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RESISTING MARRIAGE-AS-IDEAL ONLINE: NON-NORMATIVE SEXUAL
POLITICS AND THE INTERNET

By

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A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Communication, Information, and Library Studies

Written under the direction of

Deepa Kumar and Christina Dunbar-Hester

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2016

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Resisting Marriage-as-Ideal Online: Non-Normative Sexual Politics and the Internet

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In this dissertation, I argue that people pursuing non-normative sexual politics have organized to harness and appropriate social media platforms to meet the needs of counterpublic communication. Building on various conceptions of public sphere and counterpublic theory as well as studies of the politics of the Internet and social media technologies, I focus on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on identity formation, social movement mobilization, and interpersonal communication, all important communicative components in sexual politics. The sites of this dissertation are media objects, use practices, and platforms that encourage alternatives to heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the cultural emphasis on marriage. I concentrate my study on the following contemporary case studies, which show a number of ways that normativities can be challenged in contemporary America: the formation of an active “asexual” community online, two campaigns against hetero- or homo-normativities that have produced print and online media, and dating and sex websites and apps that promote alternative courtship and socialization practices.

Acknowledgements

Far too many friends, family, and colleagues have contributed to my intellectual growth and well-being during the time I wrote this dissertation to name them all here.

Special thanks to Deepa Kumar and Christina Dunbar-Hester for helming this dissertation, and to Louisa Schein, Aram Sinnreich, and Philip Napoli for their help in making this work better. While at Rutgers' School of Communication & Information, Jack Bratich, Jennifer Gibbs, Jessa Lingel, and Sheena Raja helped me develop the thoughts developed here.

The writing of this dissertation was supported greatly by a fantastic group of readers who participated in my writing group: Miriam Tola, Stina Soderling, Sasha Rodriguez, Jasmin Young, Paul Edwards, Grzegorz Sokol, and Kate Jenkins.

Outside of Rutgers, I received helpful comments and encouragement on specific presentations and portions of this project from Hollis Griffin, Shaka McGlotten, Mary L. Gray, Tom Boellstorff, and Sherry Wolf.

Nick Gamso, Jenna Brager, and Tucker Dean deserve special praise for their patience and support of the thought process that developed this dissertation.

Many thanks to the interview subjects that made this dissertation possible: David Jay, SwankIvy, Angela Tucker, Ryan Conrad, Sasha Cagen, and twelve pseudonymous Grindr users.

Portions of the introduction and Chapter one have been published in the October 2015 issue of *New Media & Society* in the article “ ‘Where I can be myself...where I can speak my mind’: Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment.”

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Introduction

I wasn't invited to many weddings in my twenties, but after attending the ceremony for one of the few I attended in that decade, I was waiting with a group of people to be let into the wedding reception. Celebratory cocktails were scheduled before the meal, and the group of people standing around our cocktail table all had Budweisers in our hands. I was quiet as I usually am in situations in which I am surrounded by people who do not know my personality very well. In the midst of some catching up and small talk, a relative of the bride came up to our table.

"What does it even mean anymore?" he said. We were perplexed. "A five minute service, without a minister. It's kind of a joke."

This was odd coming from the bride's relative because it was well-known that he was in an unhappy marriage. The couple marrying that day seemed laid back and content with each other and the ceremony. They walked around with a clear indication that they were people with quite different temperaments, but that this worked for them. They had clearly developed strategies to deal with each other.

It wasn't the way the couple was walking around that the bride's relative was referencing. Instead, the bride's relative was referencing the way the wedding ceremony was carried out. The bride's friend had officiated the ceremony, having become ordained online through the Universal Life Church, a church that allows people to sign up to become an ordained minister in a minute or so. He rushed through the legally required portions of the ceremony, and on the couple's request, he eschewed formalities like readings from the Bible, other religious texts, or classic literature.

“Getting ordained on the Internet! What does it even mean?” the relative said, incredulously, to punctuate his comments. He didn’t seem to be questioning the reason for coming all this way for the wedding; he seemed to be posing an existential question about the meaning of it all, because...The Internet. The Internet’s reputation as a site of inauthentic, half-baked, or disruptive sociality — or as a site for a-sociality for that matter — informs many critiques of online communication. Contradictorily, in recent years, social media companies have gained public relations points for being seen as aiding the spread of democratic participation. This tension provides the background for my dissertation.

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The aim of this dissertation is to explore the use of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) in contemporary U.S. non-normative sexual politics. I argue that people pursuing non-normative sexual politics have organized to harness and appropriate social media platforms to meet the needs of counterpublic communication. This study is particularly interested in the ways that media are produced, consumed, configured, and harnessed by people in ways that affect the pursuit and maintenance of a set of sexual identities and practices that create modes of non-normative sexual politics, from critiques of heteronormativity and homonormativity to the popularization of new non-normative sexual identities and political affiliations inspired by the use of new digital ICTs and social media platforms.

My definition of non-normative sexual politics includes politics that create spaces for relating that extend beyond what is endorsed by normative American society. In studying digital ICTs, specifically social media, I focus on important factors in identity

formation, social movement mobilization, and interpersonal communication, all important communicative components in sexual politics. My focus on *networked counterpublics* builds on late twentieth century challenges to the model of Jurgen Habermas's bourgeois public sphere as ideal, most notably the theories on counterpublics from Fraser (1990) and Warner (2002), and an adaptation of boyd's (2011) concept of networked publics. Several recent studies of queer, single and other non-normative identities and communities suggest that digital ICTs have affected the U.S. population in ways that make non-normative sexualities and sexual politics easier to enact and organize around (e.g. Cobb, 2012; Gray, 2009; Klinenberg, 2012; Weiss, 2012). However, few book-length studies focus primarily on the interaction between individuals or communities and these ICTs.

The sites of this dissertation are media artifacts and platforms that encourage alternatives to heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the cultural emphasis on marriage. Unlike previous movements that encouraged alternatives to the Victorian ideal, most notably the free love movements in the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, contemporary movements are often not based in physical spaces, like the intentional/utopian communities or communes of the American eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I am interested in ways that these ideologies are mediated, how movements spread their message, and how media are used to maintain these communities or these networks of individuals. Though I necessarily consider historical contextualization and perspective, I concentrate my study on the following contemporary case studies, which show a number of ways that normativities can be challenged in contemporary America: the formation of an

active “asexual” community online, two campaigns against hetero- or homo-normativities that have produced print and online media, and dating and sex websites and apps that promote alternative courtship and socialization practices. The cases are, in a sense, incommensurable in that they do not all hold shared values or enact sexual politics in similar ways. Instead, I see value in showing a wide variety of sexual politics and looking at various examples of enacting sexual politics through media. I also see value in thinking about how single-issue sexual politics can be expanded upon and integrated into coalition campaigns, a topic that will be explored throughout the examples. As I progress through the chapters of this dissertation, I concentrate on different “levels” or “scales” of resisting normativities. I move from resistances to normative sexual identities to resistances to hetero- and homo-normativities to resistances to normative courtship practices.

In chapter one, I look at an instance of the Internet’s role in the formation of the asexual community online. In the first few years of the twenty-first century, people who do not experience sexual attraction gathered together on the website for the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, AVEN, to solidify the “asexual” identity category. This first chapter considers the ways that the community harnessed digital ICTs to create a somewhat cohesive community, and how the community is maintained now that the first phase of the creation of the community is over. In the chapter, I analyze and compare the communication pursued on AVEN’s message boards as well as the communication pursued on social media sites, especially Tumblr.

In chapter two, I compare two campaigns that promote lifestyles, identities or politics that resist heteronormativity or homonormativity: Sasha Cagen’s quirkyalone con-

cept and the work of the Against Equality collective. I observe how contemporary networked social organizations pursue transmedia political campaigns, meaning that these campaigns produce media that traverse different (analog and digital) media forms. While the quirkyalone community challenges our expectations of adults as either coupled or actively pursuing a relationship, the Against Equality community provides a queer critique of mainstream LGBT organizations, noting the ways that these organizations are neoliberal institutions of power.

In line with the observations of Freeman and Berlant's (1992) study of Queer Nation's own media production strategies, I examine the ways that both the quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns use both new and "old" media. The case of Sasha Cagen's boundary-redefining concept of "quirkyalone," which had its beginnings in the realm of zines, expanded into a book published by an imprint of a mainstream publisher, and sponsored various quirkyalone Days (Valentine's Day counter-programming on February 14), which were covered by various mainstream and alternative media outlets. The multimedia expressions of Cagen's concept point to the ability of a pervasive, multi-channel, digitally enabled mediascape to shape the existence, persistence, and form of sexual normativities. While Cagen's contributions to public culture did little to change the form of normativities and the dominant discourse on sexuality, the synergistic transmedia expansion of her concept is indicative of the possibilities of anti-assimilationist and other counterpublic addresses in the information age. Thus, I will take the opportunity to explore how movements that did not originate on the Internet but that utilize the Internet create and maintain counterpublics. Provoked by an acknowledgment of the ebbs and flows of

activity around quirkyalone and around queer critiques of the mainstream LGBT movement, I will also think about the unpredictable future of these various communicative acts.

My third chapter studies the use of Grindr, a geolocator app that is designed to show gay/bi/queer men nearby users looking for social encounters. The app has a reputation for facilitating hook-ups, but the app is used to facilitate a wide variety of interactions. In the first half of the chapter, I use interviews with Grindr users to explain how they are encouraged to develop an expedient style of use that ends up leading to disappointment and continued use of the app. The second half of the chapter looks at various sites that criticize Grindr users for expressing racialized desire and non-desire in their profiles. The chapter looks at Grindr as a site with a counterpublic context, and it also looks at a counterpublic of anti-racist Grindr users that seek to change the standard of use on the app.

In my conclusion, I sum up my observations on contemporary movements and modes of practice that seek to encourage or form communities around alternatives to marriage-as-ideal, and I want to be reflective about what focusing on the non-normative does to those that take solace in or resist through normative romantic and sexual categories. Throughout, I will be insistent on pursuing Lisa Duggan's (2003) call to integrate identity politics with calls for economic, racial, and social justice. As I discussed earlier, at this point, I do not aim to privilege any one solution to addressing the larger material problems encountered by those creating kinship structures outside of American normativities. My focus is on the particular ways that including the Internet and other digital me-

dia technologies as social actors has complicated this particular social field and created networked counterpublics of particular constitutions and shapes that would not be possible offline.

This dissertation is primarily a work of critical cultural studies with ethnographic elements. From gender and sexuality studies, I rely on and contribute to histories of sexuality and marriage. I build on work within digital cultural studies and Internet studies to contribute to discussions on how new media and communication technologies structure these networked counterpublics. While some interviews were carried out—with leaders of the *quirkyalone*, asexuality, and *Against Equality* movements and with users of *Grindr*—the dissertation primarily does an interpretive analysis of media systems of producers and designers, audiences/consumers, and texts/interfaces, in a way that works at the boundaries of cultural studies and STS (Boczkowski and Lievrouw, 2008). Following van Dijck (2013), I am interested in the ways that groups of users push against the intent of users to create new possibilities and to protest against or deemphasize certain promoted features on specific platforms. However, following Gray (2009), my focus in each case is driven by the subjects at the heart of my cases. My analysis also relies on interviews to provide examples of the decisions made by members of networked counterpublics, the lived experience of counterpublic members, and the actual use of media texts in situated environments. I explore the contemporary digital-infused mediascape through the subjectivities of my individual and collective subjects—networked counterpublics and the individuals that form them. Thus, I seek to come to a broad understanding of the contemporary landscape of perspectives on sexual politics while carefully choosing examples of chal-

lenges to the marriage-as-ideal perspective to show examples of ways that digital media is harnessed, produced, and consumed in ways that encourage or enable practices that resist marriage-as-ideal.

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The social concerns that we voice when we discuss technology are concerns we would have even if there were no technology around. They are questions of what it means to be truly yourself, to have meaningful relationships with others, and to be situated in a world of others who are very different from the people by whom we were raised.

-- Nancy Baym (2010, p. 48)

In addition to the common understanding that social systems that are native to the Internet are less legitimate than more entrenched social systems, various commentators have also expressed concerns about using the Internet for the pursuit or maintenance of sexual relationships. Many have discussed concerns over safety and the quality of relationships formed over the Internet. Popular arguments insist the Internet makes cheating easier, dating more casual, porn more prevalent, relationships of all sorts more fleeting. The television shows *Catfish* (MTV, 2011-) and *To Catch a Predator* (NBC, 2004-2007) have incited a fear of “stranger danger” online for adult and child users. A 2015 *Vanity Fair* article noted that middle-class young Americans were experiencing the “dawn of the dating apocalypse,” and the dating app Tinder was partially to blame (Sales, 2015). As Baym (2010) holds, however, these arguments are always tied to larger trends, anxieties, or sentiments in the culture from which they come.

The rise of social uses of the Internet and other digital ICTs have inspired a variety of approaches to identity online. One need only look at the trajectory of the writings

of one of the leading scholars of digital culture, Sherry Turkle (1995), to grasp some of the different approaches to online identity that have been afforded and normalized over the past two decades. In the 1990's, as the Internet was being rapidly adopted and expanding beyond the specialist tech user bases that were early adopters of the technology, Internet users often engaged in identity play. Turkle (1995) studied the pro-social uses of these technologies for identity play. In the twenty-first century though, after the popularization of contemporary social networking sites (SNSs) like MySpace and eventually Facebook and the popularity of smart phones, Turkle (2011, 2015) began to worry about the over-reliance on digital ICTs, which now serve as extensions of real name/real world identities.

Meanwhile, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the Internet and social media were also being celebrated for their role in mobilizing the democratic protests that were most visible in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements (see, e.g. Wolman, 2008; Gustin, 2011; Costanza-Chock, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The role of digital ICTs in popular democratic and social justice movements has inspired a number of studies of how these technologies afford, change, and shape contemporary politics and social movements. Scholars of media and communication studies, political science, and social movements who study the use of digital ICTs for protest and resistance have noted that the contemporary digital mediascape consists of a complicated assemblage of corporate and state actors, users with varying, contradictory motivations, and powerful political economic forces that shape the purposes for which these technologies are used. Many of these scholars and commentators (see, e.g., Morozov, 2013; Gladwell, 2010; Fenton,

2016) have noted that the optimistic and celebratory discourse about social media's role in democratic moments has been overblown; these celebrations have not focused enough on *how* democracy should be pursued or reorganized.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I lay the foundational intellectual context for this study. First, I explain what I mean by the term “non-normative sexual politics.” I historicize contemporary U.S. sexual politics with regards to discussions of normativity, and I justify my focus on non-normative sexual politics and explore the contemporary state of U.S. sexual politics and sexual normativities. Next, I discuss the meaning and significance of networked counterpublics with regards to social media. Finally, I lay out the interdisciplinary mixed methods approach that I intend to use to study non-normative sexual politics online.

Literature Review

Resistance of Sexual Normativities

This dissertation is interested in non-normative sexual politics, but I am wary of advocating anti-normativity. Conforming to normativities does not mean investing in normativities. I seek to expand our understanding of non-normative sexual politics in a historical moment that is more accepting and tolerant of non-normative sexual politics. As I will discuss below, contemporary tolerant culture acknowledges LGBT identities and feminism while seeking to temper, commercialize, and commodify feminist and queer politics. In what follows, I conceptualize normative U.S. sexual politics as an ideal trajectory of one's sexual life. I have decided to describe the contemporary set of normativities that define U.S. sexual politics using the term “marriage-as-ideal.”

“Marriage-as-ideal” sexual politics can take a number of different pathways. But consider this map of a generalized “marriage-as-ideal” sexual politics: One is born and develops according to one of various (maybe, yes, contradictory) models of child development. One’s youth is celibate until one encounters a tame period of dating. At a certain point, one enters a monogamous, intraracial, intraclass, intragenerational heterosexual (or, recently, maybe homosexual) marriage that bears several children, until death does our couple part. Normative “marriage-as-ideal” politics incorporate various normativities. We see here heteronormativity, reproductive normativity, sex confined to private residences, the normativity of sexual chastity before marriage; there are also normativities related to what kind of mate one can choose. Aberrations in these normativities are, of course, expected by those that enforce them, but those people that do break with the norm find themselves up against the law, community policy, public opinion and the judgment of families. These normativities shift in different regional, local, or familial situations, but it is important to note that behaviors and life courses that hew close to these normativities are assumed and left unquestioned. These normativities are not hard-and-fast rules, but they do materialize as actual cultural forces.

In Foucault’s (1976) landmark study of sexuality, he argues that while we generally believe that the best way to resist the repressive “Victorian” strictures on sexuality is to engage with a set of biopolitics that has sought to regulate aberrant sexualities through the state and through the medical professions, most notably psychiatry and psychology. Thus, for Foucault, sexuality is wrapped up in language; it is defined by the ways we speak about it. This has led to undesirable consequences for those whose sexuality exists

outside of the (Victorian) norm: that is, most of us. In his description of the prevailing of the restrictive *scientia sexualis* over the more productive, creative *ars erotica* as the dominant mode of conceptualizing sexuality in Western civilization, Foucault notes,

Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret. As if it needed this production of truth. As if it was essential that sex be inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge. Thus sex gradually became an object of greater suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we carry with us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends. (p. 69)

In this lengthy quote, we see Foucault explicate society's motivations for applying Enlightenment ideals of scientific certainty on ourselves, specifically our sexuality. In this way, what Foucault calls "the other Victorians" (the sexually aberrant) are relegated into systems into which their sexualities must be named and thus repressed in a way that forces one to confess, be punished or be diagnosed so that power is channeled into institutions who have been dictated to uphold the norm. For Foucault, the practices of "the other Victorians" wield power, and it is possible for the aberrant, norm-resisting behavior, to resist being utilized to uphold the institutions that define and relegate bodies on the basis of norms. Thus, there is potential creative, disruptive power imbued in those outside the norm. Under these conditions, these "other Victorians" possess power to provoke an upturning of the forces of normativity.

This dissertation will follow the lead of the actually existing phenomena and groups that are the subject of my chapters in naming normativities that are being resisted. In the first chapter, I look at the coming-together of self-identified asexuals online. These

people resist the normative assumption that all normally developed humans have a sexual drive; a critique of the sexual world, or sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011), that promotes this normativity has been launched. In the second chapter, I chart the development of two political media campaigns that challenge normativities in sexual politics. The third chapter looks at gay/bi/queer men's use of Grindr, an app that is used for casual dating and sex, practices that promote hook up culture, which is certainly counter to some very popular normative ideals.¹ This last chapter also contends with a subgroup of Grindr users who criticize widespread sexual racism on the app, which reinforces the ways that even in spaces of supposedly non-normative sexual politics, well-worn power dynamics and hierarchies are recreated. Thus, the dissertation focuses on normativities as they are defined by the non-normative groups themselves.

Theorizing Sexual Normativities in the U.S.

The mid-twentieth century saw robust activity in the U.S.'s women's and gay liberation movements. These movements changed the landscape of sexual politics, expanding possibilities for women and LGBT people. By the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the LGBT movement and feminist movement are solidly present in U.S. cultural politics. But with the mainstreaming of these politics has come a desire to consider the feminist and queer struggles *faits accomplis*.

This contradictory state has been analyzed by many in feminist and queer studies.

McRobbie (2004) describes the postfeminist moment by explaining

¹ The hook-up culture that Grindr symbolizes is also, in some ways, quite normative, in that it has been commodified and successfully integrated into contemporary capitalism.

[postfeminism operates] through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism[...] Finally it suggests that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of "young women," feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant. Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must in more public venues stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition. (p. 255)

Thus, for McRobbie and others who note the presence of a postfeminist ideology thriving in contemporary U.S. culture, the transformative demands of feminism are seen as outdated and unnecessary.

The concept of heteronormativity has provided a helpful way for people to name one of the cultural forces – perhaps the most overarching one—that normalizes sexual behavior. Heteronormativity describes the set of cultural expectations and forces that emanate from the expectations placed on people to enact “normal” sex, gender, and heterosexual identity roles. Michael Warner (1991) is credited with inventing the term, and did so by using Rich (1980), Rubin (1984), and scores of other feminist and gay and lesbian theorists of the previous decades (and in fact, even thinkers from as far back as the Frankfurt School) to conceptualize the force of the cultural expectation and assumption of heterosexuality. In naming the giants on whose shoulder he is standing, Warner notes in his essay “Fear of a Queer Planet,” “These writers have argued that a nonoppressive gender order can only come about through a radical change in sexuality, even while they have also begun to argue that sexuality is a partially separate field of inquiry and activism” (p. 3-4). Thus, Warner notes that the power relations between the sexes are incredibly impor-

tant for understanding contemporary oppression, yet it is not only the heterosexual social order that is the site for this oppression.

On noting the effects of heteronormativity (a more pervading hegemonic force than Rich's (1980) concept of "compulsory heterosexuality"), Warner (1991) says,

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated [sic] with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. (p. 6)

Thus Warner charts the coming-to-be of an understanding of queer subjectivities, which are always already attuned to the systematic regulation of bodies, sex acts, and ways of being. In Warner's gesture toward a queer politics, he notes, "It requires bringing differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that can address broad questions" (p. 11). In charting a more sustainable plan for such a movement, he adds, "Much depends on how the common ground is defined, and in recent years an important multicultural critique has shown too often the common ground has been assumed to be that of relatively dominant positions: whites, males, middle-class activists of the US" (p. 11).

Warner also addresses resistances to heteronormativity, which often crop up in what he terms queer counterpublics. In the same essay, Warner notes the shift to speak of a "queer" public over a self-definition that resists the term "gay." He says, "The preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization;

it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (p. 16). In *The Trouble with Normal*, Warner (1999) elaborates his critique of the normal through his engagement of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement: “Many of the leaders of the gay and lesbian movement continue to be defensive about sex and sexual variance...[T]he aura of scandal has been heightened by many of the movement’s spokespersons themselves, who have increasingly called for a ‘new maturity,’ beyond mere sex” (p. 45).

The contemporary gay movement proclaims: Being gay is about more than just sex! Lisa Duggan (2003) coined the term homonormativity to describe “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 50). In linking homonormativity to consumption (capitalism) and domesticity (self-governance), Duggan makes a direct correlation between mainstream gay politics and neoliberal ideology. She also updates the classic text of the Marxist approach to sexuality, John D’Emilio’s (1983) “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” for the neoliberal age. D’Emilio’s essay argued that twentieth century capitalism organized and privatized courtship in such a way as to allow the gay identity-type to mature, and Duggan notes how further privatization and a quest for normalcy have cultivated the new homonormativity, which we could even extend to the hook-up cultures of Grindr and other platforms. This is most caustically intertwined in the marriage equality movement, where a sense of enfranchisement distracts members of the gay rights movement from other social and economic problems.

Duggan (2003) and Warner (1999) conceive of marriage as tying the private sexual lives of its adherents to the nation-state.

At the same time, some scholars have noted new effects of the homonormative as neoliberal acceptance of same-sex marriage and lesbian and gay civil rights rage on. Puar (2006) notes, “Sexual deviancy is linked to the process of discerning, othering, and quarantining terrorist bodies, but these racially and sexually perverse figures also labor in the service of disciplining and normalizing subjects *away from* these bodies” (p. 68). Thus, U.S. culture has been implicated in a system of homonationalism, in which “the contradictions inherent in the idealization of the U.S. as a properly multicultural heteronormative but nevertheless gay-friendly, tolerant, and sexually-liberated society can remain in tension” (p. 68). Puar’s (2006) argument is a far-reaching critique of U.S. imperialism at the turn of the century and the implication of homonormativity in this imperialism (valuing the supposedly “accepting” US/West over the intolerant (Muslim) other), but here, it is also illustrative of the ways that American homonormativity is simultaneously able to find fault with (marriage equality now!) and also valorize the sexual politics of the U.S. (i.e. we don’t criminalize homosexuality).

Writing before the Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling that struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DoMA) effectively forcing all states to marry all same-sex couples who ask the state for the legal recognition, Walters (2014) argues for a sexual politics that counters the normalizing forces of the mainstream LGBT movement,

we too often stop at these important but limited goals (access to institutions, repeal of biased laws), interpret those victories as stable indicators of the tolerant and accepting society we desire, and rarely look beyond or through that tolerance

to a vision of a deeply changed America...when gay rights are framed this way—as discrete rights that are offered up by an increasingly ‘tolerant’ society—real and robust integration is avoided and ignored. By framing these gains in a discourse of tolerance, we set the bar too low. Thornier and more contentious and challenging questions persist: How might full inclusion undermine the sexist masculinity at the heart of military culture? What can queer kinship say to nuclear families? How can we detach acts from identities and still embrace egalitarian struggles? These challenging questions also enrich the ‘mainstream’ culture, so it’s not just a matter here of reducing homophobia but rather producing a more inclusive flexible interesting, happy society in general. (p. 259).

Walters here notes the ways that normative sexual politics—here, normative LGBT sexual politics—have missed the mark with regards to envisioning a society that allows the pursuit of a broad swath of kinship structures and sexualities amongst consenting adults. She laments the twenty-first century’s lack of a formidable force for radical or non-normative sexual politics that aims for what Muñoz (2009) might call a queer utopian horizon.

Marriage-as-Ideal in the U.S.: A Historical Perspective

The American public sphere is obsessed with marriage. Despite low marriage rates (Wang and Parker, 2014), the American public sphere leaves unquestioned the dominance, general structure, and purpose of the institution of marriage. Marriage-as-ideal discourse reinforces the mandates of neoliberalism, which insists on the governmentality of the self by the self, through the state (Whitehead, 2011). Notably, the debate over same-sex marriage has, for the most part, obsessed over these questions and reinforced the hegemonic ideals of marriage as ideal. While neoliberal politics, with its roots in a libertarian fetishization of free market economics, at first do not seem to correlate to a cultural politics in which people—and their bodies—are regulated, neoliberal politics rely

on state-sponsored marriage to encourage citizens to manage their lives with families, without state support. Ingraham (2008) even introduces the idea of the “marriage industrial complex” to link the contemporary fascination and excitement over weddings to a billion dollar industry that supports a globalized economy that exploits the third world for its sites of low-cost production and for honeymoon travel with little regard to personal economic accountability and ethical consumption practices.

In Cott’s (2000) historical study of the changing parameters of sanctioned marriage in the U.S., she notes that the U.S. has historically used marriage to regulate the sexualities of ethnic minorities (e.g., through the denial of marriage rights to slaves and interracial couples, and the regulation of arranged Asian immigrant marriages), religious minorities (e.g., through the fight against Mormon polygamy), and sexual minorities whose kinship structures lie outside of the norm (e.g., through the denial of marriage privileges to same-sex couples). In the second half of the twentieth century, the love marriage (as opposed to the convenience marriage) became the norm. On this new norm, Cott (2000) states, “The resiliency of belief in legal marriage as the destination of a love match and as a safe haven begs for explanation, even when hyperbole about love seems to demand none...Sexual love has even more of a halo, because we assume that an individual’s full subjectivity blossoms in the circle of its intimacy” (p. 225). Cott (2000) argues that the love marriage and the management of social support in it is a source of national pride, because it is made possible by agentive (free) partners who choose to pursue marriage relationships.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the U.S. has privileged sexual normativities in its family laws and social support structures. In this way, the U.S. leaves many people out of legal protection and social support. These policies have been reinforced by a political commitment to marriage promotion and the U.S.'s institutional support of a marriage movement that gained steam in the late twentieth century. Legal scholar Nancy Polikoff (2007) characterizes the marriage movement as a broad political movement facilitated by the popularity of evangelical-fueled family values rhetoric that argues for a fifties family sitcom approach to encouraging the primacy of marriage for all people in all situations.

Polikoff says,

The marriage movement reiterates the importance of marriage—and marriage alone. Although some individuals in the secular arm of this movement support same-sex marriage, gender equality, and social supports for all families, the literature and court briefs produced by marriage-movement organizations attack these goals. Their arguments further a larger agenda of reinforcing gender norms and relieving the government and the market from any responsibility for poverty and urgent social problems. (p .82)

Stacey (1996), in her feminist sociological study of the postmodern family, identifies the political class that participated in formulating the discourse surrounding the importance of marriage. “While the right wing may prove the prime beneficiary of current family-values discourse,” she says, “it is not its primary producer. Rather, an interlocking network of scholarly and policy institutes, think tanks, and commissions began mobilizing during the late 1980s to forge a national consensus on family values that rapidly shaped the family ideology and politics of the Clinton administration and his New Democratic party” (p.54). Among these policy groups were the Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project. Scientists—usually, in this case, sociologists—gave the marriage

movement extra power by arguing for the value of marriage in promoting stability. In Heath's (2012) ethnography of Oklahoma's marriage promotion programs in the first years of the twenty-first century, we see how, though the state may have intentions to promote normative expectations of marriage through attempted indoctrination, these attempts to "teach" lifelong marriage are often dismissed by citizen "students" whose life circumstances have already written them out of the strict (Christian-inflected) lesson plans.

Queer counterpublics self consciously encouraging alternative kinship pathways resist the neoliberal nationalist motivations that energize the traditional marriage movement and the marriage equality movement. A number of trends in kinship, relationships, marriage, and sex throughout American history have provided instances of resistance to sometimes destructive and imposing national norms. As Berlant and Freeman (1992) note in their history of the formation of the counterpublic-creating collective Queer Nation, the group's campaign creates its own nationalism that counteracts an oppressive U.S. nationalism: "As long as PWAs [People with AIDS] require state support, as long as the official nation invests its identity in the pseudo-right to police nonnormative sexual representations and sexual practices, the lesbian, gay, feminist, and queer communities in the United States do not have the privilege of national identity" (p. 154). All the while, Berlant and Freeman wish to note the campaign's utopian anti-assimilationism, one which "imagines a 'gorgeous mosaic' of difference without a model of conflict" (p. 154). Central to Queer Nation's formation of a counterpublic was the creation of affective me-

dia objects that stitch together various queer Americans in a patchwork of anti-assimilationist queer identity politics.

Speaking of marriage politics today, Whitehead (2011) notes in her ethnography of a marriage equality organization, “marriage operates as a compulsory system that orients subjects to neoliberalism by promising to decrease danger for all of the ‘gay community,’ not just same-sex couples who marry” (p. 293). Whitehead notes that marriage equality highlights the ways in which risk is utilized to argue for rights (e.g. hospital visits and medical decisions): “the logic of risk obscures activists’ construction of a vulnerable ‘gay population’ dependent upon marriage for its continued survival at the same time that it reaffirms the abject status of nonmarital intimacies and care arrangements” (p. 294). In focusing on risk, the neoliberal scheme of economic inequality is not called into question and a liberalization of marriage, not a change in this system, is seen as the solution. As legal scholar Dean Spade (2011) reminds us, “the emotional or affective registers of neoliberalism are attuned to notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ that obscure systemic inequalities and turn social movements toward goals of inclusion and incorporation and away from demands for redistribution and social transformation” (p. 50). Thus, for many, including Spade, the marriage equality movement is a social movement that obscures the economic effects of neoliberal economic policy by focusing instead on the “progressiveness” of “equality.”

In their statement on the “I Still Think Marriage Is the Wrong Goal” page erected as a response to California’s Prop 8 activism, published on their online Make Zine, Spade and Craig Willse (n.d.) explain their materialist opposition to marriage of all stripes:

The simplistic formula that claims "you're either pro-marriage or against equality" makes us forget that all forms of marriage perpetuate gender, racial and economic inequality. It mistakenly assumes that support for marriage is the only good measure of support for LGBT communities. This political moment calls for anti-homophobic politics that centralize anti-racism and anti-poverty. Marriage is a coercive state structure that perpetuates racism and sexism through forced gender and family norms. Right wing pro-marriage rhetoric has targeted families of color and poor families, supported a violent welfare and child protection system, vilified single parents and women, and marginalized queer families of all kinds. Expanding marriage to include a narrow band of same-sex couples only strengthens that system of marginalization and supports the idea that the state should pick which types of families to reward and recognize and which to punish and endanger.

In so doing, Spade and Willse reorient queer politics to eschew assimilationist policies that reinforce pathways to normative marriage-as-ideal and make these queer politics attend to what Willse (2004) elsewhere calls "a broad commitment to social and economic justice issues." Still, Willse (2004) explains that his critique of the mainstream LGBT movement's prioritization of marriage equality did not stop him from fighting against President George W. Bush's proposed constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage. In the politics of Whitehead's subjects and Willse's explanation of his own political priorities, we see great confusion on how one should situate themselves within or against marriage promotion and marriage equality movements. The politics of marriage and the various ways of resisting its dominance are tangles of economic and social, personal and community politics. These considerations have, of course, now changed greatly after the legalization of marriage equality nationwide.

Resistance Online

Writing about the Internet is often difficult because there is often a great deal of technological change to account for. One does not know when a site or an app will go de-

funct, change its name, or develop new features or priorities. For its users, “the Internet” is not just one thing, as the work of Baym (2010), Gershon (2010), Streeter (2010), and Miller (2011) would remind us. But, still, for individual users and commentators, “the Internet” is often spoken of as an actor that affects social relations, sexualities, and relationships in particular ways. As Baym (2010) and Carolyn Marvin (1988), have shown, new communication technologies are often accompanied by theories of technological determinism, some of which offer a utopian hope for peace and harmony and others offer a dystopic fear of dishonest uses and further isolation due to a decrease in face-to-face contact. In looking at public response to the early twentieth century domestication of the telephone, Marvin notes how the presence of the telephone was thought of as a threat to family stability: affairs could be easily facilitated, and courtship practices could be taken out of the public realm (p. 67-76). By analyzing Dear Abby columns from the mid-to-late 1990’s, Nancy Baym reminds us that as the Internet became a domesticated technology, similar concerns rose about how family dynamics might be disrupted by Internet use.

A long lineage of digital scholarship, most notably Turkle’s (1995) study of identity online, has documented the ability for Internet users to both play with and explore various enactments of genders, sexualities and other sexual identities in virtual spaces. In discussing the ways that digital communication is thought of as distinct from face-to-face communication, Baym (2010) focuses on the ways that reduced social cues impact digital communication. She notes that often with text-based communication, social cues, such as body language, are lost. However, she points to the presence of emoticons (e.g. the

ever popular smiley face :)) to provide social cues and the fact that often times, communication becomes visual or face-to-face after or in addition to online communication.

Baym (2010) also notes the ways in which identity markers are often de-emphasized in online text-based communication. Other times, though, users rely on avatars to signify certain identity markers (gender, race, nationality) they wish to convey and that help to craft online personae. While the Internet often reinforces stereotypes and allows for the possibility of anonymous malicious communication (e.g. flaming), Baym points out that a number of studies show that flaming does not make up as much of online communication as the hysteria around it would have us think. Instead, studies show that encouragement and friendliness are much more common within those Internet communities that allow us to communicate anonymously or pseudonymously (p. 57-9). Baym also points out that identity politics plays a role in one of the reasons Internet technologies are sometimes feared. As Baym observes, “Another reason for the societal discomfort with online relationship formation is that these new relationships are often between categories of people who would not have as much of a chance to form relationships offline” (p. 104).

Of course, new trends towards using “real names,” which are technically required for participation on Facebook and Google+ are changing the ways we link our online and offline selves. This does not mean, though, that users do not carefully curate their online selves on these sites, though (see Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). It is important to remember that users of the social networking services studied in this dissertation, namely dating and sex sites, do not normally link real world identities to their offline identities.

Often times, as Gibbs et al. (2006) note, slight lies are told to make people seem more attractive or desirable.

Turkle follows up her 1995 *Life on the Screen*, that takes on identity play online, with her 2011 book *Alone Together*, which is driven by a feeling of disappointment at our over-reliance on computer-mediated communication. In *Alone Together*, she says,

If, by the end of researching *Life on the Screen*, I was troubled about the costs of life with simulation, in the course of researching this book, my concerns have grown. These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time... We bend to the inanimate with new solicitude. We fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other. (p. xii)

While Turkle's book has proven a popular reference for those seeking to explain the ways that technologies have become domesticated and our lives have adapted to this domestication, I am not fully committed to her theory of isolation-because-of-technology. In fact, the asexual community was founded and greatly facilitated by the use of digital ICTs. I do not want to discount Turkle's observations, though, and want to think about the ways that people perceive themselves to be isolated. However, I want to think of a number of other factors that could be contributing to the isolation of some users and how digital technologies contribute to or alleviate those feelings of isolation when paired with enactments of non-normative sexual politics.

Cultural critics like Gross (2003) and Gray (2009) have looked at the ways in which digital communication environments allow for queer (specifically, in the case of Gray, rural) youth and other alienated individuals and communities to negotiate their identities in ways previously unavailable for them. The ability to address and cultivate

counterpublics has been made easier and more pervasive with the ubiquity of computer-mediated communication.

Social Networks and Networked Communication

In his landmark book *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler (2006) notes the two key elements that differentiate a networked information environment from the mass media:

The first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment. The second is the practical elimination of communications costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries. (p. 212)

In his explanation of the abilities of the “networked public sphere,” Benkler notes two critiques leveled since the 1990s against the rhetoric defining the Internet as a democratizing force. First there is “the concern that information overload will lead to fragmentation of discourse, polarization, and the loss of political community” (p. 214). This model of the Internet sees it as housing a cacophony of voices, difficult to hear, distinguish, and, least of all, organize into allegiances and communities. In the second (contradictory) argument, “Both infrastructure and, more fundamentally, patterns of attention are much less distributed than we thought” (p. 214). In this model, the Internet is so intensely regulated and co-opted in a way quite similar to the ways conglomerates have dominated and diluted other media.

Benkler notes two elements of the mainstream media that the networked public sphere tempers: “(1) the excessive power it gives its owners, and (2) its tendency, when owners do not dedicate their media to exert power, to foster an inert polity” (p. 220). In

response to the question about whether or not Internet communication is too chaotic or too concentrated, Benkler responds that the networked public sphere is “if not ‘just right,’ at least...more attractive than the mass-media-dominated public sphere” (p. 239). Benkler believes the Internet, in practice, facilitates a much-improved public sphere, which can take forms that improve upon or keep in check the mainstream media. Recent work by Eugene Thacker and Alexander Galloway (2007) and Tiziana Terranova (2000) has complicated our laudatory conception of the network model for communication technologies.

The Internet has facilitated conversations among people across vast space that would have not been as robust without it (e.g., see Baym, 2010) or would probably not have occurred without it (e.g., see Elliott, 2000). In their ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad, Miller and Slater (2001) call these two affordances of the Internet “expansive realization” and “expansive potential” (p. 11-13). With regards to expansive realization, “the encounter with expansive connections and possibilities of the Internet may allow one to envisage a quite novel vision of what one could be, a vision that is often projected as a feature of the Internet itself (for example, transcendence of mundane identities)” (p. 11). In expansive potential, “people glimpse quite new things to be (or even an escape from what they were)” (p. 13). While expansive potential is often exemplified in cyber-realities that are somehow better or at least more imaginative (see Turkle, 1995), it is also often seen as a way to tweak the world online and off.

In the last aspirational moments of his book *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells (2009) blends the ideals of Internet architecture,

Enacting social change in the network society proceeds by preprogramming the communication networks that constitute the symbolic environment for image manipulation and information processing in our minds, the ultimate determinants of individual and collective practices. Creating new content and new forms in the networks that connect minds and their communicative environment is tantamount to rewiring our minds. (p. 412)

In Castells's formulation of the capability for Internet media for social change, he notes the ability for the new structures of communication to create new ways of thinking, interacting, and innovating. He reinforces this point, saying,

[T]he technology of communication that shapes a given communicative environment has important consequences for the process of social change. The greater the autonomy of the communicating subjects vis-à-vis the controllers of societal communication models, the higher the chances for the introduction of messages challenging the dominant values and interests in communication networks. (p. 412)

In so doing, Castells reinvigorates Benkler's argument about the powerful potentialities of the networked public sphere as it differentiates communication from the model in which the mainstream media leads and directs communicative progress.

The Polymedia Environment

In order to understand the material circumstances enabled by the diverse choices of media platforms for communication and relationship maintenance, Madianou and Miller (2012) have developed a theory of the polymedia environment. They say,

polymedia is an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an 'integrated structure' within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media. In conditions of polymedia the emphasis shifts from a focus on the qualities of each particular medium as a discrete technology, to an understanding of new media as an environment of affordances. (p. 170)

In her anthropology of mediated break-ups, Gershon (2010) develops the concept of id-

idioms of practice, which are defined by people's "media ideologies." In describing these idioms of practice, Gershon says,

people figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other...Idioms of practice point to how people have implicit and explicit intuitions about using different technologies that they have developed with their friends, family members, and coworkers. Often the implicit intuitions don't become apparent until someone violates an expectation--perhaps by...using the wrong medium. (p. 6)

Thus, when considering the materiality of media and the ways that it affects our relationships with each other, it is important to think of the ways that users approach various media, and the ways that these various approaches, these media ideologies, work to diversify the social uses of technologies that we may even think of as domesticated.

There are other consequences of the polymedia environment. As the title of James Katz and Mark Aakhus's (2002) edited collection claim, we live in a world where "perpetual contact" allows the world's citizens to be engaged with each other instantaneously, due to the compression of time and space permitted by new media and the ubiquity of mobile communication technologies.

Of course, the polymedia environment relies on users that have access not only to the Internet but also to enough material wealth to have access to multiple channels and material devices to access the Internet. Even if we privilege the polymedia environment as a way of identifying the present period in technological history, we must consider non-users and casual users as a part of the polymedia environment. The materiality of Internet and other ICTs can be complicated by discussions of the digital divide. As several studies have shown, the policy approach to conquering the digital divide concentrated on at-

tempts to achieve universal access or gave empty instruction in technological literacy that did not address the ways that people would actually use technologies (Kvasny, 2005; Dimaggio, et al., 2004; Eubanks, 2011). Following Wyatt (2003), it is important to keep in mind also the lived experience of non-users with access to technologies and technological know-how and the effects of their interaction with producers and users as well as their superficial interaction with technologies. As communications scholar Laura Portwood-Stacer (2012) has noted, personal politics and resistance to wider cultural phenomena may factor into decisions to resist participation on certain digital ICTs.

As Miller (2011) reminds us, there is not just one Internet. There are many Internets, as many as there are people to interpret what the Internet and its attendant technologies means to them in any number of situations. Slater and Miller (2011) say, “contrary to the first generation of Internet literature -- the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" (p. 1). It is also important to acknowledge the fact that often in a poly-media environment, users often conspicuously consider or decide upon using certain media platforms on a field of choices that include both old and new media or analog and digital media (Dunbar-Hester, 2009). In giving agency to users to manipulate their material experiences with technology, Eglash et al. (2004) have developed a theory and rubric for appropriating technology that is often intertwined with identity politics. Many scholars have shown how the development of digital ICTs has been driven by reappropriative energies and users not imagined by technology developers. The work of Eglash and Bleecker (2001) has reminded us of various instances that a black vernacular has affected

technological development, while Judy Wajcman (2007) has developed a theory of technofeminism, which is often a productive, creative force. Here, we may also think of Suchman's (2002) idea of "located accountabilities," the considerations of users' various situated knowledges, that need to be taken into consideration in technology design, and we may also think of the various ways that the originating producer of a technology conceives of the user (Oudshoorn et. al., 2004).

Decoding and Recoding Love & Kinship?

In his book *Code*, Lawrence Lessig (2006) writes that "code is law." In his hopeful manifesto for the development of an ethical Internet, Lessig argues for a coalescence of interested parties (coders and governments) to provide an architecture of cyberspace that allows for an ethical architecture for digital media. In the early pages of the book, Lessig notes, "There is no reason to believe that the foundation for liberty in cyberspace will simply emerge" (p. 4). And so how does he propose that those in power can assure the thriving of liberty on the Internet? By programming liberty into the system, a Constitution for cyberspace programmed into it, and if that's not enough, write a Bill of Rights. He says, "Change is possible. I don't doubt that revolutions remain in our future. But I fear that it is too easy for the government, or specially powered interests, to dislodge these revolutions, and that too much will be at stake for it to allow real change to succeed" (p. 8).

Lessig, in his description of the current state of regulation of code, singles out the hacker ethic as that which is the most creative and ethically responsible to the tenets of his argument and simultaneously notes that the state has produced a smear campaign

against the hacker community, as it began to be seen as antithetical to the progression of the Internet the (American) state wanted to carve out for the world. The operability of Lessig's "code" is one that carefully considers the ethics and communities that have formed around the Internet and the ways that those communities conceive of their cultural production and the ability and necessity of collaboration and collective production.

In the realm of critical theory, Dominic Pettman (2006) has asked a question that complements Lessig's theory quite well:

[Barthes's] image-repertoire is the discursive legacy of love stories which we have imbibed and internalized since we were children, often through literature but also through television, movies, gossip, fairy tales, magazines, and so on... To tweak the metaphor a little, the image-repertoire is a *code*. Like a computer code, it is designed in order to execute a program, here inscribed into society, in order to keep things running. But like a secret code, we must learn to *de-code* it" (p. 20-21, emphasis in original).

It is the responsibility of my study to discover ways in which communities and individuals are already using digital technologies to de-code (or hack) love. As Pettman says later, "The code is inconsistent when it demands monogamy and fidelity..." (p. 35). Based on my discussion of normative sexualities above, one can imagine a number of other ways we code love and code our image-repertoire. Likewise, we can anticipate a wide variety of mechanisms with which we can work to de-code – or hack – these normativities.

I began this section using Lessig and Pettman to privilege the creative possibilities of technological use and manipulation. In many ways, the subjects of this dissertation are interested in creating new possibilities within kinship, and often use or appropriate technology to these ends. While certain technologies remain domesticated and their conventional uses remain uncontested, at certain points the standards established within certain

technological realms and on certain technological platforms are harnessed in unconventional ways or used towards non-normative purposes.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, it will be important to think of the reasons and ways that people and organizations have put to their own use various digital media. In discussing alternative or radical media as it has migrated to the Internet, Atton (2006) likewise works against essentializing the Internet by not “assuming novelty and progress within it,” but encourages analyzing the Internet’s development alongside the practices of alternative/radical media writ large (p. 157). In particular, Atton’s relativistic argument is impacted by the trans- or multi-mediated nature of alternative and radical media. Thus to essentialize or extol the Internet would work to discredit the other media that were created simultaneous to Internet content and that often work to complement Internet content. Those that seek to disrupt normativities use the Internet in similar ways, after all, as those that uphold normativities.

Regrouping and Agitating Normativities: Networked Counterpublics and Online Resistance

It is widely acknowledged that the Internet’s possibility for decentralized communication affords the possibility of a networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010, 2014). Social networking sites (SNSs) have been seen as especially conducive to certain kinds of communication. In boyd’s explication of SNSs as networked publics, networked publics are both the “space constructed through networked technologies” and

the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice ... [T]hey allow people to gather for social, cultural and

civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family. (p. 39)

But SNSs are not inherently good at fostering whatever kind of communication one wants to engage in at any given moment. In recent studies on youth use of SNSs (Lenhart et al., 2013), for instance, the discomfort many youth feel using Facebook to communicate in certain ways has been a point of curiosity. These studies seem to suggest that youth do not want to communicate certain things that makes those messages visible to adults in their lives. This section seeks to expand on boyd's analysis of SNSs as networked publics to create a model for understanding the affordances and the social dynamics therein of various SNSs for counterpublic communication amongst asexuals.

Because marginalized groups sit radically outside of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1990) notes that they often form their own, smaller public spheres, which she called subaltern counterpublics. As the queer theorist and cultural critic Michael Warner notes, counterpublics "are constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying" (p. 423). Following this, some kinds of communication are not intelligible by certain publics; in some cases, one-to-many communication is participating in counterpublic address (Lindtner et al., 2011). The value of counterpublic communication is rarely recognized, except by those seeking to change the status quo, because it engages in the "non-compliant practices of intervening, and the formation of new social and cul-

tural structures, both in support of and resistance to changing social norms and values” (Lindtner et al., 2011, p. 5–6).

In Fraser’s (1990) critique of Habermas’ concept of the bourgeois public sphere, she at once acknowledges the utility of the public sphere concept but also notes that Habermas assumes a singular public sphere. Fraser notes that one need look no further than the gender makeup of this imaginary public sphere—it is overwhelmingly male—to note that it leaves no room for other kinds of publics to exist. That is, the fact that women do indeed exchange ideas among themselves in public proves that publics are multiple. In a stratified society characterized by a “basic institutional framework [that] generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination” (p. 66), there are indeed multiple publics, many of whom counter the hegemony of the dominant public. It is these publics that Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics.”

In Fraser’s (1990) formulation of subaltern counterpublics in a stratified society, she acknowledges that these publics serve two simultaneous roles: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (p. 68). In this categorization of the modes of counterpublic communication, Fraser assumes that counterpublic communication is always instrumental, that counterpublic always has a purpose that leads to the refinement and the deploying of the counterpublic message. However, I find that there is also a more mundane kind of ritualistic counterpublic communication that occurs when withdrawal and regroupment fails to inspire agitation. In a politics of the everyday like sexual politics, these communication rit-

uals could be equally important in maintaining counterpublics. As Warner (2002) notes, publics and counterpublics are not formal organizations. They are created by communicative acts within specific contexts. When Fraser (1990) points out the various ways that the 20th century US feminist counterpublic has circulated its ideas—“with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places” (p. 67)—one can imagine the various medium-specific ways that counterpublics are configured in these cultural forms.

In her discussion of SNSs as networked publics, danah boyd (2011) explains how the architecture of specific sites affords the creation of and address to networked publics. In so doing, she defines networked publics as “publics that are restructured by networked technologies” (39). Because counterpublic communication of a certain type is often more rare than communication that addresses a dominant public, one must often go looking for counterpublic communication.

In their often-quoted definition of SNSs, boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) set up the following limits to classifying a platform as a SNS:

a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. (p. 158)

Thus, the paradigmatic North American social network sites are Facebook, Twitter, the professionally oriented LinkedIn, Google+, Myspace, and the now-defunct Friendster.

Tumblr, Foursquare, StumbleUpon, and SoundCloud are some examples of sites that could be considered SNSs but have unique and important technological features and uses that complicate their classification as a SNS. Based on the unique architectural attributes of SNSs boyd names—profiles, friends lists, public commenting tools, and stream-based updates (p. 43)—SNS affordances shape these networked publics in certain ways.

The first two chapters of this dissertation will focus on how social media platforms can be created or harnessed in order to pursue either or both regroupment and agitation. These chapters will argue that, in order for online networked counterpublic communication to be robust and productive, counterpublic participants must possess and respond to their *counterpublic media ideologies*. Following Gershon (2010), I propose that members of networked counterpublics are mindful of the communication platforms they use, and in keeping, they make decisions in which they either create their own platforms or media, or use other platforms for specific reasons. In the third chapter, the focus is on a counterpublic that comes out of the use of a social media platform used for *interpersonal* (i.e. one-on-one) communication. I argue that the communication on certain platforms is understood to take place in a “counterpublic context,” which makes use of more intentional and open for reflective criticism. I will now turn to these case studies.

Chapter 1

Asexuality and the Internet: Finding a Counterpublic Online

I felt this way years before I discovered asexuality. I'd had a girlfriend, and the occasional persons of vague interest had been women, so clearly that means I'm straight, right? But at the same time, I never really thought about sex. I never went looking for it, I never felt like I needed it. Whenever I thought about these women, I thought about things like going on vacation or scouring the local thrift stores for retro video games with them, but I never really thought about taking them to bed. One day, I decided that meant that I was straight, but I just wasn't very good at it.

Later, when I discovered asexuality, I mentioned this on an asexuality forum. I was surprised by the number of other people who said that they had felt the same way. Some of them had even used the same phrase to describe themselves.

-- Anonymous

<http://www.asexualityarchive.com/category/asexual-life/>

The experience above is from one anonymous Seattle-based self-identified cis-gender male who works in the software industry. He says he possesses “a currently undetermined romantic orientation that lives somewhere close to aromantic, but with just enough heteroromantic touches sprinkled into it to keep things confusing.” His vocabulary for describing his sexual identity may be new to those not familiar with the discourse around identity developed among those that have found a place under the asexual identity umbrella. The anonymous writer has created a website with a thorough introduction to asexuality, AsexualityArchive.com. In this chapter, I explore the sites of online communication on which those that identify as asexuals participate in the counterpublic practice of regroupment, in which members of a counterpublic process and develop the set of assumptions that undergird their ability to speak as a group that somehow differs from

mainstream publics. Asexuality is unique in creating an online identity that is distinctly more robust online than offline.

In describing the asexual experience, the author of the Asexuality Archive is thoughtfully considerate of the diversity of experiences and subject positions outside his own, but he often includes his personal perspective to describe elements of asexuality. Like members of *sexual* minorities (e.g. lesbians, gays, bisexuals, BDSM practitioners), this experience—seeking out and finding other people on the Internet who share a common disposition towards sex—is shared by members of the asexual community. Asexuality, perhaps because of when it became viable as an identity marker, is widely associated with the Internet.

The anonymous writer of AsexualityArchive.com is not alone in finding out that others are like him online; he is one of many people who have created and published media about their asexuality online. In this anonymous writer's case, he has also self-published his writings in a book called *Asexuality: A Brief Introduction*, available as a free PDF on his website, a Kindle e-book, and a book printed on demand using Amazon's self-publishing service CreateSpace.

This chapter is concerned with the use of digital information and communication technologies to discuss asexuality as a (non-)sexual identity and to produce media that engages an asexual counterpublic. It looks at how non-normative sexual politics have played a role in the twenty-first century communication of the asexual community. I focus specifically on the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), which I will argue is the most significant digital platform for asexuals. But I also acknowledge

the ways that asexual regroupment is a multiplatform phenomenon. I discuss the multiplatform media production of a prominent member of the asexual community, SwankIvy, and I also use Tumblr as an example of particular social media platforms becoming more popular sites for counterpublic regroupment.

As has been well documented by Foucault (1978) and many cultural historians, identities are social constructions used by people to make their own or other people's bodies legible to institutions that need to have these people classified which then, as a result, makes these bodies legible to culture at large. In a culture that treats marriage as ideal, marriage ties are assumed to be sexual and, despite volumes of jokes about sexless marriages, all or most subjects that enter into these bonds assume that the married relationship will facilitate and include sex. For someone who experiences no sexual attraction or for someone not interested in sex for whatever reason, this assumption can be annoying or downright troubling. The assumption that marriages facilitate sex between married couples is just one example of a way that institutions can assume subjects are sexual and/or *want* them to be so.

This chapter takes three parts. In the first section, I will tell the history of the site most connected to the forging and maintenance of an asexual identity, AVEN (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network at <http://www.asexuality.org>), by starting with its founding in 2001, to 2014. Central to this section will be an explanation of what exactly the online nature of AVEN had to do with forming, or at least codifying or solidifying, this identity. I will discuss ways that the website has been used to define and identify key terms relevant to asexuality, and to create a resource and communication forum for asex-

ual people. To do this, I will rely on the content and structure of the site itself, specifically its diverse and robust forums, and an interview I conducted in 2012 with the site's founder and frequent media spokesperson, David Jay. In this section, I will focus on the specific attributes of AVEN that influenced the prominence of the site – that it is online at all, that it uses specific kinds of communication technologies, and that it has a charismatic leader that is involved in the administration of AVEN. If, as Hacking (1986) notes, dynamic nominalism—shifting names for shifting cultural forms over time and space—is a fact of life that is difficult to standardize as a cultural process, is there something to be said of the burst of dynamic nominalism on the Internet, which one sees when shared affinities have been discovered over time and space using networked technologies?

In this chapter's second section, I discuss the perspectives that have risen as important to the asexual counterpublic that has recently come together to regroup. I take up questions about twenty-first century sexual politics to examine asexuality's major concerns in the contemporary sexual-political environment. Building off of Ian Hacking's (1986) concept of dynamic nominalism and Spivak's (1984-1985, 1989) concept of strategic essentialism, I propose that the asexual counterpublic deploys *strategic nominalism* to critique the biomedicalization of those with a lack of sexual attraction. I coin the term strategic nominalism to describe how the asexual counterpublic has proliferated the ways with which people can describe their sexual (and romantic) identities. The use of identity categories amongst asexual counterpublics is strategic because it seeks 1.) to resist the medicalization or (bio)medicalization (Clarke et al., 2010) of those who do not experience sexual attraction, 2.) to create an asexual umbrella under which various identi-

ty attributes can be organized under the same banner, and 3.) to exploit a social context that is, for the most part, tolerant and accepting of non-normative sexual politics.

I will focus this section on the media production of a prominent member of the asexual community, Swank Ivy. I will turn my attention to one particular short video, “Shit People Say to Asexuals,” uploaded to YouTube, which she crafted with help from asexuals from different parts of the world. The video provides an interesting case study for how people who identify as asexual work together to produce their own media about asexuality and, more specifically, how an asexual politics hopes to reconfigure the perspectives of powerful institutions that assume sexuality for all subjects. I will end this section by considering an antagonist to asexuality, the sex columnist Dan Savage, who cites specifically an issue with how and when asexuals decide to name themselves as asexuals.

Finally, in the third and final section, I attempt to understand why a particular social media platform, Tumblr, became known as a popular site for communication about asexuality by asexuals. In this section, I will focus on the examples of communicating about asexuality or amongst asexuals on AVEN and Tumblr to explore how certain affordances of digital communication platforms impact the desirability of those platforms for those seeking counterpublic communication (e.g. size of desired counterpublic audience, presence of the right *kind* of people, the character of the communication activity, the likelihood of the “right kind” of interaction). But after spending time exploring the ways that platform specificity may impact counterpublic communication, I will expand my analysis to talk about the counterpublic mediascape more broadly, to consider ways that counter-

publics are disrupted by outsiders and to think about competing affinities for digital and analog counterpublic media forms.

I should also say here what often is not seen as necessary: I am a sexual person. I am not a member of the asexual community, though I have observed many of its media objects and public communications posted online. I am not working from, but rather I am working alongside, the five tenets Ela Przybylo (2013) proposes as the “interdisciplinary method” of asexuality.² For Przybylo, the asexual method:

(1) questions dominant norms of relating, loving, kinship and intimacy, (2) diversifies sexual options, experiences and lifestyles, (3) challenges, in some capacity, schemes of the medicalisation and pathologisation of sexual lack, (4) exposes the constraining force of the sexual imperative and sexual liberation rhetoric and crucially (5) insists on the legitimacy, viability, positivity and possibility of absence or low levels of sexual attraction, desire, arousal or pleasure. (p. 194)

Certainly, nothing below is meant to challenge individuals’ or the community’s claims to the above. When speaking of asexuality, this chapter largely takes these politics as given and focuses its questions on how asexuality self-expression and community expression has manifested itself online and to what effects. While this chapter is not invested in the asexual method per se, I do believe this contextualizing and historicizing work respects the work of those who put asexuality to work, as Przybylo outlines above. My aim in outlining the shape and character of asexual organization and communication is to bring attention to the power of the identity as strategically named, strategically formed and circu-

² Here, “asexuality” can be a method just as queer theory can. Przybylo (2013) also offers Bogaert’s concept of the “lens of asexuality” as an alternative to “method” (Bogaert, 2012).

lates in ways that force us to reconsider the normalization and power of sexuality in at least the contemporary U.S.

AVEN and Defining Asexuality as a Collective Identity Online

In recent years, the Internet has provided a clearinghouse of sorts for constituting the asexual community. While it would be incorrect to say that people who do not experience sexual attraction did not exist until the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network came about, the role of AVEN in codifying asexuality and providing a centralized site for people to find other self-identified asexuals and information about asexuality is hard to ignore. For scholars of asexuality like sociologist Kristin Scherrer (2008), asexuality is “a relatively recent emergent sexual identity [that] has...developed with the aid of internet technologies which have allowed for the formation of community by otherwise geographically isolated individuals” (p. 622). According to psychologist Anthony Bogaert (2012), “the identification as an asexual person (‘I am asexual’) is probably a recent phenomenon, and largely a Western one at that. Use of the word ‘asexual’ to describe an individual may also be a relatively modern, Western phenomenon” (p. 38). Bogaert (2012) attributes the popularity of the term “asexual” as an identity category to AVEN and its creator David Jay and two academic articles within the field of psychology (one of which was written by him in 2004).

AVEN was founded in 2001, and it lays claim to an optimal URL: asexuality.org. The organization’s dual mission, fostered through *visibility* and *education*, is listed on its About Us page: “creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community.” At the time of this writing in 2016, the AVEN

homepage lists their definition of an asexual at the top of the page: “Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction.” As I will discuss below, this definition was approved by a vote on AVEN, but is not uniformly used by all individual asexuals. Further down the AVEN homepage, the asexual identity is defined against the identity of the celibate: “Unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation. Asexual people have the same emotional needs as everybody else and are just as capable of forming intimate relationships.” Here AVEN makes the decision between a moral, religious, personal choice and an orientation, an innate (perhaps biological) attribute.

In this section, I will chart the crystallization of an asexual identity by focusing on the creation and early years of AVEN. I hope to provide a clear understanding of how AVEN and the human actors that used the site as a communication hub contribute to our current understanding of asexuality. In so doing, I will also historicize the development of an asexual identity by making clear the other social, historical, and political actors that created the conditions that made it possible for such an identity to form. My analysis and the history I craft are informed by a 2012 interview conducted with David Jay, various academic studies of asexuality, media representations of asexuality, and an analysis of AVEN and its forums. In my history here, I hope to place asexuality more firmly in its sociopolitical history as well as consider what it means that AVEN and other online forums are the primary vehicles for the formation and maintenance of asexual counter-publics.

The Creation of AVEN

Before there was AVEN, a series of declarative acts by people unknown to each other—all expressing a feeling of being left out by *sexual* culture—appeared on blogs, message boards, online journals, and personal websites. As AVEN founder David Jay (2003) notes in a paper he wrote in college about collective identity formation, people were identifying their experience variously as “celibacy, nonsexuality, antisexuality, and asexuality” (p. 3). He goes on to quote from a post on the alt.bondage³ Usenet message board in 1995:

I am [...] trying to bring this out in the open. Asexual people do exist. Someone who is asexual is someone who has no real interest in either sex. Someone who has never been turned on by human genitalia. [*sic*] Asexual people may have other turnons [*sic*] *like bondage* but not much else gets it for them. I have been struggling over this issue for over a year now. I am very confused about my issues as well. Anyhow, I just wanted to try to start a little thread on asexuality. (p. 3)

Here, we see one Usenet user seeking to carve out a space for asexuality within the Usenet group’s discussions because they have been *struggling* with the issue and are *confused*. For this user, speaking up was an issue of feeling like they didn’t fit in within a culture that is full of sexual imagery and assumes that everyone has a sexual drive and sexuality. Writing on her blog for the user-generated content Dispatches site of AZ Star-net, “the online service for The Arizona Daily Star,” Zoe O’Reilly (1997) said,

With Ellen's coming out and the new trend towards "outing" and the overall hipness involved, there's been a lot of press dedicated to gays, bisexuals and most other sexually-oriented groups. But there is one group continuously overlooked:

³ The alt.* (alternative) hierarchy for newsgroups was set up for discussion of topics that were not deemed appropriate for the eight broad categories of Usenet newsgroups, which corresponded to ways of organizing academia or journalism (e.g. comp.*, humanities.*, news.*). The alt.bondage newsgroup was established for people to discuss bondage, in the sadomasochistic sense.

The asexual.

I'm out and proud to be asexual. My people are a definite minority group who wish to be recognized like all the others. We want a colored ribbon, a national holiday, coupons for fast food. We want the world to know that we are out there.

O'Reilly here assumes and presages the formation of an asexual identity and interest group and humorously suggests that asexuals should even receive specific coupons.

These sentiments led some people to band together to form a Yahoo! group on October 12, 2000, still active with 496 members, called Haven for the Human Amoeba.⁴ David Jay started AVEN on March 10, 2001. At that point, AVEN was quite different from what it is today. The original AVEN website was an invitation for people who experienced, like Jay, a lack of sexual attraction to email him. Jay developed AVEN without having met anyone else who felt alienated by sexuality and sexual culture.

I started AVEN because I'd been having this experience in high school really struggling to come to terms with myself. All my friends were experiencing/exploring sexuality, having crushes on people, having this shared experience being sexually attracted to people. All this culture was there to help them understand that, even for some people there was queer culture, and there was straight culture, and straight culture was more predominant, but this culture was telling them what it meant to interact with someone, what that meant to have relationships with people, and they got their emotional needs met over time, and to me, there was nothing. (personal interview, April 23, 2012)

When AVEN started, David explained, "I just had a link for people to email me when I started the website. That's how I had the first few conversations" (personal interview, April 23, 2012). One of the people who messaged Jay informed him about the Yahoo!

⁴ The Yahoo! group is categorized under the Yahoo!-generated category "Abstinence," a term that does not correspond to many people who identify as asexuals, which is a stark reminder of the importance of considering the politics of categorization and infrastructure (see, e.g., Bowker and Star, 1999). It appears, by looking at the publicly visible page for the group, that there were just over 50 posts in 2012.

group. After participating in the Yahoo! group for some time, Jay felt the discussions were getting too cluttered. “People were getting in these discussions about what it was about. And then we would have new people coming in and we’d need to welcome them. The traffic became overwhelming. So I went and created a multithread bulletin board [on AVEN]” (personal interview, April 23, 2012). The AVEN forums went live in 2002, and the next day, the site moved from Jay’s personal webpage on a Wesleyan University URL (Jay was pursuing his undergraduate degree at Wesleyan at the time) to asexuality.org.

The forums, which were originally hosted on a now-defunct BBS (bulletin board system), eventually moved from the open source phpBB to the proprietary Invision Power Services BB software. According to Jay, the upgrades were made necessary by the robust discussions that occurred on AVEN’s forums. Jay explains the early days of the AVEN forums,

We would have people that would come in every other week or so and tell us these big long stories describing their experience. They had this same validation that I had, that they weren’t alone, to find people who related to experiences that they’ve never been able to really have other people understand. [...] So I really started thinking about how to create a community for people, especially people who are really interested in figuring themselves out. A number of people started working with other volunteers in the community who took an active role in welcoming everyone, and they got into discussions about what it was to create a safe space with all of those people who were coming in and finding a way to understand themselves. That core of providing a safe space has been core in AVEN’s mission. (personal interview, April 23, 2012)

People continued to come to the site for similar reasons (what Jay calls “collective identity formation”), but as time went on, more complicated questions about the community started developing. At the time of this writing (January 2016), there are more than 78,000

registered accounts on AVEN, the AVEN open Facebook group has over 9,500 members, and the AVEN Twitter account (@asexuality) has over 6,000 followers.

AVEN's Role in Setting the Agenda for Asexuality

While AVEN's professed focus on education and visibility emphasizes its mission in communicating asexuality to a larger public, in practice, AVEN has been a way of working asexuality out from the inside. Within AVEN and other media that facilitated discussions, new identities formed along the romantic spectrum (e.g. heteroromantic, biromantic, homoromantic, aromantic) and along the sexual-asexual spectrum (e.g. gray-a's and demisexuals). Jay says,

Not surprisingly, questions about relationships and intimacy became really central to what that community was exploring because a lot of the scripts that exist for everything from dating to marriage to friends-with-benefits strongly implies sexuality, and if you want to engage in intimacy with people without sexuality, you have to do anywhere from light to heavy rewriting of those scripts. And that's a really interesting piece of exploration our community is engaged in. It's something that wouldn't have been able to happen without the Internet. (personal interview, April 23, 2012)

Thus, as discussed above, AVEN provided a forum to troubleshoot relationships, often with sexual people—family, friends, and romantic partners. The forums also facilitated the creation of discussions in other languages—German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, French, etc.⁵—that became their own splinter forums. People with certain other identities, like older and gender-neutral people, splintered off with their own forums, too. Conversations on AVEN also helped in the process of deciding on an asexuality flag, which stacks

⁵ In 2016, the AVEN homepage has several links at the bottom of the page to some language-specific sub-sites on AVEN (listed above) and several non-AVEN language-based sites for asexual communication on other platforms (e.g. Chinese, Turkish, Norwegian BBSs).

horizontal bars from black down to grey down to white down to purple, and was part of the informal propagation of the community symbol of cake (the tongue-in-cheek in-joke is that asexuals gain something similar to sexual pleasure from eating cake). These symbols of the community, though not universally endorsed or used, can be seen across asexual media.

One thing Jay and others have made clear is that AVEN was helpful in allowing many people feel that there were others like them. To do that, though, people who do not experience sexual attraction must be able to find the site. In the case of medical information, many Internet users have developed a trust of certain sites, so much so that they seek out and trust information found online to help them diagnose and treat abnormalities. This use of online information to provide medical advice has been described as “the WebMD effect” (Conrad and Stults 2012).⁶ In the case of AVEN, it was important for an asexual-positive source to rank higher in search engine results than sites about asexual reproduction in single-cell organisms and other sites so that asexuals could find AVEN—which had begun to develop a reputation as being a good resource for people coming to terms with their asexuality. If AVEN is accessed when a user is looking for information about their own experiences and subjectivity, the message one receives when coming to AVEN is one of affirmation and community. Circuits of affirming information sources have been documented in the trans* community (Stone, 1992) and amongst parents of

⁶ WebMD is a medical megasite that can provide information about medical conditions. It, along with other sites on the Internet, can provide health information after a simple web search. Online search queries regarding illness, when fulfilled, often help quiet (or ramp up) concerns or get appropriate treatment (Conrad and Stults, 2012).

intersex children (Still, 2008); the availability of this information has been seen as a way for subjects with non-normative bodies to fight for their autonomy in the face of a drive to medicalize and treat.

Members of the asexual community, because of the world they live in, which tends to believe abnormalities should be treated, have had to confront the scientific language used to talk about sexuality. In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of asexuality, members of the asexual community often argue for more scientific research so that asexuality can be understood better. In the “Overview” section of the AVEN website, the page starts with:

An asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are. Asexuality does not make our lives any worse or any better, we just face a different set of challenges than most sexual people. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently. *Asexuality is just beginning to be the subject of scientific research.* [emphasis added]

AVEN itself has been the recruitment tool for many studies of asexuality. As social networking sites become more popular amongst asexuals for the purposes of maintaining community and social networks amongst asexuals, AVEN, as something of the “official” site of and for asexuals, remains important as a site to manage the perception of asexuality. Part of this includes the responsibility to encourage studies of asexuality as a way of legitimizing it as an identity. Perhaps learning from the history of homosexuality, asexuals tend to seek studies from sociology and psychology that take the self-reported contentment with a lack of sexual drive as a given, instead of seeking studies that intend to create (bio)medical solutions for asexuality.

The AVEN Overview page goes on to elaborate upon the relationships, attraction, arousal, and identity of asexuals, each under its own subheading. While there is no specific mention of needing scientific justification to set the border of who is and who isn't an asexual (and who is or isn't a member of x sub-category), the language used to describe each of these attributes of asexuality is couched in language that is positivist, organized by a quantitative elaboration of the composite asexual. For instance, under identity, the sentence "Most people on AVEN have been asexual for our entire lives" uses a statistical claim to mark the "normal" asexual. The identity section does go on to acknowledge that minorities of asexual-identified people transition between being asexual and sexual and spend time questioning their asexuality.⁷ In many ways, the Overview section elaborates on the asexual in a way that allows people to understand the trends within asexuality, which can also be understood as defining the norms of asexuality through observation of lived reality (i.e. science).

On the one hand, the AVEN site and the formation of an asexual *identity* perpetuate an *essential* asexuality. The language on the AVEN website seeks to enfold asexuals within the quest for an enlightened multicultural society that respects all kinds of people. As such, it follows ethnic multiculturalism by adapting a "born this way" essentialist understanding (Scherrer, 2008), albeit, as I will explore in the next section, in a manner that strategically de-emphasizes certain aspects of biological essentialism and, in fact, facilitates a diversity of perspectives on what counts as asexuality. As both Scherrer (2008)

⁷ This brings up similar issues, about the veracity and immutability of the identity, encountered by Rust (1996) in her study of bisexuality.

and Carrigan (2011) have found, though, asexuals have a wide variety of understandings of how their own asexuality is defined. The larger FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section that the Overview above is taken from also includes sections commonly asked by friends and family and (presumably sexual) people in relationships with asexuals. These sections highlight the everyday concerns that asexuals may have (e.g., the expectations of family, friends, and partners to engage in sexual relationships) and a more immediate reason for asexuals to “come out” than the larger identity politics (i.e. visibility and education writ large) AVEN promotes.

According to Jay, “There have been a lot of discussions about the definition [of “asexuality”] and I think some discussions about the word [itself]. And I think a lot of encouragement pretty early on from people who agree with the way that I’ve always used it” (personal interview, April 23, 2012). But as time went on, members of AVEN realized that there were myriad ways of *being* asexual. Many new sub-groups within asexuality were deliberated upon on AVEN’s bulletin boards. Jay explained the process for developing sub-identifications:

There’s a definition of asexuality that is on the front of AVEN. That is there to help—it’s kind of a flag to get people to the community, but it’s not hard and fast, everyone can kind of pick up the word asexual and use it however they want to figure themselves out. And if, along the way, you want to invent new words to help you figure yourself out, then great! Don’t put those words up right away, but you can offer them up and see if they’re useful. (personal interview, April 23, 2012)

Though various ways of identifying within (a)sexual and (a)romantic categories exist, many people who do not experience what they consider sexuality as others understand it find use in identifying as asexual. Members of the community, as Jay says, will take up

other terms if they are appropriate and stick (personal interview, April 23, 2012). Jay focuses on collective understandings of identity, but, of course, individuals may use certain language against community standards.

The asexual writer and media producer SwankIvy, who we will return to later in this chapter, describes AVEN as a social organization that had the critical mass and media attention to affect her use of words to describe her own identity. In the following, SwankIvy references AVEN in her discussion of her own first blog post about asexuality:

I'm an asexual who doesn't experience a sex drive either, so I referred to what I didn't understand when a lot of people referred to having a sex drive but not experiencing sexual attraction. I didn't think of those two things as separate, so I just described myself as not having a sex drive. And defining my experience as lack-of-sex-drive. I noticed that after David Jay started AVEN and people started talking about their experiences, that a lot of people experience these two things separately, sex drive but not sexual attraction. So when I realized that those were the terms they were using for these things and that one of them referred to a physical experience of a libido and one of them refers to who you're attracted to, which is, in my case, no one, not sexually anyway. I realized that I need to phrase how I viewed my experience differently because it got confusing and I could see why. When David Jay provided a place to discuss things like that on AVEN, he was definitely trying to create a community, and I was not, so some of the consensus that they came to in that community were what went out to the media. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

SwankIvy did not become a member of AVEN until 2010. She eventually did create an account because she felt that too many conversations were occurring that she wanted to be a part of, especially because she was so prominent a figure in the community. That she was able to gain an audience outside of AVEN reminds us that various other social networking sites have connected asexuals before and since the founding of AVEN. These platforms, as well as AVEN, carry different associations and afforded uses. On finally joining AVEN, SwankIvy says,

I [developed] relatively few scars growing up as an asexual. I appreciated that experience from others, but I didn't have that drive to find others like me, like so many people describe in the asexual community. I never really felt that isolated. I was used to and didn't really care about being misunderstood and being the only person like me. So when I wrote about my experience, I wasn't looking for comfort and I think I've also not really been a joiner of things like that. I don't join a lot of interest-based or orientation-based group like that. I don't participate in a lot of those communities. I just felt like I wouldn't go there much, like it wouldn't benefit me. I eventually joined, because I figured that as someone who's so well known in the community and not even have an AVEN account—that's the hub of what's going on! It seemed like most people who would want to talk to me would go there first to see if I had an account. So that's why I did it. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

Here, SwankIvy elaborates on several reasons why people might come to AVEN, and might seek out counterpublic communication about asexuality. SwankIvy initially understands AVEN as a site for communication amongst a counterpublic for therapeutic purposes. But over time, the other possibilities of counterpublic communication became apparent and attractive for her. Her story here points to the multivalent uses and purposes of sites of counterpublic organization and communication.

Legitimizing Asexuality with Science

Maybe it's repressed sexuality...because you don't want to face what sexuality might look like. Lie down!

-- Joy Behar, *The View* (Jan 15, 2006)

When introduced to the concept, sexual people often link asexuality to celibacy or Puritanism. Foucault's (1978) history of Western sexuality explains how at a certain point in Western history, sexuality and sexual liberation began to be valued. According to him, the repressive hypothesis stipulates that sexual liberation was needed in order for people to become freed from the Victorian mores of sexual repression that dominated mainstream society. Asexuality insists that even in a culture in which named and codified sex-

ualities are valued and various, none of them coincide with asexuals' experience of sexuality. When AVEN founder and spokesperson David Jay appeared on the American talk show *The View* to explain asexuality, co-host Joy Behar joked that she could "turn him" if she were given the chance. The segments of the mainstream media that are prone to sensationalism, like talk shows, have often discussed asexuality.⁸ In Angela Tucker's (2012) feature-length documentary about asexuality, *(A)sexual*, asexuals are seen getting heckled at the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade. For many members of the parade audience, asexuality was read as a sex-negative Puritan political identity, antagonistic to their out-and-proud LGBT or LGBT-allied *sexual* identities.

Recently, many scholars, especially psychologists and sociologists, have sought to legitimize asexuality by studying it. Shortly after the formation of AVEN, several scholars began studying asexuals as subjects with a distinct (a)sexual orientation. Many of them note that a distinct, nameable asexual orientation came out of the cultural work of members of AVEN. Scientific contributions, like those of Bogaert (2004), complement the work done on AVEN and the publicity done by AVEN founder David Jay to provide a

⁸ As Josh Gamson (1998) notes in his tribute to trash talk shows, "If you are lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgendered, watching daytime TV talk shows is pretty spooky. (Indeed, it must be unnerving and exciting for pretty much anyone whose behavior or identity does not conform to the dominant conventions of goodness, decency, and normality.)" (4). One can gain greater clarity of why so many asexuals see a 2007 episode of *The Montel Williams Show* as an important but problematic landmark in the movement when one considers Gamson's words. He continues, "Exploiting the need for visibility and voice, talk shows provide them, in distorted but real, hollow but gratifying ways" (5). While the show legitimized asexuality in a way, it also relied on the trope of pitting the asexual as boring and drab (Przybylo, 2011).

platform for the mainstream media and public to discuss and take asexuality seriously (Bogaert, 2012, p. 38).

As Bogaert (2012) points out, the invention of AVEN is not the first time that what has come to be described as asexuality has been documented. The famous sexologist Alfred Kinsey acknowledged that not all people he surveyed could be fit on the 0-6 Kinsey scale, where 0 is exclusively homosexual and 6 is exclusively heterosexual. He designated those who did not experience sexual attraction or participate in homo- or heterosexual behavior with the designation 'X' (Kinsey, 1948, p. 651; Kinsey, 1953, p. 472). Rothblum and Brehony (1993) have also documented the long history of women living together in (romantic but) asexual relationships, termed "Boston marriages."

Hormone therapy is often recommended to those that express low desire in sex, though as Bogaert (2012) notes, taking testosterone often increases sexual activity but not desire. Within the United States, there is currently a listing in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V, first published in 2013) for female sexual interest/arousal disorder and male hypoactive sexual desire disorder. Previously, the DSM-IV had entries for hypoactive sexual desire disorder for both sexes and sexual arousal disorder for females. Male sexual arousal is treated as erectile dysfunction, which is seen as having a physiological cause that is easily treated. Female sexual interest and arousal, for the DSM-V, have been seen as difficult to distinguish. The diagnosis for female sexual interest/arousal disorder and male hypoactive sexual desire disorder hold similarities to historical entries for homosexuality (removed from the DSM in 1973), Gender Dysphoria (added to the DSM-V, and replaces Gender Identity

Disorder (GID) from the DSM-IV⁹), and Transvestic Fetishism (which only applied to heterosexual men in the DSM-IV and is now open to “gay men and women” in the DSM-V, though it is only treated if it becomes a disorder if there is “significant distress or impairment”), in that they treat as potentially disruptive and abnormal certain behaviors, feelings, and identities that many people have recently begun organizing around with pride.

The histories of these diagnoses are complicated. Though the inclusion of homosexuality in the DSM is often remembered as something that was thankfully overcome, early homophile activists in the mid-twentieth century U.S. and the Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1893), publishing in the late 19th Century, sought psychological classifications for homosexual behavior to prevent “inverts” or others from having their sex acts turn them into criminals. In the case of transgenderism and transsexualism, medical diagnoses have been used to stigmatize those who transgress or seem to transgress gendered expectations, but they have also been used to secure desired surgeries and treatments.¹⁰

⁹ There is currently much debate over the gender identity diagnoses. While the progressive press cheered the APA’s recent decision to get rid of the GID diagnosis in favor of the diagnosis Gender Dysphoria, the GID diagnosis was often used to get approval for gender reassignment surgery. The APA Task Force on Treatment of GID was assigned with setting guidelines for treatment, and “The task force additionally recommended that the APA begin making position statements supporting the ‘rights of persons of any age who are gender variant, transgender, or transsexual’” (Lowder, 2012).

¹⁰ It is well known, too, that those seeking gender reassignment surgery have often learned how to narrate their experience so that it fit within the psychiatric protocol for approving such surgery (Stone, 1992, p. 228).

Psychologist Lori A. Brotto (2010), an expert on low sexual desire and asexuality, writes that those who seek treatment for HSDD differ from asexuals who experience low sexual desire or interest because of the distress they feel at having no sexual desire or interest (p. 230). This does not prevent many from attempting to medicalize the lack of sexual attraction experienced by asexuals (See Anonymous, 2012; Bogaert 2012, p. 105-114). While some who experience low sexual desire or interest are often distressed by this, self-identified asexuals are usually not. Moreover, many asexuals would make a distinction between a lack of sexual desire or interest and a lack of sexual attraction; for them, it is the latter that makes them asexual (Anonymous, 2012; Bogaert, 2012). The DSM's recent conflation of desire and arousal may, in fact, make it harder to make an asexual-affirmative differentiation between desire and arousal. The ability to be diagnosed and treated (whether or not such treatments are possible or successful) may thus be helpful for some people, but the fact that the diagnosis exists allows asexuals to encounter people who think they should seek a professional psychiatric opinion on such symptoms. By creating an identity that rejects the medical solution and the ways that (bio)medical discourses turn people with no sexual attraction into potential cases to be cured, the asexual identity short circuits attempts to (bio)medicalize what the community calls asexuality.¹¹

The Expansive Potential of Identity Creation Online

¹¹ When I speak of medicalization and biomedicalization, I am invoking the work of Adele Clark et al. (2010) who have outlined the ways that individual subjects can submit to or reject medicalization, biomedicalization, or alternative solutions to maladies and abnormalities.

I first started calling myself “asexual” when I was sixteen, but at the time, I didn’t realize that that was actually *a legitimate orientation*, so it was really more of a joke. I didn’t date. I wasn’t dating. And I wasn’t interested in sex. It remained a curiosity. It wasn’t until I was 19 that I found AVEN and I found out that there were a lot more people like me.

-- Winter, *The Montel Williams Show* (January 4, 2007),
emphasis added

The philosopher of science Ian Hacking elaborates upon Foucault’s (1978) postulation that homosexuality came into being after sexuality was overtaken by scientific rationalism in the Western world, what Foucault categorizes as *scientia sexualis*. For Foucault, the homosexual rights movement eventually formed itself around this identity formation, which was simultaneously classified as a psycho-sexual disorder. Hacking takes the concept of the creation of homosexuality and of Multiple Personality Disorder as different models in society’s “making up people.” People with certain attributes take on new names in different places and at different times. They are created by a number of historically defined social actors, both human and non-human, individual and collective. Hacking gives this phenomenon the name “dynamic nominalism,” and for Hacking,

Dynamic nominalism remains an intriguing doctrine, arguing that numerous kinds of human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labeling them. It is for me the only intelligible species of nominalism, the only one that can even gesture at an account of how common names and the named could so tidily fit together....But just because it invites us to examine the intricacies of real life, it has little chance of being a general philosophical theory...I see no reason to suppose that we shall ever tell two identical stories of two different instances of making up people. (p. 170)

So, for Hacking, that new kinds of people are being named regularly is a fact, but it seems impossible to create theories for this process of identity creation. Proliferation of

new identities, and whether these names derive from the new group of people or bureaucracies that invent the category, is deserving of investigation. Hacking's insistence that the invention of new names for kinds of people is defined by historical and social conditions, so it is important to note the specific conditions that encouraged the naming of asexuality.

In various geographical and historical contexts, various subjects have been understood as having an asexual disposition. Owen (2014), for instance, notes the ways that the category of the mammy created by white supremacy attributed to the mammy an asexual orientation. As Owen notes, though, this perception of asexuality was informed by the white perspective that "says nothing about the mammy's own desire and everything about the white male master. Because she is not constructed as desirable, the question of the subordinated mammy's own sense of desire is rendered a non-issue. Her so-called asexuality is not agential but restrictive..." (Owen 2014, p. 123). Owen's analysis shows the way asexuality has been used to subjugate certain people and create subjectivities with circumscribed (a)sexualities. The affiliation with an asexual identity that I am discussing is agential, but, in fact, the asexual community's strategic nominalism is based on cultural forces other than self-identification.

In Bogaert's (2004) article analysis of a British population survey that popularized the "fact" that 1% of the population is asexual, he explores the demographic attributes of those that finished the sentence "I have felt sexually attracted to..." with the response, "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all" (p. 281). Bogaert uses the word "asexual" to describe these respondents, but these respondents were not asked if they used the

word to describe themselves. From this one survey, Bogaert found that his group of asexuals were more likely to be older, female, non-white, and from lower socioeconomic conditions than the respondents to the survey he would describe as sexual (p. 282). In interpreting Bogaert's paper, it is important to remember that he is attributing an asexual identity onto these respondents based on their self-reported sexual disposition towards others. It is difficult to tell if the asexual category I am examining here, the one that is used to self-identify, arises in the same patterns as Bogaert's system for categorizing. As Bogaert (2004) finds (p. 282), many of those who reported no sexual attraction are in long-term relationships; many self-identifying asexuals are, too. It is difficult to tell how the subjective asexual category that Bogaert relies on relates to the self-identifying asexual category that we see on AVEN and elsewhere. As Bogaert (2004) and Scherrer (2010) remind us, the bureaucratized and privileged forms of familial organization that rely on coupling are not necessarily challenged by asexuality, but in individual instances and with certain kinds of mobilization, they could be. Though the strategic nominalism of the asexual community is understood as an identity that addresses a collectivity of people who can situate themselves somehow under the asexual umbrella, the strategic political gains of self-identifying as asexual are individualistic.

In the case of self-identifying asexuality, the Internet plays a crucial role in the development of the identity categories that describe the non-normative attributes that fall under the asexual identity. In the case of asexuality, the naming and codifying of an asexual identity went on to create a "collective identity" by, in many ways, combining expansive realization and potential (Slater and Miller, 2001), in order to spawn a whole net-

work of media creations and identifications that affirm an asexual identity. Because asexuality was not named previously, it was seen as less likely to be “realized,” but by naming it and codifying it, the potential of asexuality—whatever that may be—can be more easily activated. But how is the existence of an asexual identity category valuable for those who identify with it, and how might it be radical in a sexual world? Because excitement over expansive potential is widely seen as having been squelched by real-name policies on social networking sites and other pushes to reify the offline world’s dynamics and possibilities, how may an asexual identity provide another model for understanding the development of identities online?

In the next section, I classify the asexual identity whose genealogy I explored above in the context of *strategic nominalism*, a concept that borrows from Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism to think about the creation of new identity categories. In this way, the expansive realization and potential of online identities, in conjunction with late twentieth century identity politics has led to the strategic nominalizing of an asexual identity that has real value for its members.

Asexuality’s Strategic Nominalism

In two interviews from the 1980’s, the postcolonial feminist thinker Gayatri Spivak conceded that her anti-essentialist views on identity (that, for instance, there is nothing essentially true or immutable of the categories around which systems of sex, gender, or race are based), do not preclude her from acting as a woman for feminist causes or as a “subaltern” Indian for decolonial causes (Spivak with Rooney, 1989, Spivak with Grosz, 1984/1985). This concept, known as strategic essentialism, allows minoritarian subjects

to *do something* with the identity that has been attributed to them. This strategic essentialism has corollaries in much radical work that seeks to revolutionize systems of thought. In contextualizing her 1981 essay “One Is Not Born a Woman” in a 1992 collection of her essays, Monique Wittig says that she sought to “establish a link between women fighting for women as a class, against the idea of ‘woman’ as an essentialist concept” (xvi). Intersectional feminists, including Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2008), have argued that though powerful forces create the boundaries and definitions of racial and gender categories, the systematic oppression meted out against certain racial or gender categories can still be named and fought against. And, in fact, members of oppressed gender *and* racial categories can and do experience heightened oppression.

The case of asexuality, as formulated here, is unique in that it is an example of a minoritarian subject naming and legitimizing their own identity. In the case of asexuality, the minoritarian subject initiated the naming act, unlike the nominalization of women, homosexuals, blacks, and colonial subjects. Naming asexuality is a way of bringing to light the taken-for-grantedness of sexuality, a strategic nominalization indeed. The pervasiveness of “sexusociety,” a term Przybylo (2011) coined to describe the nature and assumptions of the “sexual world,” was made possible by the sexual revolution and a new tolerant culture around homosexuality that made expressing a distaste or non-desire for sex or sexual culture more troublesome to normative culture.

With strategic nominalization comes strategic essentialism, and so the asexual community points to quantitative or other scientific proof of the veracity of asexuality. For many in the asexual community, the ability to point to numbers, diversity, and robust

communication is helpful in legitimizing asexuality as an identity—and its own politics. A name is necessary to create the category of asexual and to point out the desire for many to exist outside of the asexual imperative. In an interview with *The Guardian*, David Jay tells Rosie Swash (2012) that the asexuality movement is in its third phase. As Swash explains,

the first phase began in the early 2000s, which isn't to suggest that asexuality didn't exist before—simply that it didn't have a coherent public identity...Phase two involved mobilization. In 2006 David Jay hit the media with his message about asexuality. People were curious, but the response was brash and superficial...In 2012, phase three of the asexuality movement, as Jay defines it, is about challenging the mainstream notion of what constitutes a normal sex drive.

But later in that same article, several academics disagree with Jay's contention here, saying that asexuality is hardly known even in the parts of the world that contain the most self-described asexuals. Jay's understanding of his own success in publicity raises an interesting question about what could be gained by more awareness of the asexual resistance of a (bio)medicalized tolerant pro-sexual culture that assumes that all subjects are sexual subjects. As Walters (2014) argues in her own study, tolerance occurs in contexts that are also, contradictorily, quite phobic and oppressive. Because the asexual community's oppression manifests more in microaggressions and in intimate relationships and less in systematic oppression and ribald violence, the single-issue identity politics discussed by Jay here is limited—both in audience and in ability to cause change. I now turn to an example of a piece of asexual media that sheds light on the responses to another type of asexual publicity: asexuals' self-identification in everyday life.

Shit People Say to Asexuals

Canadian writers Kyle Humphrey and Graydon Sheppard started the @ShitGirls-Say Twitter feed in April 2011, and at the end of that year, they released the first in their “Shit Girls Say” web series, which is predicated on spouting off a series of female stereotypes.¹² In early 2012, a group of asexuals from around the world linked by a common friend—SwankIvy, most of whom knew one another primarily through the Internet, created their own response to “Shit Girls Say” and its many parodies. Many videos in the “Shit Girls Say” vein do not poke fun at a certain category of speaker, but instead parody the kinds of things that are said *to* certain kinds of subjects (e.g. “Shit Girls Say to Gay Guys,” “Shit White Girls Say to Black Girls,” “Shit Guys Say When Texting Girls”). In these inverse responses to “Shit Girls Say,” members of subordinate groups point out the ways they are stereotyped or mistreated, emphasizing ways that ignorant members of the dominant group categorize them, address them, and make assumptions about them.

“Shit People Say to Asexuals,” like other videos in this genre, is set up as a series of quick shots, hurling one-liners at the online viewer. Unlike many of the other like videos, which feature one person in various situations, “Shit People Say to Asexuals” is crowdsourced. Its production is not just the responsibility of a single production team and set of actors in the same place. People from various parts of the world contributed their own, and SwankIvy edited all of the contributions together. “Shit People Say to Asexuals” to indicate asexuals’ understanding of the public’s perception of asexuality and to provide a representation of asexuals’ resistance to mainstream culture’s sexual impera-

¹² The first video, which features Hollywood actress Juliette Lewis, has received over 21 million views.

tives. In humor and parody, one can find a helpful guide to understanding a variety of ways that asexuals have found their asexual identity is challenged and debased.

In conversation, SwankIvy discussed “Shit People Say to Asexuals” as being something she recommends, along with AVEN and various Asexuality 101 webpages, to people who are looking for a primer on or introduction to asexuality.

I like to show that one off, because it shows so many different kinds of asexuals, so many different kinds of people with the same message—very diverse group—people of very different races, sexes, and orientations. So I like showing that one to people, it's more concise than my in-depth content. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

For SwankIvy, then, the video is one that shows how sixteen people all come to a similar understanding of how asexuals are and should be treated. They are also, in a roundabout way, also outlining the diverse, and sometimes contradictory, characteristics of asexual identity as experienced by asexual individuals. It is worth mentioning that by recommending the video to those who are just being introduced to asexuality, SwankIvy is also preparing them for the ways that non-asexuals respond to asexuality.

Below, I pull out some of the lines in the “Shit People Say to Asexuals” video, grouped thematically, in order to illustrate the ways asexuality, as a newly nominalized identity, is delegitimized. While it could be imagined that lists of things that get said to members of oppressed groups, these videos do not feature actors screaming the various slurs that are said to disparage members of oppressed groups. Nor do these videos point out the violence that many oppressed groups face. Though intimate partner violence related to refusal to engage in sex certainly exists, these and other acts of violence or structural oppression are not included in these videos. Rather, the videos document ostensibly

benign forms of ignorance that provoke micro-aggressions and alienation, but do not include evidence of more systematic or violent forms of oppression. There is little evidence of more structural forms of oppression, so the kinds of frustrations displayed in these kinds of video make this genre a suitable introduction to the ways that asexuals feel antagonism from normative sex society.

You're using the word wrong.

But...you masturbate...

Never? God, I'd die.

Oh God, you must have so much time on your hands.

Why do you need to raise awareness? It's not like asexuals are being asexual-bashed.

When any minoritarian subject must explain the tenets with which they approach the world, majority subjects often trivialize their perspective and seek to define their subjectivity from the outside. In these lines, the majority subject defines the borders of asexuality, assumedly not allowing the time or space for the asexual subject to explain their own subjectivity and their own self-understanding of their identity and subject position. Far from being afforded the space to define one's subject position in relation to more codified definitions of asexuality, the asexual subject must defend their self-definition to the majoritarian subject. When the asexuals quoted earlier discussed their desire for something (like AVEN) that could legitimize this aspect of their identity, it was this kind of response they were looking to counter.

You're really just straight...stop trying to seem special!

You're gay then?

Comments like these—that assume that asexuals in relationships or homogeneous spaces that either assume gayness or straightness and assume the opposite is acceptable—are unique to a tolerant pro-sexual society that sees homosexual identities as suitable and able to enter the “charmed circle” of acceptable sexuality (Rubin, 1984). Still in these scenarios, asexuality—or an unwillingness to participate in certain sexual arrangements or a lack of sexual attraction—does not make sense to the ignorant conversation partner.

Have you had your hormones checked?

Humans are sexual by nature!

You know, you should really see a psychiatrist about that.

I saw that on an episode of House. I’m pretty sure there’s a cure for that.

That’s not a personal medical question at all. I just want to know if you got your hormones checked.

The language used to discuss sexualities that lie on either side of Gayle Rubin’s border of acceptable sex have been categorically subsumed into the scientific rubric of normal and pathological (or legal/moral categories of legal/moral and illegal/immoral). Today, scientific explanations (e.g. hormone levels) are commonly assumed to be cures for low levels of sexual attraction. The post-Foucauldian asexual identity actively rejects these explanations for their desires.

Sexual aberrations, deviations, which we now can understand to be akin to sexuality scholar Gayle Rubin’s circle of “bad,” “abnormal,” “unnatural” sexuality (281), are understood by the stigmatizers as worth investigating and diagnosing because they are the cause of other symptoms. For Foucault, “there was scarcely a malady or physical distur-

bance that did not impute at least some degree of sexual etiology” (1978, 65). Since the de-medicalization of homosexuality and other so-called deviances, some sexual non-normativities have become less stigmatized. Alternatively, some modes of stigmatization have become less broadly salient. There is, of course, a continuing social decoupling of harmful effects of homosexuality. The cause-and-effect relationships between deviations and their symptoms have become more specific. While certain sexually transmitted infections are popularly seen as products of “deviant” sexualities (HIV infection amongst gay males, for instance), in the case of the asexuality video, we see other linkages between sexual abnormalities and abnormal social behavior.

If we understand the ignorant subjects portrayed in this video as being complicit in an otherwise tolerant society, even individuals that claim to understand that LGBT individuals are not sick or deficient can impose these old models of medicalization on asexuals. This impulse to medicalize and not empathize is even more striking with an identity that has not been “normalized,” that has not led to widespread “born this way” awareness bolstered by scientific claims to “truth” around the normal asexual. In AVEN’s mention of scientific research of asexuality on the AVEN FAQ page and many asexuals’ quest for awareness and education, scientific language is still privileged and the production and circulation of asexual research is deemed necessary. Many of the inverted remarks to the “Shit Girls Say” phenomenon aim to point out stereotypes, often grounded in (biological) racism or sexism that still creep in to everyday interactions despite the politically correct illusion that the enlightened among us will not make such ignorant assumptions of others.

I don't get why you don't worry about racism first. I mean, that's a bigger problem than people not recognizing your sexuality.

A young black asexual woman, playing the part of someone speaking to her, says the preceding words, and in so doing, shows a component of intersectionality—the expectation that one will incorporate and consider simultaneously various intersecting minoritarian subjectivities. By classifying this quote as “shit,” the speaker points out that an identification with asexuality often provokes assumptions that asexuality can only fit within single-issue identity politics. Intersectional analyses of asexuality are rare, and asexuality is often presumed to be white and middle-class. The rhetorical style of the video does not allow a more nuanced intersectional critique to arise; instead the video uses an ambiguous defensiveness to bring up the issue of competing identity politics but does not encourage an anti-racist asexual politics.

You just haven't met the right person yet.

You kids and your phases!

You're just a late bloomer!

Yeah, my best friend's cousin's boyfriend's uncle's son's nephew was asexual but he got over it.

From the perspective of asexuals, the idea of the latency of sexuality – that sexuality is often obscured or suppressed because of shame – is often used to empirically discredit the possibility of a sexual identity formed around no sexual attraction. In the video, we see repeated mention of asexuality as a passing phase or a point on the stage of full maturity. That is, not experiencing sexual attraction is a moment of immaturity that will

be overcome. By now, the scientific justification for the naturalness and immutability of diverse sexualities is a dominant way of understanding of sexuality.¹³

Hey, if you're happy with a houseful of cats, that's none of my business.

You must be so spiritually enlightened!

Are you, like, really religious?

Here, the video shows the limited ways that normative culture understands non-sexual lifestyles. To normative culture, a life without sex can only be explained by religious asceticism — or a religious devotion to caring for cats.

Did you get this idea from the Internet?

One quote in the video implies that the very fact that the Internet is seen as the origin of an asexual identity cheapens the identity. Here, there is an assumption that the identity is native to or unique to the Internet and therefore is a simulated, not actual, identity. This attitude is common for cultural identities that form in virtual spaces like video games, television shows, and the Internet (e.g. fan and geek identities).

~

“Shit People Say to Asexuals” is thus one of many amateur-created media objects that allow asexuals to promote their message, and to discursively carve out a space for asexual self-determination and resist the push for medicalization. The crowdsourced nature of the video allows the viewer to see a multicultural array of English-speaking asexuals of various gender presentations, nationalities (through at least American and British

¹³ However, these well-worn claims that homosexuality and heterosexuality are consistent and unchanging have been challenged by the likes of Rust (1996) in her study of bisexuality.

accents), and ethnicities to contribute their own lines, perspectives, and creative energies to the project. This does cultural work on multiple layers. It reminds viewers that asexuality is an international phenomenon, not only limited to members of certain genders and ethnicities.¹⁴ It also subverts the dominant ideology by creating a parody of everyday interactions that reinforce stereotypes.

By following the conventions and structure of a popular meme, asexuality is able to more easily enter into conversations and perspectives of those who were previously unaware. After all, when one starts watching “Shit X Says” videos, they are coaxed to watch more by YouTube’s recommendation algorithm, which pushes similar videos to viewers after a viewer finishes watching one.

The crowdsourced nature of this video has an interesting aesthetic result. While I noted above how the crowdsourced nature of this video is a democratizing move for videos of this genre,¹⁵ most of the asexuals who shot footage of themselves with humorous lines were shot with lo-fi webcams or other consumer video cameras. The grainy footage serves to remind us of the ways that those involved in the production of the video probably did not have access to the latest HD cameras and the video makers were not in-

¹⁴ It would be incorrect to say that the video, or even the asexuality forums in several languages linked on AVEN, prove that asexuality is adopted by people in a great many cultures. Asexual identification seems to be largely predicated on the awareness of the online communities and affiliation with cultures that are understood to be mostly accepting and tolerant of lesbian and gay sexualities. Thus, most of those who identify as asexual come from specific cultural contexts.

¹⁵ Many “stars” of these videos are trying to promote their own comedic or other creative work, and the original “Shit Girls Say” comedians received a book deal and other rewards for the popularity of their Twitter account and video (Battersby, 2012).

vested in slick production values and the standardized modes of consumption that so mark sexual culture.

Asexuality's Collaborative Problem?

Many asexuals, especially David Jay, are proud of AVEN's collaborative ethos. Major decisions are decided collaboratively and David Jay sees AVEN as one of many facilitators to the community's development and agenda-setting. At the time of our interview, he noted that the most vital discussions about asexuality were not happening on AVEN, but actually on Tumblr (a phenomenon that will be explored in the final section of this chapter). The somewhat decentralized and non-bureaucratic nature of asexual activism and organization are easy to see as positive attributes for the community by those who give credit to AVEN for initiating the legitimization of an asexual identity. As Daniel Kreiss, Megan Finn, and Fred Turner have noted, these tendencies to celebrate peer production, which sprouted up during the early 2000's in conjunction with collaborative web technologies under the Web 2.0 banner, have been accompanied by a demonization of bureaucracies. In the section of their essay that challenges the idea that "[p]eer production necessarily realizes ethical relationships between collaborators" (251), they note the ways that bureaucracies (much-maligned in celebrations of peer production) allow the state to regulate the ways that employers treat their employees and the ways that peer production can be managed by an unchecked leader.

Though the market has arisen as an actor in many of the online sectors of asexuality discussed in this chapter (AVEN has a market where AVEN-branded goods are sold, SwankIvy has a book contract under her given name for a book on asexuality, and the

editor of AsexualArchive.com has self-published his own book), much of what has been documented is part of “a flourishing nonmarket sector of information, knowledge and cultural production” (Benkler, 2006, p. 7). Kreiss, Finn, and Turner’s essay on peer production can push us to think about asexuality here in two important ways. First, though few are making jobs out of asexuality, organizations supporting asexuality could band together to fight for state recognition of new kinship patterns or more legal rights for those that are asexual. By bringing this up, I do not mean to say that bureaucratization is the answer; LGBT organizations in the twenty-first century, for instance, have pursued marriage at the expense of the rights of the non-married and other vulnerable communities (Conrad, 2010; Warner, 1999; Duggan, 2003; Walters, 2014). I bring this up, though, to note the ways that asexual politics and organization do not address the ways that asexuals are and would not be included in various state protections related or tied to marriage and kinship, like health care, citizenship, and power of attorney (Polikoff, 2007). Second, though David Jay’s initiative to launch AVEN as well as his willingness and eagerness to represent asexuality in the mainstream media are all generally supported by the asexual community, he has gained cultural power in driving the agenda around asexuality. The totality of peer production on AVEN is seen as valuable to asexuality, but when the asexual message is taken to the mainstream media, David Jay’s is the privileged voice. These two issues arise precisely because of the collaborative nature of the asexual community which is brought to the fore when one considers the following incident.

Just as the Internet has helped grow the possibility to identify as asexual and to find other people who lack sexual attraction, so has the Internet allowed for the increased

circulation of the words and thoughts of one man, Dan Savage, who writes a sex column for the *Seattle Stranger* that is syndicated by several alternative weeklies and published online.¹⁶ Savage has had an odd relationship with asexuality. He has a history of trying to undercut the similarities between asexuals and gay organizations as he did in an interview for the documentary *(A)sexual*. In it, he says, “Well, it’s funny to think about, you’ve got the gays marching for the right to be cocksucking homosexuals, and then you have the asexuals marching for the right to not do anything. Which is hilarious. Like, you didn’t need to march for that right. You just need to stay home, not do anything.”¹⁷ But in his work as a sex columnist, Savage has had a singular, more nuanced bone to pick with asexuals.

Through a number of columns and podcasts, Savage makes an ethical point about how asexuals should approach romantic relationships with sexual partners. These ethical statements have come to feel like blame to many members of the asexual community. Savage has often been called out for his un-PC statements and arguments,¹⁸ but his comments about asexuality have caused particular ire in that community. Since a 2005 col-

¹⁶ Savage gained widespread attention in 2003 when he attempted to sabotage the web presence of then-Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA). In 2011, Savage gained further popularity by launching the It Gets Better Project to send the message to LGBT youth that as one gets older, “it gets better.”

¹⁷ At least in this instance, Savage’s “gay politics” does not, it seems, include LBT coalitional politics.

¹⁸ The description for the anti-Savage Tumblr Fuck No Dan Savage reads, “ ‘Fuck No, Dan Savage’ was created to showcase the cissexist, sexist, anti-asexual, anti-bisexual, classist, racist, sizeist, and ableist douchebaggery of Dan Savage, of “It Gets Better” (for privileged queers only) fame.” For a critique of the It Gets Better campaign’s race and class politics, see Puar (2010) and Nyong’o (2010).

umn, “No Sex, Please,” Savage has maintained that asexuals should disclose their asexuality to sexual partners at the beginning of a relationship or be okay if their sexual partners want to be sexually intimate with someone who is also sexual after coming out as asexual. He also compares this with informing partners of HIV serostatus, which is often seen by asexuals as a way of further stigmatizing asexuality. Savage’s (2005) response to a woman who does not experience sexual desire or arousal and is married to a sexual man is flippant: “I would describe you as fucked up and order you to get your sorry butt into therapy.” This is obviously an insufficient and offensive response, but Jay’s response is also inadequate. He says,

You've got what sounds like a great husband who you love and great friends. Instead of focusing your energy on worrying about sex (which up to now has been nothing but boring), focus on further exploring the things that you actually find pleasurable...I wouldn't be that worried about your husband...If he had some overwhelming need to have more sex he probably would have mentioned it by now.

Because Savage pathologizes the asexual in a relationship with a sexual person and Jay avoids the question, neither response fulfills in the sense of allowing the couple to affirm or deny whether they are content with this current situation. Both responses also preclude the possibility of the couple affirming their sexual/asexual discordancy in ways that would allow an affirmed asexual or healthfully negotiated arrangement, or that would lead to non-normative perhaps poly* arrangements (cf. Scherrer, 2010).

Savage draws particular frustration from the asexual community because in his columns and podcasts, Savage does treat asexuality as fact. Since the 2005 column mentioned above, Savage has brought David Jay to lend an asexual perspective on matters of

asexual concern at least two more times (Savage, 2011a, 2011b). Savage also considers himself sex-positive, a politics also claimed by many in the asexual community. There is a sense that those who would generally respect sexual autonomy would also embrace asexuality. Savage argues that asexuals must contend with the ethics of dating sexual people.¹⁹ Though members of the asexual community are disappointed with many things that Savage says and also with his complicity in being the skeptical-of-asexuality voice in the film *(A)sexual*, Savage doesn't challenge the definitions of asexuality held by the community.

It is the existence and robustness of AVEN as well as Jay's grace as spokesperson that allows for Savage's representation of asexuality to avoid being completely derisive. In these cases, Savage points to the counterpublic communication and organization on sites like AVEN as evidence of legitimacy. The peer production model of producing asexuality here is something to point to in order to legitimize asexuality, but only one person—David Jay—is relied on to explain the asexual position on this issue. Here, not only is the relative silence of asexuality on issues of relationships, kinship, and marriage within the asexual community as a whole made apparent, but also the defense of a lone representative speaking for himself is ultimately an inadequate response to the critique offered by Savage.

The Radical Potential of Asexuality?

¹⁹ Scherrer (2010) has written about the ways that the asexual respondents to her survey often reported curiosity about or participation in non-monogamous relationships.

Asexuality is distinct in creating an online identity that is considerably more robust than its offline formations of identitarian community. In Mary Gray's (2009) ethnography of rural queer youth, she notes the degree to which young people she spoke to were consumers and producers of new media. In talking about her own methodology, Gray says that she sees these new media artifacts as "sets of social relations—metaphorical landscapes of social interaction—rather than any given, particular place. These landscapes offer a momentary glimpse of pivotal relations that make up our understandings of ourselves, our surroundings, and of others. But new media do not offer stable sites with literal clear entrances and exits to social worlds" (p. 103). For Gray, many of the youth she studied were involved in communities that met, socialized, and organized themselves in physical spaces. For her, then, on- and offline queer social worlds had more overlap, and borders of social spaces were harder to draw.

For asexuality, the spaces of asexual socialization and asexual social exchange are found mostly online, in cyberspaces.²⁰ Gray speaks of the ways queer youth's conception of themselves as queer leads the queer identity into the home, "the producers and users of these new media transform them into boundary publics that...stretch their sense of connection to others imagined to be like them...[Through these new media,] queerness is both extended outward and brought back home" (p. 103). While the social relations of asexuality were and continue to be enacted online regularly, it is less common for asexuals to organize in social spaces in physical space regularly or with regular, deliberate pur-

²⁰ In making the film *(A)sexual*, director Angela Tucker said that the fact that the lack of formal or regular meetings of asexuals provided an obstacle to *showing* (rather than telling) asexuality (personal interview, April 9, 2012).

pose. Unlike, for instance, lesbians and gay men, who have historically developed spaces and circumstances that increased their chances of encountering others with whom they could develop sexual encounters or romantic or sexual relationships, asexuals have fewer enumerable offline opportunities for encountering other asexuals. This, of course, does not mean that asexuals do not meet in physical space; rather, there is perhaps less of an imperative (because asexuals do not all seek out others for relationships) and therefore less of an opportunity. Though asexuals develop close ties online and off with other asexuals, there is little evidence that asexuals develop asexual-specific family or kinship ties that *replace* conventional family ties, as in the LGBT community's mid-to-late twentieth century phenomenon of "chosen families" (Weston, 1991).

In the case of asexuals who are in romantic relationships or whose friends and family wonder about their lack of interest in sex, asexual media production can indeed be "brought back home" as was the case with Gray's subjects, and, again, AVEN's FAQs anticipate this use. But it is interesting to note that there is no concerted effort by asexuals to reconfigure what it means to be in a relationship or to value, prioritize, or idealize marriage. It is worth remembering that AVEN was formed in 2001 and took years to accumulate thousands of users. At this point, both conservatives and gay activists were working hard to reify marriage-as-ideal. Queer and feminist critiques of the institution of marriage were losing their salience. As it is with sexual people, some asexuals want marriage, some don't (and asexuals have gone one step further and created the romantic/aromantic distinction). Asexuality can indeed push us to think creatively about how we relate, how we should support and care for each other, and how we should value various forms of in-

timacy and various kinds of kinship and family ties (see, e.g., Scherrer, 2008, 2010).

However, these issues are largely seen as separate from asexual identity politics.

In attempting to explain the emergence of organized asexuality, Przybylo (2011) says, “The ‘sexual world’ is for asexuals very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity for LGBTQ populations, in the sense that it constitutes the oppressive force against which some sort of organizing and rebellion must take place” (p. 446). But Przybylo acknowledges that asexuality can be either a product of sexusociety or a movement of resistance within sexusociety. For Przybylo, following Wendy Brown, asexuality is a product of a neoliberal world that values identity politics that position subjects through pre-existing structures and institutions without challenging and transforming them. But still, through a number of tactics, asexuality questions the structures of sexusociety. For Przybylo (2011), asexuality can be resistant and can “transform sexusociety from within” by enacting and repeating alternative models for living, relating, and coexisting that do not reify the primacy of, for instance, marriage, heterosexual penetrative vaginal sex, or the male orgasm (p. 455-457). At this point, these possibilities are potentialities; they have not been realized.

While I do not have a solution to prescribe in this section in order to make asexual politics more radical or resistant (and nor do I think they should necessarily be), I hope to have elucidated ways in which the contemporary shape of asexuality is ill-equipped to contend with some elements of contemporary sexual politics. Because it is largely a discursive critique against medicalization and an argument for autonomy without specific acknowledgement of the power of cultural and political institutions that inscribe sexuali-

ty, asexuality has little radical power as it stands. But the strategic nominalization of an asexual identity can do much work for those who do not want to submit to certain aspects of sexual culture. In the next section, I turn to the “where” of asexual communication in order to interrogate what sites, other than AVEN, might be especially conducive or friendly to asexual communication.

Tumblr’s Networked Asexual Counterpublics

Because counterpublic communication online is often tenuous, at risk of being disrupted, ridiculed, dismissed, or ignored, the platforms that have been conducive to counterpublic communication are often seen by their users as worth defending. Individual users may feel certain kinds of communication should be posted to multiple platforms while other kinds of communication should be posted only to one or more carefully chosen platforms. Madianou and Miller’s (2013) theory of the polymedia environment was originally developed to consider transnational interpersonal communication, but here I adapt their theory to consider the decisions that members of counterpublics make when deciding on which platform/s to communicate about asexuality.

Travers (2003) argues that ideally, “[t]he necessarily separatist off-line subaltern counterpublic serves as the basis for organizing the contestation of the mainstream cyberpublic but gives way to a parallel structure on-line” (p. 231). But she also contends that because ideas published on the Internet are potentially visible (and easily stumbled upon) by unintended audiences, the communication is not separate and hidden. AVEN is such an important part of asexual identity because it became a place where an asexual subjectivity was talked about among thousands of asexuals. There were few notable asexual so-

cial spaces or organizations before a geographically dispersed user base convened on the AVEN website. Conversation on AVEN, then, is engaging in a separatist model of counterpublic communication; it is assumed that information is circulated on AVEN among asexuals and allies. Unless otherwise marked, conversation is assumed to be about asexuality or concerns associated with an asexual identity. It follows that certain platforms for communication are able to be more “parallel” to dominant publics than others. Asexual posts on Tumblr show up on some users’ feeds next to cat videos and fan art, each contextualized differently; on the other hand, some Tumblr users have never seen a post having to do with asexuality. Visitors to AVEN, on the other hand, predominantly expect conversation about asexuality.

In circumstances in which it is advantageous to discuss asexuality in the mainstream media, AVEN, as a separatist counterpublic online platform for organization and communication, has been uniquely important. As discussed above, mainstream media sources have used either AVEN founder David Jay or other active AVEN users to represent the asexual perspective, indicating the centrality of this site for the contemporary organized asexual population. AVEN’s simultaneous status as an online platform for counterpublic communication and a de facto organization allows it to be used by mainstream media outlets as a way of gaining access to credentialed interview subjects and talk show guests. Whereas the separate URL, bulletin boards, and official sounding name bestow AVEN and those associated with it the power to officially speak for asexuals in the mainstream media, participation on other forums of counterpublic communication do not easily serve as credentials to serve as a representative of a community to larger publics.

SwankIvy's Multiplatform Counterpublic Address

On her website, SwankIvy.com, which she describes as her “hub,” SwankIvy lists the many online outlets she uses. The homepage of SwankIvy.com shows how diverse SwankIvy’s interests are and how diverse her work is. She writes speculative young adult fiction under her given name. She posts her comics online. She lists some of her recipes online. She has a subsite of SwankIvy.com that is a resource for people interested learning more about Wiccan practices and craft. She has links to many online profiles on which you can find her, networked on Amazon.com, AVEN, Comixpedia, deviantart, Drawception, everything, Facebook, flickr, 43Things, goodreads, imvu, mangahelpers, LiveJournal, OKCupid, shelfari, singsnap, tumblr, twitter, Witches’ Voice, Yahoo!, and YouTube. She also lists her author profiles on various social networks and static sites: Absolute Write, Blogger, Facebook, figment, Poets & Writers, QueryTracker, scbwi, Twitter, WordPress, WritersNet, YalitChat, and YouTube. For SwankIvy, her self-presentation is marked by a (not very secret) distinction between the blogger and vlogger SwankIvy and author. For SwankIvy, unwritten rules about keeping certain profiles (e.g. the dating site OKCupid) unlinked from others are not followed. By way of explaining the way that her sites (and self-presentations) are linked, SwankIvy says,

My website links out to every kind of content I have, not just related to asexuality. I have links so that you can see my writing, arts, and crafts, I have a web comic, I have silly writing, I have a lot of stuff that has nothing to do with asexuality, it's all integrated, stuff about me, it's a hot spot about me. I would say that my asexuality is an integral part of my life, it comes with me wherever I am, so it does seem natural that there would be occasional references when I'm on Facebook or something that has nothing to do with alternate sexual orientations. It would come up every once in awhile, because I think the Internet activism—I don't know if

you'd call it a hobby or just something that I do a lot of—it's part of the SwankIvy experience. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

Thus, SwankIvy sees the media she's produced and the unique sites and platforms she posts to as being integral to her online self and others' experience of her. She also sees the education and visibility work she does as being indicative of something she calls "Internet activism."

SwankIvy acknowledges that she is not a member of every SNS. Still, overlapping use of various SNSs allows different posts to circulate across platforms. SwankIvy explains,

I'm not on Tumblr at all. I realize that there's a pretty big, active Tumblr community for asexuals, but my stuff gets passed around there. I don't have an account there myself. I'm represented there because I know people who spread my videos around and I have quite a few asexual friends on Facebook. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

This example reminds us that though one may be theoretically interpolated in a message with a counterpublic address, one does not always have the opportunity to view messages with counterpublic address, either because one is not a member of a particular SNS or simply because one missed a post. Some messages are posted across different platforms and users repost others' posts, so messages are presented in new contexts, which adds new meaning to the message.

For SwankIvy, it is important for her to broadcast her thoughts to as many people as possible. The reason she is on so many platforms is that she knows her intended audience does not all use a similar social media platform. She says,

[W]ritten forms [of expression] were more familiar to me and they were an obvious choice when I started writing and communicating about [asexuality]. There

were several places where I wrote essays and thoughts. I felt there was a sub-section of the population who wouldn't know this existed if there wasn't something to watch rather than something to read so I decided to put my videos out there. I think the YouTube videos have reached the largest audience of all of my media, with the exception of my published articles that were picked up by [woman-centered, sex-positive magazine] *Good Vibrations*. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

When asked about how people respond to her writing, SwankIvy took the opportunity to further elaborate upon why she writes about asexuality and herself.

[I]t's gratifying to know that it is getting through to my intended audience. I do have some people that think it's not an important issue. And I get very peculiar dismissive comments every once in awhile, sometimes in YouTube comments, sometimes in private email, saying "This isn't a big important issue. This isn't something that deserves the attention you're giving to it, why don't you shut up already?" That kind of thing... "This isn't important"... My truthful response is, "You don't get to decide what's important enough issue to warrant discussion. Look at all these people who are thanking me in the comments, right below where you said "No one cares." These people care! Look at all these people who care! When the affected population is the one saying thank you for this, I'm doing my job. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

Thus, for SwankIvy, the ability to talk about parts of herself and to facilitate dialogue about the asexual community is something worth defending. She takes the responsibility of speaking for an incredibly diverse community quite seriously.

In some cases, where I said something incomplete or possibly misleading, I went back. In the case of YouTube, I use the annotation feature to put little thought bubbles to clarify what I was saying. And I've also made an additional video, a two-part video called "The Unavailable Asexual," where I go through the whole list that has been established in the asexual community, for reasons that people throw at us, for reasons we might not want to have sex, besides being asexual. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

For SwankIvy, when attempting to make media that addresses the broad spectrum of asexuals, she sometimes forgets that she speaks from a certain position that allows her to not be stigmatized or not be pointed out as an exception to certain broad statements.

Though much is made of asexuals not necessarily having a history of abuse, illness, autism, or sex, some asexuals do have these things in their history. In the case of YouTube, SwankIvy uses the annotations afforded by the platform to correct any misspeak, and in general, tries to make sure her representation of the community does not make certain people feel ostracized.

[Certain people] can't say, "no, I'm not on medication," "no, I'm not physically or mentally ill," "no, I've never had abuse," "no, I'm not autistic." Because I can stand up as a good example and the detractors can't say those things to me, doesn't necessarily help [those people who are taking medication, are ill, have been abused, are autistic], because they'll still have those things available as excuses. So I guess part of my responsibility as a person who is one of the faces of the movement...and also a gold star asexual,²¹ I'm more likely to point these things out, because there are detractors coming to me [pointing out the way my words might cause other people trouble]. That's kind of my responsibility if I'm going to be rambling about this all over the Internet. (personal interview, April 19, 2012)

Here, SwankIvy shows some of the considerations she makes and the awareness she has being a "spokesperson" for asexuality, afforded to her by digital ICTs.

In addition to AVEN and the SNSs discussed here, asexuality is a common topic on blogging platforms like WordPress, Livejournal, and Blogger. Discussion of asexuality occurs in offline media, too. Echoing Piepmeier's (2009) analysis of the material values of zines for their makers and readers, asexual blogger and zinester Mage (2010) says in a blog post about the value of asexual zines,

Here's a scenario: you come out as an asexual, and your acquaintance has questions about what asexuality is. You give a brief explanation. Not wanting to tire yourself out with the more complex questions which usually follow, you offer to email them a link to some blogs or other articles on the internet, or you write down the names of some blogs on a scrap of paper. This is all well and good, but there's no guarantee that this acquaintance will take the time to follow up and go

²¹ A "gold star asexual" is an asexual who has not had sex.

read those blogs, or perhaps you'll forget to email them or be too busy to concern yourself at the time with that.

This is where a zine is useful. If you have a little booklet with information about asexuality already printed out, you can distribute this as freely as you want to. You can hand it out to passerby on the street, you can sell it at music festivals, you can share it with your friends so they'll get to know you better, you can take it with you to parties or always have a couple on hand to give out to new acquaintances.

I will return to the idea of zines and counterpublic address in the next chapter. But the point here is that in the case of Mage, SwankIvy, and various users of AVEN, it is clear that media makers often think carefully about the medium in which they work. What kind of cultural, political, or aesthetic work should the media artifact do? What resources are available? Who is the intended audience? It is with these questions in mind that I turn to a discussion of #asexuality on social networking sites, specifically Tumblr.

Counterpublics in a polymedia environment

Madianou and Miller's (2013) concept of polymedia is meant to demarcate "the emerging environment of proliferating communication opportunities and its consequences for interpersonal communication." In what follows, I mean to expand their theory beyond the context of interpersonal communication to create a theory for counterpublic communication that takes the polymedia environment into account. The focus here is specifically on SNSs, but certain individuals may see other media forms (e.g. zines, blogs) as appropriate (or the most appropriate) for counterpublic communication about asexuality.

In an effort to explain how standards develop for where to post specific kinds of communication to certain audiences, Ilana Gershon (2010) offers, "people figure out to-

gether how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other” (p. 6). She calls these perspectives on appropriate use media ideologies. So while there are a number of choices on what platform to, say, discuss what it means to be asexual or to share a meme that uses a joke that mostly only asexuals would understand, one’s media ideologies are often key factors in choosing platforms over others.²² In a polymedia environment, media ideologies help one decide where to communicate certain kinds of ideas. With counterpublic communication, which is often happening among relatively small groups of people, the ability to reach an appropriate audience is especially important. With changes in platforms and networks of users, media ideologies shift.

While Gershon’s formulation focuses on the ways that people co-develop media ideologies with each other, it is necessary to acknowledge how the design and politics of technological platforms may play a role in impacting their use by those participating in counterpublic communication. The “politics of platforms” (Gillespie, 2010), though often invisible to users, may impact how the designers of a platform conceptualize and prioritize the kinds of interaction users have with their site. Thus, with regards to counterpublic communication, the politics of a platform become important when one considers how the platform allows users to communicate in the formats that they would like to in a context they find conducive, comfortable, or inviting. To address this, it is necessary to acknowledge how technological affordances of media technologies play a role in which platform one uses.

²² But, to paraphrase Miller (2011), there is not just one Tumblr (i.e. no two media ideologies of Tumblr are alike), though there are trends.

Individual users' choice of platform for particular messages is informed by their personal tastes as well as wider social trends and practices. Speaking of affordances allows "[technological] potential to exert its own pull" in this understanding of platform choice (Graves 335). Factoring in the affordances of platforms allows one to understand how a given technology could likely become a more pronounced actor in sociotechnical systems. This reminds us of the importance of industries, producers, designers, and technicians in the design and marketing of SNSs. The existence of these actors also reminds us that technological affordances and social practices on a platform are not the only factors in explaining situations in which one platform has robust communication and another is empty.

From networked publics to networked counterpublics

While some might not care that a wide variety of Facebook friends see their public post about asexuality, there is reason for many to use a counterpublic address to communicate about asexuality at all or to communicate about asexuality in certain ways. All of this is not to say that all asexuals are members of certain sites. (One does not need to be a member of AVEN, for instance, to self-identify as asexual.)

While Tumblr fits boyd and Ellison's (2007) definition of SNSs, it has several different features that distinguish it from other platforms that, like Facebook, are more closely tied to the maintenance of a true identity often tied to a real name, in which social contexts are collapsed (e.g. on some platforms, one's relationship with immediate family and a one night stand occur within the same forum). Building on boyd's (2011) framework for networked publics, my goal in the next section is to consider how Tumblr cre-

ates its own publics, and why it is so conducive (or perceived to be so conducive) to facilitating counterpublic communication. How does the Tumblr architecture create different technological affordances? How does it then establish a different set of dynamics for users to contend with or exploit? In a polymedia environment, why do users seeking certain kinds of expression or communication seek out certain platforms, in this case Tumblr?

#asexuality on Tumblr

In May 2013, in an effort to catch up with Google's dominance in the field, Yahoo bought the notoriously unprofitable but popular Tumblr for US\$1.1 billion (Waters and Bradshaw, 2013). Tumblr, a company founded in February 2007, is a blogging platform that allows users to post text and media objects (usually only one media object at a time). It pitches itself as a creative community and, unlike many contemporary SNSs, allows for aesthetic customization. Knowing that this would be a controversial move from the perspective of Tumblr users, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer created a Tumblr account and revealed the acquisition in a manner rarely seen in business deal announcements. Like many other Tumblr posts, Mayer's included an animated GIF. The post, which doubled as a press release, was rather irreverent and particularly aware of the defensiveness Tumblr users have about the purity of the platform. Mayer (2013), "We promise not to screw it up," yet Mayer's assurances were not enough to calm many users who were afraid that the "great thing going" (as Mayer called Tumblr in the post) might be tainted by a large corporate owner. Users of Tumblr took to the Internet—often on their Tumblelogs (the

portmanteau Tumblr uses to talk about individual blogs on Tumblr)—to express their worry about the merger.

The anxious posts were collected on a separate Tumblelog called “Meltdowns about Yahoo Buying Tumblr.” On a post reblogged on that Tumblelog, user songbird8 (2013) explained the value of Tumblr, saying,

You meet many different people, see absolutely [sic] and feel absolutely beautiful things, experience things that wouldn’t happen in your wildest dreams and learn the most useful, weirdest and craziest things. Tumblr gives us the opportunity to connect unlike any other platform out there.

The post from songbird8 ends, “Please don’t ruin or take away Narnia [C.S. Lewis’s fictional world].” Another user, x-yoursmilemakesmemelt-x (2013) says,

I FEEL LIKE TUMBLR IS ONE OF THE ONLY PLACES WHERE I CAN BE MYSELF WITHOUT MY FAMILY WATCHING OVER MY EVERY POST OVER ANALYZING EVERYTHING AND WHERE I CAN SPEAK MY MIND AND NOT BE AFRAID AND WHERE EVERYONE ISN’T A STUCK UP B***CH [sic] AND WHERE YOU GET ACCEPTED FOR WHO YOU ARE ...

Several times in this post, the user makes references to things that she sees occur commonly on another platform, assumedly Facebook.

Among the most vocal in news reports covering the merger and on the Meltdowns Tumblelog were two categories of users: those that use Tumblr to browse and post NSFW (not safe/suitable for work) content and users who used the platform to publish fan art and other fan-created remixes of mainstream media properties. Although Mayer’s post emphasizes the site as a platform for “creators” to showcase their work, many users were worried about exactly how she was defining creators: Tumblr users who use the site to post and browse NSFW content and members of fan cultures had been invested in the site

because of the site's lax policies for regulating posts that are pornographic or that potentially infringe copyright.²³ Beyond and including these two very visible groups, lies a larger—encompassing—category of people who value the affordances of the Tumblr platform: members of counterpublics looking to, in the words of the Tumblr user quoted above, “be themselves.” The zeal with which these users defend the site shows the value that the platform has in the eyes of certain users whose relationship with the platform is defined by a specific non-mainstream use they have for the site. The asexual counterpublic is far from the only one that has a reputation for using Tumblr as a venue for in-group communication. As Thelandersson (2013), Cho (2011), Fink and Miller (2014), and Lenhart et al. (2007) have noted, Tumblr is a platform used by feminists, queers, trans* people, and alienated youth to communicate with each other, respectively.

There are many Tumblelogs specifically devoted to asexual or, for short, “ace” identities on the site. Sample asexual Tumblelogs include Tumblelogs that provide resources for the asexual community and those interested in learning more. The site also hosts several blogs for asexual humor. Many asexual individuals host their own Tumblelogs to share personal thoughts.²⁴ Much of the Tumblr content about asexuality includes user-generated images about asexuality, media about asexuality taken from other sites,

²³ For a discussion of the investment of NSFW Tumblr users in the platform, see Tiidenberg (2013), and for an example of the reports on Tumblr's July 2013 changes in presenting NSFW content in searches, see Blue (2013). For a discussion of the investment of fandom cultures in the platform, see Romano (2013), and for more on fan interactions with corporations, see Jenkins (2008).

²⁴ An extensive list of Tumblelogs and other online resources for the asexual community can be found on the Tumblr post: sophiaphilemon.tumblr.com/acetumblr. An up-to-date stream of visible Tumblr posts marked #asexual and #ace can always be found at www.tumblr.com/tagged/asexual and www.tumblr.com/tagged/ace, respectively.

and text posts with commentary about an aspect of the asexual community or about oneself as an asexual. Tumblr posts tagged #asexuality or #ace also often include participation in a 30-Day Asexuality Challenge, where users post one answer to a 30-day survey per day. (Sample questions include the following: “1. What is your romantic/sexual orientation? 2. Are you out? To whom? 3. How old were you when you realized you were asexual? What made you realize it?”)

The contents of asexual posts on Tumblr are thus diverse in the scope of their identification with a stable asexual identity or a larger asexual community and in the degree to which the sexual world—or sexusociety—is mentioned, engaged, or critiqued. Posts sometimes include personalized or individualized experiences or opinions, and sometimes they talk about community issues from a more distant perspective. Sometimes, too, they address issues like systemic sexual privilege. In the next section, I will introduce the affordances of Tumblr and the resulting social dynamics of its users that inform the context in which asexual users create and distribute content.

How does Tumblr afford counterpublic communication?

boyd’s (2011) analysis of networked publics is based on an understanding that profiles on SNSs are meant to be a representation of the self, a place where “participants must determine how they want to present themselves to those who may view their self-representation or those who they wish might” (p. 43). So what makes the architecture of Tumblr different from boyd’s SNSs? And what makes it different from AVEN for asexuals? First, I compare boyd’s four characteristic attributes of SNSs to those of Tumblr.

As discussed above, profiles are not as extensive on the Tumblr platform as they are on SNSs. Against the prevailing trend on SNSs (turned into official Terms of Service policy on Facebook and Google), users on Tumblr rarely use their real names. Instead, they use pseudonyms or create a name that would make sense aesthetically or pragmatically as a URL. Tumblr pseudonyms are instrumental; they also serve as the URL for the blog. Tumblelogs are sometimes given a title that corresponds to this pseudonym-URL; sometimes, they are different.²⁵ Because profiles are less tied to “singular” identities, people often have multiple Tumblelogs, manage Tumblelogs collaboratively, or do not link their Tumblelogs with their identity beyond the identity created by that Tumblelog. Sometimes, too, Tumblelogs have direct connections to “real world identities.” The standard for Tumblelogs, then, is for users to make their blogs technically accessible to anyone and for them to open themselves up to be followed by anyone. Unlike sites like Facebook and Google+, which limit the aesthetic display of blogs, Tumblelogs allow for editable HTML styles.²⁶ These styles not only define the colors and displays of the blog posts and streams, they also define whether certain data (like a Tumblelog’s followers or the interactions that other users had with individual posts) are visible and how they are displayed.

While friends lists on SNSs are often public and meant to show connections that meet a certain level of familiarity, most Tumblelogs use a “follower” model instead of a

²⁵ Thus, a Tumblelog titled Asexual NYC is found at asexualnyc.tumblr.com; a Tumblelog titled A Gray-Asexual Space is found at gray-asexuality.tumblr.com. When the owners of those Tumblelogs post comments or reblog content, their activity gets credited to asexualnyc and gray-asexuality, respectively.

²⁶ One of the few income streams for Tumblr is pre-made premium styles.

“friend” model. Under a follower model, a Tumblelog can be followed by anyone who finds the blog without needing permission from the Tumblr user who manages the blog.⁷ Also, Tumblr users can choose to operate their Tumblelogs on an invite-only basis. Unlike Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace, public lists of followers on Tumblr are rare and are only visible in some page formatting styles. This allows users wanting to expose themselves to counterpublic communication to follow Tumblelogs freely without expecting which blogs they follow to be easily exposed.

Public commenting tools on Tumblr differ from those on SNSs in a number of ways. Unless Tumblr users have attached a commenting plug-in or add-on to their Tumblelog, commenting directly on or under Tumblr posts can only be done by users who follow and are followed by the Tumblelogs they are looking to comment on. For the most part, though, interactions on Tumblr posts are either “likes” or “reblogs.” Likes, as it goes, too, on Facebook, are affirmations; reblogs post the given content on the relogger’s own Tumblelog. Unlike “shares” on Facebook, which only show the most recent person from whom a post is being shared and often require a user to click on a post to see the original poster for the content, reblogs on Tumblr retain the identification of the original poster, conspicuously shown, no matter how far removed from the original poster the reblog is (many reblogs are reblogs of reblogs of reblogs ...). Reblogs of a post are often accompanied by new commentary, which is shown with the post on the relogger’s Tumblelog and, settings permitting, is listed, often truncated, when a reblog is listed as a note on a Tumblr post. This is one way in which Tumblr, as a self-described creative platform, makes the identification of creators, or at least original posters, more conspicuous than

other SNSs do.²⁷ Individual interactions with any given post on Tumblr are obscured by most Tumblr styles. Typically, all interactions with a post (likes, reblogs, and comments) are registered as “notes” and a count of those notes is what is registered on individual Tumblr posts.

The one element of SNSs that boyd does not explicate is the sites’ stream-based updates. Backwards chronological (most recent to most distant) streams of posts are far from new for online platforms. Posts on BBSs are often backwards chronological; online personal journals established themselves as backwards-chronological diaries; the backwards-chronological running feeds of blogs distinguished them from more traditional news websites that used newspaper layout-like curation. As these forms persisted, new forms of aggregation were developed to manage large streams of data. Stream-based updates on sites like Facebook are curated by an individually calculated social algorithm that privileges new posts over old ones and assumes one only wants to see posts that garner a lot of interactions or that are from certain people or organizations that one interacts with regularly. When Tumblr users log in to the site, they are greeted with a stream of the latest posts from the Tumblelogs they follow. Like other blogs, the unique URL for the blog always serves as an archive of all that has been posted on the blog thus far. The diversity of posts one sees when one logs on to Tumblr allows people to be exposed to various kinds of public and counterpublic address, silly and serious. Compared to AVEN,

²⁷ While it is a community standard to always either only post your own copyrighted material or attribute the originator of the creative content in a post, this standard is often violated.

using Tumblr as a social platform allows for more diverse communication. The stream of updates provides an easy way to have this diversity pushed to the user on login.

Alternatively, users often discover new content on Tumblelogs by clicking on the site's hashtags,²⁸ named after the hash symbol or hash mark (#) that precedes the tags. Hyperlinked tags, added by users when they post content, mark themes, categories, short commentaries, or other attributes of the content. When one clicks on a hashtag in Tumblr, one is taken to a reverse chronological feed of the latest viewable posts that include the tagged text in the content of the post or as a tag. The hashtags #asexuality and #ace are popular general tags for asexuality, though posts about asexuality often include many other tags, based on what the content of an individual post is. Because posts on Tumblr are often images or videos unaccompanied by text, tags allow these posts to be discovered by those searching or browsing, which is usually based on text keywords.

What affordances emerge from the technological architecture of Tumblr that make it especially appropriate for counterpublic communication? Again, I build off boyd's (2011) formulation for SNSs as networked publics. While "online expressions are automatically recorded and archived" on Tumblr, this persistent information is often not tied to individual identities like posts on SNSs. Identities on Tumblr are often closeted, collective, obscured, or evanescent. Therefore, the implication that the traces of individuals can be stored on SNSs means something different on a site like Tumblr. The replicability of

²⁸ The hashtag, which developed its present functionality in 2009 when Twitter started turning hashtagged words into hyperlinks, was not included in boyd's original analysis of SNS's architecture; however, it is incredibly important to Tumblr use and became a feature on Facebook in 2013. Unlike hashtags on Facebook and Twitter, (hash)tags on Tumblr are appended to a post, not integrated into a post.

content online is exploited by Tumblr users regularly, and as discussed above, individual creators of images, videos, screeds, and memes are more easily attributed back to their original posters.²⁹

The widespread use of hashtags, and the ease of following users one is interested in, helps the visibility or circulation of content posted on Tumblr to become easily scalable, especially if users have followers who are interested in the post and the post is appropriately tagged. The searchability of posts is often not defined by the text or content of a post. Instead, users must search posts using hashtags and text searches of text-based portions of posts. Because so many posts on Tumblr are not text-based, tags are often the only way that users can easily stumble upon a given post through search.

These affordances lead to dynamics of use that differ from other SNSs. In addition to the three dynamics of SNSs discussed by boyd—invisible/unknowable audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private—which still apply to Tumblr, I would argue that six additional dynamics can be used to understand why Tumblr has become such a prominent venue for counterpublic communication:

- *Commentary is trackable but deemphasized.* If the original poster wants to engage their followers, they can see the ways that their followers have interacted with a post by looking at the notes underneath it. If commentary on reblogs is extensive, that commentary is only available to those who visit the commentator's website. This is quite different from automatically making any comment on any post vis-

²⁹ For content brought into Tumblr from outside that was not created by the original poster, attributing content to the original creator is a standard among many Tumblr users.

ible to everyone. In this way, Tumblr posts welcome dialogue, but do not widely broadcast responses to posts as comments on most other blogs do.³⁰

- *Trolling (argumentative or negatively provocative commenting) is de-incentivized:* Because, when viewing posts in feeds, comments on blogs are not visible to other users, users must access posts through that post's unique URL (i.e. out of the context of the feed). Therefore, even incendiary comments are hard to notice, unless an annotation is included in a reblog. In these cases, though, the counterpublic address is towards the relogger's own followers and not the original poster's.³¹

- *The original poster of an object is easily discovered:* Knowing where posts come from helps users find followers worth following, and helps users stay up to date with Tumblelogs that are interesting to them, including those who originate many things they enjoy (e.g. certain kinds of asexual posts or media objects).

- *Near equivalent emphasis of posts from new and more advanced users:* Once users have become acclimated to the site's interface and start using the site for interactions, which may take some time for uninitiated users, posts by new users can be found somewhat more easily than they can on a platform that bases discovery of

³⁰ Tumblr founder Dave Karp has been quoted as calling Internet comments "gross" (Young, 2013).

³¹ This does not prevent provocative Tumblelogs. The Tumblelog Privilege Denying Asexuals (<http://privilegedenyingasexuals.tumblr.com>), maintained by a self-identified "pansexual male-assigned-at-birth genderfluid androgyne," caused a stir among some in the asexual community when it took offense to some asexuals trying to prove they just as oppressed or more oppressed than queer sexual people.

new content solely on a poster's reputation in the community or the pre-existing social ties of the user. While certainly much discovery of content exists because individual users are already following other users, the prominent use of hashtags allows posts by new users to be discovered.

- *Private and/or anonymous interaction with other users is available:* Although in many ways public commentary on Tumblr posts is deemphasized, many Tumblrs feature prominently an "Ask" button, which encourages inquisitive responses to a Tumblr user's posts (as opposed to, say, compliments, insults, or recommendations). Questions can be asked anonymously, and the Tumblr user who is being asked can choose to respond to the question asked either publicly as a post on their Tumblelog or privately within the Tumblr interface. Because this is a way to interact with others without identifying oneself, in the asexual context, this might be enticing for those who have an embarrassing question or who want to stay closeted. Tumblr users can also receive feedback on their blog with the Fan Mail feature, which is activated once someone has followed a Tumblelog for 48 hours. The 48-hour buffer prevents those newly connected to a Tumblelog to send an impulsive screed to the user operating the account.

- *Consolidation of (counter)public discussion:* The community standard of hashtagging allows content of all media types on a certain topic or addressed to a certain (counter)public to be easily found in one place. Conversations in response to someone else's post are reblogged in a way that shows the genealogy of the conver-

sation. Thus, a running list of posts about topics like asexuality can be easily accessed through the interface, using the search of hashtags like #ace or #asexuality.

Counterpublic antagonism

In the television shows and news features cited earlier in this chapter, there is almost always some skepticism or resistance to understanding asexuality as a legitimate identity. I want to now turn and explore another reaction one can have to learning about asexuality: *antagonism* that questions the legitimacy of asexuality. The affordances of counterpublic spaces exemplified above on Tumblr may potentially be subverted and antagonism can color counterpublic communication acts. In discussing the affordances and social dynamics of the Tumblr platform and alluding to other platforms along the way, I have emphasized the ways that users seeking out counterpublic communication chose or use particular SNSs in order to engage in counterpublic communication unhindered by outsiders. While many instances of counterpublic communication are separatist and seek to carve out a semi-autonomous space for users to discuss certain topics or feelings, often communication seeks to reach a larger public. Throughout this chapter's final section, self-containment, privacy, and autonomy have been important concepts central to thinking about the attributes that are sought out within counterpublics. On SNSs, counterpublics can be disrupted with antagonism. In ways either afforded or limited by the platform, ill-intentioned trolls can disrupt counterpublics.

Within the Tumblr interface, those who stumble on a Tumblelog may write a short post via an Ask box if the Tumblelog has that feature activated. Antagonistic "Asks" can make the manager of the Tumblelog aware of the presence of someone not a part of the

counterpublic. Once the “Ask” is received, the recipient has control of the situation from there: sometimes, recipients post an answer to the response as a public post in order to make the sender’s message known. While this is a way of publicizing antagonism, the recipient, as the administrator of the Tumblelog, is able to control whether that kind of post is worthwhile for their followers to see.

While administrators on individual Tumblelogs are able to control the content sent out on their Tumblelog, they cannot control how others choose to contextualize their posts in a reblog. Antagonizers can choose to reblog posts with derisive commentary. But, again, reblogs are only available to be seen on the relogger’s Tumblelog. Users who wish to interrupt the asexual counterpublic’s use of the #asexual hashtag have written posts saying “asexuality isn’t real” or that it is “a myth” have also used the #asexuality and #ace hashtags.

Another site that explicitly organizes itself around categorized—often counterpublic—communication is Reddit. Reddit allows its users to link to and therefore recommend various media objects hosted off site, created by users themselves or others. It also allows its users to contribute textual commentary on the site. But no matter what kind of post a user submits, the site places the post into its algorithmic system that tracks the number of up votes (thumbs up) and down votes (thumbs down) over time to create a dynamic list of what’s popular in any number of categories. While there is a set of default categories that all users are subscribed to when they join and that non-users see when they log onto the Reddit homepage, the site has a wide variety of user-created categories,

organized into unique URLs called subreddits.³² While there is an asexuality subreddit with just over 9,000 subscribers, my focus here is on how asexuality's Tumblr bubble can be burst on Reddit.

Online and off, many progressive people have been derisively identified as “social justice warriors” (SJWs) to mark their fight against oppressive forces in contemporary society, and many of these people have subsequently come to embrace the term. SJWs have made a number of subreddits that combat what they see as the oppressive nature of many of the site's posts. /r/ShitRedditSays, which explicitly names itself as a member of a “Fempire” of subreddits on Reddit, invites users, “Have you recently read an upvoted Reddit comment that was bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, or just reeking of unexamined, toxic privilege? Of course you have! Post it here.” This subreddit has made links to several links that question the existence or the integrity of asexuals.

On the other hand, /r/TumblrInAction exists to rip apart political correctness they see as laughable on Tumblr. This subreddit directly parodies the /r/ShitRedditSays structure by saying it is affiliated not in a Fempire but in a Patriarchy Network of subreddits. It addresses its users, “Seen a horribly oppressed transethnic otherkin blog their plight? Weeped at how terrible it is for the suffering of multiple systems to go unheard every day? Been unable to even live with the thought of the identities of someone's headmates being cisdenied?” One user of /r/TumblrinAction, AntagonizeTheElderly, posted a comic

³² The usual designation for subreddits is /r/[name of subreddit]; I will use this designation below.

with the headline, “It’s just you and me and our made up sexuality against the world.”

The comic, found on the creative online network deviantart,³³ drawn by deviantart user Kibbutzer, shows two people wearing shirts identifying them as asexuals exhausted by meeting a number of people with questionable credentials (e.g. two “pseudo psychologists,” a “perv”) telling them that asexuality is not real and that a number of other excuses can be found for what they are feeling. The assumption from the original poster was that the comic would be ridiculed by other users for portraying a “made up sexuality.”

While many of the posts in /r/TumblrInAction seek to disrupt the comfort many take in contexts conducive to counterpublic communication, there is sometimes resistance to attempts at ridicule on the subreddit. The responses to AntagonizeTheElderly’s post in particular show how the subreddit’s users rationalize their critique of certain kinds of people. Says user daman345, “Right. [asexuality is] real, but the real ones [asexuals] are just outnumbered by the tumblr ones who make all of them look like retards.” User DorianCairne continues, “Aye, that’s really the worst thing about SJWs - not the labels they make up, but the ones that they completely strip of all substantial meaning.” Thus, though the original poster aimed to gain support in his antagonistic behavior, in this case, he was outnumbered by people who see a difference between two different genres of posts with a counterpublic address: minoritarian politics in general (acceptable) and the actions of SJWs, who according to the active members of /r/TumblrInAction, let their pleas for social justice cloud their reason (unacceptable). That all being said, the framing

³³ There is a specific note on this reddit post that marks it as “not-Tumblr,” though the fact that the comic was not originally reposted from Tumblr does not change how people within /r/TumblrInAction talk about it.

of these posts within these subreddits point to the ways in which the Tumblr architecture can be exploited so that the user whose communication is brought into the /r/TumblrInAction context is made vulnerable by these attacks, whether they are aware of it or not. The brand of humor exhibited here on the /r/TumblrInAction subreddit shows how the users of this subreddit enjoy gawking at and poking fun at people who they feel take their social justice causes and identity politics too seriously. In practice, posters on the subreddit had called out asexuality a handful of times in order to interrogate whether or not it was a “made-up” sexual orientation.

In order to exploit the systems of protection built into Tumblr that I outline above, they encourage users to browse Tumblr like a SJW to find “post[s] exuding craziness.” They suggest being proactive: “Browse SJW tags!” and go on to list a number of tags that often have appropriate content for their subreddit, including #social justice, #privilege, #feminism, and #masculism. Posts to deride are searched for and discovered the same way counterpublic members find these posts; the purpose, though, is different.

Thus, the affordances and social dynamics on Tumblr discussed above with regards to facilitating counterpublic communication have been exploited in each of the examples of antagonism in this section. These examples remind us that, as Travers (2003) notes, it is difficult to treat counterpublic communication online as truly separatist – it often has an unintended audience. My focus on antagonism adds to this conversation with an acknowledgment that some interactions can be disruptive, and may encourage counterpublics to modify their communicative tactics.

Potentials for Asexuality across Platforms

If SNSs are popular places on the web because of the ways that they organize various pieces of information and instances of communication, the affordances of SNS platforms for certain kinds of communication are important. Online communication platforms are particularly important for asexual counterpublics because there are few offline forums to discuss asexuality or to engage in socialization or communication with these counterpublics.

Counterpublic address allows those that lie outside of sanctioned publics to map their own ideologies, thoughts, and subjectivities among people, mostly strangers, that share an awareness of similar countercultural referents. The thriving of publics, which are constantly morphing, relies on information molded in counterpublics to push publics into new directions. I have developed a theory of counterpublic communication on SNSs that explains how the politics and affordances of platforms may encourage, tolerate, or prioritize counterpublic address on their platform. Considering counterpublic communication specifically within a polymedia context emphasizes the fact that certain counterpublic communication is limited and afforded by what platforms are available and popular, and reminds us that messages are imbued with different values based on where they are posted.

As the meltdowns over Yahoo buying Tumblr helped note, many factors, including the economic and industrial moves of technology companies, impact the affordances and features of websites. The ability for counterpublic communication is difficult to justify as a priority when faced with design priorities like profitability and expanding the user

base. I have worked to create a deeper understanding of the affordances of and social practices on Tumblr and, to a lesser degree, AVEN for asexuals and their allies.

Conclusion

While people who do not feel sexual attraction have existed before the Internet and before anyone identified as asexual, the platforms discussed in this chapter have served as a place for self-identified asexuals to solidify a collective identity and communicate over space or time as asexuals to other asexuals. AVEN, YouTube, and Tumblr are far from the only platforms used for communication amongst asexuals and about asexuality. The community-formation and community-building role of AVEN was pivotal in shaping the asexual community as it exists today. A specific combination of factors – a charismatic leader, bulletin board and chatroom technologies, a website with its own asexual branding and a unique URL, a method for establishing definitions and community standards – all came together to shape the contemporary asexual community. Various human actors, including David Jay, SwankIvy, and various asexual Tumblrs, have impacted the media landscape for asexuality, presenting a wide variety of subjectivities, arguments, ideologies, and perspectives for consumption by others. It is nearly impossible for journalists to mention asexuality without mentioning AVEN and thus the Internet.

As a somewhat coherent identity, asexuality has certainly been made possible by virtue of the Internet. Where asexuality goes as a political project remains to be seen; this and other academic projects are often called out as places where asexuality can be legitimized, further understood, and complicated. It remains to be seen how asexuality will evolve as the platforms for online communication change and other factors impact the

contours of the community. We are, as Mark Carrigan (quoted in Swash, 2012) points out, far out from widespread awareness of asexuality and a broad reconsidering of sexual normativities, but it seems asexuality will continue being present in various conversations around sexuality and romance. The shape of counterpublic communication will continue to be affected by the structure and affordances of communication on AVEN and Tumblr, as well as other media forms, but no one can predict what new forms communication within and about the community will take.

Chapter 2

Resisting Hetero- and Homonormativity Online: The Transmedia Campaigns of Quirkyalone and Against Equality

Howdy, quirkyalones! The blog is here -- all the better for us to share the good word of quirkygospel with everyone! Expect more frequent news updates, party/gathering announcements and links to quirkyalone press coverage. This is indeed the start of a movement, and we are gaining momentum.

Also, you now have an online community in which to talk amongst yourselves. The response to the quirkyalone book and concept has been overwhelming -- too many emails to respond to, and nearly 800 of you visiting the website each day -- and many of you have asked for an online discussion forum. Who would we be to deny you that? Come on in!

-- Sasha Cagen on the *Quirkyalone* blog
January 15, 2004

Welcome! This Facebook page is an offshoot of the Against Equality website/archive, and is meant to be a quick way for interested people to connect and engage with each other about the materials archived, suggest reading/viewing material, and to share information about the work they are engaged in.

[...]

This FB page can only be a starting point for building community; it cannot become and sustain community. Feel free to use this space to call for reading groups or activist spaces in real or virtual time. But if you seek community, we cannot provide you with one.

-- Yasmin Nair on the Against Equality Facebook page
August 5, 2013

In the first epigraph, San Francisco-based writer Sasha Cagen announces the creation of an online discussion board on her quirkyalone.net website that she had created to mark the release of her book *Quirkyalone: A Manifesto for Uncompromising Romantics* (2004), in which Cagen expands on the titular concept that she first wrote

about in an email to friends in 2000. She offers a dictionary-style definition of quirkyalone:

a person who enjoys being single (but is not opposed to being in a relationship) and generally prefers to be alone rather than date for the sake of being in a couple. With unique traits and an optimistic spirit; a sensibility that transcends relationship status. (no page number)

The quirkyalone campaign introduces an identity that is not tied to relationship status; there are also the quirkytogether and the quirksylut modes of being. Cagen's epigraph announces the launch of the discussion boards and addresses those who expressed a desire to talk to someone about the book and its contents. Cagen, seemingly overwhelmed by all the response to the book, encourages the book's readers eager to share their thoughts to speak with each other on the boards.

In a 2013 post that has been "pinned," in this or a similar form, to the top of the Facebook feed for the Against Equality Facebook group since it was first posted, Against Equality collective member Yasmin Nair explains the purpose of the Against Equality Facebook page. According to Nair's message, the page exists so that visitors can "connect and engage" with material in the Against Equality archive, "suggest" other material, and "share" information about work one is doing; it is not there for the vague purpose of building "community."

The communicative purpose for both the quirkyalone message boards and the Against Equality Facebook page is similar to the purpose, as discussed in the previous chapter, some asexuals have for visiting AVEN: wanting to discuss a common identity or

politics and to communicate as and among people who have that identity or politics.

Whereas my focus in the first chapter was primarily on the first of Fraser's (1990) two tactics of communication within counterpublics, regroupment, this chapter's focus is on the ways that regroupment prepares counterpublic members for the other communicative purpose of counterpublics, agitation of larger publics.

The *quirkyalone* and *Against Equality* campaigns work against hetero- or homonormativity. As was explored in this dissertation's introduction, heteronormativity is used to describe the privileging of "good" coupled heterosexuality in mainstream culture, and homonormativity privileges "good" coupled homosexuality. Hetero- and homonormativity are cultural forces that create and reinforce sexual, romantic, and relationship norms, and as many feminist and queer scholars have explored, these norms create undue expectations and pressures on those who are not in what Rubin (1984) calls the "charmed circle" of sexuality. These normativities have a history of defining who is worthy of state support and aid; categories of people like "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" (Cohen 1997) are often left out of social support and are denied empathy for their inability to subscribe to these normativities. These normativities thus work in concert with systemic forces like white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism to define worthy citizens and discipline behaviors and relationships.

Quirkyalone and *Against Equality* explain the normativities they rebel against differently, and both campaigns politically affiliate themselves differently. Sasha Cagen coined the *quirkyalone* identifier in a 2000 essay to friends that has been published several times in alternative publications and eventually inspired her book. The

quirkyalone identity is meant to frame the coupling imperative as a real force that detrimentally disciplines subjects and creates unhealthy expectations about proper sexuality and relationships. Against Equality, on the other hand, is a collective that has amassed a large archive of works that challenge the politics behind marriage equality, the enfranchisement of out gays and lesbians in the military, and hate crimes laws. Against Equality's politics are grounded in a materialist critique of the mainstream LGBT movement in the age of marriage equality and the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell.

In this chapter, I analyze these two campaigns against hetero- and/or homonormativities in order to investigate how digital information and communication technologies are used to facilitate these particular counterpublics' interactions with larger or more mainstream publics. How have digital ICTs become tools for critics of these normativities? How do various social actors affiliated with these campaigns use these ICTs to impact the discursive and material terrains of sexual normativities? Both the quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns balance print media with digital media. The centrality of print media in both of these campaigns corrects the assumption that twenty-first century communicative campaigns do not need to be driven or dominated by their online component.

Internet platforms and social media platforms specifically have recently been attributed revolutionary capabilities in events like the Arab Spring (elements of which have been called the Twitter Revolution or the Facebook Revolution) or Occupy Wall Street (which is sometimes written out in a Twitter-friendly hashtag -- #occupywallstreet or #ows). This chapter will thus necessarily consider the affordances of both alternative

print publishing structures and digital ICTs for these media campaigns, tracking the ways that print media and digital media are used purposefully and strategically.

After brief descriptions of the quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns, this chapter will be divided into three sections. First, I investigate and analyze the medium and platform choices both campaigns made to spread their messages. The strategic decisions both campaigns make are based on the specific affordances of certain media and platforms. I will pay particular attention to how print and digital platforms that have a low barrier to entry offer both opportunities and limits to these campaigns. Because both campaigns have print and online components, I classify them both as transmedia political campaigns that work on multiple platforms to do their agitational work.

Next, I will argue for the value of counterpublic communication online in the face of popular analyses of political communication that decry or warn of an end to deliberative communication and a proliferation of echo chambers. These models of deliberation in political communication reinforce the bourgeois nature of the Habermasian counterpublic by allowing mainstream publics to set the terms for these deliberative scenarios. These models, in other words, do not allow for an understanding of how counterpublics may agitate to encourage the reframing of certain issues or may demand attention for an unacknowledged question, problem, or issue. While it would be impossible for me to develop or propose a meritocratic system where worthy issues and arguments are privileged on their own value, I will look at the ways that arguments against the fragmentation of deliberative communication privilege normative discourses over the discourses of counterpublics and subjugated voices and unproductively propose

technological solutions to social problems. I advocate smaller counterpublics publicizing their own critical perspectives while linking their work with other (counter)publics and radical media projects.

Finally, I will use certain “failures” of both campaigns’ desires to agitate larger publics to think about the temporality of counterpublics. How, in other words, does the success of a counterpublic’s agitational communication affect the counterpublic’s stamina, its energy, and its vitality? I will end by considering how the transmedia nature of these campaigns might leave their agitational potential open even after they fall apart or transform.

From Email to Book to Multimedia Meme: Sasha Cagen’s Quirkyalone

Anderson Cooper: Is there really a tyranny of coupledom?...You talk about that in your book.

Sasha Cagen: I think that there is, and I think that even people who are married or people who are in couples feel this idea of the tyranny of coupledom. It’s that dinner party that you go to where only couples are invited. It’s that law firm that has a party that says... “Bring your spouse...” Well, what about bringing a guest? It’s [at] a wedding where single people are made to feel subtly or not subtly strange for not bringing someone.

- *Anderson Cooper 360*, February 2004

San Francisco-based writer Sasha Cagen conceived the quirkyalone concept and identity and first explained the concept in an email to a friend after the millennial New Years. After her friend forwarded the essay to a list of people and many people responded to the original email, Cagen published the essay in the inaugural issue of her *To-Do List* zine in 2000. The quirkyalone concept has resonated with a large audience and has been

the subject of much media attention, with Cagen quoted in various news articles and appearing on television news programs like *Anderson Cooper 360*.

When Cagen published her quirkyalone essay in her *To-Do List* zine, which soon after became a blog and eventually became a book, she was already a zine maker. She had already produced her *cupsized* zine from 1994 to 1996 with her friend Tara Emelye. Looking back on her work on *cupsized*, Cagen (n.d.) says on her personal website that *cupsized* was “the creative project that first brought [her] alive as a writer—and that has been the most fun, hands-down.” Speaking of her work with zine co-creator Emelye, Cagen (n.d.) continues, “We were quasi-riot-grrrls living in New York City, collaborating on a print publication in the mid-90s when email was still exotic and blogs did not yet exist.”

The publication of the inaugural issue of *To-Do List* in 2000 launched two concepts that eventually led to book projects for Cagen. In 2004, HarperSanFrancisco, an imprint of HarperCollins, published *Quirkyalone: A Manifesto for Uncompromising Romantics*, an exploration of the quirkyalone and the concerns they experience in the early twenty-first century. Then, in 2007, the Simon & Schuster imprint Fireside³⁴ printed *To-Do List: From Buying Milk to Finding a Soul Mate, What Our Lists Reveal about Us*. The quirkyalone book deal came after the original essay was re-published from *To-Do List* in *The Utne Reader*, through which the concept was further popularized.

In the case of both the *quirkyalone* and *To-Do List* books, Cagen launched websites tied to publication. The quirkyalone blog was launched when that book was

³⁴ The book is, as of 2014, published by Simon & Schuster imprint Touchstone.

released in 2004, followed by the release of the *To-Do List* website.³⁵ Cagen launched the quirkyalone website as part of the release of the book, seeking promotion and a continuance of the conversations that were occurring around the themes of the book. Cagen says, “Making a quirkyalone website was just because I should have a website for the book.” (personal interview, July 16, 2013). As a promotional tool for the release of the book, Cagen anticipated using the blog to publicize events around the book, to link to journalists’ coverage of quirkyalone, and to host forums on which conversations about quirkyalone can happen. Soon, Cagen realized that the ability to take the “Are you a quirkyalone?” quiz was very attractive to the site’s visitors.

The idea of a new identity category carving out a space on the Internet for counterpublic conversation is obviously analogical to the case of AVEN explored in the first chapter. The quirkyalone forums, started after AVEN began, are gone, though. In explaining the forums to me, Cagen admitted that after she set up the top-level topics for

³⁵ Following other books made up of crowdsourced content like the 2005 blog-turned-book *PostSecret*, the *To-Do List* blog was launched in 2005 after the book deal was received, in order to solicit to-do lists from the Internet. On May 19, 2005, Cagen posted on the *To-Do List* blog,

To-Do List rides again! For three years (between 2000 and 2003) I published To-Do List: a magazine of meaningful minutiae. Among other major recognition, To-Do List was named Best New Magazine of 2000, Reader's Choice, in Utne's Alternative Press Awards.

Now I am collecting lists for a book and I want yours. Your to-do lists, pros and cons lists, holiday lists, work lists, boys/girls I have kissed lists--lists of all kinds. I especially need more lists from men. (Men seem to more often keep "mental lists" rather than write their to-dos down.)

the quirkyalone forums, she wasn't involved with the conversations happening on them. Unlike David Jay's involvement with the asexuality identity, Cagen's relationship to quirkyalone always refers back to her definition of the concept, her explanation of the identity throughout history, and her anecdotal research and analyses of quirkyalones. The quirkyalone website is explicitly tied to the book, which makes the communication happening under the banner of the quirkyalone website subject to the marketing whims of Cagen. Neither those original forums nor ones launched in subsequent years, for instance, are maintained as a link on the quirkyalone homepage as of 2014.



Figure 2.1 The quirkyalone “How It Happened” timeline.

From Cagen (2004b)

The timeline printed in the quirkyalone book (reprinted, above) explains how the concept developed and was publicized. After tracking the writing and various publications of the quirkyalone essay prior to the

publication of the book, Cagen notes that many people took the “Are you a Quirkyalone?” quiz on the website. And after that, Cagen notes that, independently of her, people communicated with each other and adapted the concept to their own creative purposes: creating quirkyalone groups, introducing the concept in college courses and sermons, and programming a quirkyalone short film program – Fuel for the Quirky Alone

– at the SF Indie Fest film festival in San Francisco.³⁶ From there, the timeline moves to a concept that she *has* been a part of, the promotion of International Quirkyalone Day, which not so coincidentally occurs on February 14, more popularly known as Valentine’s Day in the U.S.

Akin to the Adbusters Media Foundation’s Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week, the holiday seeks to destabilize cultural control over our life and love. On her website, Cagen’s list of ten things to do to celebrate Quirkyalone Day includes a suggestion to go shopping—but at a thrift store—and to buy a bouquet of daisies, the “official flower of the quirkyalone movement.” Unlike Buy Nothing Day and TV Turnoff Week, the implicit nature of the critique of corporate culture has allowed for the day to be picked up vastly by various media outlets and city mayors, who have proclaimed February 14th Quirkyalone Day for any given year. While the day is a response to a holiday that conspicuously celebrates and reinforces the primacy of coupledness, the alternative holiday is not a complete rejection of the consumerism that attends the more famous holiday.

Though media coverage and vernacular use of the concept was most dense before and around the release of the book, the concept still has enough relevance that people

³⁶ The program consisted of the following seven short films: Marisa Delcon’s “Five to Seven” (2002), Lee Hall Fearnside’s “Age of Weddings” (2001), Randall Good’s “Hannah Can’t Swim” (2002), Melissa Cooperman’s “How They Wear Deceit” (2002), CJ Roy’s “Human” (2002), Eva Saks’s “Needle in a Haystack” (2001), and Christopher K. Dillon’s “All We Know of Heaven” (2002).

regularly visit the website and take the quiz.³⁷ In subsequent years, Cagen printed the book in Portuguese, promoting it in Brazil, and Spanish, promoting it in Argentina, taking some time off in the middle.

In 2014, Cagen listed herself on her own personal website as “Author of *Quirkyalone + To-Do List*, life coach, teacher, lover of life!” In 2016, she identifies as “Sasha Cagen: Author / Coach / Speaker / Thought Leader.” Cagen is a professional writer and essayist who currently also holds online classes and consultations with people on a variety of topics. Cagen’s increased attention to building an email list and her career focus on becoming a life coach indicate her desire to affiliate herself with the quirkyalone identity as brand, tying the identity to profit for her.

From Blogs and PDF Archives to Book to Multimedia Meme: The Against Equality Collective

Against Equality, a collective of five people, considers itself “an online archive, publishing, and arts collective focused on critiquing mainstream gay and lesbian politics.” Writing on their website, they go on, “As queer thinkers, writers and artists, we are committed to dislodging the centrality of equality rhetoric and challenging the demand for inclusion in the institution of marriage, the US military, and the prison industrial complex via hate crimes legislation. We want to reinvigorate the queer political imagination with fantastic possibility!” In an interview with Weiss (2012), collective member Yasmin Nair notes that the fantastic possibility she hopes to activate is the ability

³⁷ In explaining the importance of the quiz, Cagen explained that the quiz was a collaborative idea that was collaboratively written. Since 2012, Cagen asks for an e-mail address when people take the quiz, and this has been “a huge driver of [her own personal promotional] email list” (personal interview, July 16, 2013).

to imagine “free health care, a world without prisons, no more war” (p. 849). Their archive of articles dealing with these themes is found on their website, and they also have a robust Facebook group.³⁸ Aside from their online presence, the collective has published three edited collections of essays showcasing queer critiques of gay marriage, the prison industrial complex, and the military.

The group seeks to create a space for critique of the homonormative political projects of well-funded non-profits like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), who have been integral players in the lobbying efforts for marriage equality, gays and lesbians in the military, and hate crimes legislation, all priorities that Against Equality specifically enumerates and criticizes for being a part of a LGBT complicity with the harmful privatizing and profiteering priorities of neoliberalism.

Against Equality not only maintains an online archive of its essays offering queer critiques of the mainstream LGBT movement; it has also published three books compiling essays from the archive around the themes of marriage, the military, and the criminal justice and prison systems, as well as a fourth book, *Against Equality: Queer Revolution Not Mere Inclusion*, which compiles the three smaller books, adding a new introduction. All of the Against Equality books were published with the help of Oakland-

³⁸ As of this writing, a Facebook group allows all members to put posts on the group wall, which allows that post to be seen by all members of the group. (This is what Against Equality uses, though it requires posts to be approved by an administrator.) This differs from a Facebook page, which allows only the page’s administrators to make posts viewable to all that “like” it. In other words, pages afford top-down communication; groups afford more dispersed, democratic communication.

based AK Press (n.d.), which describes itself as “a worker-run collective that publishes and distributes radical books, visual and audio media, and other mind-altering material.”

The collection of critiques against gay marriage, *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage* (Conrad, 2011), was at first self-published using a vanity press (Against Equality Press). The small booklet is a collection of essays written by activists and scholars who wish to reprioritize the mainstream (read: homonormative) LGBT movement to abandon the quest for same-sex marriage. The collection is available at radical independent bookstores and online sites like Amazon. A collection of essays primarily reprinted from its contributors’ personal blogs and other self-edited online spaces and from academic journals, *Against Equality* collects a number of writers whose work seek to decouple queer politics from any ties to the neoliberal pro-marriage agenda. Among the writers are figures who have been incredibly influential in the last several decades in queer activism and critique: self-proclaimed gender outlaw Kate Bornstein, former Queers for Economic Justice head Kenyon Farrow, University of Chicago history professor John D’Emilio, genderqueer writer Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, and queer academics Dean Spade and Craig Willse.

Three members of the group’s leadership, Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair, and Karma Chávez, are public faces for the organization. Conrad edited the first book, and Nair wrote its introduction. Conrad also has an essay in the collection. In contextualizing the book and its reason for being, Yasmin Nair writes in the introduction, “Through our reliance on the marital family structure, emphasized and valorized by the push for gay marriage, we allow the state to mandate that only some relationships and some forms of

social networks count” (p. 5). More broadly, the introductory essay provides a queer activist history that exists as an alternative to a version of gay and lesbian activism that paints the Stonewall Riots and its resulting cultural achievements as the result of the work of concerned white gay men. Nair not only reminds us of the sexual, gender, racial, and class diversity of LGBT/queer people and the LGBT/queer movement, she also associates the queer movement with calls for progressive change to health care, the prison system, and U.S. imperialism.

Typically defined in opposition to “assimilationist” gay and lesbian politics, queer politics and queer counterpublics provide an antidote to the homonormative agenda of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement, which has focused on media representation, marriage equality, incorporation into the military, and other state recognitions that do not disrupt capitalist, police, and military priorities. From a variety of queer identities, carefully contextualized by individual writers, the contributors to *Against Equality* remind readers that the queer movement should be more inclusive and diversify beyond the coupled white leaders that dominate the bureaucratic mainstream organizations. They argue that the queer movement must be more mindful of broader societal inequities and injustices.

The counterpublic addressed by *Against Equality* is buttressed by the broader oeuvre of the writers it includes. It also is encouraged in a tour of college towns and radical bookstores, on various online spaces (e.g. Facebook groups), and by online radical publications where *Against Equality* contributors write (e.g. *The Bilerico Project* or personal blogs).

Much of the activity around the Against Equality collective happens on the group's Facebook group. Originally, Conrad and the other admins in the collective saw the Facebook group as a way to reference—and “activate”—the preexisting online archive. Conrad noted, “I think the idea was that it was a vehicle [for the archive]... When we add something to the archive, we'll post to the Facebook. ‘Hey! Recent addition!’ It's a way to activate the archive, so the archive doesn't become a static thing” (personal interview, November 13, 2012). Conrad notes that others don't necessarily see the relationship between the Facebook group and the archive as he does. That is, for others, the Facebook group is its own entity; it is not necessarily something that derives from and drives to the archive on AgainstEquality.org. On Conrad's motivations for encouraging the collective's web presence to be the way it is, he says,

I'm kind of a history dork, and an archival dork, and I don't think everyone else is in the same boat as me in the collective. But it's really important to me. It's part of why we did the call for art postcard project out. It's because there's not as much visual culture being produced that pertains to these politics. It's usually ephemeral or there's no documentation or it doesn't end up on the Internet. (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Especially as users of the Internet and other media technologies are exposed to or able to access unprecedented amounts of written information, users' relations to archives change.

Despite the fact that Against Equality's group is open, there are ways that the group tries to regulate the kinds of communication that can occur on the group's page. In 2013, a post from fellow admin Yasmin Nair explains how the collective would like the group to be used.

Welcome! This Facebook page is an offshoot of the Against Equality website/archive, and is meant to be a quick way for interested people to connect and

engage with each other about the materials archived, suggest reading/viewing material, and to share information about the work they are engaged in.

We have no desire to censor anyone's views, and we don't expect that all the views expressed here will be in exact congruence with our own. We expect that people will join us because they have similar goals and aspirations as ours, and are genuinely interested in exploring possibilities in dynamic even if occasionally impolite and impolitic ways. That being said, the web is full of trolls.

For this reason, posts on this page have to be approved by moderators, and trolls and their comments will be removed if they prove distracting to any conversations.

This is a Facebook page. It's not an activist space; it's not a community; it's not a tutorial page for Queer Radical Politics 101; it's not a safe space; it's not a place for you to advertise your website; and it's not anybody's business to engage mindlessly with you just because you don't get the basics of what we're about and because you like seeing your name appear on the wall.

Here Nair, as an administrator, sets the terms for the kinds of sharing and discussion provided by the post. It is an explicit way for Nair to define the boundary of the counterpublic addressed by the Against Equality group and to set the bar for the level of discourse she expects; all those whose perspectives lie outside of the boundaries set up by Nair must not betray those positions via a post on the group's wall (it will be deleted by an administrator before it has the opportunity to be posted). This declaration also allows Facebook users to decide if they want to start or continue being a part of this conversation or to be considered as a part of this group. Users who see this post can use it to decide whether or not to join the group or whether or not to stay in the group.

At a April 19, 2014 event at New York City bookstore Bureau of General Services — Queer Division tied to the release of Against Equality's fourth and final book, Ryan Conrad said that the collective members would be moving on and directing their energies

to new projects. In the face of the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell and great zeal around marriage court cases, including the *Windsor v. U.S.* decision which required the federal government to recognize any marriages legal in any state,³⁹ Conrad said of Against Equality, "we lost." A few years later, the Facebook group is still going on as it has been.

The Medium is the (Alternative) Message?

When choosing platforms for communication, quirkyalone and Against Equality chose mediums for which there was a low barrier to entry. The quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns have very purposeful relationships to their choice of media and the way the central figures view themselves as professional media makers. In discussing with Sasha Cagen and Ryan Conrad the media production around their respective campaigns, both held specific thoughts and arguments about publishing alternative media. Specifically, both campaigns discussed their decisions to publish much of their literature in print and detailed their reasons for including certain kinds of information and interactivity online. What are the affordances of alternative print publishing structures and the digital ICTs used by these campaigns for alternative and radical media? In what follows, I will examine the reasons for and consequences of communicating on three categories of media that both campaigns have used: zines, alternative publishing, and the Internet.

Zines

³⁹ The *Windsor* case is also the main focal point of the introduction to *Queer Revolution Not Mere Inclusion*.

In her study of what she, following Mary Celeste Kearney (2006), calls grrrl zines, Alison Piepmeier (2009) explains why she has chosen to use the problematic term “third wave feminism” to describe the politics of the young women creating DIY (do-it-yourself) magazines, or zines. She says,

Girls and women who came to consciousness in an era in which second wave feminist ideals were part of the culture—taken for granted, even if not actually enacted—have a different view of gender than earlier generations...their initial encounters with feminist ideas are often mediated through the conservative backlash against feminism....this group has grown up in a late-capitalist culture that has shaped individual subjectivity, designating (in often limiting ways) what is possible and what is imaginable. (p. 8-9)

And so, Piepmeier is noting the particular conditions that impact the subjectivities of those that are writing zines in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. While Piepmeier notes that scrapbooks and other DIY forms pre-exist the group of people she would call third wave feminists and have also been used for feminist purposes, there are particular distinctions between second- and third-wave feminist media participatory culture that are useful. Feminist zines flourished in the 1990’s because they addressed counterpublics that were tired of the conservative backlash against feminism. These zinesters created media in a way that was conspicuously against the mainstream media model.

With regards to the production model of zines, Janice Radway, speaking specifically of the zine production of younger girls in a way that is applicable to zine producers more broadly, says, “Zine writers are struggling, it seems to me, not simply with the languages of the self and with the idea of planning an individual future but also, and perhaps more radically, with the viability of collaborative production and communal

forms of sociability” (p. 10). Radway notes here ways in which zine culture does not fit in with stereotypical understandings of the individualistic priorities of third wave feminists; a counterpublic formation of fellow women, though they might not use the term “feminist,” is part of the cultural work of these zines. In his history of zines, Stephen Duncombe notes the strange ways in which individualism may actually help create community, “Zines are an individualistic medium, but as a medium their primary function is communication. As such, zines are as much about the communities that arise out of their circulation as they are artifacts of personal expression. People create zines to scream out ‘I exist.’ They also do it to connect to others saying the same thing” (p. 49).

Before *Against Equality* published some of the contemporary essays in its archive in book form, Conrad’s friend Jazz-Aden Wood published the zine *Don’t Get Hitched, Get Rowdy, and other essays: a collection of queer propaganda, which focuses on the monster the gay marriage agenda has become* in February 2010. Featuring some of the same essays later published in the *Against Equality* collective’s first book collection, *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Same-Sex Marriage*, the zine took the typical photocopied zine aesthetic including some photocopied visual art expressing a queer agenda. The zine, perhaps anticipating a particular audience of cutters, pasters, painters, and drawers, included an ad to contribute visual art to the *Against Equality* collective’s published work (the cover of *Don’t Get Hitched, Get Rowdy* and the *Against Equality* ad are reprinted below).

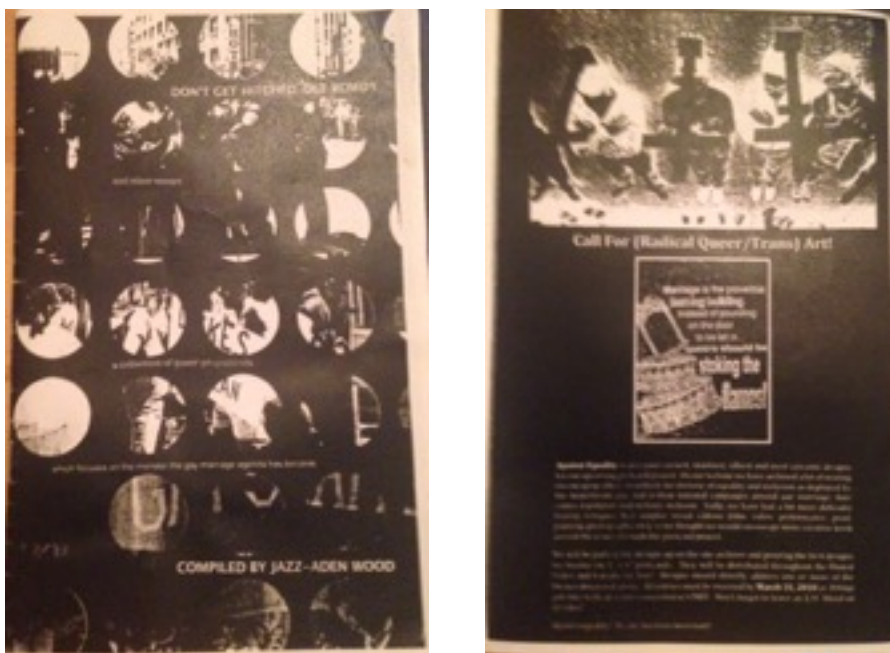


Figure 2.2 - Front and back cover of “Don’t Get Hitched, Get Rowdy,” compiled by Jazz-Aden Wood

So while the overlap and collaboration between the Against Equality collective and the *Don’t Get Hitched, Get Rowdy* zine signal a similar audience, Against Equality as a collective has not produced its own zine.

For Cagen, her quirkyalone essay was first printed in a zine only after it circulated as an email amongst friends and then friends of friends, and throughout various social networks as an email forward. Before writing the quirkyalone essay, Cagen had a history of making zines collaboratively and wrote *cupsized* with a friend. She launched the zine *To-Do List* with the quirkyalone essay included, and it then went on to be published in the alternative magazine *Utne Reader* and other places, including the *Quirkyalone* book.

When asked if zines were still relevant, Cagen responded by saying,

No, they're not. I don't think so, but I love them. I always think that I'd like to go back to doing that. Because the experience of that can be more satisfying and kind

of more healing and fun, you know. Feeling more connected to the thing, you know? I mean I was in this riotgrrrl book. And I was putting up pictures of my zine *cupsized*, and that's fun, that brings the Internet and zines together, like having the images of the zine, it's just a power in that stuff that digital stuff just never has, that weight or feeling -- it's just so *click* *click* *click* *click* (personal interview, July 16, 2013)

Here, by looking at Cagen's two-decade experience with zines, we can see that Cagen still values the attributes of zines, even if Cagen currently finds them irrelevant. For Cagen, zines are affectively important but do not currently have an audience. While the existence of zine fairs and zine presence at book fairs and book stores prove her wrong that they don't have an audience *at all*, compared to a few decades ago, when more independent bookstores existed in the U.S. and zines were more vital forms for counterpublic address, the twenty-first century landscape for zines is much different. For Cagen, who is a professional writer, the ability to write similar content as she would for zines and get paid for it may also mean that zines also do not do what freelancing for mainstream publications and publishing books with alternative presses do: help her make a living.

Alternative Presses

In the mid-twentieth century, the new social movements, many of which focused on identity politics, developed a robust set of publishers, magazines, and other periodicals to address the communication needs of the various movements that were gaining ground at that time (Fraser, 1990; Gamson, 2003). Later in the twentieth century, the new social movements' publishers often went out of business or began to work more in line with the demands or preferences of advertisers eager to reach niche audiences (Gamson 2003).

The *Quirkyalone* book was published by the HarperSanFrancisco imprint of mega-publisher Harper Collins. Imprints of large publishers often have unique relationships with specialty bookstores and audiences; in the case of HarperSanFrancisco, its other books cover New Age spirituality predominantly. The Against Equality books, though some have been published under the Against Equality imprint, have all technically been printed by AK Press, an Oakland-based publisher whose radical politics complement Against Equality's.

For both campaigns, the published books serve as centerpieces for larger transmedia projects. For *Quirkyalone*, the book allowed Cagen, a writer by trade, to expand on her concept in a number of ways. The book serves as a resource that can be revisited, a media form that has value as a long-lasting fixture on library and personal book shelves, making it in some ways more likely to be discovered than information on the Internet. The format of both books is slightly unconventional. Cagen's book takes on the look of a polished, not photocopied zine. The first three Against Equality books, about resistances to marriage equality, military inclusion, and hate crimes legislation and other means of criminalization, were each pocket-sized, and the first book included a cover designed by and three postcards inside by the trans artist and filmmaker Chris E. Vargas.

In Cagen's case, publishing a book was seen as an option after an agent who read the original *quirkyalone* essay contacted her. Explaining Against Equality's decision to publish books, Conrad says that the collective has "published some of the archives in books because not everyone goes online—specifically older folks and people in prison—

so thinking about access around digital technology” (personal interview, November 13, 2012). In the introduction to their fourth book, collective members Conrad, Nair, Karma Chavez, and Deena Loeffler (Conrad, 2014) say,

While it may be surprising for city dwellers to learn that not everyone has high-speed Internet access or seamless cell-phone coverage, rural queers know all too well what it means to be on the losing side of the digital divide...Regional libraries and schools often become the main lifeline to online access, and these spaces are surveilled and policed in ways that make it difficult and uncomfortable, if not outright dangerous, to access queer and trans materials online. (p. 9)

They go on to explain that many people simply do not use the computers to which they have access for various reasons (see Wyatt 2008) and that incarcerated readers will have an easier time finding the book than accessing the readings online. But they end by noting the affective pleasures of holding a book:

Though we make this collection available as an e-book due to demand from those overseas who find shipping costs prohibitive, there is still that irreplaceable feeling one gets when folding down the corner of a page and writing notes with a pencil. The feeling of gathering for a book club discussion where well-worn pages are smudged with traces of shared meals, and discussed, reworked, challenged, and built upon. The feeling of passing on a cherished book to a lover, friend, or the next generation of queer and trans people who will look at this moment for traces of resistance like we did with previous decades. The feeling one just does not get from gathering around the glowing screen of a laptop or tablet. Plus, it's much easier to cruise someone on the beach or in the park by checking out their book than trying to guess what's on their e-reader. (p. 10-11)

I quote this paragraph at length here to capture the great lengths to which the Against Equality collective goes to emphasize the affective pleasures of reading and discussing as social acts. They discuss the ways that books are in some ways more likely to inspire the future explorations of the alternative or the resistant, but in fact, they even go as far as acknowledging the sexual attractiveness of reading from printed books.

The Internet

Much ink has been spilled on the revolutionary potentials of the Internet, especially because of its low barrier to entry and the ability for media and political watchdogs to publish to near unlimited audiences. However, the revolutionary potentials of the Internet are often technologically determinist in a way that gives too much credit to especially visible digital technologies and their developers. In his study of the “alternative Internet,” Chris Atton (2004) notes that to many commentators, the Internet is “either economic opportunity or social utopia – it is rarely conceived to be both” (x). He goes on to say, “As in any social-scientific study we need to attend to all these features [the Internet as political or technological fix (for democracy, for economic downturn), social revolution or social development, or creative or cultural utopia] taken together, the better to understand their relatedness, their contradictions and the richness of the object of study” (x). So, here, in this small contribution to the literature on the alternative Internet and following Marvin (1988), Boczkowski (2004), Dunbar-Hester (2014), Costanza-Chock (2014) and Wolfson (2014) in bringing nuance to narratives of progressive uses of digital ICTs, I focus on the Internet as a media forum with both attributes for and limits to being used to promote the quirkyalone and Against Equality agendas.

In explaining why a quirkyalone website (quirkyalone.net) was ever created, Cagen told me that she thought she needed a website because that’s what one does when they publish a book.

I had a volunteer webmaster, and he suggested there should be a blog. And that at that point was completely new. Like "What is a blog?" and all that. It was a very rudimentary blog on movable type. And then when the book came out, people wanted a forum, they wanted a community. So we set up php forums. And that just quickly blew up, and that was like an incredible phenomenon that I really was not that involved with all...I was involved with it because I set it up and I wrote categories for discussion, and I posed questions for people to discuss at the top level for people to discuss. Like "This is what this is about." (personal interview, July 16, 2013)

Though at the time of publishing the *Quirkyalone* book, Cagen only included a website because that's just what you did (in other words, it was secondary promotional material to the book), the website still provided a platform for counterpublic communication about quirkyalone, a great value for many of those touched by the concept.

Today, the quirkyalone site is linked to Cagen's personal website, which hosts her classes and other ventures as a writer and life coach. Unlike the discussions that occur on AVEN explored in the previous chapter, after some time, Cagen did not maintain the quirkyalone forums on her site. But the quirkyalone concept still circulates, and Cagen has realized that the concept's meaning, while rooted in a somewhat centralized media project, is actually quite decentralized:

The Internet helped the concept spread and I've had comments on Gawker where someone will talk about quirkyalone, and they don't know what they're talking about. They'll say it's something completely different or watered down. That's just kind of what it is. Mainly [the Internet] has been a huge force for spreading it. But along the way I've had to accept that this word is viral and it will spread and a lot of people also don't get the depth of it. (personal interview, July 16, 2013)

Here, Cagen acknowledges that her readers communicating amongst each other, including on the Internet, helped popularize the quirkyalone concept. As communication about the term extended beyond the domains she managed, Cagen lost control of the

concept, which is a blessing and a curse for the author who cares deeply about the concept but wants the word to keep the meaning she gave it.

There is one use of the Internet that Cagen finds especially helpful now. Cagen hopes to grow her follower base by capturing emails of visitors to one of the most popular features of her online presence, the *quirkyalone* quiz. When I spoke to her in 2013, she had just realized that she should be doing this to help her regularly updated email list grow in size. While *quirkyalone* has some social media presence, its presence online currently primarily takes the form of more personal small-group communication in Cagen's classes.

What do groups do when communication happening under their banner takes forms that are not in line with the founding counterpublic politics of the group? Against Equality has been conspicuously dealing with members of their Facebook group staying on message. In the introduction to the *Against Equality* media production that opened this chapter, I included the post by Nair about the ground rules for participation in the AE Facebook group. The decision to be clear about what would or would not be permissible or appropriate for the *Against Equality* Facebook group was informed by other experiences using Facebook for radical queer political groups. The establishment of the *Against Equality* Facebook open group was inspired by another Facebook group that preceded AE. Ryan Conrad explains,

There was one for [I Still Think] Marriage is the Wrong Goal, which was a Facebook page that was started after Dean Spade and Craig Willse wrote the piece by the same name. It sort of became a hub that people were using. It wasn't necessarily being managed or curated in any way. So we sort of thought "What if

we tried to do something similar to them, but collective members were actively posting to it?” (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Spade and Willse’s still existing group is closed; it requires an administrator to approve one’s membership. They also stopped posting themselves after a while, and for Conrad’s taste, the discussion became too inactive.

So Conrad created a Facebook group for Against Equality,⁴⁰ with the collective members as admins, originally as a way to “activate the [online] archive” (Interview) but later to share news and thoughts about various issues from across the globe having to do with queer and/or radical politics. From the beginning, Conrad says that the group decided to take a certain stance on moderating the page.

[We would remove] things about someone's like random art opening, or like random pro-gay marriage stuff. Or gay marriage trolls that like joined the group to make fun of us. Which at one point did happen. We banned this guy. We were like, “Look!...This is not a place for you.” We sent him an email [saying] if you really don't like us, you can start an Against Against Equality group, and they did. And then it disappeared after a few months because...there was like three people in there. (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Nair’s permanently pinned post also defines the kinds of posts that are encouraged and what kinds of posts will be deleted by the admins. Nair’s post makes it clear that there is something particular about “a Facebook group,” but we don’t get much information about what makes this different. We hear a number of things that it is not (an activist space, a

⁴⁰ While the critical mass of Facebook’s large network of users makes it a useful tool for communicating to a great amount of people with relatively little effort, it would be inappropriate for me not to flag the fact that Facebook’s policies are often anti-democratic and are reliant on a destructive, privacy-exploiting capitalist business plan that makes claims for the platform as a beacon of democracy suspect. Christian Fuchs (2014) has proposed that we seek out and encourage a social network or multiple social networks that are open-source and engaged in more ethical business practices.

community, a safe space, a tutorial), but we are not really let in on what the Facebook group specifically affords. The post explains that this is a place where, as Conrad notes, the archive can be activated, but it also encourages members to see the group as a place where new possibilities can be imagined. Though Against Equality has an open group, it has chosen to approve all posts before they go live. The openness of the group means that new members do not need to be approved by admins to become members, and it also means that all posts are viewable to all other Facebook users who are looking at the group, not just those who have already joined and are looking at the group.

Conrad also sees the geographic reach of Against Equality's web presence as valuable. He says,

I think that a major component of the project through an archival process, particularly online, has been about challenging feelings of isolation. People that are in major urban centers like New York or San Francisco or Chicago don't necessarily have the same access to more radical activist communities. So being able to have a link to that sort of politic and that sort of mentality is a component of our project. I don't think it was ever how we intentionally built it, but it is definitely the purpose it has served. (interview, November 13, 2012)

This explanation is an interesting complement to the reason the collective gave for publishing a book. By being attuned to access, the Against Equality collective found it important, helpful, or appropriate to produce work on multiple mediums. These particular kinds of access became apparent when Conrad toured with the book.

When we go on tour, people in small towns are really excited about us. We'd do a thing in San Francisco and like six people would show up. I feel like the critique of and what Against Equality has to offer doesn't resonate as much with big city folks because they have the availability of radical folks who can like feel connected or they can say "I don't want to be connected with gay marriage because it's stupid and I have this crew of people that work on other things that I think are really interesting, and I'm going to put my energy into that." In smaller

places, smaller towns, there isn't necessarily other folks with radical politics or at least it's difficult and there's like a sense of extreme isolation and alienation. That's where I was coming from when I first started writing about gay marriage in 2009. And I'm sure Against Equality—it's like an island on the Internet that people can get to that is an escape from places where gay marriage mainstream is so ubiquitous or it's the only option. (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Here, quite apart from the specific medium being deployed, what this quote makes clear is the very value of mediating counterpublic communication in ways that are able to span distance and time. Though earlier the collective focused on the affective pleasures of engaging in face-to-face “real world” communication about ideas, here they also acknowledge that in many communities, accessing the mediated work of the Against Equality collective is many people’s outlet to find themselves engaged in counterpublic address.

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Both campaigns emphasize medium specificity, questions of access, and the ability to reach a desired audience. The materiality of print media and the affordances of digital platforms for agitational communication are in tension for both campaigns. Rather than finding contradiction in this fact, these groups’ tactics point to the necessity of different kinds of counterpublic communication in order to do impactful agitation of larger publics. While both campaigns configure interaction on their digital platforms in specific ways, both campaigns’ print media campaigns allow the opportunity for uninterrupted explanation of some of the arguments, demands, and ideologies that have been fostered within the counterpublics.

In the next section, I will focus on the digital campaigns of quirkyalone and Against Equality, especially in light of the preoccupation within the political communication literature on the ways that digital ICTs often deemphasize deliberative communication and foster personalization.

Mainstreamed Identity Politics, Digital Media and the Discursive Space for Critiques of Hetero- and Homonormativities

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was—as there continues to be—much enthusiasm about the potential that social media can bring about social change. Into the second decade of the twenty-first century, certain social activist campaigns, for instance, have arisen that are intricately tied to the Twitter-friendly hashtags that emblemize the cultural work they do: #blacklivesmatter, #bringbackourgirls, #occupywallstreet #solidarityisforwhitewomen. In this section, I investigate the digital media tactics of Sasha Cagen and Against Equality in bringing their critiques of sexual and romantic normativities to larger publics and counterpublics. To do that, I focus on the ways that non-normative perspectives have a hard time fighting the bandwidth for political communication set up by news and information institutions and experienced by news and information consumers and producers. In doing this, my goal is to contribute to theorizations of radical democracy that push the conventional Habermasian deliberative model of the public sphere into counterpublic models that acknowledge the difficulty counterpublic agitation has at making headway in larger publics.

This chapter follows Costanza-Chock (2014) in developing nuanced understandings of transmedia political campaigns. In noting the transmedia organizing of

the early twenty-first century immigrants rights movement in the U.S., Costanza-Chock complicates easy good/bad analyses of the impact of social media on democratic mobilization. As may already be apparent and will become more clear shortly, Quirkyalone and Against Equality have not fostered much real-world or targeted organizing around their politics. The rhetoric of both campaigns and the material social justice work done by many Against Equality contributors and members of the Against Equality collective make studying the campaigns as potentials for organizing or developing coalitions appropriate. So far in this dissertation, I have spent little attention on the ways that ideas of concern to counterpublics enter into the consciousness of those participating in mainstream publics or other counterpublics. In order to account for the ability for new priorities and proposals to enter into public or counterpublic discourse, theories of publics and counterpublics need to address the needs of radical democracy, to move from “consensus to contestation” (Dahlberg, 2007; see also: Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, Mouffe, 2000).

As explored in the previous section, Quirkyalone and Against Equality deploy their campaigns in a variety of ways; theirs is a transmedia agitation, which following Costanza-Chock (2014), makes it difficult to isolate certain online platforms as definitively affording success or failure—or many definitive qualitative attributes at all—for the campaigns. They are both differently situated as political campaigns, though. Quirkyalone, centralized and managed by one person, is predominantly a campaign for a new identity politics that overlaps with other non-normative politics around gender and sexuality; Against Equality, managed by a collective of five central people—three public

writers and two background support people—is a component of a broader queer movement. Against Equality members have a hard time being taken seriously by both activists and academics because of the fact that their work is predominantly intellectual but is not formally affiliated with educational institutions (Weiss 2012).

While both campaigns are attempts to contribute to the discursive fields of sexual politics, both campaigns are aware to some degree of the material urgency of their politics. Cagen's (2012) review of Klinenberg's (2011) book on the rise in single living in Western societies (a book in which she is featured) on her blog ends by saying, “We need to design new ways to support each other in our desires to be alone and together.” Ryan Conrad was motivated to start writing critiques of the mainstream LGBT movement when the local Lewiston, Maine social support organization he worked for was de-funded (Conrad, 2009); Against Equality collective member Chavez (2011), in her participatory research on queer and immigrant rights groups, notes the importance of coalitional politics amongst those whose material situations are similarly adversely affected by social, political, and economic forces. As Against Equality says it themselves, “every contributor to this anthology [*Queer Revolution Not Mere Inclusion*] and every member of the small Against Equality collective is connected to projects that radically alter the political landscape” (Conrad et al. 2014, 5).

But both campaigns' seek to publicize their work in larger publics and in the media. In her dominance/resistance model of the mainstream media, Marxist media studies scholar Deepa Kumar (2007) notes several ways that resistance can spring up in the mainstream media. While her book is about labor struggles and strikes and the impact

they can have on the establishment media, she argues that “Even in the absence of collective resistance, the media sometimes present dissenting views when there is conflict between elites; when the pressures of circulation or ratings force them to reflect, in however distorted a manner, the problems faced by their consumer base; when journalistic ethics contradict the interests of ruling groups; or when a media organization’s credibility is at stake” (p. 49). This observation goes for both mainstream media and radical or alternative outlets that have heavily entrenched standards for the kinds of content or perspectives they can expect to cover or include. Because much of what gets shared on social media and what is served in search engine results comes from mainstream and alternative media outlets, it would logically follow that the publishing trends of these media affects what is available and accessed by online news and information consumers.

In recent years, voices of resistance have arisen in the mainstream and alternative media against homophobia, heterosexism, racism, misogyny, and capitalism. These voices of resistance have arisen for the very reasons Kumar outlines in her dominance/resistance model of the media. With the mainstreaming of resistant or non-normative voices, though, feminist and LGBT-affirmative politics have been co-opted and tamed by advertisers (Gamson 2003) and a “tolerant” liberal culture in which radical queer or socialist feminist perspectives are not seen as necessary (Vaid 1995, McRobbie 2004, Walters 2014). The mainstream media has many narratives that frame these issues as social problems that are tied up in party politics, representational politics, or can be solved with “free market solutions.” Because of the power of mainstream media

narratives, radical or non-normative interventions are often ignored or are seen as idiosyncratic blips. It is within this context that discourse about gender and sexuality circulates.

Both campaigns have had exposure or contact with mainstream media outlets. Sasha Cagen has used the mainstream media to publicize *quirkyalone* often. The quote from her interview with Anderson Cooper quoted earlier in this chapter was part of the publicity campaign she launched with the publication of her book. Also tied to her book and occurring subsequently for years after was the anti-Valentine's Day *Quirkyalone* Day, which often received mainstream media coverage. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2012) says of Cagen, "she seems to be everywhere on February 14, because the media never tires of contrasting the *Quirkyalones* with couples who are paying dearly for roses and *prix fixe* meals at romantic restaurants" (p. 133). Cagen's mainstream media appearances are numerous despite *quirkyalone*'s anti-normativity because the ideology does not challenge any powerful institutions (marriage, the church, the state, corporate culture, consumerism) outright; it only challenges the coupling imperative.

Conrad and *Against Equality*, on the other hand, do not have an outlet in the mainstream media. Most obviously, mainstream media organizations equate resisting the mainstream LGBT movement with homophobia, and even in the LGBT press most coverage goes to the mainstream movement (Bernstein and Burke 2013). But the collective's own politics make it difficult for them to contribute to the mainstream media when asked. Conrad was asked to write about queer resistance of mainstream LGBT

politics for the Huffington Post, but he refused in protest of the outlet's practice of not paying most of its blogging contributors (he was not offered payment):

There was a piece that I wrote on the *Bilerico Project*, which, it is what it is, it's a similar model of *HuffPo* where no one gets paid and everyone writes, and you're supposed to be happy getting attention or something... I'm really skeptical of supporting [this model] in any way, shape, or form. Someone from *HuffPo* contacted me and asked me to write for Gay Voices or whatever, and I was like "Hell no! Fuck you people! No!" (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Thus, *Against Equality* limits the outlets it will contribute to based on their own political perspective on the ethics of journalistic outlets.

If one values the counterpublic contributions and potentials of quirkyalone and *Against Equality*, it would follow that one values perspectives that lay outside of moderate normative political discussion. The theory of deliberative enclaves (Sunstein 2001) as developed in the field of political communication states that if the goal in civil society is for the public to engage in deliberation on all topics, then the Internet is not particularly good at fostering this kind of discussion because it encourages the development of deliberative enclaves (read: counterpublics) that, it is accused, deliberate too much amongst themselves without entering into mainstream deliberations. This discourse tends to privilege deliberative communication instead of contestation or any challenge to the political norm (Dahlberg, 2007). In this section, I will focus on less popular components of Sunstein's (2001) argument about deliberative enclaves that have not been acknowledged in many subsequent studies, moments when Sunstein acknowledges the potential value of deliberative enclaves and the mechanisms by which they can add value to political discourse. For Sunstein, the assumption is that certain

ideas may need the space of deliberative enclaves to form and gain traction, but, he argues, these ideas do not have any real significance until they enter larger (mainstream) publics. This theory assumes that moderation is ideal.

After contemplating Sunstein's theory, I move on to map the quirky alone and Against Equality campaigns as deliberative enclaves in contemporary information ecosystems. The challenge for critiques of hetero- and homonormativity is that the politics of gender and sexuality have already been moderated by our contemporary tolerant culture.

What Does Fragmentation Do for Critiques of Normativities?

Cass Sunstein (2001), a prolific legal scholar who served as Administrator of Information and Regulatory Affairs under President Obama, warns of a heavily personalized information environment in which news consumers are never exposed to certain important information because they have preselected the kind of information they want to see and have pre-chosen the kinds of information they do not want to be exposed to. Writing in the age of numerous obituaries for the American newspaper, Sunstein predicts that we no longer pick up local newspapers based on where we live. Instead, Internet users will read his theoretical *The Daily Me*, a set of news that is delivered to us based on our pre-ordained news consumption interests. Striving for personalization, Sunstein argues, leads to the fragmentation of the information market. At the expense of sharing common topics of concern, all news consumers have their own agenda. Sunstein's concern with "a fragmented communications market" that fosters "deliberative enclaves" is based on the assumption that these phenomena "[entrench] existing views, [spread]

falsehood, [promote] extremism, and [make] people less likely to work cooperatively on shared problems” (p. 87).

Beyond its applications to mainstream political discourse online, Sunstein's work has become a lightning rod reference point for those interested in radical democracy online because of his focus on the ways that deliberative enclaves (which are nothing if not platforms that mark the boundary of counterpublic dissemination of information and communication) are distracting to productive deliberation. As Atton (2004) as well as Sunstein acknowledge, the Internet's possibilities for encouraging radical or extreme communication is equal opportunity—if certain Internet technologies foster radical or progressive communication, they probably also support conservative populist communication.⁴¹ Though Sunstein warns of the polarization afforded by a fragmented news landscape, in a portion of his fragmentation thesis that is not well-cited, he admits,

Properly understood, the case for deliberating enclaves is that they will improve social deliberation, democratic and otherwise, precisely because enclave deliberation is often required for incubating new ideas and perspectives that will add a great deal to public debate. But for these improvements to occur, members must not isolate themselves from competing positions, or at least any such attempts at insulation must not be a prolonged affair. (p. 78-9)

⁴¹ As social media sites and new information startups become more corporatized and dependent on advertising dollars, capital begins to tip the scales with regards to the kinds of information and the kinds of perspectives that are covered in specific news and information outlets. The landmark *Citizens United* case was centered around the financial contributions that resulted in a piece of well-funded conservative political media, and the political right in the U.S. has formalized the relationships between mainstream media outlets like Fox News and blogs. But public interest journalism and media projects (e.g., The Marshall Project, The Intercept) as well as Democratic and other left or leftist organizations (e.g., Occupy Democrats, Upworthy) have arisen to fight the well-funded media projects on the right.

Here, Sunstein makes the point that the communication that goes on within enclaves must see itself within the context of other—larger—conversations going on within political communication. I bring up this aspect of Sunstein's argument because his contribution to the theory of the fragmentation of the information landscape is often simplified in other research just to demonize balkanization and the popularity of deliberative enclaves. At a closer look, though, Sunstein is critiquing the news industry forces that have created a proliferation of politicized news sources, many of whom eschew journalistic or other ethical protocols to foster a reactionary politics.⁴²

Building a Progressive Transmedia Coalition

Because quirkyalone and Against Equality are often introducing concepts for the first time to their audiences, the clear boundary formations that the campaigns make serve to enforce the clarity of their perspective. Specific media objects like the quirkyalone quiz and the instructions for posting on the Against Equality Facebook page serve to delineate the kinds of discourse that will be expected within either movement. As alluded to earlier, the campaigns also develop archives that make clear the genealogy of their perspectives and reinforce these perspectives by showing how they crop up in various media contexts. Cagen includes a list of books and films for quirkyalones and writes about them online, and Against Equality's website archives are central to the work they perceive themselves doing.

⁴² Sunstein (2011) gives the name “cybercascade” to the phenomenon of untruths becoming confirmed by self-contained deliberative enclaves. Recently, specific platforms have made apparent how cybercascades can happen within progressive counterpublics. Goldberg's (2014) reporting on feminist disputes on Twitter points to the ways that the platform does not afford deep understandings of issues.

While both campaigns contextualize themselves within a corpus of oppositional work, both campaigns have issues with regards to contextualizing their work in larger radical (counter)publics. Cagen's quirkyalone campaign is really a brand that she manages and that contributes to her financial sustainability as a writer, a notoriously precarious employment. She implies her ownership of the concept when she talks about how she has to be okay with how people take up the concept online, and she discusses the ways her business coach gave her good suggestions to improve the spread of and monetize quirkyalone. The media around quirkyalone allows individuals to recognize themselves in a world that emphasizes the coupling ideal, but the campaign in its current centralized version does not have the tools to advocate for social support or to fight the material consequences that many single people face. Cagen should not be blamed for this necessarily, but I just mean to point out the work that she is aware needs to be done but that the campaign does not really afford.

My critique of Cagen is parallel to hooks' (2013) critique of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) women-in-corporate-America feminist tome *Lean In*, in which she acknowledges that Sandberg's book encourages change in some sectors of society but criticizes Sandberg for turning a blind eye to women outside of certain class privileges and feminist theory that preceded her work. Both Sandberg and Cagen build critiques of heteronormative patriarchy that eschew the language of feminist theory (like, for instance, "heteronormative patriarchy"). Sandberg's description of her reluctance—but ultimate decision—to call herself a feminist points to the context of both Sandberg's and

Cagen's work: it is produced in a postfeminist brand culture in which the word “feminist” is encountering what could be called a rebranding.

Cagen alludes to and cites many self-described feminists throughout her book and has given a few posts on her website a “feminist” tag, but she does not affiliate the quirkyalone concept directly with the long history of feminist critiques of heteronormativity and the coupling imperative that preceded her. The inevitable participation of *Lean In*, quirkyalone, and feminism in brand culture is a concern for those who want to build a culture that contradicts contemporary capitalism's focus on brands and the accumulation of brand capital (Banet-Weiser 2012).

Against Equality participates in a critical, oppositional brand culture that emphasizes their resistance to the mainstream LGBT movement. The most visible LGBT rights organization in the U.S. Human Rights Campaign (HRC) spends much of its energy and work in the corporate world. Against Equality often uses a “>” symbol as its logo on blue and yellow, a direct reference to the blue and yellow HRC “=” logo that became very popular in the years when states began to consider same-sex marriage initiatives and legislation. This oppositional branding and affect often turns off even otherwise sympathetic members of the progressive-left,⁴³ which makes coalitional politics somewhat challenging. It is also why some Against Equality's strongest critics come from the left (Weiss 2012).

⁴³ Whitehead (2011) found in her ethnography of a state LGBT organization that many of the activists had critiques of marriage but found that it would be beneficial for LGBT rights to participate in this struggle.

Against Equality has specific critiques of the left-led LGBT rights establishment. Instead of arguing that Against Equality should try to build a coalition with these parts of the left, I want to be clear about the counterpublic purposes of Against Equality and the contemporary U.S. organizations they most loudly critique in LGBT and queer politics. Against Equality has explicitly set itself up to contribute to a larger LGBT/queer public, whereas HRC and NGLTF aim largely to contribute to a larger mainstream public. In his analysis of the competing reasons for participating in alternative media production, which uses involvement in a low power FM radio station as an example, Schiller (2007) notes the key contradiction for applying Sunstein's (2001) encouragement for counterpublic communication to enter into mainstream publics, "Expanding the circulation of ideas and culture outside of a particular subaltern group [...] risks the dilution of the identities or ideas making them subaltern in the first place" (p. 126). In fact, Schiller (2007) justifies the decision of groups like Against Equality to not aim to enter into mainstream public discourse. He says,

a subaltern group is by definition in a subordinate position to mainstream ideas and culture, but crafting counterpublic discourse that resonates with the mainstream risks compromising what is uniquely subaltern. Too much emphasis on preserving the collective identities of the group, in contrast, limits the possibilities of broader political and/or cultural influence. (p. 126)

For Schiller, then, the value for groups like Against Equality to "be the media" by producing or managing their own media platforms is more in line with Carey's (1988) ritual theory of the media than his transmission theory of the media. Sunstein's theory of deliberative media privileges the transmission model by assuming that the purpose of communication is to spread one's message, listen to others' messages, and to have

deliberations about competing messages. An approach to political communication that emphasizes the transmission model makes those that see more value in ritualistic communication like regroupment in preparation for agitation seem foolhardy.

Following Dunbar-Hester's (2011) call for media activists, scholars, and reformers to more carefully consider the relationship between varying tactics – often seen as competing—for producing a more democratic media system, I find it important for alternative and radical media campaigns to position themselves within larger movements for media activism and critique and social change and critique. This is not to say that groups like Against Equality should align themselves with mainstream organizations, rather I am saying that there is great and unseen value in aligning with other likeminded groups who have similar perspectives about media and politics. This is happening naturally in many activist campaigns; a new epistemology has emerged that responds to the New Left concern that identity politics is distracting, individualizing, and therefore easily co-opted by corporate and other neoliberal actors. This epistemology links structural forces to identity categories and subjectivities. Costanza-Chock (2014) notes that contemporary horizontalist immigrant rights organizing integrates an intersectional approach to much of the work they do; Against Equality collective member Chavez (2011) notes an example in Arizona of enclaved counterpublics strategizing on immigrant's and queer rights built coalitions to counter the oppressive forces of the media, legislature, and police.

Both historian Lisa Duggan (2003) and African-American studies scholar Robin D. G. Kelley (1997) have specifically critiqued the anti-identity politics of left stalwarts.

Writing against late 1990's anti-identity politics progressives from Todd Gitlin and Richard Rorty, Duggan writes, that they "can be understood as advocating one progressive-left formation, the one they felt allegiance to in their youth (the New Left for Gitlin, the Reformist Left for Rorty), be updated and expanded in familiar form as the *whole left*" (78). Kelley also criticizes Gitlin and takes on Michael Tomasky, who quotes the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement in order supposedly to critique identity politics for its narrow thinking. However, Kelley offers *The Combahee River Statement* as a hypothetical alternative genealogy to a progressive politics that more completely incorporates identity politics, saying that it

proposed a clear socialist agenda, argued that emancipation for everyone could not take place until racism, homophobia, sexism, and capitalism are annihilated, and criticized mainstream feminist organizations for not being inclusive enough—for not dealing adequately with the needs of the poor or with racist oppression of men and women. (p. 111)

Today, various movements are based in similar politics—a historically informed politics that acknowledges the unequal and disproportionate ways that institutions and other sites of power affect different populations based on identity categories.

Because of the mainstreaming of certain identity politics and the ways that certain proponents of identity politics see an individualist lifestyle politics as radical or revolutionary, advocates of radical media are sometimes nervous about the inclusion of identity politics—specifically *single-issue identity politics*—in radical media projects. In their radical critique of alternative media, Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) make a recommendation to small counterpublics,

Small counterpublics should be connected to each other and form a joint counter-public sphere. In this case they can become more visible in society and are more likely to effectively challenge the dominant discourse. For the realm of alternative media this means that self-sufficient alternative media projects that do not engage in wider political projects will become individualistic spaces of withdrawal, whereas networks of alternative media that develop political visions and practices and act together to form a larger political counter-public sphere have the potential to support larger-scale political change processes. Hence we consider a larger counter-public sphere that is accessible for all exploited, oppressed, and excluded groups and individuals as an important foundation for political change processes. (p. 143)

The coalitional politics called for here are complementary to a call for counterpublic agitators to contextualize themselves within a larger corpus of radical media and progressive-left politics. They continue,

[S]mall-scale individualized alternative media alone cannot become effective parts of large transformative social struggles or movements. In many cases, they will remain an expression of lifestyle politics that please and console their producers or even become ideologies that forestall collective political struggles because these producers find no time for political activism and consider their individual product as a sufficient statement. But a statement that does not reach the masses is not a significant statement at all, only an individual outcry that remains unheard and hence ineffective. (p. 143)

Here, though, Sandoval and Fuchs criticize all counterpublic agitation that is too small to be “significant.” This allusion to a standard for significance is a dangerous way of criticizing counterpublics that are less popular at any one time. Though it does make sense to attempt to build coalitions before attempting to work towards a common goal from within a smaller counterpublic, history is filled with conflicts within oppositional counterpublics over prioritization. Simply look at the ways AIDS activists in the 1990's fought over whether attention should be paid to interfacing with the pharmaceutical industry *or* addressing whether or not groups were paying attention to the needs and

concerns of women and men of color (Gould, 2006), of the ways that racism within the women's movement and sexism within the abolitionist movement created unfortunate material conditions and affective realities for those involved (Davis, 1983), and the wide variety of ways that in much critique, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy are left under-interrogated (hooks, 2001).

When Counterpublic Campaigns Come to an End

In the previous section of this chapter, I challenged various theories about political and activist media in the twenty-first media environment and analyzed various ways that the twenty-first media environment shapes identity politics campaigns. In this section, I explore the ways that the quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns may lose agitational stamina. Doing this allows me to note the vulnerabilities of counterpublics based on identity and sexual politics. I will first discuss two instances in which the political horizon has faltered for quirkyalone and Against Equality, whether or not these hiccups actually have led to the failure of the campaigns. Because these campaigns are not bolstered by many media and other institutional infrastructures, their presence in public and counterpublic discourse is reliant on the campaigns' own agitational energy and stamina. I will end by speculating on the afterlives of the various elements of the transmedia campaigns for quirkyalone and Against Equality, comparing the endurance of each campaigns' digital and print components.

The Material Realities of Quirkyalone

The sociologist Eric Klinenberg's interviews with Cagen and his analysis of her work in his 2012 book *Going Solo* explain some issues with creating activism around singledom. He starts by quoting Cagen in an interview with him:

Quirkyalone was never about being *alone*—it was about being connected, to yourself and to other people too. Now I'm ready for a different experience. I've lived alone for a long time, and at this point in my life I'd grow a lot more if I were partnered. To be honest, I worry that if I keep on making this the center of my life I'm going to wind up being single forever. (p. 134)

The burden that Cagen feels sometimes from being associated with quirkyalone is, we can see from her own words, confining. When I spoke to Cagen in 2013, she was much more excited about the concept, though those energies were being channeled in various modes of media production, not necessarily all about quirkyalone. Echoing her words in Klinenberg's book, Cagen told me:

To be honest, I felt kind of like dead on quirkyalone for a few years, and was sort of sick of it -- and I felt limited by it. I didn't want to be known as this one thing. I had this perception that [people] perceived me as always being single because of it, and I didn't want to be limited in that way. Because that was never what it was about. It was always about equal states of possibility, single or partnered. It just felt that because this word said the word "alone" in it, a lot of people, as time goes by, on the internet, just see that and form an impression quickly, and I was feeling sort of frustrated by that. (personal interview, July 16, 2013)

The burden placed on her by “the Internet” and by anyone who recognizes her as the writer who came up with “quirkyalone” and has written about single life in various other publications is easily seen as limiting. But the issue here is that it is difficult for the quirkyalone concept to be seen as one of many quirky- identities. As Cagen's own experience shows, much of the focus is on quirkyalone as a mode of being single. And so,

even if Cagen wanted to put the focus on the suite of quirky- identities, the most common focus is on quirkyalone and being single. Single identities are stable *until they're not*.

Until-you're-not identity categories challenge the expectation that identity activism gains greater strength when it is based on immutable characteristics. In addition to the single component of the quirkyalone identity, examples also include bisexuals who enter monogamous relationships, certain non-binary trans* identities, and asexuals who have sex. For allies or those who—sympathetic or not—try to understand the needs of until-you're-not categories, it often becomes confusing or difficult to accommodate the demands of certain identity politics when it is known that a member of the minority category can make decisions that could conceivably lead them to become or be seen by some as a member of the majority category. This challenge should be fought against by building a respect for self-determination that is tied to a larger (sexual) politics.

Furthermore, as Klinenberg (2012) reports in *Going Solo*, Cagen has encountered issues with advocating quirkyalone identities as perfect solutions for all people. He recounts Cagen's story of her aunt who was living alone and was diagnosed with cancer. She could no longer do everything herself, and a support network was activated. Cagen's aunt left her home in Los Angeles to move to Rhode Island, where she eventually passed away under the care of her extended family. According to Klinenberg,

Cagen knew that most people who live alone are unlikely to wind up this way, and she didn't want to interpret her aunt's tragedy as a consequence of going solo any more than of bad luck. But the entire situation added new urgency to her attempt to make a life churn, part of which involved publicly redefining Quirkyalone in a blog post so that it emphasized the possibilities for being in relationships. (p. 155-6)

The motivation for Cagen to first write her *quirkyalone* essay and the issues that her aunt faced when she needed to activate her care network are shaped by similar societal forces informed by heteronormativity. The systemic problems that heteronormativity causes have inspired many other people to organize around certain issue publics (e.g. people interested in retirement issues, issues around the aging, people concerned with fighting for welfare support) and to make political demands (e.g. for welfare programs, social support and care for people living alone, universal health care). That different groups and different individuals name problems that are caused by similar societal forces are not working together is not unique and should not necessarily be seen as a problem. It is important, though, to recognize that Cagen has not done much to extend *quirkyalone's* political potential to building coalitions or otherwise link the political situations of *quirkyalones* to other similarly situated subjects.

Has Against Equality “Lost”?

In a 2014 New York City event tied to the release of the fourth *Against Equality* book, Ryan Conrad told a few dozen audience members tightly packed into the city’s new queer bookstore that the *Against Equality* collective would be moving on to new kinds of work because, after the dismantling of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and the inevitability of marriage equality, he joked, “We lost.” This is an instance of having temporal deadlines for measuring the success alternative media and developing a clear sense of “losing” or “winning.” Of course, defeating the marriage equality movement was not the explicit goal of the *Against Equality* collective, but to the implied point of Conrad’s remark, as the mainstream LGBT shifts its focus after *winning* its policy goals, the mainstream

LGBT movement's policy campaigns are no longer viable sites of critique. Local LGBT organizations that focus on marriage, after all, have dissipated after winning marriage for communities instead of addressing other needs of the LGBT community (Olsen, 2014; McKinley, 2015).

Another way of reading Conrad's offhand remark is by interpreting the mainstreaming of LGBT activism as the foreclosure of possibilities for queer creativity with regards to non-normative kinship structures and ways of being. The dominance of mainstream LGBT activism, in other words, could be seen as oppressively clouding out any of its resistance. Boelstorff (2007) critiques anti-assimilationist queer critiques of gay marriage for being unimaginative, saying that they invest themselves in "straight time," but in the negative. In other words, just as marriage promoters talk of marriage as the ultimate privilege and preferred option, queer anti-assimilationist critics often assume that creating the possibility of same-sex marriage shuts down queer activism. Though the Marxist edge of *Against Equality's* argument implies it has more than an anti-assimilationist critique, the success of the mainstream LGBT movement seems to be making non-normative queer cultural politics, including *Against Equality's*, even less accepted by other LGBT people and allies. Instead of seeing one victory as leading to another, mainstream LGBT energy has wavered after realizing marriage equality. This is the curse of the homonormative: when certain elements of LGBT activism are mainstreamed, those that do not go along with these mainstreamed tenets are seen as inherently oppositional or contradictory. Thus, counter to Boelstorff's argument, the appeal of the homonormative is so strong that it has actually clouded out any radical

rethinking of appeals to enfranchise LGBT people into normative society without changing central oppressive tenets of the society itself. While Conrad's "They won." could have multiple meanings, the true purpose or meaning of this statement will be most apparent in the next step he and the collective makes, or it will be made apparent when other queer activists and media makers take up new tactics based on the new shape of the mainstream movement.

The Afterlives of Counterpublic Agitation Campaigns

In her book on the contemporary LGBT movement and what she calls the "tolerance trap"—the limits instilled on larger publics as a result of the LGBT movement's complacency with LGBT tolerance, instead of accommodation or celebration, in mainstream publics, Walters (2014) asks "how do you measure the success of a social movement?" To which she answers, "The gay rights saga is, like so many other stories of integration and inclusion, complicated and filled with contradictions. Truth be told, I can't make up my mind about it half the time! I am torn, like many people, I think, between a celebration of the real changes and despair over the persistence of anti-gay animus" (256). Thus, for Walters, whose object of study is the American LGBT movement(s), the measures of success, according to both her and the mainstream LGBT organizations, are a series of (abstract) structures of feeling—safety, freedom, liberty, autonomy. Returning to her book's central thesis, Walters feels that the mainstream LGBT movement has been too eager to accept tolerance as a goal that enables these loftier measures of success. In fact, the mainstream LGBT movement, according to

Walters, sees the goals of marriage equality and military inclusion for LGBT people as the end of the struggle for LGBT rights.

So if the mainstream LGBT movement was able to make some headway but that headway did not achieve the expressed goals for all and does not stomp out variously motivated anti-LGBT hostility, including violence against trans people (Grondahl 2016), we are stuck in a bind. The more radical visions of 1950's "gay liberation" and 1980's and 1990's AIDS activism's various radical visions of a society that fought for the care, support, and lives of others have not been realized; it has been easier to publicize the success of certain kinds of toleration that Walters notes as insufficient. If Walters's question is about the success of an already-mainstreamed "LGBT movement," my question here is how can we measure the success of and prepare for further success of alternative movements, movements that are, yes, in-progress, provisional, tentative, but at the same time are grounded in the lived reality of members of counterpublics?

Rodriguez (2001) describes the context in which citizen's media exists: "what we find is a multitude of small forces that surface and burst like bubbles in a swamp. But in the same way that these bubbles are a clear sign that the swamp is alive, we should approach democratic communication as a live creature that contracts and expands with its own very vital rhythms" (p. 22). Here, Rodriguez gives us more reason to believe in the value of ritualistic counterpublic communication. This kind of communication keeps active certain kinds of ideas that could potentially "bubble up." There are various ways to push this common assumption about alternative media. Rodriguez's swamp metaphor allows for ebbs and flows, fits and starts, successes and failures, of oppositional media.

Mouffe (2000) has argued for a radical democracy that is always contesting priorities, always in-progress and never settled. Downing (2000), in discussing the temporal aspects of radical media also reminds us the richness and messiness found in varying tactical priorities. He starts with a quote from Elizabeth Nelson's (1989) study of 1960's and 1970's British counterculture, where she acknowledges that "success" may go beyond "winning," talking about the value of the counterculture putting important issues into the collective consciousness regardless of whether problems were "solved," and adds,

Such memories, yes, may degenerate into a nostalgia that goes nowhere, but they often spur further activity in the same and allied directions. Of course, there is also burnout, there is middle-aged disavowal of youthful excess, and there are deeply negative experiences[...], which may indeed permanently sour those who have been scarred by them. Perfectly understandable. But there is a whole lot else to be learned and gained beside the shadow side, and this must not to [sic] be forgotten, either. (p. 393)

Downing here pushes his readers to think of the ways that the efforts of radical media producers—which can be applied to the similar category of counterpublic agitators that is at the heart of this chapter—often have unpredictable consequences. He acknowledges the ways that sporadically shifting political horizons, disagreements, and personal feuds can color participants' interpretation of their work on radical media campaigns. But mediated communication targeted and addressed to (counter)publics larger than the counterpublics from which the ideas originate has untold ripple effects on the people who consume this media.

To extend Rodriguez's swamp metaphor, every instance of media that bubbles up to reach other (counter)publics has the potential to change the constituting chemistry of the mud that makes up the swamp; a long-ago published media object could also take a

long time to bubble up in this swamp of ideas and change the swamp's constitution. Both campaigns are already intimately aware of the possibility for the snowballing of this kind of counterpublic media work, which is evident in both campaigns' use of creating archives that create a genealogy for their particular politics and the ways that these campaigns have inspired other people to participate in the communication around these concepts.

In the *Quirkyalone* book, Cagen creates an anachronistic list of historical quirkyalones and lists film titles that have quirkyalone plotlines. While the quirkyalone concept was created by one person (Cagen), various people have taken up the concept in their own ways. For Cagen, this was all a very welcome surprise:

I was fairly aware that there was self-organizing going on. And that it was amazing. It was an amazing thing. I remember that there was a film festival, an independent film festival in San Francisco. I just stumbled on it. I saw the film festival magazine for the festival—and it was like Fuel for the Quirkyalone—a series of film shorts. It was amazing. It all spurred me forward. I wouldn't have done that book if I didn't get a call from an agent after that telling me you should write a book. It wasn't really on my radar to do that. I also wouldn't have written it if I wasn't getting so many stories coming—and through the mail too; people were sending me letters to my PO box. I was getting these extremely heartfelt letters from people—and from prisoners, from lesbians, from everybody. And so that motivated me. (personal interview, July 16, 2013)

Though several people produced media around the quirkyalone concept on their own, this media was, for the most part, unaffiliated with Cagen's own work.

With *Against Equality*, original work comes into play in various ways. Much of the work that is collected on the organization's website existed before or independent of the collective. Outside of Conrad's own writing, the initial inspiration for the *Against*

Equality collective in its web and printed form when Yasmin Nair found photos online that Conrad had taken. Conrad recalls,

Yasmin was the first other person to sort of jump on board. She learned about me because I did this project where I did this wedding dress with a bouquet and a beard. It's a really amazing wedding dress, and I had this sign that said "Gay Marriage Will Cure AIDS." I was trying to figure out the most offensive thing I'd ever heard about why we should have gay marriage. It was like as ridiculous as Andrew Sullivan can get.⁴⁴ She saw this picture of me on the Internet and that's how we connected originally was the picture of me that someone had posted of me on Facebook. (personal interview, November 13, 2012)

Conrad and Nair often mention their affiliation with the collective in their own independent work, and so that work is often nominally attached to the collective. But much of the work of the collective is their (re)contextualization (or in the parlance of digital media, their curation) of other people's work into their specific framework of their own specific brand of radical queer politics. The life of counterpublic agitation, faced as it is with the multifaceted uphill battle of publicity or distribution needed to reach audiences, is unpredictable. Counterpublic communication can have immediate and delayed ripple effects. If agitational media is to have delayed ripple effects, though, it must be available to be discovered long after its publication.

The afterlives of counterpublic agitation are obviously helped by transmedia campaigns. More opportunities to encounter the campaign's media means a higher likelihood of being discovered after a campaign stops producing agitational media. It is also here that print media has an edge over digital media. Print media can be encountered

⁴⁴ Sullivan (1989) said in his "(conservative) case for gay marriage, "A law institutionalizing gay marriage would merely reinforce a healthy social trend. It would also, in the wake of AIDS, qualify as a genuine public health measure."

on library shelves, can be taken off of friends' bookshelves, can serve as a referent for future digital facsimiles.

The ephemerality of digital media is often not present in the minds of those who extol its powers in helping media reach audiences. Hosting fees and contracts with ICANN must be kept up to date, site designs often need to change when browser or operating system standards change, the original communicator-broadcasters themselves often take down information after some time, entire platforms that host large amounts of information (e.g. MySpace, Friendster, Geocities, Angelfire) are often taken down from the servers on which they were hosted.⁴⁵

Thus the transmedia campaigns of quirkyalone, focusing as they are on the importance of print media, have increased their chance of being discovered or having an afterlife that extends past the time when the political horizon—or financial sustainability—has expired for the counterpublic from which the communication originates. This potential of print and other physical media to inspire the critical imagination of future audiences and counterpublic regroupment is evidenced by the quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns themselves in things like Cagen's anachronistic list of quirkyalones through history and her list of books and films for the quirkyalone, and the Against

⁴⁵ Sometimes defunct web storage platforms are archived publicly. There is, of course, the Internet Archive, which regularly checks in with websites and archives basic copies of Internet pages. However, that archive often eschews the saving of larger files like photos and videos to help make its storage more efficient. Other means of archiving information may exist for a specific platform. For instance, Reocities.com and the research project *A Terabyte of Kilobyte Age*, both archive the pages on Geocities.com before the site was taken offline. These projects, though, only archive that site in a single moment of time.

Equality archive, which includes pdfs of a 1911 essay by Emma Goldman and a pamphlet from the 1990's activist group Anonymous Queers.

As I write this, Sasha Cagen is running classes built around quirky- identities, and the members of Against Equality continue to run the Facebook page but have not expressed a desire to do any more publishing. Their print publications, as well as their web presence, are undoubtedly spurring on the intellectual and social energy of various audience members. What will come of these audiences' encounter with these campaigns now or in the future is unknown. But the transmedia dynamics of these campaigns ensure that these ideas will be encountered, accessed, and built off of for years to come.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have advocated for very particular political priorities. While I see great political value in, following Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) and Lisa Duggan (2003), combining an economic and systematic critique to contemporary identity politics, I also acknowledge that this is not a game of getting everyone to agree with one side of an issue or a list of specific politics to hold in common. I stake a strong claim against progressive politics and radical media proponents that encourage the avoidance of identity politics in their work. While it is often useful to have a grasp on the reach or appeal of an alternative or radical politics, the effects of alternative and radical political campaigns are often unconventional and not immediately apparent. Thus, thinking about medium choice and campaign strategy, a common discussion in activist communities, is a helpful component of any work attempting to reflect on the larger aims, shape, and vitality of radical or alternative media campaigns.

In many ways the media work of the asexuals in the first chapter of this dissertation could have been included directly alongside the *quirkyalone* and *Against Equality* media. My focus there, though, was on identity formation, and here, I hope to have shed light on the various ways that ideas and politics are circulated in contemporary America's capitalist democracy, ways that concerns that could be considered single-issue identity politics can become a part of intersectional and coalitional politics.

By focusing on non-normative sexual politics, I have chosen to largely focus on sexual politics that contend with or resist directly the coupling or “normalizing” ideal. What’s normal, though, has changed, and the current “tolerant” culture has created a culture where it is assumed that contemporary mainstream U.S. culture has made concessions (instead of remaking itself) and that it has made all the concessions it needs to. I hope to have pushed us to think of the value of counterpublics and the various potentialities for counterpublic communication in making change. Media industries, technologies, social configurations, and individual understandings of kinship and democracy are all at play here, and are all actors in making a situation where these perspectives have the room to cultivate and percolate a possibility.

Chapter 3

Looking?: Grindr's Non-Normative Courtship Protocols and Counterpublics Inspired by Platform Use

Summer 2007. A few weeks before starting my graduate studies, I was working as a waiter at a neighborhood cafe in Manhattan's West Village. A few blocks away from the Stonewall Inn, remembered as the starting place of New York's gay rights movement, the restaurant was a hangout for the neighborhood's inhabitants, artists and members of the bohemian bourgeoisie that had secured living units and homes before real estate and rental rates became cost-prohibitive for those with their income. Some of the regulars at this restaurant were early adopters of a technology that would prove to leave its mark on a larger society's ideas of convenience, boredom, and sociality.

Those that bought the iPhones early would pull them out and show them to their breakfast and lunch companions. The iPhone was released just as Apple's reputation for being sleek and “user-friendly” was being solidified and, with the iPod released a few years earlier, helped the brand transition from being associated with specialists to consumers of all sorts.

Inevitably, at the lunch table, the iPhone show-off would open a web page or a photo and place two fingers on the screen, pinching them together and pulling them apart to show how users can easily use the technology to zoom in and out of an image. The demonstration showed how simple maneuvers exposed a surprising amount of (graphical and textual) information in a device small enough to fit in your hand. People were awed at the phone's interface, the way that the phone allowed large amounts of information to easily be stored, accessed, manipulated, and viewed.

Spring/Summer 2009. Another unfunded graduate program, and another restaurant. This time in the professional residential neighborhood of Park Slope in Brooklyn, known for its upper-middle-class families and lesbian and gay residents. The iPhones were again out on the table. This time in order to show a social function of these technologies.

For the several years that the iPhone had been in existence, various apps were developed for social uses (notably, social media like Facebook and Twitter, and geolocated social apps like Foursquare). But for the crowds I spent my days observing day in and day out, unlike those apps, the new social possibilities afforded by Grindr warranted a public display at the dinner table. This was an app that allowed you to arrange a hook-up with nearby men from wherever. How unbelievable! How convenient! How creepy?⁴⁶

Spring 2010. I bought my first smartphone.

~

While the first two chapters interrogated the ways that digital technologies afforded counterpublic communication, both in the sense of regrouping and agitation, this chapter focuses on the users of a particular app—Grindr—to interrogate both the significance of a counterpublic context for profile creation and one-on-one conversation, and also the reasons that Grindr inspires counterpublic conversation both on- and off-app about proper use. In the case particularly of men pursuing men, a great many sites and apps have arisen that intend to introduce strangers to each other for dates and sex, but

⁴⁶ Their word, not mine.

what follows focuses on one app—and its direct competitors—in particular.

In the first section, I argue that Grindr, as a commercial technological platform whose business plan encourages regular and continued use, relies on the Silicon Valley rhetoric of the day by encouraging its users to see the app as solving a problem with great expediency. To do this, I rely on my observations and interviews to argue that Grindr and its users privilege expedient use of the app. The affective-behavioral traits that accompany this expedient use encourages users to treat each other like objects in a marketplace. I will look at the ways that individuals talk about using the app and often, how they believe others are or should be using the app. I will pay particular attention to the ways that Grindr specifically, and online dating and contemporary early twenty-first century dating cultures in general, invite disappointment by creating certain kinds of subjective experiences that encourage regular use that emphasizes expedience at an expense of the other human beings who use these social technologies. I end this first section by noting how these attributes of Grindr use incite some of its users to participate in counterpublic formation and communication.

In the second section, I explore the ways users talk about a topic that inspires many different kinds of responses: racialized desire. Specifically, I consider the way that anti-racist (queer) counterpublics organize their communication around Grindr—and sometimes *on* Grindr. Many users of Grindr and other dating and sex sites name expressly racialized desires and/or non-desires in their profiles (e.g., “no Latinos;” “Latinos to the front of the line.” “Latinos++ and whites++”). This practice is justified by Grindr’s emphasis on expediency, and it is a stark example of the ways that expedient

uses of social technologies can have detrimental social effects. This behavior has been called out by other users, blogs dedicated to eradicating or shaming the practice of identifying certain kinds of racialized desire or non-desire, and it has also been made irrelevant by other dating and sex sites and apps (e.g., Tinder) that make such naming of desire redundant or unnecessary.

This section contextualizes this phenomenon and its response within critical race theory and catalogues the many responses to these practices in an effort to chart a course for dealing with this as a social problem that can be confronted through user interventions and organized responses. My consideration of these anti-racist counterpublics contributes to this dissertation's overall interest in the shape of counterpublics online. In this specific case, I use these counterpublics to think about the ways that apps that emphasize expediency may inspire ire from users and create targeted rage from counterpublics. In this case, what are the consequences of targeting anti-racist energy towards Grindr and its users specifically, instead of seeing these instances of sexual racism as evidence of larger racist forces and coming up with a comprehensive anti-racist strategy.

Grindr is a mobile app for gay/bi/queer men and trans* people that uses GPS technology to allow users to see a display of other users, ordered by which users are in closest proximity. Users have the opportunity to supply demographic information about themselves: height, weight, race, relationship status. The app also provides small text-fields to supply a display name, headline, and "about" sections. Only one photo, which

must pass muster under the site's guidelines,⁴⁷ may be uploaded to a profile to represent the user. Users can favorite and bookmark other users' profiles. Favorited users are displayed before non-favorited users, in order of proximity no matter whether they are online or not. Those users that are not favorited show up only if they are online or have been very recently. Users may contact each other via profiles for one-on-one text and photo conversations. The app has a reputation for facilitating sexual liaisons between strangers; however, the app is also used to arrange romantic or friendly dates and to facilitate chats that do not end up in an in-person meeting. According to the developers of Grindr, the possibilities enabled by GPS technology are attractive for people who would like to meet others *on demand*, situated immediately close in space and time. It is for this reason that the app uses the phrase "Zero feet away" as its tagline.



Figure 3.1 Promotional images of Grindr's features. Source: Grindr.

Since its debut in 2009, Grindr has gained much attention in the gay and

⁴⁷ For an analysis of the politics behind Grindr's decency standards, see Roth (2015b). In 2015, many of their rules about showing skin in photos seem to have been made more lax.

mainstream press. Unlike preceding dating and hook-up sites, Grindr has inspired many commentators, professional and amateur, to track the impact of Grindr on gay/bi/queer identity, gay/bi/queer sociality, and gay/bi/queer spaces. The impact of other media technologies on society have been scrutinized and analyzed before. Over time, media technologies from the novel (Davidson, 2004) to the radio (Douglas, 1989), from the television (Williams, 1974) to the telephone (Fischer, 1992; Marvin, 1989), the Walkman (du Gay et al., 1997), and the smartphone (Turkle, 2011, 2015) have inspired much commentary warning of or celebrating the ways that these technologies will impact the way we organize our personal, social, and civic lives. This chapter shows that, following Gillespie's (2010) formulation of platforms as inherently political, Grindr is a platform for sociality whose structure and use are widely understood to be political in the sense that Grindr shapes use in particular ways and creates a community of users who perform and propagate specific (sexual) politics.

Grindr seems an obvious example of a technological platform that facilitates non-normative sexual politics, because it is used as a means of interpersonal communication in pursuit of relationships of all sorts. The great variety of encounters, experiences, and relations that Grindr users pursue on the app makes different from platforms like Match.com, which brands itself as a platform for finding "the one" by searching, browsing, and in time, going on dates with "quality singles" (Arvidsson 2006). As Grindr and other apps and sites that allow people to meet strangers to turn them into familiars through sexual, dating, or other (hopefully) friendly encounters have become normalized in certain ways, the affordances of these apps have challenged normative

ways of understanding courtship practices. This, however, certainly does not prevent Grindr and Grindr use from perpetuating pernicious normativities that reinforce the stigmatization of old and new sexual subjectivities or proclivities outside of the “charmed circle” of “accepted” sexual pursuits (Rubin, 1984). As much as Grindr markets itself as being designed for one thing, what happens on the app is co-defined by its users.

Communication on Grindr happens on two scales: the profile and the one-on-one conversation. The profile communicates a consolidation of oneself for introductory purposes, and one-on-one messaging between users allows users to feel out and potentially pursue conversation or meeting. If we understand that to perspectives that privilege marriage-as-ideal and that promote normative kinship contexts, the Grindr context is non-normative and the image and text of a Grindr profile can be understood as communication with a counterpublic address. The messages between users and the relationships that form between users—whether they be quickly abandoned, quickly forgotten, transitory or long-lasting—occur in a counterpublic context, wherein the accumulated trends within individual messages communication create a context where one understands oneself as a member of a counterpublic. Though one-on-one communication is invisible to all members of the counterpublic except those engaging in the conversation, the conversations that occur between Grindr users may impact the experience and expectations of the users involved. The affective content of both profiles and messages enters into a feedback loop that—at least in discrete localities—impacts the counterpublic context of Grindr communication. This feedback loop may, for instance, help certain topics to become more common on Grindr profiles (naming one’s HIV status

or top/bottom/versatile preference or identity) or may make certain conversation starters (“sup?,” “[what are you sexually] into?,” “Looking?,” “HWP [height-weight proportional]”) popular or cliché.

In addition to analyzing company marketing materials and media reports on the app, the research for this chapter has come from an autoethnographic engagement with the Grindr platform. I have been an on-again-off-again member of Grindr from 2011 to 2015. From October 2012 to December 2014, I conducted twelve interviews with Grindr users recruited through in-app conversation.⁴⁸ While I used the app sporadically throughout those years for non-research purposes, the interview subjects included in this chapter were recruited during specific times that I logged onto the app knowing that I had time to schedule an interview. Most times, I recruited interview subjects when I had time and people who struck up conversations with me were interested in being interviewed for the dissertation. Other times, something in a user's profile provoked me to ask them for an interview (e.g., a comment about racialized desire written in their profile) on my own initiative. Thus, the interviews are not meant to be wholly representative; instead, they are meant to lend insight into certain phenomena that became apparent through use of the app. Interviews were semi-structured and were carried out in person (except for one, carried out over Skype). They focused on *all* of subjects' use of web- and app-based platforms for the pursuit of dating or sex both contemporary to the interview and preceding the time of interview. I did this so that I could compare Grindr with the use of other sites and apps, but I also did this to try to understand how Grindr figured into

⁴⁸ A list of information about these interview subjects can be found in the Appendix.

individual users' use of various sites and apps in conjunction with each other and over time. For all of my subjects, Grindr was not the only platform they used for sociality with strangers in the pursuit of dating or sex.

Ages of the subjects, all cis-gender men, range from late teens to mid-thirties. Nine lived in New York City, one lives in a mid-sized midwestern city, one lives in a small mid-Atlantic city, and one lives in a small mid-Atlantic town. Most of those who lived in New York City had all lived in another city or suburban area within the past few years. Four subjects considered themselves Latino; four considered themselves white, three considered themselves Asian; one considered himself black. Over the research period, I also took many screenshots of profiles I encountered, messages I received, and conversations I participated in as “field notes” of my experience on the app. Information from these notes are used throughout to shape the argument of the chapter.

It is important to note that as time has passed, Grindr's mainstream visibility and popularity has risen. Many of my subjects, in fact, told me that they learned about the app from mentions in entertainment media. Grindr has been referred to or joked about on the NBC series *The Office*, Conan O'Brien's late night talk show, the PBS web series *Everything But the News*, the Chicago improv group Second City on their YouTube channel, the Hollywood film *Neighbors*, and the ABC sitcom *Selfie*. The success of Grindr even inspired a frenzy in the tech industry to find a “straight version” of the app that “women would actually use” (Greenfield, 2013).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The assumption or conclusion by many is that women are uncomfortable by GPS-enabled apps that emphasize who is closest to you. This gap was supposedly filled by the app Tinder, which can also be used to find same-sex partners.

Throughout this chapter, I will sometimes consider the apps, sites, and cultural phenomena that are contemporaneous to Grindr's popularity to contextualize and expand conclusions I make about Grindr and its users. While Grindr has been unusually popular in discussions of “the impact of online dating on society” since its debut in the App Store, there is not one simple reason for this. Similar geolocated technological systems have been available since before Grindr (Mowlabocus, 2012), and Grindr quickly encountered much competition in the category of apps that organizes profiles predominantly distinguished by photos, sorted by geolocated proximity with “real-time” updating. For the purposes of this chapter, sometimes my subjects or I talk about Grindr in a way that includes all similar but slightly differentiated technologies—Scruff, Jack’d, GROWLr, BoyAhoy, etc.—and sometimes, my subjects or I will speak specifically about Grindr, with its unique technological affordances, critical mass of users, regional popularity, and branding. For the ease of reading this chapter, I may use “Grindr” to stand in for all technologies that have the attributes described above; however, I will make clear when I am speaking specifically about a certain app or site when it is especially important to differentiate between platforms.

While it is unusual to think of platforms for interpersonal communication as context for counterpublic communication, my approach assumes that the creation of profiles on Grindr, the interactions on Grindr, and the conversations about Grindr all contribute both to gay/queer sex (counter)publics. Careful considerations of sex publics, publics that are defined by their relation to sex (Berlant and Warner, 1998), address the ways that objects, platforms, circumstances, common practices, places, communities,

neighborhoods, and the like all impact sexual cultures and possibilities for pleasure (Warner 1999). I argue that Grindr is a context for counterpublic communication, which happens solely through profile creation and one-on-one communication primarily between gay/bi/queer cisgender men. The platform hosts no homepage seen by everyone,⁵⁰ and—outside of profile text, which requires one to click on a profile twice to see—the app does not have features that allow individual users to post content that can be readily seen by others through features like a timeline or message board. Counterpublic communication on Grindr is thus very diffuse and networked. Thinking of Grindr as having a counterpublic context requires an understanding of Grindr users as members of an “imagined” counterpublic. Just like Anderson’s (1984) metaphor of imagined communities to describe the way nationalism works amongst country mates who do not know each other, Grindr users understand their context for communication without knowing what everyone else on the app is saying. Grindr use and the disappointment it entails do, however, serve as an impetus for people to comment on and complain about the state of contemporary sex publics on platforms outside of Grindr, like social networking sites, blogs, and culture sites (see, e.g., Rogers, 2012; Moylan, 2012).

There is a significant literature that discusses the ethics and values of gay/queer sex publics and gayborhoods. Delany (1999) explains the value of sexually charged spaces by arguing that the encounters he had in a Times Square porno theater were all

⁵⁰ Though it does not have a homepage with the same content visible to all users, the Grindr team does show similar notifications to its users, in a similar way that it sends its notification-style advertisements. Griffin (2017) notes how these messages—incredibly popular during the same-sex marriage movement—encouraged a homonormatively neoliberal context for Grindr communication.

about cross-class *contact*, which he posits as counter to the prevailing middle-class concern, intra-class networking. Motta and Lubin-Levy (2012) disagree about whether or not to celebrate the new, privatized sex publics created by sex apps and sex parties in private residences and businesses; is the best way to create a sex public to charge entry, and to therefore exclude potential members of the sex public? Lubin-Levy also wonders if the sex publics in the decades leading up to the 1990's crackdown on public sex venues that Delany describes were any less hierarchical than contemporary sex publics. The essay collection *Policing Public Sex*, a collection of academic and activist polemics about the attack on public sex edited by a group of scholars calling themselves Dangerous Bedfellows (1996), signals that the AIDS-era proponents of a sex-positive/queer politics had a great variety of competing solutions to the public health crisis that was caused by the AIDS pandemic. While public officials' responses to the crisis were either non-existent or not uniform, the collection of essays published by Dangerous Bedfellows includes competing technological fixes that would bring healthfulness to the sexual culture that had been developed by the time of HIV. The collection promotes technological fixes, like changing the shape and size of doors and private rooms in sex clubs and changing the tools and printed material provided to sex educators, for preventing the spread of HIV while maintaining sex publics. While how to design sex club doors to promote safe sex was abandoned as a priority when the city's official priority was to shut those sex clubs down, other essays explored the design of safe sex curriculums in order to save lives, which is still a hotly debated political topic.

Today's cities have gone the next phase beyond Disneyfication—the shorthand

used most directly to describe Giuliani's collusion with the Disney corporation in the redevelopment of Times Square, which sought to make the area more family friendly—and most cities that are thriving have exploited development attention paid to cultivating the “creative class.” Florida (2003) argues that cities that cater towards the creative class have been able to retain information workers and the growing creative class. In addition to cities’ “diversity index” and “bohemian index,” Florida also argues that cities’ “gay index” is related. Florida's urban theories started off as descriptive, but they also gave language to the development decisions city leaders made to make their cities “cooler” (see, e.g., Bloomberg, 2012). So, whereas in the nineties, gay sex publics were a scourge, gays and lesbians are now both noted and sought out as harbingers of growth for cities.⁵¹

When focusing on the “gay index” and other creative class development strategies, gay development is valued when it adds to the “coolness” or financial value of a city. Hanhardt (2014) brings a historical perspective to gay development and shows that the creation of gayborhoods has, for the past several decades, coincided with a desire to keep gayborhoods free of crime or intimidation; the threats that gayborhood champions tried to chase out were often raced and classed, leading to increased policing of certain communities, often poor and of color. Schulman (2014) is astute in her analysis of the gentrification mindset; her analysis of contemporary New York attempts to make sense of all of these competing ideologies and development practices. Ultimately, she says, poor

⁵¹ As Gray (2009), Tongson (2011), Herring (2010), and Johnson (2013) have all pointed out, LGBT people live in the suburbs and rural areas, too.

people, people of color, queers, and artists are pushed out of neighborhoods once the neighborhoods possess enough cultural cache to allow for real estate hyper-exploitation. All this is a roundabout way of saying: the changing of gayborhoods and the closing of gay bars have a lot more—and more pernicious—causes than Grindr.

This chapter intends to shed further light on the shape of Grindr's sex public and the shape of the counterpublic it inspires in response.

In the Glow of a Smart Phone Screen: The Grindr Context

*Just looking for friends or such so hit me up I do ask for a face pic at least
to chat...*

NSA [No Strings Attached] safe fun – Pitcher 4 catcher

*Players stay away – I'm tired of games and going back and forth. I want
some stability ltr [long-term relationship] oriented but looking for friends
as well*

*Not looking for anything serious (as if anyone is on here anyways.) I'm
actually pretty neat, all I ask is to not waste my time.*

*Biggest turn off is when a guy tells me he's only into Asian. I'm sorry but
if you're only into me for the color of my skin then there's the door to the
left*

*Looking for dates – Nice Midwesterner living in Brooklyn, looking to meet
nice handsome guys for dating and hopefully a relationship. Say hi*

Say more than hi or sup

The above messages are the text from actual individual Grindr profiles. There are three opportunities to include free-text in Grindr profiles. In addition to a 15-character “display name” that is visible in the cascade of the closest users on Grindr's home page, users' profiles, which can be seen by clicking on the user's picture from the home page,

may also have text in the 80-character-max “headline” field and 255-character-max “About Me” field. When these fields are filled, users often share something—but not too much—about themselves, their desires, or their current activities. A few hundred characters, after all, cannot get much across. As the examples from “About Me” profile text shown here display, many users write in the free-form text fields to signal to others what they are looking for or what others should or shouldn't do or expect when reaching out to them. Like the use of previous mediated forms of matchmaking, these features encourage users to treat their use of the app as “relationshopping” (Heino et al., 2010) within a marketplace of desire. Other similar apps do allow for more description and, in fact, ask specific questions of their users. Grindr’s streamlined profile design is one of its differentiating characteristics.

In addition to these free-form text fields, users may also choose to indicate other identifying characteristics about themselves in a number of fields with pre-determined choices. These fields include age, height, weight, ethnicity (from Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, Other, South Asian), body type (from Toned, Average, Large, Muscular, Slim, Stocky), relationship status (from Single, Dating, Exclusive, Committed, Partnered, Engaged, Married, Open Relationship), Grindr tribes (from Bear, Clean-Cut, Daddy, Discreet, Geek, Jock, Leather, Otter, Poz, Rugged, Trans, Twink), and the kinds of interactions they are “Looking For” (from Chat, Dates, Friends, Networking, Relationship, Right Now). All fields can also be left blank. Once users are engaging in in-app one-on-one conversations, users can send text messages, photos, and a geolocated pin of their current location.

There is, in fact, a burgeoning field of research on Grindr and similar apps. They are a compelling site for scholars of public health—because they invite new questions about STD transmission and protection, and because they make recruitment for studies easier—and social informatics—because of the ways that geolocation affords new affordances for shaping contexts for meeting strangers. While a bibliography of public health work about Grindr and other locative apps would not be incredibly relevant for my argument here, some studies from within public health and health informatics invite questions about how Grindr and other apps shape gay sex publics. Kane (2014, 2015), for instance, notes the importance of gay (counter)publics in creating networks for support and care during the HIV epidemic, and notes how the prevalence of sex apps reshapes (counter)publics, in a way that may impact the possibility for collectively organizing around, or at least discussing, health issues.

Within communication studies, several scholars have noted the ways that the geolocate affordances of Grindr and similar apps have reconfigured social spaces and created new relationships between users and their surroundings. Various scholars have analyzed how Grindr impacts pre-existing social geographies that have developed around gay men or sexual minority cultures. Some of these (e.g., Crooks, 2013, Bumgarner, 2013) see historical continuity between these spaces and attendant social behaviors (e.g. cruising and gay bar sociality) before and after the arrival of Grindr, while others (e.g., Ghaziani, 2014) note the way that Grindr and other similar technologies help reconfigure social geographies by making gay spaces less relevant or needed. Out of the context of de facto gay spaces, other scholars (e.g. Blackwell et al., 2015, Schwartz, 2011) note how

locative technologies for gay sociality create new possibilities, concerns, and sexual subjectivities, which both force users to consider new concerns regarding publicity and privacy, and unseen or invisible sexual possibilities in areas where gay presence is not pronounced (e.g., in rural areas).

My study of the context of Grindr acknowledges that, in spite of Grindr's reputation and its affordances for superficial communication in pursuit of hook-ups (Licoppe et al., forthcoming; Mowlabacus, 2012), Grindr users approach the app and in-app conversations with a variety of conscious and unconscious desires and dispositions towards the value of meeting others. There is no one way to use Grindr. Taking this as an assumption, I map the experiences on the sociotechnological systems that form around Grindr and gay/bi/queer sociality by turning to interviews with Grindr users.

Expedient Use

Grindr markets itself by distinguishing the way it affords expedient use, by making sure that other users one is invited to communicate with are online or have been online recently and are close by. Grindr uses the slogan "zero feet away" to explain its mission. Take, for instance, this promotional copy on its website, which explains Grindr's tagline:

Grindr's different because it's uncomplicated and meant to help you meet guys while you're on the go. It's not your average dating site—you know, the ones that make you sit in front of a faraway computer filling out complex, detailed profiles and answering invasive psychological questions. We'd rather you were zero feet away.

With Grindr, "0 Feet Away" isn't just a cute slogan we print on our T-shirts. It's a state of mind, a way of life—a new kind of dating experience. Turning Grindr off and being there in-person with that guy you were chatting with is the final goal of

using the app. Being 0 feet away is our mission for you. (<http://grindr.com/learn-more>)

According to this copy, Grindr users are assumed to be “on the go,” which not only denotes the user in-motion, going between work and other engagements, but it also connotes an assumed user who is incredibly busy and benefits from technologies that make their life more “uncomplicated.” While it has been well-documented that most modern long-term relationships started with people who lived close to one another (Ansari, 2015), Grindr’s “0 Feet Away” is an extreme example of proximity—it connotes flesh contact—as a value in pursuing partners. Not only is it about who is close and available as a partner, but it also differentiates itself by allowing users to pursue partners who are available *here and now*, should the parties be available and interested.

It becomes clear quickly upon perusing Grindr profiles that one of the most popular ways for users of Grindr to set the expectations and context for contact from other users is to insinuate or state outright the kinds of things one hopes to get out of interaction with someone else on Grindr. There is a “looking for” field that allows you to choose from a list of kinds of interactions you might be interested in pursuing, but this field is not fully trusted as an exhaustive list of options a user might consider. Between the options chosen in the “looking for” field, the text in one’s profile, and the initial substance of early communication, users are often clear about what they think they want. Embedded in the joking phrase “there’s an app for that,” is the expectation that apps and all other products of Silicon Valley are addressing the needs of our lives. In the case of Grindr and other technological platforms meant to encourage stranger sociality, the

emphasis is often on expedient use so the strangers can become familiar with the kinds of strangers they are seeking out as soon as possible.

Grindr, as with other Silicon Valley platforms, sells itself to users by convincing them that it exists to solve a problem. Here, Grindr presents as a problem that it is hard to (quickly) find people with whom to fuck/date/meet/chat. Grindr has a solution: it will present you with a cascade of users close to you who are looking for the same thing. The goal is to find other people that you would be interested in, and Grindr is in the business of convincing users that this is a problem worth solving and that they are very good at doing it quickly. In his excoriation of the “solutionism” he sees all over Silicon Valley marketing strategies, Morozov (2013) flips the expectations of many tech consumers,

The inefficiency, ambiguity, and opacity—whether in politics or everyday life—that the newly empowered geeks and solutionists are rallying against are not in any sense problematic. Quite the opposite: these vices are often virtues in disguise. That, thanks to innovative technologies, the modern-day solutions has an easy way to eliminate them does not make them any less virtuous. (p. 14)

Solutionism is especially suspect when the principles of Silicon Valley marketing offer up networks of consumers to be their surefire solutions to concocted problems. If Grindr is to do what it claims it does, then it relies on elements beyond just its technological platform. Other users must cooperate, and the sociotechnical system—platform design, algorithms, other users—must work together to efficiently winnow the database of users down to a desired one or lot.

Grindr use can go on for stretches of time, and it can occur intermittently throughout the day. While expediency is the selling point and the barometer of success to a degree, Grindr is often not used for expedient purposes, or does not deliver with regards

to its expedient goals. Despite the fact that users often log on more than they intended with fewer connections than they would expect, the expedient ideal of Grindr use is hard to avoid. Even if users don't want to hook up and even if they say so in their profile, they still get asked if they are "Looking?" No matter users' track record with the app or their intended purpose for use at any given time, expediency still reigns. I am distinguishing expediency from other ways users think about what happens when they use the app because for users, it often has a positive valence. I then want to start with some users' understanding that the need for expediency becomes an "addiction."

~

"Sometimes I find myself being on all this for hours, even if I'm not doing what I should be doing. It's addictive, man, it's like Internet crack," Darnell⁵² tells me in the middle of a long explanation of where he accesses the plethora of locative apps he uses to find gay/bi/queer male companions. He continues, "Internet photos of penises and guys drag me from things I need to do, purely because of the idea of hope or possibility -- that loneliness, peace and longing, maybe just for friends or connections." These are real needs that become understood as boredom when users replace the human with the app as their social goal.

These are some of the concluding remarks in an interview I conducted with Darnell, a black educator in his twenties who lives in a small city. The tales of addiction were common amongst my subjects, and they often focused on the app as a productive or

⁵² All names and identifying characteristics have been altered. Ethnic identities, occupations, and geographical locations have been made vague to protect the identity of the subjects.

worthwhile cure for boredom. Darnell is explaining the reason that he disciplines himself into only developing what he would consider good conversations (i.e. ones in which there is a promise of making friends) with local gay/bi/queer men using locative apps. As it will become apparent, though, Darnell's use patterns have been varied, and his standards of use have much to do with the men on the other end of the communication. Darnell has adjusted his use to the site based on previous disappointment, being let down after getting excited about talking to or meeting other men on one of the many locative apps for socializing he uses. Now the limited text in his profile identifies him as someone who's eager to chat and eager to answer any question anyone may have. As our conversation went on, I realized Darnell's use of these apps and sites is more varied than it seems at first glance. I met him through the locative app Grindr. He contacted me first and immediately told me he was looking for friends in the area. This, according to Darnell in our interview, is generally how he expresses his intents no matter who the person or what the platform. After exchanging some pleasantries on the app, I asked if he would be interested in talking with me in person about his experience using dating and sex websites and apps. He agreed, and a few weeks later, we met near the small mid-Atlantic city in which he lives.

Darnell's best friends in the area had all recently left, and he was eager to find new people in the area. When we started our conversation, Darnell gave me a list of several locative apps that he used to chat with strangers. He explained,

There's Grindr, there's Skout, there's GROWLr, which I'm not a big fan of... GROWLr is a more bear-oriented or you know, for bigger guys, hairier guys and their chasers and admirers. Skout is kind of like uh it's a less popular version of

Grindr, supposedly for meeting friends and stuff like that. Let's not be fooled. There's BoyAhoy. That's another downgraded version of Grindr. Adam4Adam, OkCupid...

Upon asking him how he managed all of these apps, Darnell elaborated on his use:

Well, I try to log into all of them. I hate to say it but they're so addictive. Especially if you have any down time. "I'm so bored, I want to log into Grindr and see who's around me."...[I do this] multiple times a day. Multiple times an hour. Just log on. It's just like a cure for boredom. For me it's just like, in a way when I log on, maybe someone will message me just to chat or [want to be] friends or something like that. It really helps that a lot of the apps have a push notification. It's like a text message. "You've got a message from Paul on Adam4Adam." [On Grindr], if you don't have the [Premium pay version] Xtra, that one's really addictive. The fact that they withhold the push from you and you have to go on there to see if anyone does [message you], I think that's more [addictive].

In his journalistic account of Grindr, its developers and its users, Woo (2013) notes,

"Grindr can feel like a slot machine...A Grindr jackpot is an available hunk nearby totally into the same fun, sexy time as you" (p. 45). Woo continues, expanding on his comparison, "Now, while slot machines are pre-programmed, Grindr is obviously not. However, Grindr can also feel like a variable ratio reward schedule. Based on the number of conversations users initiate or respond to, a fraction of them will result in desired interactions ('winning' or reinforcement, in psychology parlance) and, because people are unpredictable, the frequency a user reaches the end goal can feel random" (p. 45). Thus, the possibility for Grindr to disrupt the monotony or ordinariness of everyday life and bring rewards and new experiences may lead users to find the app worthwhile to use.

Darnell's citation of boredom as a reason for logging on and for being a regular user of the app was not uncommon. Boredom, in fact, is recognized as a common reason for using and becoming dependent on mobile and social media. Turkle (2015), in her

extensive research on the mobile-mediated communication of middle-class young Americans, observes “When people say they’re ‘addicted’ to their phones, they are not only saying that they want what their phones provide. They are also saying that they don’t want what their phones allow them to avoid. The thing I hear most is that going to your phone makes it easier to avoid boredom or anxiety” (p. 37-8). Following her earlier (2012) observation that “we expect more from technology than from each other,” she adds, “Boredom and anxiety are signs to attend more closely to things.” (Turkle, 2015, p. 38.). Turning to the phone is a bandage and not a cure for these feelings.

In her ethnographic analysis of the design and use of video gambling machines, Schull (2012) explains that the machines are carefully designed to encourage addictive use. Video poker and slot machines are designed to encourage continued use, to not only take people’s money but to also make sure that not too much is taken and that the user will come back later. Video gambling machines are also programmed to recognize the gestures of individual users and to respond accordingly to develop a “flow” of machine play and put players in “the zone.” Darnell’s explanation of losing track of time on the app sounds a lot like the idea of “being in the zone” that Schull’s subjects report. And so while Grindr must necessarily rely on other humans to induce this zone, its emphasis on expedient use keeps users hooked by creating the idea that the user one wants will show up on the home screen.

Grindr and its competitors are in the Silicon Valley economy, where Facebook went from dating platform to multi-billion dollar company. Thus, the allure of becoming the next Facebook—or at this point, the next Grindr—is enticing to investors. Following

Turkle (2015), what are the ramifications of building a business that depends on users to become “hooked” to avoiding boredom to be “in the zone”? Important for this discussion are the streams of revenue that bring income to the app’s owners. In the case of Grindr, there are two major streams: advertisements run at the bottom of the screen throughout use of the app and users can choose to pay a premium for access to Grindr Xtra, a version of the app with extra features. Both advertisements and the premium version of the app benefit from continued use of Grindr. Like other premium versions of free apps, Grindr Xtra gets rid of ads. The free version is much more popular than the premium one, though. Grindr Xtra allows users to load more users at a time and gives users the opportunity to isolate or eliminate categories of users in results. It also allows users to search by ethnicity, which will figure into my discussion of race and desirability on Grindr later in the chapter.

In talking about Grindr as addictive, I do not mean to pathologize Grindr use and Grindr users. I do this in response to the widespread use of the word “addiction” to describe the use of the app. I’m thinking here about things like the title of a Gawker article, “The Founder of Grindr Is Just as Addicted as Everyone Else” (Moylan, 2011). Or consider a quote from said Grindr founder, Joel Simkhai, published in *The Telegraph*, “A quarter of our users - 250,000 people - sign on at least once a day, though on average, it's between five and seven times a day. That's understandable: every time you move around, there's a new group of guys to check out. I don't have a sense of whether that's healthy, or whether it's verging on addiction” (Yiannopoulos, 2010). For the most part, these accusations of addiction are not treated seriously, except maybe in incidences when one’s

partner is “addicted” to the app (Brubaker et al., forthcoming). Dowling (2016) shows that the ways these apps lead users to commodify themselves and those they pursue creates an unachievable chase for fulfillment. Speaking about gay and straight apps, she says,

Free as we may now be to pursue it, we also find no peace in this constant pursuit of others – many others – to satisfy our desires and wants. Never quite settling on one person for fear that they won’t be enough. For fear that we won’t be enough. And in this brave new world of algorithmic apps and online tools of multiple, abundant connections, there are always more, better matches to choose from.

Dowling reminds us that our desires never arise from within us, and therefore we are never completely satiated.

Grindr and other dating and sex sites remediate (Bolter and Grusin 1999) previous media forms of dating media. Compared to other platforms, Grindr adds expediency heightened by place or time; it is now about getting what you want, when you want it, where you want it, either here (host) or there (travel). Dating sites are remediations of the newspaper and video personals that preceded them; Grindr profiles are also remediations of the gay dating and sex sites that came before, and expedient use is not new. While profiles and classified ads often include certain genres of rhetoric that are included in other forms of dating and sex profiles (e.g. “x looking for y;” “Me: x, you: y;” the variety of acronyms that save space when it costs money, in classified ads, or characters, on Grindr), the limited space available for text on Grindr means that profiles cannot be as extensive. All of these rhetorical tactics are done in the name of expediency, in the name of getting what you want, just in time. But different platforms allow for different kinds of expediency. Tech economies are built around developing even more expedient platforms.

The 1-click shopping on Amazon wasn't enough, so the Dash button was invented to order laundry detergent the minute we needed it. In the realm of dating, the freedom allowed by the space of a Craigslist profile allows for very specific requests and detailed asks. The character limit of newspaper personals led to the development of a number of abbreviations and shorthand phrases for those seeking mates (e.g. SWM for single white female). Grindr profiles are visually based but also allow for a character-limited description, and they also let users know when others are currently online and therefore likely available to immediately respond to a message. This indication of availability adds an extra layer of expediency to Grindr use.

Indications of what one is looking for on Grindr come both in profiles and in conversation. It is common for profiles to include the up arrow, down arrow, or up and down arrow emojis to indicate that they are a top (inserting partner in anal sex), bottom (inserted partner), or versatile, respectively. If this is not shared in the profile, it is often revealed or sought out early in conversation. This discussion, of course, insinuates that users are looking for penetrative sex, which is not always the case. But revealing this information is still a common expectation on the app. HIV+ users often identify their status by choosing the "Poz" tribe or including a + sign somewhere in the text of their profile. HIV- users often include the last time they were tested in their profile. Trans users often use language to identify their trans* identities (e.g. FTM [female-to-male] or MTF [male-to-female]) in their profiles, and those who are looking for trans* users often mark this in their own profiles. In these ways, the negotiation and information sharing that sometimes attend sex with casual sexual partners is sometimes done (and early on in

interactions) by users who find that information important. The fact that Grindr allows users to see when others are online and available to respond to messages means that messages are sent to extract more information of various sorts from other users to see about compatibility—the physical kind but also whether or not users are looking for the same thing at a given moment.

Kennedy, a creative professional in his late thirties, who has used various digital platforms to seek sex and dating partners over two decades, explained to me that he currently prefers to use apps, specifically Scruff and Grindr. Here, he explains the way expediency was pursued on different platforms:

Kennedy: I think Craigslist was even better than a chatroom because you could just type in key words. You know, “sub[missive] bottom” or “sub top” or “dom[inant] bottom” or “dom top.” You’ll find those key words, and there was just more filters. I guess there is some on Grindr and Scruff, too. But it wasn’t as fast. Because you’d have to email that person, and that person would have to email you, and now you’re chatting through email. So if you were smart you would get their screen name and chat with them through that posting...But there was more catering [to users’ desires] on Craigslist. You could narrow down your search easier than you could on just a chatroom. And then Grindr. There was a long time when I just didn’t go on those sites anymore, I was just like “I’m over it.” But then Grindr came along. Just because everyone was talking about it. You can kind of get sucked in.

Bryce: Why do you think you get sucked in?

K: For me, it was either you could jerk off or hook up with someone. Fortunately, a lot of people that I’ve hooked up with are friends. Or people that become friends. There’s like four that are my friends now. And we don’t even hook up. But I don’t know, it’s a good way to get off. But then once that tension’s away, you find out whether you like this person or if it’s just a fling. But I don’t use it to make friends. I don’t go on it with the intention to make friends with someone. I use it to get off. Or sometimes not even to get off. Sometimes to just feel cool with yourself. You know it’s like “I’m okay.” It’s like getting likes on Instagram or Facebook.

Here, Kennedy, gives a narrative that explains how his use of sites and apps for the pursuit of sex evolved over time. Expediency—getting as close to what he wanted as close to when he wanted it as possible—meant different things to him at different times. He explains, also, that sometimes what he was expediently seeking was validation from others. As boyd (2014) and others have shown, seeking validation on social media can be laden with a number of different values, and for Kennedy here, perhaps small validations can make him feel desirable (a good for him) or destructive (if he comes to obsessively depend on this and other kinds of validation). But the desire for validation in these social media contexts is reinforced by the larger digital culture's economics of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2014) and economics of status (Marwick 2013), which both reinforce self-value through validation by others. In what follows, I use my observations of Grindr users to note the link between the expediently used Grindr and users' disappointment in their social situation while using the app.

Disappointing Use

While Grindr and other apps were unquestioned parts of his daily routine, Darnell—the black man in his twenties who used several apps several times a day—had varying experiences with Grindr and Grindr-like apps. It may not be surprising that when people log on to these apps with cross-purposes, interactions are not always pleasant. While he had been using the apps for a long time to meet friends, many people responded unfavorably to his photos. Within our interview, he explained to me what he felt went through other people's minds when they were talking with him.

Darnell: As soon as you say hi, and if they're willing to respond to you, first

they're looking at your stats and your age and stuff like that. And if they're willing to [continue], the first or second thing they ask you for is a [body] picture. And I tell them I'm only interested in chatting, and they say, "ehhh, no pics no chat." So you know they're not really interested in meeting people. Why does what someone looks like dictate whether you want to be friends with them? Uhhh--- I'm just trying to say hi. I'm Darnell, and I'm looking for new friends in the area, and I don't get any messages back. Most of the time, I get blocked before I get any [more] words in. And that's alright, because people are gonna be who they're gonna be.

Darnell seeks connections with people that he can explore, but Grindr's expediency encourages alienated networking. In fact, in our interview, he thought hard about meaningful relationships—good experiences—that came from finding friends on dating sites or apps. Though this is what his profile claims he uses the apps for, he was able to offer two examples. One he could point to was a long-term friend he met on Manhunt quite a few years ago that developed into a friends-with-benefits relationship. Another one was a dinner he had with someone he met on a locative app that ended up in a hook up.

What is clear in Darnell's attempts to use the app to gain friends, and a feeling of community, is that other people often do not have the same priorities. Many of them are looking for sex, and he sometimes allows himself to be taken up by those desires. Others do not want to consider him as a friend, Darnell assumes, because they do not like the way he looks. He tells me, "I just wished people were more straightforward. Don't say 'I'm looking for friends!' Maybe you could say 'I'm looking for only hot friends.' Let's cut the bullshit right now. Alright? I'm no threat to you. If you don't like me, you don't like me. [pause] I still want to talk to people." The fact remains that Darnell is often disappointed in the ways that men respond to him on these platforms.

Others I spoke with were close to deciding they should abandon the app. Hector, for one, explained that his use of Grindr was not leading him to meet people. And so I asked him if he planned on keeping the app. He went on to explain that he hoped his life would soon be restructured so that he could meet new people in a way that is less alienating.

Hector: Right now, I don't have any distractions. As soon as I get a job or something, I'll delete the app. Because when you're working and when you're at school, you tend to meet people. When I don't need that, in order to not get bored too easily, I'm going to delete that of course.

Bryce: How do you like it as a cure for boredom? Is it enjoyable?

H: Sometimes, but of course, sometimes I get bored of the app also. Because sometimes I can be logged in all day and nothing really happens and I'm like okay and I just log off. It's kind of a distraction. It can get a little addictive as Facebook. When I started using Facebook, it was insane. I was just entering into Facebook then I was out and then again and again. It's not that I enjoy it, it's just a way of distracting myself.

Here, not only is the general disappointment that animates Hector clear. He is also direct in linking his disappointment with the way he is addicted, or at least pulled into the zone, of Grindr and other social media platforms like Facebook. He gets more out of the distraction being in the zone than actual social connections.

While Grindr use is characterized by its expediency, the expectation that users should know exactly what they want at any given time from a body of unknown and different users is encouraged by the platform and its community of users. As McGlotten (2013) says of creating a Grindr profile,

Creating a profile forces one to attend to one's own desirability and to one's own desire, neither of which are self-evident, and both of which demand articulation in

virtual spaces as much (perhaps even more) than in real ones...who am I and what (or who) is it that I want? Sexuality, as the congeries of ideologies, histories, desires, identifications, and practices, is, as a number of queer theorists point out, deeply ambivalent, even incoherent. (pp. 67-68).

Grindr users must operate under the ideal that they are able to articulate their exact desires, and that these desires may either be always-looking-for-x desires or right-now-I'm-looking-for-x desires. With each person who presents himself on the cascade of local users, a user must wonder if these people should be interrogated or otherwise pursued, and he must contemplate what questions or photos will lead to a sought-after interaction. In my research and everyday life, I have seen or heard of Grindr being used to find sex partners, to find dates, to find "the one," to find someone to go for a drink, to find a coffee date, to collect nude photos to use as masturbation fodder, to find gym partners, to advertise marijuana sale, to find someone to smoke with, to find someone to play video games with, to find friends in a new neighborhood, to have someone to chat with, to find someone to send pictures of yourself, to get pictures of other people, to find subjects for an art project, to find subjects for an HIV research study, to entertain friends with the novelty of a new technology at the dinner table.... The list goes on. If the goal of expeditiously using an app is to have two users with clear needs, mutually met, then the fact that there is a mystifying number of diverse sought-after uses at play at any one time makes disappointment—and also serendipity, for the openminded—incredibly likely.

When users feel that their intentions are different from others', they are expressing ambivalence about a difference in "media ideologies" (Gershon, 2010) between themselves and other users. Gershon's concept of media ideologies emphasizes the ways

that we prefer certain technologies over others for talking about certain (e.g. serious) topics or for having more or less emotional communication. Users often come to technologies for diverse reasons and use them in varying ways. The diverse media ideologies of a communication platform like Grindr speak to the “interpretive flexibility” of these technologies (Kline and Pinch, 1996). In the case of Grindr’s publicity materials, for instance, the platform is a place to find people “for dating or friends” but the site is commonly referred to as a sex app. Grindr and other platforms that seek to make strangers into familiars or that seek to engage strangers or familiars into communication and interaction open themselves up to failing because users are at cross purposes. Technological platforms that pitch themselves as performing these kinds of services open themselves up to failure precisely because users are uncertain of the best way to approach others.

Many users have tried to curb this incongruence between their desires and the desires of those with whom they communicate by stating up front their reasons for using the app, either in the “looking for” drop down menu, in limited text space provided for users to write brief messages (e.g. “friends only,” “no hookups”), or in the first few messages exchanged with another user. The common “sup” and “hi” salutations are often alluded to in the limited profile space both in ways that discourage these salutations (e.g. “Say more than sup.”) and in ways that encourage them (e.g. “hi is a fine way to start a conversation.”).

In her analysis of technological design, Suchman (2002) documents the way that technologists account for their own perspective in making design choices—sometimes considering the variety of eventual users, sometimes not. In order to better design and

thus enhance the user experience, Suchman argues that technologists should be attuned more closely and intimately to the desires of technology users to understand how technologies actually fit into users' workflows, and how users manipulate technologies to better suit their needs. Suchman coins the term "located accountabilities" to discuss the ways that technology designers can choose to become aware of their own biases and perspectives; the assumption is that designers will be accountable when they realize that users are approaching a technology from a different metaphysical location or standpoint. Many Grindr users have made it their responsibility to take located accountability for their own media ideology of the apps and to locate and account for the media ideology of other users. But many other users have not found it worthwhile or important to become invested in considering located accountabilities of other users of these social technologies. In other words, many people realize that the uses for these apps are diverse and that one must quickly try to ascertain individual users' interest in them and in the other users' intentions. The misreading or misplaced hope that one is on the same page as other users is one of the most common ways people report becoming disappointed on the app. Users who develop good tools to weed out users with intentions that are incommensurate with theirs have less opportunity for disappointment, or at least prepare themselves for inevitable disappointment and are less affected by it when it comes.

Sandeep, a doctor who lives in a small midwestern city who I spoke to when he was visiting New York, explained that he felt Grindr did not set the right set of expectations for the kinds of interactions he wants. I asked him what he what was looking for, and he explained,

Sandeep: People I know I can talk to. Just to know people are in the community. I live in a small city. Midville's a very small city. It's difficult to meet someone I would get along with. Midville's a university city. To meet someone of my professional caliber in that city is very rare. It's again, not me being pompous about things. I don't think about things like "Oh, I'm a doctor, I cannot meet someone less than me." But I'm moving out in a few months. But I'm not gonna find anyone worthy on Grindr, I just think that.

Bryce: Why is that?

S: The 70% of people who just want to hook up...

B: What about the other 30%?

S: The other 30% would just talk and then get on to their regular lives and work.

Sandeep is a user who has downloaded the app, used it for limited purposes, and seeks to get rid of it soon after starting use. He speaks of anticipating disappointment, which sets himself up only to be pleasantly surprised.

But, of course, more dedicated users can also experience disappointment on the app. Bobby shared several stories as evidence that he often finds himself at odds with others' priorities on Grindr and other platforms. He says, "If I start talking to some guy at 3:30 in the morning, and we'll be like "hey" and "hey," and he'll send me the picture of his dick, I'll say something like "that really wasn't necessary" and he'll respond 'it's 3:30 in the morning, of course it's necessary.' For me...it's seeing what people are out there who maybe want to chat." He also, though, explained how, Grindr made him aware of his own "shallowness" and "greediness," saying, "Sometimes I get over-aspirational and message attractive people and don't get responses back but I get a lot of incoming messages from shorter, not in as good as shape, sometimes balding individuals. Of course, I could be friends with them..." Despite the fact that he claimed to be using Grindr to find

people to chat with and see what happened, Bobby noticed that he was also being exclusionary. He is aware of the various dynamics of use that bring on his disappointment, but he sees no clear need to change his use practices or his outlook. Contrary to Sandeep's assumption of disappointment, Bobby actually feels himself becoming a shopper on the Grindr market, in a potentially insatiable quest to find the perfect product. In his case, he has the expediency of a shopping list that tells him exactly what he should be looking for, but he also has a disdain for certain kinds of horny, impatient expediency.

I mention these incongruences to create an understanding of Grindr use that counters the fiction of fulfilled expediency. Instead of following the logic of Grindr's own marketing strategy that emphasizes getting what you want now with one-click shopping expediency, I propose this more complicated narrative of incongruent media ideologies and users' considerations of other users' located accountabilities. It is essential to consider the social networks of human users who one interacts with on these platforms, for it is these cumulative human subjectivities that one is interacting with on these platforms.

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Grindr use's reputation for being expedient, addictive, and disappointing is an essential framework for understanding the sexual cultures, and sex publics, it propagates. Expediency is and was, of course, a characteristic of contemporary sexual cultures before Grindr was developed. Grindr's focus on increasing engagement and cultivating addictive use is a hallmark of contemporary Silicon Valley culture, and it is exacerbated by the competition for attention on individual smart phones and in app marketplaces. In cultures

where limitless choice is emphasized and interactions with strangers are assumed to be ideally accommodating and frictionless, disappointment of some sort is sure to follow. Grindr has been an especially popular reference point for talking about the problems with contemporary sex publics. This has happened because it has a critical mass of users and has a large degree of brand recognition, but it also has inspired commentary simply because it has a brash expedient approach to thinking about the ethics of sex publics. In the next section, I turn to a specific example of a phenomenon, naming racialized desire and non-desire on the app, as evidence of how expedient Grindr use shapes contemporary sex publics.

The Racial Politics of Platforms: Expedient Uses, The Better User, and How Racialized Desire Becomes a Problem

The racial preference argument is just as strong as our gay argument. If we didn't have a preference to certain characteristics solely belonging to a certain race, then why do we have a preference for men at all?

— JGay, in the comments on a Douchebags of Grindr post

JGay, don't be a simpleton. What you are basically saying is that racial preferences and homosexuality are simply a matter of individual taste. We don't exist in a vacuum and our tastes, desires, and the like aren't simply things we put on like a pair of socks. They are cultural. The tricky part is how we come to view preferences as natural and personal rather than as the effects of our cultural upbringing, larger societal mores, and many deeply engrained prejudices. Have you stopped to ask yourself why SO MANY people have the same "preferences"? What happens when you scratch the surface of "no chocolate/no rice, sorry just a preference"? Why don't people want to be with men of color? Well, because they don't find them attractive? Why don't they find them attractive? I mean, come on, it's not like all Blacks, Latinos, or Asians come in one shape or size, right? But when someone says no to entire an group,

he's saying I don't find ANY of you attractive, because you're all the same. This idea, that all members of a racial group are the same, is by definition racist because it fails to recognize the incredible diversity within racial groupings.
— queerprof [Shaka McGlotten], in response to JGay, in the comments on a Douchebags of Grindr post⁵³

Douchebags of Grindr⁵⁴ is a blog that accumulates screen caps of Grindr profiles and Grindr user conversations that indicate inappropriate uses of the app. Typically, the posts call people out for either indicating in their profile that they are exclusive in who they are looking to connect with (“whites only”), or for naming races, body types (usually “fats”), and gender presentations (usually “femmes”) that they are not interested in. The blog includes images of profiles that make the following declarations: “Vanilla and spice, no chocolate and rice;” “WHITES ONLY!! All blacks, keep moving cuz I ain't interested unless u can prove not all blacks are the exact same mkay?;” “block people fast. if you are still on here talking to me be lucky;” “Don't message me. I'll message you :). No blacks Asians or fems. Love it when fats call themselves masc. haahhaha.”

I've started this section with an exchange that McGlotten (2013) participated in and writes about in his analysis of race on Grindr. The exchange happened in the comments to a post on Douchebags of Grindr titled “Polite Douche.” The Grindr user earned the “polite” adjective because his profile broadcasted, “*sorry* but only into white” (emphasis added). So in response, JGay indicated in his comment that only being into whites is a “preference,” just like a preference for men, which is a “preference” that many Grindr users share. The “it's just a preference” defense is a common one for those

⁵³ This exchange is explained in McGlotten (2013, pp. 132-133).

⁵⁴ <http://www.douchebagsofgrindr.com>

users who see great expedience in naming racialized desire. Consider this post, filed the day after McGlotten's, by a user calling themselves blah: "To those bitching about this guy being 'racist' he's not into people of other ethnic background sexually. So what. You can't change that. Posting this online only saves him and other guys time." McGlotten's brings up this exchange in the comments to interrogate "racial preference" in his larger analysis of the affective experience of black Grindr users. In this section of the chapter, I want to consider the phenomenon of naming racialized desire or non-desire as a way of optimizing the expediency users seek from Grindr. What kinds of things are users willing to do to "save their own and other guys' time"? Does naming certain desires or non-desires *actually* save anyone's time? Does it have more pernicious effects? I ask these questions to destabilize the conversation of racialized desire or non-desire. To McGlotten's point, racialized desire is not "just a preference," but here, I want to ask if technological platforms and genres of user practices can change how these "preferences" manifest and, as a result, how this field of "preferences" may change or be shaped by technological design or commonly pursued uses. I also note the critiques launched by anti-racist counterpublics specifically against racism on Grindr. In answering these questions and doing this analytical work, I link the emphasis on expedient Grindr use to these expressions of racialized desire. These proclamations, the claims that racialized rules of attraction are "just a preference," and many of the critical responses to these practices (like *Douchebags of Grindr*) ignore the structures that produce normative gay desire.

In their studies of gay and bisexual male online daters in Australia, Callandar et

al. (2015, forthcoming) investigated the character of “sexual racism” amongst these users and on these dating platforms. To do this, they use Stember’s (1978) definition of sexual racism as a starting point: “the sexual rejection of the racial minority, the conscious attempt on the part of the majority to prevent interracial cohabitation” (p. xi). Their interpretation of sexual racism includes expressions of desire or non-desire and tactics for discouraging or avoiding interracial flirtation, contact, or intimacy. In interviews with men of color, Callandar et al. (forthcoming) found that these men experienced sexual racism in a number of forms (e.g., warnings in profiles, aggressive messages, subtle indications embedded in indifference or rejections). The fact that users are aware of other users’ even subtle biases indicate that power dynamics and imbalances can be sensed even within this form of mediated communication. The researchers also noted that response to sexual racism was understood by their respondents either as a preference, as based on prejudice, or as intent-dependent. Faced with instances of sexual racism, the researchers observed three kinds of responses carried out by their subjects: disconnection, adaptation, and confrontation. Racial dynamics are messy online, and though some may head to online platforms for the expediency and the straightforwardness of digital communication, racialized desire provokes complicated dynamics and interactions. Callandar et al. (2015) find that there is a high correlation between anti-multicultural (i.e. conventionally racist) beliefs with instances of sexual racism in gay/bi online dating contexts. It is not necessarily a surprising finding that those that have clearly delineated expectations for their own racialized desirability and undesirability to others also harbor anti-multicultural views in other portions of their lives. What is more compelling to me,

especially in light of the argument of this section, is that the researchers find that of all respondents—regardless of whether they had a favorable or unfavorable view of sexual racism or found it to be a problem at all, 70.7% agreed that “Indicating a racial preference in online profiles saves everybody time and energy” (p. 1997). There is great possibility for productive friction in interventions that force those that indicate racial preferences to expend—not save—time and energy. This section will end with a serious consideration of several of those strategies.

Accusations about racism on Grindr have led to a rich critique and a range of potential solutions for counteracting racist actions on the app. To analyze this phenomenon, I will start with a review of the literature on contemporary dating with regards to race and interracial contact. I will then move to elucidating the empirical case of racialized desire and non-desire on Grindr, because it is the cause of many of the accusations of racism against Grindr and its users. I will include in this section some excerpts from interviews in which some of my respondents explain why they include racialized desire and non-desire in their profiles or otherwise use racial markers to define how they use the search features of the app. Finally, I will catalog the interventions against racism on Grindr and the ways offensive race talk on Grindr and other platforms has been avoided. While doing this, I will also speculate on ways that users and non-user stakeholders can or could be empowered in the face of a technological developer that prioritizes expediency.

In her analysis of the pursuit of romantic relationships in Western modernity, Illouz (2012) notes that compared to the pre-modern search for a mate, “In modernity....,

given that race, socio-economic status, and religion are no longer formal obstacles to the choice of a mate, the competition becomes both horizontal and vertical, within one's social group, but often and quite typically outside of it, thus becoming in principle open to everyone" (p. 52). While Illouz's main point is that recent changes have made it so that there is more *competition* for mates, she misunderstands the difference between pre-modern and modern society—as I showed in the section on disappointment, and for which she cites Marshall Berman—by assuming that there has been a flattening of race, class, and religion, making them irrelevant markers for the romantic market she analyzes with such care. The fact is, of course, that race and the other factors she mentions matter very much on the romantic market.

Illouz's consideration of race in her analysis resembles work that assumes a post-racial world, one in which racial difference does not impact social relations in any meaningful way. She is not alone in painting with excessively broad strokes when describing the ways that race plays out in the contemporary romance market. African-American legal scholar Banks (2011) shows that because black-white interracial heterosexual dating statistically favors black men and white women and because the mass incarceration of black men in America has taken many black men off the market, a large number of black women are single. He has a solution for this phenomenon: black women should simply marry white men. Banks has foregone trying to investigate and stamp out the reasons for mass incarceration; instead, he has found a Band-Aid that will help single black women pair up. Now it's up to culture to follow suit? It's unclear how he hopes for this phenomenon to be realized. While Banks's plan is not necessarily post-racial, it does

assume that racial inequities can be solved by simply asking them to change.

Illouz says that “formal obstacles” have been eliminated that allow for interracial, interclass, and inter-religious relationships to be pursued, but beyond the formal legal bans on miscegenation that existed in some states when they were found unconstitutional in 1967, it is unclear what she means by “formal obstacles.” There are, after all, many “informal” obstacles and—as we saw above—“preferences” that prevent these leaps across race, class, and religion to be pursued. There might, indeed, be emerging trends in conceiving race, class, and religion when it comes to dating in the West, but these categories have not been flattened by these trends. As McBride (2005) notes, emphasizing how pervasive such post-racial (non-)politics are and noting with a critical eye the dominant consumerist marketplace perspective on dating, “if race is a salient variable in the sex-object choices we make in the gay marketplace of desire (an idea that has long been resisted in favor of an investment in the serendipity of desire and its companion notion of romantic love), then those who benefit unduly under such a system (whites) have a great deal invested in depoliticizing desire” (p. 100).

In his ethnographic work with black Grindr users, McGlotten (2013) shows how multiple affective experiences attend black Grindr use. He outlines how Grindr use inspires anxiety, paranoia, and (yes) optimism. For McGlotten, unlike Illouz, race is constantly present in interactions on the platforms he discusses in this work, Grindr and Manhunt. Users are anxious about what ethnic or racial identification means. Users can become paranoid when trying to understand why interactions do or do not progress in a certain way. Finally, McGlotten relates the perspectives of interlopers who conceptualize

a “not-yet-here” of a circumstance when racialized desire can have valences that go beyond unwelcome stereotypes, like the black sexual aggressor, the Mandingo (p. 75).

While the post-racial argument may be easy to band about, the truth is obviously much more complicated and difficult to resolve. The field of racialized desire inspires two dominant trends: 1.) desires that name and invest in well-worn racial hierarchies (e.g. white is beautiful, black is not), and 2.) desires that invest in non-dominant race types as attractive stereotype and fetish (e.g. submissive Asian bottom, Latin lover, Mandingo). Instead of seeking the easy answer and attempting to chart an easy resolution to these phenomena, McBride (2005) proposes that being attuned to these phenomena gives us access to truths that are too often left unnamed. On his own study of race and sexuality in various cultural forms — from pornography to pick-up bars to dating and sex sites, McBride says, “there is no better place to come to understand and to appreciate the ways in which the legacy of U.S. society’s profound primal experiences with race have permeated all aspects of life in this country, right down to and including our sexual desires, than to examine our behaviors in our most ‘unscripted’ or personal of moments” (p. 92). In his observations of race on gay dating and sex sites, McBride observes,

black men pander to white fantasies about what white men want them to be (even to talking in black dialect); white men freely acknowledge without being condemned as hubristic that they are ‘very good-looking’ (‘VGL’) since it is only an admission of the obvious logic of the marketplace of desire at work; white men apologize for not liking black guys (‘sorry bois....not interested in black men’) without the least thought of how offensive or racist such a gesture might be; indeed, it would seem that whiteness is the all-around salient variable that increases one’s value in the gay marketplace of desire. (p. 117)

McBride's analysis highlights a variety of cultural practices on such platforms, and shows how most of these practices reinforce the always already valued whiteness. He acknowledges that "not-interested-in"'s are "offensive or racist" and are not recognized as such by their writers because of the saturation of the marketplace and commodity logic in these spaces, but he has not yet heard the "it's just a preference" justification as loudly as we have heard in the age of the Grindr Douchebag.

The importance of such work, that acknowledges what we think when we fuck, is underlined by Reid-Pharr (1996) in an essay that is cited as an inspiration for McBride's thoughts,

The task that awaits all of us, then, is to speak desire plainly, to pay attention to what we think when we fuck. It is the particular task of white men to give up the comforts of naivety, of banal gestures to racial inclusion... We must insist on a queer theory that takes the queer body and what we do with it as a primary focus, lest we allow for the articulation of a queer subjectivity that never recognizes the differences we create and carry in our bodies, including not only race but gender, health, and age, to name only the most obvious categories. We must not only think as we fuck but also pay close attention to all the implications, good and bad, of those sometimes startling thoughts. (p. 85)

Though Reid-Pharr is writing to argue for a more nuanced, less white-washed queer theory—an intellectual project whose obituary has been written dozens of times in the past decade—his plea still stands for whatever we might call the kinds of queer or progressive anti-racist projects being developed today.

Writing a few years before Reid-Pharr, hooks (1992) begins her book *Black Looks* with two essays on the complicated field of racialized desire. In "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," she notes that her literature students foreclose the possibility of literary characters loving and embracing their blackness. She ends, "Loving blackness as

political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life” (p. 20). She extends this strand of thought using another cultural phenomenon as a starting point in “Eating the Other,” an essay that addresses the reasons for and political possibilities of racialized sexual conquests. She starts her argument by noting the phenomenon of (white, heterosexual) men bragging to each other about sexual conquests that tally ethnic or national backgrounds. This, indeed, gives a different meaning to “loving blackness,” one for which she prefers to use the less sentimental term “eating the other.” This essay, though, ends just as optimistically but less matter-of-factly, saying,

Within a context where desire for contact with those who are different or deemed Other is not considered bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations. Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible. We cannot, however, accept these new images uncritically. (p. 39)

And so hooks is writing from a historical moment when racist stigmas are being reconfigured. She is careful to note that this is not a liberating moment, but is rather a moment worth figuring out and exploiting. This perspective is optimistic in the same sense of McGlotten’s subjects’ optimism: it is hopeful for, and sees signs of, an otherwise.

To return, though, to the Douchebags of Grindr comment that came after McGlotten’s, the one that validated the “just a preference” argument, using market logic of consumer choice to explain that acknowledging such preferences helps make Grindr

use more expedient: we now have a more coherent arsenal to contend with this argument. To echo McGlotten, attractions are, indeed, culturally conditioned by diverse and competing forces that operate at different intensities and affect different people differently. But the commenter forces us to ask if naming such preferences does, in fact, save other guys' time and lead to more expedient use. Many for whom these declarations are painful, offensive, or just plain unnecessary may not feel that their own time is saved. They may linger longer on such encounters or interactions because such confrontations with sexual racism are not easily ignored. Many users that assert that known and named racialized desire or non-desire is "just a preference" fail to also acknowledge that they, for the most part, are not the originators of these desires. Trends in racialized desirability are affected by cultural context. If we take into account the negative reception of such disclaimers which include hurt and offended responses, then expediency might not be achieved.

The design of the platform shapes the kinds of behaviors with regards to racialized desire that users are afforded. In 2012, Grindr changed its Xtra features to allow for fields other than age to be available for filtering. This means that when an Xtra is looking for potential users to message, they can limit their cascade of users to those that fit into categories they would like to pursue. In a 2014 list of Grindr tips, Simkhai is quoted as saying, "You can easily filter by the type of guy you're looking for and only see them - and that's a huge time-saver," and urges users to do as much as they can to put themselves in the filtered cascades of other users, "If you don't fill [height, weight, ethnicity and other fields] out, you won't come up in the search results." In an interview

with the Israeli publication *Haaretz*, Simkhai says of the kinds of behavior pointed out by Douchebags of Grindr, “There have always been racists...I don’t like it...but it’s not my job to police such things. I’m not a sixth-grade teacher” (Halutz, 2014). Thus, in acknowledging that some of his users are racist, Simkhai, whose app, in fact, includes in its profile guidelines the line “Don’t be overtly suggestive, racist, bigoted, or anything else that might offend our community,” says that it’s not in his interest to police racism, which is a way for him to avoid confronting the difference between the bias his user agreement names and the racialized non-desire that goes on in the app.

To push the question of racialized desire and expediency, let’s turn to the experiences of some of my interview subjects. Two of my twelve interview subjects included an expression of racialized desire or non-desire in their Grindr profiles. Hector, the recent immigrant from Latin America, and I spoke about this part of his profile design and the reasons behind it:

Bryce: If I remember correctly, [your profile] also says...

Hector: That I [only] like white boys?

B: Yeah.

H: Yeah, it’s because I mean...since I got here, I’ve been asked out by a lot of black guys and a lot of Latino guys, which I’m not into...I’m a quarter black, I don’t even like my own race of people. I try to be — if you read it, it might be aggressive, because I have gotten a few messages that say I’m so racist because I just like white boys. But it’s because of that—since I got here I’ve been chased by mostly black people and Latino guys.

B: Tell me more about—it’s because you’ve been chased?

H: I’ve had three experiences now around the area — I don’t even know these guys, but I’ve been followed in the street three times. And they contacted me on

Grindr “Did you see me on the street?” And I said, “Oh, that was you?” because the other day I was wearing my headphones and I noticed some guy was following me, and I tried not to look that obvious. But I noticed he was following me. And I started running a bit, and I ran to the subway, and that was it. And then he told me that that was this guy. He texted me since I got here. He was a black guy. Another guy, at a convenience store, he was trying to get my number. And then he told me on Grindr that it was him. Another guy at the bar. At that salsa night, he was there. This was also a black guy. I was like, hey, I’m over this shit. I’m not gonna be guessing who’s who, and that’s why I wrote that. And mostly I have blocked every black guy that I’ve seen on there. Mostly, I don’t like to be somebody’s crush. Because I’m looking for friends here, and I’m looking for a job. And I’m unwilling to play those games. So that’s why I put that. As I told you, it might be quite aggressive. But it’s not meant to be that way.

Hector works hard to rationalize the inclusion of his racialized desire (and implicit non-desire) in his profile. He attributes his motivations to uncomfortable moments he has had in his neighborhood because of unwelcome attention he says he received, a discomfort he reacts to by focusing on race and warning all other black men that he does not appreciate their attention. But Hector also explains that his declaration has actually provoked unexpected responses from other users who accuse him of being “racist” or “aggressive” in his profile text. His explanation of this portion of his profile shows that though he intended the profile text to make his use more expedient, it actually affected other users in negative ways, which is evidenced in the messages he received from other users critical of his profile text.

In the rest of his interview, Hector explained that he would get rid of Grindr and OkCupid once he was settled in his new life. The experience has not been pleasant for Hector, partly because he is not able to control the interactions that the platforms facilitate. He is, in other words, disappointed with the apps, because they do not give him exactly what he wants. In this case, what he wants is a way to treat people like products,

to articulate racialized desire and to get attention from the types of guys he wants approaching him. His profile text intends to target racial categories that he aims to buffer himself from. In the end, Hector is dissatisfied with the app's affordances for buffering him from unwanted attention. The affordance of the app for relatively open contact is, in the end, one of the reasons that Hector is not happy with his experience using Grindr. While many believe this kind of mediated contact allows more streamlined communications, Hector feels that he can more appropriately send cues in real life. Because of the reactions to his "aggressive" profile, he actually feels his use is especially *inexpedient*.

Ignacio, a fashion professional in his late twenties, on the other hand, includes a line in his Grindr profile that says "sorry, not interested in white guys." In his discussion of his use of dating sites and apps, he explained that filtering by race was a way that he used or wished he could use these platforms to pursue connections.

Bryce: So do you want to be specific about what you're looking for?

Ignacio: Today, I'm just not interested in dating white men. In terms of sex, if I'm looking for immediate satisfaction, I don't really care. If it's more that I'm looking for intimacy or some kind of intimate connection, I'm not looking for white men.

[...]

Bryce: Is there anything that you wish would be true of these apps that would make them more efficient?

Ignacio: Grindr could be more — I guess it's fine. I was gonna say it could be more specific. But I guess you have — you just have to pay to subscribe to those services. I think they're fine the way they are.

B: For what reasons are you excluding for certain pursuits?

I: Mainly, it's just — in terms of a relationship or sharing intimacy. I just haven't had an experience with white men where I feel like it's not superficial. I don't know if being in a relationship with a white man is capable of being more than superficial — that's what I think.

Ignacio's expression of racialized non-desire is a response to previous experiences with white men, which he felt were superficial attempts to pursue intimacy with him. In Ignacio's case, he wishes the ability to filter by race was available to free users of Grindr, but didn't feel that it was worth it to pay for Grindr Xtra to have access to that feature. For Ignacio, the superficiality of hook-ups with white guys is unattractive; next, we will see Jofre is okay with a similar superficiality.

While it's not necessarily true of Grindr, the expression of racialized desire can be a reputation of certain platforms. After mentioning that he “does well” on Adam4Adam, I asked Jofre why he thought that was true. He said, “I don't know if this is true but my friend said that guys who like non-white guys go on Adam4Adam. That's what I've heard. I don't know if that's true, because I actually haven't had that app for that long. So maybe that has something to do with it, I don't know.” Jofre also pointed out that he sometimes finds out that guys approach him because they seek out Latinos. For instance, he told me, explaining that he doesn't have any categorical hang-ups, “I banged the hottest muscle guy — he was like 38. He liked Latinos, that was his thing. He liked Latinos. So I'm like fine with older. My whole thing is if you're hot you're hot. I'm a total hypocrite, because I'm regular. But if you're significantly older than me, you have to be like in really good shape. I couldn't believe it. At first I was like, ‘This guy's fake.’ I was like ‘what are you thinking?’” In this case, in which Jofre is taken over by the value

placed on beauty standards that place him lower in the hierarchy than a hook-up, Jofre felt like he benefited from exploiting someone's racialized desire, as they benefited from his notions of desirability.

Bobby, a white student in his early twenties, noted that he did not pay for Grindr Xtra, which would allow him to limit searches beyond the age field, which is the only field one can use to limit searches on the free version of Grindr. Speaking of how he uses filters on a site that allows them to be used for free, Adam4Adam, he says, "It allowed for a search bar called "ideal" -- [starts listing his preferences] tall white guys, athletics, HIV negative, I didn't care about dick size, because i didn't put mine and a lot of people didn't." And after telling me that "age, race, and location" were important to him, I asked Darnell, the black educator from a small mid-Atlantic city, how he searched or filtered for these people. He responded by emphasizing the ways that these filters were mostly internalized in his use,

Darnell: Age, I can do -- I'll still talk to people that are older than me, my age to maybe like 35, 38ish. But you know I'm open to talking to people. It's not chiseled in stone. I don't know what it is, I'm just not into other black guys. I'm into white guys, Asian, Latinos, mixed people...I'll talk to other people, I'm never gonna cut those people off. I'm very straight-forward. I think we can be friends, but I don't see anything else happening. You're just not my type. I'm not really attracted. Even if people do contact me, I am very straightforward, which I feel there's a lack of [on the apps]...

Bobby and Darnell both show how their racialized desire informs their use practices, by exploiting filtering possibilities and also by self-consciously internalizing one's supposed "preferences." There is a difference between these two strategies because the latter requires a confronting of the profiles of members of "undesired" categories. Grindr is

structured so that one avoids this potentially awkward mental process only by paying for a premium version of the app. Not only does paying make one's use more expedient, it also makes the cultural forces behind naming sexual desires and non-desires less explicit.

Diverse Resistances to Racism on Grindr

Not everyone who mentions race or ethnicity on their Grindr profiles is expressing racialized desire or non-desire. In many profiles — especially, it seems, in more ethnically diverse places — users ironically parody exclusionary profile text. In a poetic response to such profiles, one user includes the following in his profile: “No fats, no femmes, no gays, no life forms, no science, no logic, no substance, no future, no past, no problem.” Many other users take a more direct anti-racist approach to expressing disapproval of racialized desire and non-desire. Take, for instance, this profile text: “If you got ‘no fems’ or any racist shit in your profile, please don’t bother.” These critical profile texts operate on a different register than those that express racialized desire or non-desire. The former attempts to entice by turning exclusive profile conventions into a devolving extremist approach to exclusion; the user asks you to be a part of the in-joke. Both, but especially the latter, critique a conception of expediency that inspires people to post their expressions of racialized desire or non-desire. Instead of excluding potential partners on the basis of race, these profiles attempt to respond to those with exclusionary communication policies. Unlike those that express racialized desire or non-desire, their critics do not invite critical reactions; they put other users on the defensive.

The academic and creative practices of the video artist and cinema studies scholar Hoang Tan Nguyen brings a unique approach to contending with racialized desire and

non-desire on dating sites and apps. While his tactics and arguments circulate in the elite circles of academia and video art instead of the popular venues that the other interventions circulate in, his work includes a number of highly nuanced provocations. Discussing Grindr by way of Douchebags of Grindr, Nguyen (2014) notes “the most common, and hysterical, rejection on Grindr is directed towards Asian men” (p. 2), a claim that is hard to substantiate. The politicized project of much of Nguyen’s work rests in mapping out the range of ways Asian-American sexuality, specifically the feminized Asian-American masculinity associated with bottomhood, circulates in contemporary sexual culture. Particularly interesting is his discussion of his own video “7 steps to sticky rice” (1995), which employs a pedagogical mode to helping viewers along the process of becoming “sticky rice,” becoming a gay Asian male (GAM) attracted to other GAMs, encouraging a particular racialized sexual identity. Nguyen (2012, 2014) notes that “force-feeding” a desire for “rice” can lead to an ambivalence about racialized desire and attempts to politicize it. In other words, outright attempts to encourage intraracial romance, for instance, raise the possibility of shoe-horning desires. Another video, *look_im_azn* [Look, I’m Asian] (2011) collects instances of two competing tactics for dealing or avoiding confrontations with race on dating sites and apps: self-identifications of Asian-ness in screen names (the equivalent for this on Grindr would be the optional Grindr profile headline) and what Nguyen calls “tactical masking,” including torso-only pictures of one’s body to obscure Asian-ness. The complex field of race and desire that Nguyen describes is politicized, yes, but it is also mired in ambivalence and contradictions. His is avant-garde commentary on racialized desire, and it circulates as

such: highly provocative but stymied by ambivalence. Nguyen relies less on accusations of racism and pedagogical tactics against “racist behavior” than the tactics discussed above, but he is still interested in politicizing such desire. These tactics work to push such politics of racialized desire and non-desire beyond configurations that assume that shaming and disciplining are the key to discouraging such behaviors.

In his larger work on the politics and implications of what he calls “gay data,” Roth (2015a) finds objectionable—or at least potentially troublesome—some of the tactics for shaming espoused by actions like the douche-shaming on Douchebags of Grindr. While Roth sees some of the profile text of some users especially objectionable and racist, he worries that Douchebags of Grindr itself also engages in its own brand of shaming (some of the site’s targets are—seemingly without justification—shamed for their own looks or age) and also that the site creates a trace of a behavior (profile text creation) that did not intend to leave a permanent or intractable trace.⁵⁵ To address—or at least make more considered and open—the latter action, Roth proposes that users be notified when a user has taken a screenshot of their profile. This, according to Roth, would notify the user with the potentially offending profile that their profile image may be circulating beyond the bounds of Grindr, and it would also provoke an opportunity for discussion about the profile between the users. While I agree with Roth that this is an interesting thought experiment that pushes us to consider what happens when we post

⁵⁵ The permanence of such shaming actions forces us to question what happens when the shamed feel sorry or feel they made a mistake. While the shamed may have realized their ways (or may have been misunderstood all along), the traces of the shaming are often hard to purge from digital platforms (Ronson 2015).

something that is able to be captured and passed along beyond the confines of certain platforms, I suspect that were such a feature to be implemented, it might make users more paranoid about the purpose of users' capturing of their images. This may not be a bad thing, and it may lead to use conforming to more civil uses of the app. However, its potential effects are unpredictable and difficult to test beyond the thought experiment.

Douchebags of Grindr is not the only formal attempt to discipline the desires of Grindr users. Another site, End Racism and Homophobia in the Gay Community,⁵⁶ one of many blogs and websites sloppily interlinked—and partially deadlinked—that have been developed as a guide for using Grindr appropriately. End Racism and Homophobia in the Gay Community goes beyond the simple post-and-gripe format of Douchebags of Grindr. A version of the project promotes the page “Gay School 101” at the top of the site’s homepage. After clicking on that page, Gay School 101 is introduced as such:

Here you will learn that being gay is not just about the physical act of non-heterosexual sex and attraction. It’s about raising your consciousness to whole new level of being, where you celebrate your unique, vibrant, diverse culture free from the judgment and shame of the heteronormative world.

At Gay School, you will learn why it is so important to shed the internalised homophobia we have all been conditioned towards since early childhood. You will learn why statements such as STRAIGHT ACTING, NO FEMMES, NO GIRLY GUYS, NO QUEENS, NO ASIANS, NO BLACKS, NO INDIANS, NO RICE, NO CURRY, NO LATINOS etc are simply NOT ON.

As a project, then, End Racism and Homophobia in the Gay Community intends to

⁵⁶ Though the last posts were in 2014, versions of this Tumblr-native project still exist, as of August 17, 2015, at <https://endracismandhomophobia.wordpress.com/> and <https://stopracismandhomophobiaongrindr.wordpress.com/>. The latest version of the site identifies the administrator of the sites as an Australian cultural commentator that uses the identifiers @screamingqueen and Masc Wendy.

educate users through an anti-racist, anti-homophobic, feminist pedagogy that emphasizes the “proper” use of Grindr and similar technologies. Its attempts are admirable, but it is unclear what (counter)public constitutes the readers of this blog, especially because the site was neglected.

The administrator of the Stop Racism and Homophobia on Grindr blog includes a letter they wrote to Grindr, which asks Grindr to forbid what the site categorizes as racism and homophobia on the platform. They state explicitly that certain declarations violate Grindr’s terms of service. The letter states,

Your terms and conditions clearly state you will not accept this sort of behaviour, and yet you appear to do nothing whatsoever about it. This is very frustrating. As a prominent site in the gay community across the world, I would think you have a social responsibility to guide gay men towards acceptable, inclusive behaviour. Homophobia, internalised or externalised, is clearly unacceptable. Terms such as “Straight Acting”, and “No Fairies” and “No Femmes” and even “No Fags” are way too common on your site.

Racism on any level is also clearly unacceptable. Terms such as “No Asians” and “No Indians” and “No Blacks” and “No Rice” and “No Curry” are way too common on your site.

You need to be doing more to stop this. (End Racism and Homophobia in the Gay Community, 2011b)

According to an email reproduced on the blog, Grindr Support representative Jared P. responded to that letter saying that some language use regarding race and sexuality was considered off-limits, including “fags” and other racial slurs. “No Asians” and “No Indians,” according to the letter, are considered not offensive but preferential; “No rice” and “No curry” are called “definitely a fine line,” because they are not “as politically correct.” The letter ends with Jared P. saying,

it is very important that you understand Grindr, as an organization, does not discriminate on any individual based on race, religion, sexual orientation, mannerisms, or any other basis. The users that use Grindr are expects [sic] to make statements within our guidelines and we feel that being able to voice your preference of who you are and aren't attracted to (in a politically correct/socially positive manner, of course) is important. (End Racism and Homophobia in the Gay Community, 2011a).

Grindr's response encourages users to feel free to be as specific as possible in naming one's desires and non-desires. In so doing, they assume that these expressions will help achieve the app's marketed expediency. After listing a number of the offending expressions of non-desire ("NO ASIANS – NO INDIANS – NO CURRY – NO RICE – NO QUEENS – NO FEMMES – NO FAGS – NO JEWS – NO FLAMERS – NO GIRLIE GUYS – NO BLACKS – NO EBONICS – STRAIGHT ONLY – NO LISPS"), the administrator of the blog asks: "HOW POLITICALLY CORRECT AND SOCIALLY POSITIVE DO THESE STATEMENTS SOUND TO YOU?" I, with the administrator of the blog, wonder how permitting this kind of expediency is "socially positive," but more, I wonder what "socially positive" means and when Grindr became concerned with whether the interactions it hosted were "socially positive."

Finally, what if our technological platforms for dating and sex discouraged blatant expressions of racialized desire or non-desire by design? Such is the case of the dating app Tinder. Tinder operates by only allowing users to talk to each other if they both "swipe right," meaning that they have actively expressed mutual interest. Tinder swiping (left for not interested; right for interested) can be done on the sight of a user's lead photo (and I suspect though do not know that this is the most common way that a swipe is registered). If one half of a potential conversation expresses disinterest, then the

interaction cannot happen on the app. This allows those with conscious racialized desire protocols to forestall communication indefinitely. No expressions of racialized desire needed.⁵⁷

Now that I have surveyed a number of responses and aversions to expressing racialized desire and non-desire, none of the arguments for the expediency of naming racialized desire or non-desire are independently persuasive in their outlook. In fact, as the examples from my interviews showed, this naming may actually make Grindr use less expedient. While I trust those that say they are “just saying what they prefer,” it’s hard not to see trends in these declarations (the desirability of whiteness is rarely questioned in them), and the relentlessness declarations of undesirability of certain categories (fems, fats, Asians)—done in the name of expediency—undoubtedly have psychic effects. While one could decide to advocate the use of apps that did not encourage these blatant declarations of racialized desire or non-desire, there are also psychic effects of, say, rarely getting a match on Tinder. Still, though, when users of Grindr see fit to attempt to maximize their expediency by broadcasting aggressive declarations of desire or non-desire, they are doing something that can be reflected upon, interrogated, and curbed, more easily than the subtle factors that go into flash decision-making on an app like Tinder.

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Grindr, then, is an especially interesting example for interrogating sexual racism

⁵⁷ Despite this, on a very small number of occasions using the app, I have found such declarations present themselves even on Tinder.

or racialized attraction or non-attraction for several reasons. It has encouraged expedient use, and has afforded a disposition amongst users that makes it seem acceptable to treat interactions amongst users in a transactional, inhuman manner. Thus, just as it has invited users to name and feel comfortable to name one's preferences, Grindr has also inspired a critique of expediency and its attendant approach to interactions-as-transactions that is, in its own right, productive.⁵⁸

Offended users may decide to approach and critique a technology as it exists, and new mobilizations may develop to change Grindr's features, to develop apps that organize desire in new ways, or yes, even to encourage the abandonment of such technologies. There are a number of ways to express disinterest (don't message, ignore people's messages, tell people you're not interested in them when they message you, list certain kinds of people you're not interested in your profile, block users when you see them or when they contact you and you are not interested, use filters when browsing, use filters when searching, use apps that require mutual interest in order to contact like Tinder), and people disagree on the appropriate way to express disinterest. The goal in this section has thus not been to solve the problem of racism—on Grindr or off. While some attempts to curb racism on technological platforms assume that eliminating racism on technological platforms is easy and that tech overlords are the main roadblocks to

⁵⁸ I do not mean to imply that other platforms, like Tinder, do not inspire their own critique of the transactional. It is interesting, though, to note that the most popular and salient critiques of Tinder emphasize not expediency but rather addiction. Commentary on Tinder (e.g., Sales 2015) tends to emphasize how users treat the app like a game where the goal is the accrual of interactions (or hook-ups), not necessarily the achievement of the what-you-want when-you-want how-you-want interaction that is associated with Grindr's emphasis on expediency.

achieving a platform for interacting without needing to confront racism, it is difficult to fully avoid the impact of racism on any social technology, especially one that relies on the subjectivity of other human users for the fulfillment of the goal of the technology. What I hope to have done here, though, is to chart a number of ways that users respond to, complicate, and contest the technological structures of the app, the policies of the administrators, and the behavior of other users. Though these are uncoordinated interventions that will not rid the world—or the nation—of racism or sexual racism, their presence is felt and do have the possibility of qualitatively changing the character of the use of the app and the subjectivities of its users.

Conclusion

In 2015, there's one rule. You can take your time, but don't take mine. No one has patience anymore. We want immediate gratification, especially with sex. How the Hell did anyone do [sic] before hook-up apps? Were you supposed to meet someone in a bar and take them home before seeing their dick pics first? Nuh-uh. I don't like surprises...I think I've seen every guy's goods in my five block radius. I'm running out of quality options. But I found a loophole. A clever fishing remedy for my sex shortage: straight men.

— voice over in the trailer for episode 2 of the men.com porno *Swipe*

Grindr is a valuable site of analysis for looking at the ways that specific technological platforms, their design, and their use both invest in and afford non-normative pursuits of sexual sociality. It is particularly interesting because of the ways that it has inspired copious amounts of commentary and tech industry aspiration and emulation. The voice over of the trailer for the pornographic video *Swipe* quoted above is

a characteristic example of the ways that Grindr and its reputation for being used addictively, expediently, and with great disappointment, leads to diverse commentary in various cultural fields.

The concept of the porn, though, is perhaps unwittingly prescient. A recent British survey found that most Brits, including youth, considered themselves something other than 100% heterosexual (Dahlgreen and Shakespeare, 2015); and of course, straight—or “str8”⁵⁹—men seek sex with each other online and off (Ward, 2015). The convergence of what some call a post-gay context and technologies that encourage expedient interactions with strangers in a way that brings people into a zone of plenty and excess has undeniable effects on sexual cultures.

It is not the goal—nor would I have the space here—to chart a future for sexual cultures. Nor do I intend to chart a future of worldwide sexuality by declaring a sexually fluid future; in fact, my evidence has shown how users place much emphasis on what they think they want. But I do mean to conclude by emphasizing three themes from this chapter that are important in conceptualizing a future of sexuality that, inevitably, includes more communication technologies and probably various cyborg sexual assemblages of human and machine. First, it is essential to unlearn the hype around dating site/app solutionism that intends to encourage us to treat other users as commodities, thereby forgetting the fact that the network of users hosted on these apps are human beings. Second, systemic inequalities and discrimination are based on

⁵⁹ This abbreviation is often used in gay porn or on sex sites to describe someone who identifies as straight but has sex with men.

entrenched social forces. While anti-racist counterpublics can form around practices seen on Grindr or other social platforms, counterpublic agitation limits itself when it sees as a goal getting rid of racism only on specific apps. To see campaigns against racism on technological platforms like Grindr, for instance, as eradicating racism elsewhere, makes assumptions similar to the ones espoused by Silicon Valley solutionism. In reality, racist structures—visible or subtle as they are—must be confronted by anti-racist counterpublics in various contexts in addition to technological platforms, just as was the case before we were conditioned to have such enthusiasm for technological solutionism. Third, seeing as how technological platforms that allow for interpersonal connections of a personal or sexual nature are probably not going away, it is essential to see their presence as shaping our sex publics from here on out. Their presence, however, does not mean that we cannot—we should!—consider the creation of sex publics that de-mediate our sexual lives from platforms and encourage more serendipitous circumstances for interpersonal contact.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2012, I clicked on a link to a YouTube video⁶⁰ a friend posted to Facebook. As the video started, a young woman with short hair sits in the back of a SUV. She is given headphones by a young man who waits for a song to emanate from speakers and through the young woman's headphones. The song is from young bubble-gum pop/R&B star, Bruno Mars. The chorus to "Marry You," should you be unfamiliar with it, goes a little something like this:

It's a beautiful night
Looking for something dumb to do,
Hey baby
I think I wanna marry you.

Is it the look in your eyes?
Or is it this dancing juice?
Hey baby
I think I wanna marry you.

Schmaltz is something of a specialty for the crooner, who is something of a resurrection of Motown's greatest. But as the SUV starts moving at only a few miles per hour down a quiet residential Portland street, with the young woman's legs dangling over the back, various people begin acting out lines from the song. They pass from in front of the car, out of the woman's view to a position behind the car, a stage of sorts. From the young woman's reaction, it is clear that these are her friends.

Their every ironic interpretation of the song's lines (At every iteration of the song's "Or is it this dancing juice?," a group of men cross in front of her dancing a bastardized version of the Horah with Tallits draping around their neck. This is Portland, af-

⁶⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_v7QrIW0zY

ter all, and dancing juice is jokingly interpreted as “dancing Jews.”) is met with glee from the young woman. At one point, friends from far-flung locals arrive via recorded home videos on laptops. In the videos, the friends are dancing around signs that ask the young woman to “Say I Do” (a request that happens to be the words of the song’s bridge). As the song ends, the cadre of the woman’s friends and the car stop. The friends wiggle their fingers. She is left staring at a sea of jazz hands as a man dressed in black arises from behind them. This, it becomes clear, is the man who really wants her to say “I Do.” The song dies down and the man in black gets down on his knees to ask for the young woman’s hand in marriage. She says yes, and the crowd of friends cheers.

The video ends, and I wipe the tears from my eyes. I am ashamed that I would be so emotionally affected by such a video, cleverly designed to be a viral sensation on the Internet. The parties involved in this wedding proposal set up a carefully rehearsed performance that was meant to impress the bride-to-be as well as scores of Internet viewers. This is not the first instance of this song being used for this purpose; several other videos have been posted on the Internet where an unsuspecting woman is surprised with a public proposal after “Marry You” is blasted on loudspeakers, and I have cried at many of them. It quickly became clear to me that my tear ducts were responding to a mass appreciation of a couple. What is lovely about this is that people have taken time out of their day to let other human beings know that they care for them; what is troubling about this is that this kind of attention and care is not put forth to honor the lives of those who do not marry.

Marriage, weddings, and the preambles thereof are helpful in organizing our appreciation of other human beings. But are we too reliant on these markers? How must the

spinster toil to get the public appreciation (and dancing) of her friends and family? And what of her YouTube video? And what makes the coupled more deserving of a blender—or a spice rack—than our spinster?

After their proposal video went viral, the couple, Portland-based actors Isaac Lamb and Amy Frankel took advantage of their proposal video's popularity by posting artfully produced videos of the couple singing and videos about their wedding and their extended family to their YouTube channel.⁶¹ This couple exploited their viral video success in order to sell their brand of performance, personality, and, following Banet-Weiser (2012), authenticity.

I bring this video up to note that my work as an analyst has not been organized around disparaging normative politics. But I also bring this example up to point that the structures of publicity and promotion that attend twenty-first century social media economies even shape and exploit major personal life events. Even if this wedding proposal video was especially heartwarming and captivating, it exists in a media ecology that gives social capital to the ingenious wedding proposal and in a sociopolitical context that extends privileges to married couples but not other arrangements. It also exists in a media ecology with many competing wedding proposal videos from other users that have taken the model and used it to their own advantage.

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The goal of this dissertation has been to look at the ways that members of counterpublics harness media platforms in ways that specifically complement the counter-

⁶¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJce-zjHtwMe9eTBcD_UzOA

publics' needs to, as Fraser (1990) explains, both regroup as a counterpublic and agitate larger publics. The case studies in this dissertation were chosen because they provide a way to explore how counterpublics navigate a media landscape that emphasizes popular commercial mainstream and social media platforms but also allows for non-commercial and analog media forms. The commercial social media landscape has recently attempted to exploit the movements that have used their platforms for publicity, but it would be a mistake to think that these commercial media platforms prioritize making the world a better place over their own profits. There is, of course, some of my own subjectivity in choosing individual case studies. I have chosen examples of uses of digital media that have caught my interest or resonated with me as significant examples of ways that digital media are harnessed or created by those with non-normative sexual politics.

In the first chapter, I focused on the group of people who have coalesced around an asexual identity. I made the case that the popularity of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and its founder David Jay have shaped the early political possibilities of asexual identity politics. I noted how the proliferation of identity markers within the asexual community is an organized case of strategic nominalism, which describes the way that identity categories are strategically deployed to fight the pressure to pursue (bio)medical responses to those who do not experience sexual attraction. Though many of the most important structures of communicating about asexuality and amongst asexuals have been devised on AVEN, I investigated the understanding amongst asexuals that much asexual communication has moved to Tumblr. I ended the first chapter by noting the reasons a social media site like Tumblr are sought out because they are under-

stood to address the communicative needs of counterpublics. Throughout, I discussed the ways that the resistive power of an organized asexual community exploits the structure of a tolerant society, without agitating in a way that radically challenges the ways that relationships are valued in contemporary neoliberal society.

In the second chapter, I discussed the counterpublic campaigns of the Sasha Cagen's quirkyalone concept and the Against Equality collective's campaign against the mainstream LGBT movement. Through these campaigns, I noted the ways that online counterpublics are perceived as fostering discord in normative moderate political discussions. I showed how this strand of analysis within political communication has deemphasized the importance of radical or non-normative political thought. Though quirkyalone and Against Equality critique heteronormative and homonormative forces, I noted that both campaigns are organized differently. Quirkyalone is openly an entrepreneurial venture for its creator, Sasha Cagen; meanwhile, Against Equality is run by a collective that promotes itself through publicity centered around one of the collective members, Ryan Conrad, and some public writing by members Karma Chavez and Yasmin Nair. The quirkyalone and Against Equality campaigns also pointed to the importance for campaigns to be transmedia, exploiting the affordances of a great variety of media genres and social media platforms. Because it would be easy to understand these campaigns as having fizzled out or been unsuccessful in achieving some of their enumerated goals, I ended by considering the afterlives and unpredictable futures of political communication on the fringes.

Finally, I discussed the ways that Grindr inspires various kinds of counterpublic identification. I deconstructed the counterpublic context of Grindr as a site for hook-ups and the pursuit of relationships for reasons other than finding “the one.” To do this, I highlighted the ways that Grindr use emphasizes expediency at the expense of treating other users humanely. I parlayed this discussion into an analysis of a counterpublic of users who have formed around the sexual racism they have identified on the app, in which some users criticize others for naming ethnicities of people who they find undesirable. I showed the ways that Grindr and other similar platforms create the conditions for this kind of behavior while other platforms like Tinder create conditions for these desires and non-desires to be internalized and not expressed. In these ways, I showed that the non-normative sexual politics enacted by Grindr users actually recreate destructive power dynamics and social norms.

I have shown how social media can take many forms, and I have made the case that the groups and individuals I discuss are purposeful about the platforms and media they use to communicate to or with other members of their networked counterpublics. I have noted many times at which those pursuing non-normative sexual politics have used non-corporatized media forms—photocopied zines and books printed by anarchist publishers; open source web development tools from small companies—php message boards and WordPress sites; and large social media platforms—Tumblr and Facebook. I thus hope to have contributed to discussions of digital ICTs and social change in a way that does not treat social media technologies and platforms as neither democratic savior-solutions nor necessarily undemocratic. Instead, I hope to have emphasized the ways that so-

cial media technologies are used tactically by members of and prominent figures within networked counterpublics.

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In these concluding remarks, I want to end by thinking about how these studies of counterpublics that espouse non-normative sexual politics should factor into a larger politicized study of digital communication for democratic social change. Following Fenton's (2016) call to be more attentive to the actual politics pursued in the campaigns that communication and media studies scholars track and analyze, I want to spend some time here thinking about the ramifications of my decision to isolate counterpublics that were largely organized around sexual politics in this study.

Throughout this dissertation, I have indicated several points at which the groups and individuals at the heart of my case studies could have or have expanded the political potential of their counterpublic's priorities. Ideally, the grievances that these counterpublics raise can be linked to larger structural forces that are causing suffering and lack of support for various people. The structures that are not attending to asexuals, single people (or quirkyalones), queers who seek more than marriage equality, and those offended or affected by racism on Grindr are similar.

By focusing my attention on counterpublics, I hope to have pointed to the value of Fraser's (1990) regroupment and agitation modes of counterpublic communication. Without counterpublic regroupment, large groups of people cannot mobilize around a common oppression; without counterpublic agitation, larger publics cannot be jostled into doing something about these injustices. Single-issue politics should, however, stay at the

counterpublic level. Following Chavez (2011), agitation should be done in concert with other issue publics and sympathetic populations.

Pushes for asexual visibility and education will likely make the interpersonal interactions of asexuals easier, but the asexual counterpublic could use their extensive understanding of the forces working against those who do not participate in sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011) to politicize asexual politics by adding nuance to demands on legal and social support systems to respect *all* families and individuals (Polikoff, 2007). Though the regressive forces of post-feminism and the popularity of tolerant politics defang critiques of hetero- and homonormativities, the non-normative campaigns of quirkyalone and Against Equality counterpublics have unknown futures and potentially productive after effects. Critiques of the ways that social media platforms carry out business have been numerous and have made changes in company policies (van Dijck, 2013), so the critics of expedient Grindr use and its racialized ramifications may rightly motivate development of new social media platforms that are more equitable to compete with platforms that are profit-motivated (cf., Fuchs, 2014).

While the concerns of sexual politics are incredibly important for people everywhere, it is impossible to isolate these concerns from critical analyses of late capitalism and the neoliberal forces that make our lives more uncertain and insecure. It is my hope that by giving critical attention to specific networked counterpublics for non-normative sexual politics, I have created openings for understanding the ways that these campaigns productively use and are subsequently shaped by media platforms, systems, and industries. I hope to have argued that resistances to sexual normativities deserve to be consid-

ered in reconfiguring U.S. politics to better support people of all stages of courtship, coupling, marriage, and life, and with various desires for ideal relationships or arrangements. This study stops short at explicitly linking these politics to other political movements for social support and democratic values. The attention paid in this dissertation to the media ideologies, techniques, and ingenuity put forth by these groups will be instructive in thinking about how these counterpublics and their allies can agitate larger publics for the support necessary to pursue an equitable future for all in the U.S.

Appendix

Interviews:

Alan — 1 October 2012 — early twenties, undergraduate student, New York City, white; in-person interview

Bobby — 12 October 2012 — early twenties, graduate student, New York City, white; in-person interview

Sandeep — 31 October 2012 — late twenties, doctor, mid-sized midwestern city, Asian; in-person interview

Darnell — 6 December 2012 — late twenties, educator, small mid-Atlantic city, black; in-person interview

Jason — 26 December 2012 — late teens, undergraduate student, small mid-Atlantic town, white; Skype interview

CJ — 2 January 2013 — early twenties, undergraduate student/service industry, New York City, Latino; in-person interview

Jofre — 22 October 2013 — mid-twenties, educator, New York City, Latino; in-person interview

Hiro — 5 November 2013 — late twenties, graduate student/personal care, New York City, Asian; in-person interview

Hector — 19 November 2013 — early twenties, personal care, New York City, Latino; in-person interview

Matt — 24 January 2014 — late twenties, graphic designer, New York City, white; in-person interview

Ignacio — 22 September 2014 — late twenties, fashion industry, New York City, Latino; in-person interview

Kennedy — 30 December 2014 — mid-thirties, media executive, New York City, Asian; in-person interview

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