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Bypassing the Asexual Paradox: A Strategic Retelling of the History of Asexuality

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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By

Mark Alan Smith
M.A., Emory University, 2015
M.A., Emory University, 2012
B.A., The George Washington University, 2009

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2017

Abstract

Bypassing the Asexual Paradox: A Strategic Retelling of the History of Asexuality
By Mark Alan Smith

Today, in Western popular culture, sexuality is commonly considered to be a universal human experience rooted internally in biological sex drive and a system of stable orientations and identities. However, in the past decade and a half, these ahistorical assumptions about the universality of sexuality have resulted in the production of a new paradoxical "sexual" orientation: asexuality. This "asexual paradox"—the notion that asexuality is a *sexual* identity despite *lacking* sexual attraction—points to the pervasiveness of sexuality in modern Western society and its capacity to constrain how asexuality is experienced, articulated, and conceived of today. Consequently, this dissertation seeks to destabilize modern conceptualizations of sexuality in order to open up new ways for asexuality to be experienced today. Likewise, this dissertation also seeks to better understand asexuality without merely reducing it to a function of sexuality. To do so, this project conducts a history or genealogy of asexuality and explores alternative historical forms of asexuality as well as different relationships between asexuality, sexuality, and subjectivity over time. This project "bypasses" the modern-day asexual paradox by historicizing asexuality within the radically different historical contexts of pre- and early modern Christianity in the Western tradition. By investigating early Christianity, my project uncovers a diverse economy of alternative forms of asexuality and different relationships between sexuality and subjectivity that are utterly foreign to our modern-day beliefs. Likewise, my project historicizes potential ways in which asexuality first became part of the modern framework of sexuality as we know it today. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to utilize the alterity of our early Christian past (with respect to asexuality, sexuality, and subjectivity) to destabilize and make us suspicious of our modern taken for granted assumptions about sexuality as a universal human experience. To this end, this dissertation hopes to open a space for asexual experience to be recognized in ways that are less contingent upon these modern assumptions about sexuality.

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# Introduction

## Overview

This project begins with the commonly recognized premise within women's, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) that sexuality is ubiquitous in modern Western society. Today asexuality (as a *lack* of sexual attraction that is also a *form* of sexual identity) is inevitably mediated by discourses and popular perceptions of sexuality; asexuality is never described on its own terms but always *in relation to* sexuality. This has produced a paradox at the heart of the asexuality's modern definition—lack of sexuality as a new form of sexuality—that ultimately constrains how asexuality can be articulated, experienced, and perceived today.

Consequently, this dissertation aims to challenge the pervasiveness of sexuality in modern Western society in order to open a space for asexuality to be experienced in new ways. More specifically, this project seeks to destabilize modern ahistorical perceptions of sexuality as an inherent, universal human experience rooted internally in biological sex drive and a system of stable orientations/identities. These assumptions about the universality of sexuality, I argue, have resulted in the production of this new paradoxical "sexual" orientation: asexuality. This paradox, as my previous ethnographic research has taught me, is not merely an issue of contradictions in language and logic but also puts constraints on how asexuality can be experienced today. Asexuality is described as a "lack"—devoid of its own content and only recognizable in the form of sexual identity. This does a disservice to the diversity of ways in which individuals may subjectively experience asexuality. Consequently, this project seeks to open new possibilities for

asexuality—in how it is perceived, talked about, and perhaps also experienced and felt—by loosening the grip of sexuality on modern Western society.

To achieve this effect (i.e. destabilizing sexuality and making room for asexuality), my project bypasses the modern-day asexual paradox and looks, instead, for alternative conceptions of asexuality (and sexuality) in the past. This notion of the "bypass" is an approach adapted from philosopher Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976) in which he uses the bypass to distance his project from popular modern assumptions that sexuality is repressed (13). In reference to this "repressive hypothesis"—the popular cultural notion that sexuality, since Victorian times, has been characterized predominantly by repression—Foucault argues that one cannot "say that sex is *not* repressed…[without] falling into a sterile paradox. It not only runs counter to a well-accepted argument, it goes against the whole economy and all the discursive 'interests' that underlie this argument" (8, emphasis added). Instead of negating this argument, Foucault "bypasses" the issue of repression and redirects his attention to an investigation of the historical conditions that gave rise to modern sexuality (13). Similarly, this project cannot challenge the popular notion that asexuality is a sexual orientation without going against the whole economy and discursive interests that assume, today, that sexuality is universal, internal, and biologically inherent. It would be more beneficial, therefore, to bypass modern conceptualizations of asexuality entirely. To do so, this project looks into the past for alternative perceptions of and relationships between asexuality and sexuality that force us to reconsider our modern beliefs. Likewise, I also deploy certain strategic narratives that offer different takes on the historical construction of asexuality-as-sexuality. By historicizing asexuality through a

number of stories and angles, I hope to make the reader suspicious of our ahistorical, sexualized conceptions of asexuality today; this is the first step toward destabilizing modern sexuality and the grip it presently holds on asexuality.

In particular, my project argues that the history of pre-modern Western Christianity (i.e. late antiquity and the Middle Ages) is an ideal place to look for not only other forms of asexuality but also alternative historical conceptions of sexuality and subjectivity that make us rethink our modern views. Likewise, aspects of the history of Christianity in the early and late modern periods (focusing primarily on the 1400s-1700s) offer a path to better understanding potential ways in which asexuality first became part of the modern "deployment of sexuality."[1] As such, the first two chapters of this dissertation explore the radical discontinuity between pre-modern and modern conceptions of (a)sexuality and subjectivity. The final two chapters, on the other hand, explore the beginnings of a continuity; these chapters explore how shifting Christian conceptions of "flesh" and the body became more and more instrumental to the rise of modern sexuality.

As this project argues, through the history of pre-modern Christianity we uncover a diverse economy of alternative forms of asexuality and reveal a relationship between

[1] This "deployment" or "*dispositif*" of sexuality, according to Foucault (1976), is an expressly modern historical construction characterized by the rise of internal instinct, psychological interiority, incitement to discourse about sex, and a proliferation of sexual identities and perversions. It also entails the insertion of sexuality and the body into relations of power and knowledge—as an object through which to affect individual behavior and to shape entire populations (i.e. biopower). This will be unpacked in the "Contributions" section below.

sexuality and subjectivity that is utterly foreign to our modern-day beliefs. Through suspending our modern-day conceptions of asexuality and opening ourselves up to the alterity of our (Western) pre-modern Christian past, we uncover a variety of alternative notions of asexuality. This dissertation focuses primarily on practices of sexual renunciation: asceticism, celibacy, chastity, and continence. Beyond this, however, other versions of asexuality also exist in pre-modern Christianity: castration, virginity (including the cult of the virgin Mary), and widowhood; I present them here as topics worthy of additional consideration in future histories or genealogies of asexuality.

These pre-modern incarnations of asexuality are significant because they make us rethink modern sexuality in a number of ways. Firstly, in being predominantly practice-based, they demonstrate points in time when asexuality was something one could *cultivate* through transformative work on the self; this differs drastically from modern sexuality, which one cannot cultivate or practice but must discover *internally* within oneself. Secondly, unlike today in which asexuality is a *lack* of experience, asexuality in pre-modern times was a crucial part of mystical practices of self-renunciation that enabled access to the divine *presence* of God. And, thirdly, unlike today in which asexuality has become relatively socially adjusted (as a new addition to sexual orientation), asexuality in its various forms throughout pre-modernity had radical, disruptive, antisocial implications: in late antiquity, for instance, sexual renunciation severely disrupted social norms surrounding marriage and family life under the Roman Empire; in early modern times, on the other hand, asexuality held linkages to particular heterodox spiritual techniques that disrupted Church authority.

With respect to early and late modern Christianity, on the other hand, this dissertation addresses a number of potential hypotheses as to how and why asexuality got incorporated into the deployment of sexuality. By historicizing in several ways how asexuality eventually became part of sexuality, this dissertation aims to ensure that readers no longer take modern ahistorical perceptions of asexuality-as-sexual-orientation for granted. Recognizing that the meaning and shape of asexuality have been subject to various historical influences is an important first step toward making readers skeptical of how and why we (paradoxically) conceive of asexuality *as* sexuality today. For example: Chapter Three discusses how asexuality (as a mystical practice of self-renunciation) got caught up in accusations of demonic possession and sexual impropriety in the early modern period followed by diagnoses of sexual pathology in late modern times. Chapter Four, on the other hand, tells the story of a precise cultural moment in eighteenth century France: the "death of God" moment during the French Enlightenment and the effect it had on sexual language and subjectivity—in particular, how sexual discourse became prerequisite to knowing oneself as a psychological subject. Using the example of the death of God as my launching point, I tell a tale of the universalization of sexuality; I discuss how asexuality was forced to become part of sexuality by being interiorized as sexual identity.

As such, by using the past to make us rethink the present, this project aims not only to nuance our historical understanding of asexuality but also to disrupt modern-day ahistorical thinking about the presumed universality of sexuality (especially in the form of biological sexual orientation and psychological interiority). Hence, above all, this dissertation seeks to queer modern conceptions of sexuality by utilizing the past in the

name of rethinking the present. In other words, this project conducts a Foucauldian "genealogy" (1971) or "history of the present" (1977); it does not merely recount the past but rather utilizes history *conceptually* and *rhetorically* to transform our present-day thinking on sexuality. Whereas this dissertation relies on a number of historical texts—particularly secondary histories—it does so not with the goal of making truth claims or saying "how things were" but rather with the intention of creating *counter-narratives* (very strategic and partial stories) to challenge how we conceive of sexuality and asexuality today. Whereas Foucault was notoriously unreliable as an historian proper, this dissertation instead embraces Foucault as the fiction writer that he was. As Foucault once stated, describing his genealogical approach:

> I would also say, about the work of the intellectual, that it is fruitful in a certain way to describe that which is, *while making it appear as something that might not be, or that might not be as it is*…[S]ince these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made. (1983:450, emphasis added)

To this effect, this dissertation tells a number of stories with the rhetorical intention of destabilizing sexuality to open up new possibilities for asexual experience. This dissertation does not claim to be a traditional history, and it does not employ history as "truth"; rather, it utilizes a number of secondary histories and historical arguments—particularly ones that WGSS (especially queer theory) would benefit from considering[2]—as tools for producing strategic narratives to disrupt how we perceive of asexuality today.

As WGSS scholar Lisa Downing argues in her "Afterword: On 'Compulsory Sexuality,' Sexualization, and History" (2013), now is the time for such a genealogy of

[2] See "Contributions" section below.

asexuality: “histories of sexuality have been rather silent on the subject of asexuality, understood in the current sense of an ‘identity’ or ‘orientation,’ rather than historically as a projection onto certain groups and classes of an ‘innate nature’” or a mode of practice (530). Asexuality, she argues, holds the potential to challenge “dominant narratives of both sexual orientation organized on the principles of binary sexed and gendered attraction…[as well as] compulsory sexuality” (530). If “sex saturates the worldview of our contemporary moment,” as many WGSS and asexuality studies scholars argue, “then simply refusing to talk about it does not constitute an appropriate or efficacious intervention” (528). Rather, Downing argues, one must learn “*how* to study [or disrupt] sexuality without simply contributing to this endless proliferation of discourse” (528, emphasis in original). A genealogy of asexuality may be one potential way of doing so.

**Background**

Crucial to this project’s decision to conduct a genealogy of asexuality is the notion of the “asexual paradox,” which is a contradiction in the definition of asexuality that I first began to notice through preliminary ethnographic research in 2009. In this section I provide background information on the asexual paradox and my previous ethnographic research in order to justify the need for a genealogy of asexuality that sets its sights on destabilizing modern sexuality. My main argument here is that sexuality is so pervasive today that even *lack* of sexuality is now interpreted paradoxically as a *form* of sexual identity; a vast majority of self-identified asexuals define asexuality in this way, oftentimes without seeing any contradiction. As I illustrate below via examples from my previous ethnographic research, asexuality (for the community members with whom I interacted) was predominantly if not exclusively experienced, conceived of, and

articulated *through* sexuality. As an anthropologist, my inability to directly access asexual experience (except through the lens of sexuality) led me to the conclusion that first one must challenge the centrality and presumed universality of sexuality in order to open a space for asexuality to be experienced on new terms.

Ethnographic Findings

My project began in anthropology in 2009 with a single goal in mind: to understand the experience of asexuality as a human sexual identity. Through participating in asexual group functions in Washington, DC, San Francisco, and online, I wanted to gather a sense of what it meant to experience asexuality as both a collective and subjective identity. I wanted to evoke the richness of the experience of asexuality, so I immersed myself in asexual life.

Having participated for a summer with the Washington, DC offline asexuality group (starting with their first meeting in May 2009), I quickly came to realize, however, that there were limitations to my making sense of asexual experience. At the first meeting it became clear that the Asexual Visibility and Education Network website (AVEN)—through which all but one of the group members had come to learn of asexuality—swayed how our offline group spoke and perceived of asexuality. Displayed in bold purple letters atop the AVEN (asexuality.org) homepage was the phrase "**Asexuals Do Not Experience Sexual Attraction**," and this very same language of lack and absence pervaded our group conversations. Asexuality, as group members explained it, was not about the presence of experiences of asexuality inasmuch as it was actually about the experience of *lacking* sexuality in a society that puts so much emphasis on sex. The fact that our asexual group so often articulated asexual experience in negative

relation to sexuality—that is, as a lack of sexual experiences rather than as a presence of asexual experiences—demonstrated to me the pervasiveness of sexuality in modern Western culture and its capacity to put real-life constraints on how asexuality is experienced and discussed today. Far from achieving a "thick description" of asexual experience as I had initially intended, the only experiences I elicited, therefore, were experiences of how it feels to *not* experience something previously assumed to be so fundamental and universal to us all. *As an anthropologist, I lacked direct access to asexual experience; rather, it seemed that I could only explore asexuality indirectly through the lens of sexuality.*

Consequently, our group meetings were consumed with discussions of the hardships each asexual member faced while navigating through sex-saturated society. Our second offline group meeting illustrated this most clearly. At our second meeting in early June 2009, the group met on the National Mall in Washington, DC and moved to a nice outdoor table in the Hirschorn Sculpture Garden. It was a warm Saturday afternoon and many parents with children walked by, admiring the sculptures near where we sat. With the exception of a few new members, everyone knew each other from the previous meeting and therefore the group discussion was louder and livelier. We went around the table, each discussing the hardships of trying to fit in with sexual norms (e.g. relationships and dating; pressure from family and friends to marry; and the pursuit of medical interventions such as hormone therapy and psychiatric counseling). Many members of the group also discussed how their asexual identity was often challenged or delegitimized by others (e.g. "it's just a phase," "you haven't met the right person," "you're repressed," "maybe you're gay," "you were probably abused as a child," "have

you had your hormones checked?"). One woman (Caucasian, in her late-twenties) described a dating encounter in which her date was convinced that he could "turn" her sexual. Two men in the group (in their mid-thirties and Caucasian) described the process of starting testosterone therapy and how it had no effect on them. One of these men—a tow truck driver—even revealed how he kept a condom embedded in his wallet, perhaps as a sign of masculinity, or perhaps to be prepared should he ever begin to feel sexual. Finally, another man (Asian, in his mid-twenties) discussed the numerous occasions in which his parents tried to influence him to marry and have children. He also lamented the fact that his friendship network was drying up as more and more of his friends entered sexual relationships and became distant. Hence, above all, sexual pressures weighed heavily on the group.

All of these examples from the first and second offline group meetings illustrate how the "practice" of asexuality in modern times is, in fact, 1) the discursive elaboration of *lacking* sexuality and 2) the process of learning how to cope with such lack in the context of highly sexualized modern Western society. As it seemed to me at our second meeting, our asexual group was actually quite comfortable and accustomed to discussing sexuality; the group indeed *relied upon* sexuality in order to speak and make sense of asexuality. In the absence of any apparent asexual practices and acts, speaking of (lacking) sexuality seemed to be the primary way in which the group "performed" and "experienced" asexuality. In fact, there were instances in the Sculpture Garden when our conversation became rowdy and I witnessed several parents scowling in our direction, clearly disapproving of our "sex talk." It was at that moment when I first began to realize that rather than having anything robust to say about the actual experience of asexuality

itself, I was obtaining much more data on sexuality and the extent of its purview. By describing asexuality through its relationship to sexuality, the Washington, DC asexual group was effectively telling me that sexuality is pervasive if not also compulsory. Through my ethnographic research, I began to recognize that I was at a loss for how to understand, articulate, or even identify any actual experiences of asexuality itself.

To further compound the problem of asexuality's reliance upon sexuality, I also began to witness at that time the newfound embrace of asexuality as a human sexual orientation. In other words, asexuality was not just an *absence* of sexual attraction but also increasingly a new *form* of sexual identity. This paradox—lack of sexuality as a form of sexuality—especially became apparent to me through my participation with the asexual contingent at San Francisco Pride in June 2009.[3] The inclusion of asexuality in the San Francisco Pride parade (for the first time ever in 2009) symbolized for many participants the inclusion of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation and identity—one that should be part of the LGBTQ, many group members thought. This notion of asexuality as a sexual orientation differed drastically from previous usages of the term. Prior to the modern asexuality movement (which emerged in 2001 via the creation of AVEN), "asexual" was a term often used to describe mentally and physically disabled persons (Anderson and Kitchin 2000, DiGiulo 2003, Kim 2011). Moreover, asexuality was often also used in the biological sense to describe the process of cell division of single-celled organisms such as amoebas (i.e. asexual reproduction).

With the establishment of AVEN and subsequent online and offline communities in the first decade of the twenty-first century, asexuality took on a completely new meaning. As the AVEN homepage has made clear since its inception, an asexual person

[3] Clips from this event can be seen in the 2011 documentary, (A)sexual.

is someone who does not experience sexual attraction, and this, according to the site, is different than celibacy, which people choose. To this effect, it became common knowledge amongst self-identified asexuals (who almost exclusively learned of asexuality via AVEN) that asexuality was not a choice but rather how one is born. The asexual community embraced the notion that asexuality is a biological orientation—a sexual orientation like any other—and this was intended by asexual community members to have the effect of legitimizing asexuality by making it intelligible to how most people conceive of sexuality.

On first glance, asexuality would seem to disrupt sexual identity by destabilizing the assumption that all people experience sexuality. Instead, however, the recent conversion of asexuality into sexual orientation has had the opposite effect of sexualizing asexuality and covering over this disruptive potential. The fact that asexuality has become a paradoxical "sexual" identity demonstrates very clearly how modern Western society is saturated with sexuality. Ultimately, I argue, this pervasiveness of sexuality does a disservice to asexuality and our capacity to recognize and represent asexual experience (except in sexual terms). My project therefore took a detour: to destabilize modern sexuality in order to open up new possibilities for asexuality.

**Methodology**

Because the methodology of genealogy is so central to the goal of this project (i.e. to destabilize sexuality in order to open a space for asexual experience), it would be beneficial to discuss this prior to a discussion of contributions. The interdisciplinary methodology of genealogy that I employ in this dissertation helps to situate this project as one of WGSS rather than anthropology, history, philosophy, or religious studies.

My project elucidates the necessity of a genealogical approach to the study of asexuality. I have argued that in order to avow the existence of more diverse experiences of asexuality, first one must destabilize sexuality. This is because the meaning and experience of asexuality today is contingent on sexuality. Any analysis that fails to consider asexuality's current reliance on sexuality risks reproducing a *sexual* knowledge of asexuality that covers over the paradoxical elements of asexuality's current construction.

I utilize the methodology of genealogy as defined by Michel Foucault in his 1971 essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Most appealing to me about genealogy is its historicization of elements of life that are assumed to be transhistorical and unchanging, such as sexuality, love, desire, instinct, and selfhood (see p. 369). Moreover, genealogy resists the compulsion to conceive of history as a teleological progression in which knowledge achieves its truest form in the present day (370). Whereas traditional history takes modern-day phenomena and attempts to find their existence and origin in the past, genealogy, by contrast, "record[s] the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality…[being] sensitive to their recurrence…[and] the different scenes where they engaged in different roles" (369). My rationale for conducting a genealogy of asexuality is rooted in my aspiration to interpret asexuality according to new rules, as part of an effort to dismantle ahistorical notions of sexual orientation, sex drive, and psychological interiority. Through this approach, I hope to render sexuality less hegemonic, thus opening a space for new perceptions of asexuality that no longer dismiss it as an absence of experience.

Let me elaborate on the kinds of sexual assumptions genealogy may help uproot. Genealogy helps distance my project from several paradoxical but purportedly axiomatic truths about sexuality: 1) the notion that *all* individuals—even asexual ones—possess sexual orientations that are relatively stable throughout the life course; 2) the idea that biological sex drive/desire is fundamental to all humans, even, when its expression is "low" or "lacking"; and 3) the presumption that asexuality was biologically present and "inside" us but merely latent prior to its explicit Internet-age emergence. These ahistorical assumptions prevent us from considering shifts and contingencies in the meaning, content, and production of (a)sexuality over time. By taking nothing as intrinsically fixed, genealogy, on the other hand, is an ideal combatant against the modern paradox of asexuality-as-sexuality; it encourages us to consider alternative meanings and plural origins and transformations of (a)sexuality over time. A genealogy of asexuality ultimately aims to destabilize modern sexuality by exposing its foundations as radically historically contingent. As such, genealogy is not merely a history but also a strategic story[4]—a critical, political, and ethical enterprise that attempts to install new counter-narratives to perturb the false ascription of unitary coherence to transhistorical notions

[4] My insinuation of a close connection between "history" and "story" is based on the fact that the French word for history—*histoire*—is also the word for story. The genealogist is not primarily interested in ultimate truth and factuality of knowledge but rather in seizing the rules of history and putting them to new use. This is not to say that genealogies are "alternative facts" that are totally fictional and devoid of reality. Rather, it is to suggest that there is an inherent ambiguity between recounting a history and telling a story. The genealogist intentionally plays around with this ambiguity. Stories can be written strategically in order to have greater impact on how we think. In other words, this is a predominantly conceptual and rhetorical (rather than empirical) project.

such as sexual identity and drive. In other words, genealogy endeavors to *seize the rules of interpretation* (see esp. 369, 378, 381). According to Foucault, "the successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules" through the task of reinterpretation (378).[5]

This project is not a history but rather a *conceptual retelling of history* in order to better understand asexuality while also challenging modern ahistorical thinking on sexuality and subjectivity. Overall, I contend that it is the recent paradoxical emergence of asexuality-as-sexuality that has inaugurated a recognition of a glitch in sexuality's coherence. The role of genealogy is not to cover over but rather to expose and expand this glitch as part of an effort to reinterpret sexuality. Through my reinterpretation I hope to defamiliarize—or render less coherent—sexuality as we know it today. Let me be clear that in no way should my project be interpreted as an attempt to uncover the "truth" of asexuality; this dissertation does not seek to make empirical claims about the past but rather utilizes historical narratives to a rhetorical effect. Indeed I do wish to have a better sense of what asexuality is and what it has meant at various points in time, but I am deploying this information as part of a larger effort to dissolve the coherence of sexuality, in order to make asexuality perceptible in new ways today. My duty is to reinterpret (a)sexuality *strategically* in order to increase the chances that knowledge of asexuality will defamiliarize rather than bolster sexuality.[6]

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[5] For instance, Foucault likens the genealogist to a doctor who utilizes the events of history as diagnostic tools to identify, expose, and treat foundational illnesses, such as the popular belief in the existence of transhistorical instincts or essential sexual orientations and desires (373).

[6] Ladelle McWhorter (1999) offers some guidelines on how to increase the chances of genealogy being effective: "Genealogy works, when it works, not by claiming to describe a view or a set of events different

With respect to methods and data, genealogy in the strictest Nietzschean-Foulcauldian sense is "patiently documentary" (Foucault 1971:369), requiring "a vast accumulation of source material" (370) often on "discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method" (Nietzsche cited in Foucault 1971:370). Genealogy endeavors to historicize even those sentiments assumed to be without history. As such, the genealogist must scrounge for material "in the most unpromising places" (369).[7] Moreover, genealogy is attentive to disparity, plural significations, and multiple origins; this means that accumulation of source material must be broad in scope. Genealogy deals with the specificity of fragments, which must be accumulated in vast amounts and from many sources in order to make sense of them as a whole. For instance,

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from the one the dominant discourse describes but rather by redescribing the *same* set of events that the dominant discourse describes and, more importantly, *in a way that undercuts the dominant description of them.* This happens either because it does a better job of describing those events in accordance with the justificatory standards…or because it demonstrates that the dominant discourse somehow violates its own standards in its description. Usually a genealogy does both these things" (42, emphasis in original).

[7] In this sense, genealogy may reasonably be likened to queer theory, which, according to Halberstam, employs a "scavenger" approach (1998:13). Both approaches necessitate a creative and idiosyncratic gathering of fragments of information on topics, groups, and individuals historically underrepresented or excluded from traditional knowledge production. Genealogical and queer scavenger approaches also resemble "heterographic writing," which, according to Scully (2010), "involves giving up a search for the 'whole subject'"—opting instead for a piecing together of multiple meanings and plural strands of knowledge from across time and space (32). Scully likens heterography to a cubist portrait: although a bigger picture may be delineated through the piecing together of individual elements, this does not "render an illusion of having 'captured' the entire subject" (33). Similarly, the genealogist pieces together narratives out of fragments and does so not to capture a subject in its totality but rather to produce an alternative narrative to strategically undercut hegemonic discourses.

Foucault's work relies on a broad selection and analysis of literary texts, works of art (such as paintings and drawings), philosophical discourses, and, most centrally, fragments of archived medical documents, police records, and legal reports. Most of his work is marked by dizzying and abrupt shifts in scope, ranging from literary musings on history and philosophy to—just a few pages later—precise explications of historically-specific medical techniques, forms of punishment, perceptions of the body, etc. Most certainly, portions of Nietzche's work also qualify as genealogical. Referring to Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, Wendy Brown (1995) describes Nietzsche's project as a "weave of etymological, demographic, literary, and historical fragments" (44). As such, genealogy resembles a methodological-conceptual decathlon in that one must know when and where to mix various methods and levels of analysis to find the data one needs and to put this data to strategic reinterpretive use.

Whereas Foucault's genealogies are primarily archival, this genealogy is one that has gone through a number of methods—only part of which was archival. This project started out in anthropology and later shifted gears into an archival stage; following that, I briefly experimented with autoethnography before settling on a religious-historical approach using predominantly secondary sources. Although most of my research prior to the final phase did not show up in this dissertation, it operates in the background and has informed my most recent decision to turn to the history of religion.

Within anthropology from 2009 to 2012, my research took on a somewhat genealogical approach, combining fragments of newspaper articles and television exposés on asexuality, notes from participant-observation (with groups in Washington, DC and San Francisco), analyses of online asexual discourses (including a survey on asexual

identity formation and perceptions of gender), and etymological searches on the history of the term "asexual." Upon identifying the problem of the asexual paradox and the issue of representing asexuality on its own terms, my project shifted gears and became much more historical and Foucauldian; this coincided with my decision to change fields—from anthropology to WGSS.

From 2013 to 2015 in WGSS I began to investigate a number of eighteenth through twentieth century forms of "asexuality" or themes related to asexuality. This included, for instance, some archival work via online databases on "asexualization" or eugenic sterilization of "mental defectives" and "onanists" in early twentieth century America. The theme of onanism led me as well to primary eighteenth century texts on the medical dangers of masturbation; such texts included the anonymously written *Onania: Or, the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* (1718) and primary writings by Dr. Samuel Auguste-Tissot, the leading authority on onanism in mid-eighteenth century France. Other research I conducted at this time also included a variety of primary and secondary sources on nineteenth century nervous illnesses such as hysteria and sexual neurasthenia; I particularly focused on the work Sigmund Freud, Jean-Martin Charcot and American physician George Miller Beard.

My readings on onanism—particularly historian Thomas Laqueur's *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (2003)—are what directed my attention to early modern Protestant critiques of the Catholic practice of celibacy; labeling clergy and monks as masturbators (who could only be celibate *because* they masturbated) functioned as a powerful way of discrediting the Catholic Church and its emphasis on sexual renunciation. This linkage between celibacy and masturbation piqued my curiosity and

launched my subsequent exploration (from 2015-2017) of the relationship between sexuality, asexuality, and Christianity across various points in time. I worked backwards from the Protestant Reformation and eventually ended up at late antiquity, which became the starting point for this dissertation (see Chapter One on late antique practices of sexual renunciation). Along the way, I also investigated monasticism and mysticism in addition to some brief forays into medieval canon law and writings on virginity.

My readings on ascetic practices of sexual and self-renunciation as well as my readings on mysticism also prompted me to conduct a brief month-long experimental autoethnography in which I attempted to live an ascetic/monastic lifestyle and in which I attempted to more fully understand early Christian mysticism and the means by which to cultivate mystical experiences. During this month I read religious texts, conducted research on monastic and mystical practices, and engaged in customs such as meditation, chastity, and fasting for several days at a time. Ultimately, I call this experiment a "botched autoethnography," as I learned that it is far too tough to follow the mystical path to God in such a short amount of time—especially in the absence of a monastic infrastructure that ensures strict adherence to religious rules. Although this autoethnography is not discussed in the following chapters, it has deeply informed the writing of Chapters Two and Four on medieval mysticism and conceptions of *eros*, respectively.

In accordance with my predilection for close reading, my method for this dissertation has been to gather a very broad scope of primary and secondary published sources—on late antique asceticism, medieval mysticism, and early modern demonic possession—and then boil them down to a handful of secondary histories that are most

exemplary at synthesizing most of these texts. In this way, my project differs from a strict Nietzschean-Foucauldian genealogy in that this project does not draw upon bits and pieces of archival fragments but rather a patchwork of histories, syntheses, and grand narratives. This seemed like a necessary move for a project of this (spatial and temporal) scope. This genealogy, in the name of telling a strategic narrative to destabilize modern conceptions of sexuality, has covered a very large range of time (from late antiquity to late modernity) and has focused broadly on "the West," jumping across various places in Europe. Likewise, it covers a range of denominations of Christianity rather than focusing on solely one. From a traditional historical standpoint, this project is thin on the kind of particularity and granular detail one would get from specific archival sources and a highly specified, localized time and place. I justify such an endeavor, however, by reminding the reader that this project is, first and foremost, a queer theoretical project that will use any possible thing in its arsenal to destabilize how we conceive of sexuality today. This is a history of the present, not a history of the past. The texts I have chosen for close reading are not intended to be used for making empirical claims or providing some enhancement of our perceptions of the past. Rather, each reading serves the strategic purpose of getting us to rethink modern sexuality as a product of historical contingencies.

**Contributions**

This project is placed within the interdisciplinary field of women's, gender, and sexuality studies; it draws on themes of sexuality, gender, disability, and religion. It takes up a combination of anthropological, historical, and philosophical approaches to the study of asexuality. With respect to its specific disciplinary and field-driven

contributions, this dissertation targets (a)sexuality and queer studies. It does so in four ways. Firstly, this project is rooted in the premise that sexuality, nowadays, is ubiquitous; this is a commonly held tenet within (a)sexuality studies (and WGSS more broadly) which a large body of literature supports. This dissertation agrees with this axiom of WGSS and seeks to build upon it by conducting a genealogy of asexuality with the goal of displacing sexuality from its central position in modern Western society. Secondly, this project seeks to challenge the normalization of sexuality within queer theory. By inserting asexuality into queer studies (without treating asexuality as a mere sexual object of analysis), this dissertation seeks to disrupt the more recent sedimentation of sexuality as the bedrock of queer theory. Thirdly, this project seeks to demonstrate the importance of religion for queer theory. Whereas religious studies borrows heavily from sexuality studies and queer theory, this dissertation works to show the queer potential of religion—particularly the history of religion (in this case, Christianity)—to destabilize queer theory's normalization of sexuality. The history of Christianity holds the capacity to challenge various taken for granted modern assumptions about sexuality, eroticism, and subjectivity, among other topics. Finally, each chapter of this dissertation targets the antisocial thesis of queer theory and works to demonstrate how asexuality contributes to our understanding of antisociality and the relationship between sexuality and sociality. Due to asexuality's oft-assumed connection to purity and notions of goodness, its potential historical linkages to antisociality have remained relatively unexplored by queer theorists.

Axiomatic: "Compulsory Sexuality" and the "Deployment of Sexuality"

This project starts with the commonly accepted tenet within WGSS—especially queer and (a)sexuality studies—that sexuality has become "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" in modern times (Foucault 1976:103). According to Foucault's argument, sexuality has functioned as a locus for the discipline of bodies and the regulation of populations in Western societies in the past two hundred years (145). It has become so discursively ubiquitous and so engrained in knowledge that it is now prerequisite to our capacity to recognize and be intelligible to ourselves (155-6). In other words, sexuality, according to most WGSS scholars, constitutes the basis of modern-day subjectivity.[8] Sexuality, Foucault argues (and WGSS scholars concur), constitutes the grid of our intelligibility; in other words, the modern episteme is a sexual one. This episteme, in turn, is a product of historical construction that has arisen in modern times via an "incitement to discourse" and increased attention to sexuality as an object of knowledge and control. This, in short, is the modern "deployment" or "*dispositif*" of sexuality that Foucault outlines in his *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976).

In turn, Foucault's argument is so well known within WGSS that it is now accepted as self-evident truth; it is the *raison d' être* for entire fields of humanities research such as queer and sexuality studies. As Lisa Downing (2013) states, Foucault's "insights regarding the techniques and technologies of knowledge by which persons came to be understood as 'types' of sexual subject, and sexuality to be constituted as the very secret at the heart of identity itself, have been indispensable for the epistemologies

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[8] On this point, historian and queer theorist Ladelle McWhorter (1999) explains it most eloquently: "There was no part of me that I could withhold from the *dispositif de sexualité*…There was no outside to the sexual identification system, no place for me to be a human being without any sexual identity at all…'from within' was the only possible location for resistance" (100).

shaping the critical humanities perspectives on sex and bodies in the present (527). As such, this dissertation takes it to be a general and incontrovertible truth that a majority of WGSS scholars hold Foucault's views on sexuality to be axiomatic. My previous findings from my ethnographic research (e.g. the asexual paradox) also corroborate this commonly held belief of WGSS.

Likewise, a number of asexuality studies scholars now employ a number of analytical frameworks to identify and account for the prevalence of sexuality in modern society: sexual normativity (Chasin 2011a), compulsory sexuality (Chasin 2011b, Gupta 2013), sex-normative culture (Cerankowski and Milks 2011), sexusociety (Przybylo 2011), and the sexual assumption (Carrigan 2011). All of these terms used to describe the current centrality of sexuality allude to Adrienne Rich's essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) as well as later notions by Judith Butler (1990) and Michael Warner (1993) of "the heterosexual matrix" and "heteronormativity," respectively. To this effect, via an amalgamation of Foucault's "incitement to discourse" and Rich's identification of compulsory systems, Downing (2013) argues: by "using Rich's terminology, we might analogously describe the sex logorrhea and over-exposure of postmodernity, one local and situated articulation of which is 'sexualization of culture,' as 'compulsory sexuality'" (529). WGSS scholar Kristina Gupta (2013) concisely defines compulsory sexuality as that which "describe[s] the fact that contemporary sexual norms may compel people to identify as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity, and to describe the fact that various forms of non-sexuality (such as lack of sexual desire and/or behavior) may be marginalized" (8).

Although such critiques of compulsory sexuality and sexual normativity are now becoming much more common in asexuality studies, a significant segment of asexuality—namely sexological and psychological studies—run contrary to this line of reasoning. In treating asexuality as a form of sexuality or as a tool through which scientists can better understand sexuality, these sorts of asexuality studies publications ironically reinforce sexual normativity and the deployment of sexuality. As Anthony Bogaert (an often cited scholar in the fields of sexology and asexuality studies) argues, "asexuality offers us a unique opportunity to look at sexuality through a new lens, affording perhaps a clearer (or at least new) view of what sex is and what it is not" (2012:6). In addition to Bogaert's work on asexuality, a number of other sexologists have also worked to categorize asexuality as valid sexual orientation. With the exception of recent investigations of asexuality and its possible connections to various paraphilias (see Brotto and Yule 2016), sexological research has typically argued against the categorization of asexuality as a pathology or sexual arousal disorder (see Brotto and Yule 2011, Bogaert 2012); instead, these researchers call for an acceptance of asexuality as a sexual orientation. These studies, although likely intended to offer legitimacy to asexuality via scientific "proof," ultimately illustrate the deployment of sexuality in action, as well as the compulsion to attribute a sexual identity to each and every person. Missing from these publications is any consideration of the paradox of *lack* of sexual attraction as a *form* of sexuality. By assuming sexual orientation to be universal, these studies have covered over the paradoxical elements of asexuality's current construction.

This dissertation sides with WGSS and asexuality studies scholarship on the deployment of sexuality and compulsory sexuality (as opposed to the sexological

scholarship on asexuality as sexual identity). Beyond merely observing the existence of compulsory sexuality, however, this dissertation seeks, in the vein of Przybylo's (2011) and Gupta's (2013) work, to also explore potential ways of resisting modern sexualization. Whereas this dissertation employs a genealogical approach, other strategies exist as well. Przybylo (2011) utilizes a Butlerian frame to come up with the notion of sexual performativity; as Przybylo argues, one can potentially destabilize sexual identity by "doing" it or "repeating" it differently in such a way that it exposes sexuality as constructed rather than natural. Gupta (2013), on the other hand, conducts interviews with self-identified asexual individuals across the United States and demonstrates the various ways in which asexuals negotiate and resist sexual norms. This dissertation contributes to this area of asexuality studies that seeks to develop concrete strategies to disrupt modern sexuality.

The Normalization of Sexuality in Queer Theory

My project is an attempt to "queer" or destabilize queer studies by pushing back against its recent institutionalization.[9] The institutionalization of queer theory is clearly evidenced by a growing number of queer studies introductory texts and readers that establish a list of canonical queer thinkers (see esp. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin 1993; Jagose 1996; Hall and Jagose 2012). These texts encourage a standardization of queer

[9] In his essay "The Normalization of Queer Theory," David Halperin (2003) also takes issue with the recent de-queering of queer theory. Halperin protests mainstream liberal academic appropriations of queer theory at the expense of radical queer politics. He charges the academy with "abstracting 'queer' and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of 'liberal'" (341). In turn, Halperin wishes to renew queer theory's "magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities" (339).

theory and posit certain thinkers' ideas as axiomatic, if not also sacred (e.g. Freud, Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick, Rubin, and sometimes also Halberstam, Bersani, Muñoz, Edelman, Puar, Berlant, and Warner). However, what I protest more than this standardization of queer theory is the discipline's (seemingly permanent) installation of sexuality as its core object of analysis.[10] I find it ironic that a discipline that perpetually critiques norms nevertheless retains sexuality as the one foundation to license most of its critiques.[11] I also take issue with the reduction of queer politics to "antinormativity," or

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[10] As Michael Warner (1993) confirms, traditionally "the energies of queer studies have come more from rethinking the subjective meaning of sexuality than from rethinking the social" (x). A relatively recent retrospective titled "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" (Eng with Halberstam and Muñoz 2005) poses a critique similar to mine and ultimately calls for "a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is *intersectional*, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent" (1, emphasis in original). The authors of this reflection aim to resituate sexuality as one among many potential axes of difference. This challenges Sedgwick's (1990) argument that "sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know" (3). What I find most beneficial about this rethinking of queer studies is the notion of queer as fluid and devoid of a fixed referent. Yet, arguably, the article avoids the issue Foucault poses about modern-day subjectivity being expressly *sexual* subjectivity (so that sexuality pervades each of the identities of the intersectional subject).

[11] Interestingly, Catharine MacKinnon's "Sexuality" (1989)—often missing from the queer family tree—comes closest to an outright critique of sexuality itself: "What sex[uality] is—how it comes to be attached and attributed to what it is, embodied and practiced as it is, contextualized in the ways it is, signifying and referring to what it does—is taken as a baseline, a given…It is as if the 'erotic,' for example, can be taken as having an understood referent, although it is never defined, except to imply that it is universal yet individual…essentially indefinable yet overwhelmingly positive. 'Desire,' the vicissitudes of which are endlessly extolled…is not seen as fundamentally problematic or as calling for explanation" (129-30).

the practice of exposing and opposing norms. The queer studies notion of the "norm" is vastly overused yet surprisingly imprecise in its tendency to be conflated with "law." Moreover the notion of antinormativity has acquired an ironic normative status of its own (see Huffer 2013:29-30).

The goal of this project, then, is to pull the sexual rug out from underneath queer studies, and the one way I believe this is most possible is by conducting a queer theoretical project that sets its eyes on destabilizing sexuality itself. Likewise, this project seeks to demonstrate a way in which it may also be possible to conduct a study of asexuality that resists conceiving of it merely as a new addition to "benign sexual variation" (Rubin 1984). Hence, this dissertation has the tandem purpose of working to destabilize sexuality while better understanding asexuality (in a way that does not reduce it to a function of sexuality).

To this effect, this dissertation starts with the problem of sexual saturation today—the modern ahistorical assumption that sexuality is universal and *inside* us all—and works to treat this modern ailment via a strategic historical reconceptualization that enables us to think of sexuality, today, in a different light. In other words, this project is a genealogy. It conducts a history of asexuality, which, through demonstrating alternative varieties of asexuality, challenges the modern conceptualization of asexuality as a sexual identity. It also demonstrates alternative modes of subjectivity that challenge the modern notion of sexuality as psychological interiority.

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Unfortunately MacKinnon's own attempt to elucidate the content of these terms falls flat as she attributes sole causality to the eroticization of male dominance over women within an overarching heterosexual frame. Despite her claim that sexuality is socially constructed, her totalizing structuralist theory bars her from exploring the many other mechanisms involved in the formation of sexuality.

This genealogical project is a queer one because it sets sights on disorienting sexuality from being the cornerstone of queer theory. For instance, although queer critiques of heteronormativity are beneficial in their own right, they seem to miss the larger point that sexuality—and not just heterosexuality—is hegemonic.[12] Likewise, sexuality, to cite Foucault (1976), is not merely a norm but rather the epistemic grounding of modern subjectivity. As such, queer studies' traditional methods for dismantling norms (e.g. performativity; deployment of sexual diversity and deviancy; pluralization of sexual practices and desires; utopic yearnings for a better sexual future; and *jouissance*, the death drive, and risky self-shattering sex) do not lend themselves well to the queering of sexuality writ large. Despite their disagreements, these methods are all in different ways effective at countering heteronormativity (and sometimes also homonormativity); nevertheless, they recycle back into sexuality—either by performing

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[12] Critiques of heteronormativity are so pervasive within sexuality and queer studies that one may now reasonably argue that queer studies is mostly synonymous with "anti-heteronormativity." Canonical critiques of heteronormativity include Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (1980), Monique Wittig's "The Straight Mind" and "the heterosexual contract" (1992), Judith Butler's "the heterosexual matrix" (1990), and Lee Edelman's critique of "reproductive futurism" (2004). More recently, but to a lesser extent, queer studies scholars have also attempted to identify and expose "homonormativity" (Duggan 2003) and "homonationalism" (Puar 2007). These authors are critical of mainstream forms of American and Western homosexuality that align with heterosexual and nationalist values, thus marginalizing queer sexual minorities and displacing the term "queer" onto enemies of the state (e.g. "terrorist fags"). (Stryker 2008 provides a nice history of "homonormativity" in the winter 2008 homonormativity-themed issue of *Radical History Review*; see also the editors' introduction.) Oddly, the notion of sexual normativity ("compulsory sexuality") remained unconsidered until the early 2010s (on this topic, see Gupta 2013).

or parodying sexuality in alternative ways (Butler 1990), pluralizing sexual desires and practices (Hocquenghem 1972, Rubin 1984),[13] extending sexuality into the future (Muñoz 2009), or grounding it in the psychoanalytic sexual drive and the negativity of sexual abandon (Bersani 1987, Edelman 2004, Dean 2009).[14]

What is required, instead, is a project that works to undo the deployment of sexuality itself. My genealogy of asexuality seeks not to deploy various sexualities in order to counter norms of hetero- and homosexuality but rather to *defamiliarize the deployment of sexuality itself* via an alternative historical narration of asexuality and its relationship to different historical notions of sexuality and subjectivity. A central question of this dissertation is: Might this project's attempt to defamiliarize or displace sexuality from its central position in modern Western society open new pathways for how we conceive of and experience asexuality today? Although this project cannot rightfully predict where such pathways may lead, it does at least point to several weak spots in modern conceptions of sexuality through which new possibilities for asexuality may potentially someday emerge.

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[13] For instance, Rubin (1984) deploys the concept of "benign sexual variation" as part of her goal to achieve a "pluralistic sexual ethics" (154). Here the logic is that knowledge of diverse sexual communities, desires, and practices should be the foundation of a politics of sexuality whose aim should be to counteract sexual oppression. What remains undertheorized, however, are the potential ways that increased knowledge and discourse of sexuality may fold back into the deployment of sexuality in potentially dangerous or unforeseen ways.

[14] Antisocial queer theorists rely almost exclusively on psychoanalytic frameworks. Musings on sexuality's flirtation with death and dissolution are rooted in concepts of sexual drive and desire. The logical impossibility of asexuality is symptomatic of psychoanalytic theory and its reliance on drive.

Queer Theory and Religion

According to religious and sexuality studies scholar Mark Jordan, "queer theorists have trouble paying enough attention to queer religion—especially if the religion is Christian and the theorists Anglo-American" (2007:563). Christianity has long been queer theory's nemesis. With apparent ties to heteronormativity, traditional family values, and extreme American nationalism, Christianity gets a bad rap today. Consequently, "antireligious models…have governed so many strategies of queer activism from the late 1960s on" (563). "The church is the enemy" has become a mantra common among queer activists (563). In America over the past few decades, Christianity has remained a stronghold for anti-queer sentimentality. Through significant political leverage, right-wing religious organizations have perpetuated sexual stigma and hindered access to health care and civic rights for queer individuals. These notorious Christians tell us marriage is only between a man and woman. They associate alternative sexualities with sin and even disease and death. They tell us to "focus on the family" and that our future—the future of (and *for*) our children—is put in jeopardy by queer beliefs and practices. Christianity, therefore, is a topic that many queer theorists today avoid. When Christianity is addressed by queer theory, it is often an object of critique rather than an object of *study* through which queer theory itself could be transformed.

Mark Jordan takes issue with queer theory's avoidance of religion (especially Christianity) because there exists a "ubiquity of religious discourse about sexuality" across history and because many "tropes of religious rhetoric" have actually slipped into queer theory unannounced (564). As Jordan mentions, before the establishment of sexuality studies or even sexology, the Church had long been a domain where sexuality

was commonly, thoroughly discussed. Moreover, since the late 1990s, queer theoretical and methodological approaches to scholarship have also seeped into religious studies of various kinds: queer religious studies, the sociology/anthropology of sexuality and religion, and queer theology. However, while religious studies scholars benefit extensively from knowledge of sexuality, queer scholars, on the other hand, remain turned off to religion:

> The ubiquity of religious discourse about sexuality makes its relative absence in queer theory all the more puzzling. There seems to be some trouble here… Trouble comes because queer theory means to occupy territory long held by religion, but also because it wants to deploy all-too-familiar habits of religious diagnosis and tropes of religious rhetoric. If 'Saint = Foucault,' could it be that queer theory = theology? (Jordan 2007:564)

It appears that the modern deployment of sexuality, which, according to Foucault, started with the Christian confessional centuries ago, continues, veiled, in the form of a secular queer studies that denies and opposes its religious heritage while nevertheless carrying on the torch through extensive, hallowed talk about sexuality. Recognizing how Christianity and sexuality/queer studies are both complicit in the "discursive deployment of sexuality" is the first step toward realizing the crucial role that Christianity has played in shaping how we perceive of sexuality today. To this effect, Jordan continues:

> Long before *History of Sexuality, Volume 1,* Foucault suggested, in praise of Georges Bataille, that discourse on sexuality had been shaped to fit a space left by the death of God. 'Sexuality is not decisive for our culture

> except as spoken and to the extent that it is spoken. Our language has been eroticized for the last two centuries: our sexuality, since Sade and the death of god, has been absorbed by the universe of language…' It is not a long step from this suggestion to the suspicion that the speech of sexuality, at least in the cultures of a former Christendom, satisfies longings once elicited and addressed by Christian theology. (563-4, ellipsis added)

Phrased more simply, then, the discourse of modern sexuality has picked up where Christianity left off. Likewise, sexuality studies has taken over where Christian theology left off. As such, following Jordan (2007), this dissertation argues that we need to better examine our Christian past in order to more thoroughly understand how and why sexuality *and* sexuality studies is how it is today.

Asexuality and Antisociality

This dissertation began with the suspicion that asexuality has deep-seated historical ties to antisociality—namely, because of its strong pre-modern connections to Christian sexual renunciation, social withdrawal, and self-renunciation, as well as its strong late modern connections to medical pathology. To this effect, this dissertation began with the question: is asexuality to antisociality as sexuality is to sociality? And, if so, why has asexuality remained undertheorized within antisocial and negative strands of queer theory? To this effect, each chapter of this dissertation engages with queer theory's antisocial thesis. Chapter One explores late antique sexual renunciation and how it disrupted the social functioning of the Roman Empire. Chapter Two demonstrates medieval apophatic mystical theology's status as a desubjectivating queer art of failure. Chapter Three, on the other hand, shows how asexuality within certain heterodox strands

of early modern mysticism became sexualized and denigrated due to having challenged Church authority. Finally, Chapter Four traces the formation of the modern sexual episteme and demonstrates how asexuality had to become part of the social (i.e. sexuality) in order to become intelligible. All of these chapters as a whole make a case for the need for further research on the relationship between asexuality and antisociality as well as the relationship between sexuality and sociality at different historical moments.

The antisocial thesis in queer theory, which was first introduced by means of Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), embraces antisociality, negativity, antirelationality, and death as a queer means of destabilizing "projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation" that exclude and are often detrimental to queer individuals (Halberstam 2008:140). In accordance with psychoanalysis—especially Freudian psychoanalysis for Bersani and Lacanian psychoanalysis for Lee Edelman and Tim Dean—antisocial queer theorists commonly draw upon the connections between pleasure and death. Rather than conceiving of sexuality as "a life-force connecting pleasure to life, survival and futurity," antisocial theorists often argue that "sex, and particularly homo-sex and receptive sex, is a death drive that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution" (Halberstam 2008:140). Antisocial queer theorists ask, *what happens when we let pleasure get the best of us, when we no longer subordinate it to cultural norms but rather pursue it, selfishly, as far as it can go?* The answer, as it would seem, is that the individual is taken to the very far edges of pleasure and, in a brush with death, experiences a total loss of self-mastery. And this "antisocial" desubjectivation holds the capacity to disrupt society by refusing life-oriented social projects that are couched in idealistic notions of the

innocent child (Berlant 2007, Edelman 2004), "the good," and "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004). In other words, the antisocial thesis commonly challenges idealism, futurism, and utopianism and instead faces the facts of death and failure that queer individuals so often already represent—especially during the AIDS crisis during which Bersani (1987) was writing.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates different ways in which pre-modern (as well as some early and late modern) Christian practices of "asexuality" have contributed to the disruption of sociality and the self. As Chapter One demonstrates, antisocial queer theory's common reliance on psychoanalytic notions of "sex drive" does nothing to challenge or question the modern-day assumption that sexuality is universal and intrinsically rooted inside us all. As such, antisocial queer theory of a psychoanalytic bent ends up excluding the possibility that asexuality, too, could potentially contribute to conceptualizations of queer antisociality. Chapter One seeks to mend this problem by demonstrating how practices of sexual renunciation during late antiquity vastly disrupted the social reproduction of the Roman Empire.

Chapter Two seeks to dismantle the modern presumption that Christianity is antithetical to the antisocial thesis because of its idealistic notions of heaven and the afterlife. To the contrary, Chapter Two shows how within medieval mystical theology—more specifically, within a particular strand of mysticism known as "apophatic" or "negative" mystical theology—union with God was tied to desubjectivation and utter dissolution of the self. Chastity was an indispensable part of this desubjectivation. Overall, this chapter discusses the medieval mystical *impossibility* of experiencing the

divine and utilizes Judith/Jack Halberstam's[15] notion of the queer art of failure in order to demonstrate apophatic mystical theology's utility to antisocial queer theory.

Chapter Three engages with antisociality namely by demonstrating how certain mystical practices (which included sexual renunciation) came to be perceived as antithetical to Church values during early modern times. Consequently, accusations of sexual impropriety and demonic possession were used to discount such practices. This chapter is, in other words, about the sexualization of asexuality due to its connection to certain purportedly antisocial spiritual practices. As this chapter argues, this eventually led to the pathologization of asexuality during late modern times.

Finally, Chapter Four explores the late modern notion of the "death of God" and explains how modern sexual subjectivity was born out of it, according to Foucault. Through a discussion of Foucault's "Preface to Transgression" (1963), this chapter tells a story of how sexual language and exploration of our deepest sexual desires became the way of trying to overcome the spiritual limits that occurred upon the death of God. In the absence of God's limitlessness, Foucault argues, sexuality came to fill us up as psychological interiority (i.e. our own internal limits); it foreclosed the possibility of there being an "outside" of sexuality. In other words, this chapter historicizes (through one very specific interpretation by Foucault) how sexuality became "the social"; it discusses, as well, how asexuality had to become part of sexual orientation and identity in order to remain intelligible. In this way, I argue, asexuality lost much of its antisocial edge.

**Chapter Outline**

To reiterate, this dissertation aims to destabilize modern ahistorical conceptions of

[15] Hereafter, I will refer only to Jack Halberstam and will utilize solely male gender pronouns (he, his).

sexuality in order to loosen the hold that sexuality currently has on asexuality. I have argued that the centrality of sexuality in modern Western society puts constraints on how asexuality can be perceived, experienced, and expressed today. Therefore, challenging sexuality's grasp is crucial to make way for new possibilities for asexual experience. Overall, this is a queer genealogical project that uses a variety of Christian historical perceptions of asexuality to challenge modern thinking on sexuality and subjectivity. In doing so, the project also aims to challenge the normalization of sexuality within queer theory and to show the potential utility of using a history of religion approach to make interventions in queer theory. Finally, this project investigates a number of deep historical connections between asexuality and antisociality, which each chapter will address. Unlike a traditional history, this genealogy conducts a close explication of a number of select texts, which are used not for their empirical value but rather their rhetorical potential. This dissertation seeks to show how inclusion of these texts, which are presently not included among queer theory's go-to sources, hold the capacity to transform how the field conceives of Christianity, sexuality, and subjectivity—namely, by showing another side to sexuality other than the modern "deployment" and its emphasis on identity and norms. Because Foucault is one of the most foundational thinkers in queer theory, and, because his argument concerning the modern "deployment of sexuality" is accepted by most WGSS scholars as self-evident truth, this dissertation focuses on the work of Foucault in several chapters. I offset queer theory's emphasis on *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976) and the modern deployment of sexuality, however, by explicating several other texts by Foucault on pre-modern Christianity and its radically different perceptions of sex and subjectivity that stand in contrast to sexuality as we know

it today.

There are three goals to each chapter. Each chapter starts with a phrase to the effect of "this chapter tells the story of X." As such, each chapter is a strategic narrative with the goal of using our Christian past to get us to reconsider modern taken for granted assumptions about sexuality and asexuality. Secondly, each chapter seeks to depict alternative forms, conceptions, and/or scenarios of "asexuality" across time. Generally speaking, each chapter covers some version of sexual renunciation, such as ascetic sexual renunciation and mystical self-dissolution. Finally, each chapter addresses the topic of sociality/antisociality and works to demonstrate the utility of pre- and early modern Christian versions of "asexuality" for rethinking queer theory's antisocial thesis.[16] I provide a brief outline of each chapter below.

Chapter One

[16] I use "asexuality" in quotes here and in various places throughout the dissertation in order to remind the reader that I am not seeking to take modern asexuality as the "default." I do not seek to comb through history in order to identify the presence of the selfsame asexuality in the past. Rather, the various practices and forms of sexual and self-renunciation upon which I focus are intended to *relate* to modern asexuality, but under radically different historical circumstances that are completely severed from our present-day episteme. I also attempt to remind the reader in various places of this alterity of the past by referring to "asexuality *as* X" or "asexuality *in the form of* X" (e.g. asexuality as ascetic self-renunciation, or asexuality in the form of mystical desubjectivation). Likewise, this dissertation does not seek or intend to universalize queerness by identifying it in various places in the past. Indeed there are times when, in Chapter One for instance, I refer to Christianity as a queer fledgling religion and I demonstrate how practices of sexual renunciation disrupted society. I do not seek, however, to apply the notion of "norms" to the past (which are an expressly modern phenomenon); I try to utilize "queer," when I do use it, as a verb—as the process of destabilizing or disrupting society, the self, and so on within different historical/cultural contexts.

Chapter One goes back to the ancient Greeks and Greco-Romans and demonstrates how perceptions of sexuality became increasingly austere. In ancient times, sexuality was perceived as something needing to be constrained due to its excessive nature. Greek and Roman men therefore worked to achieve mastery over their sexual desires, and this became part of an ethical framework of self-cultivation or asceticism. I explain how the ancient model of subjectivity as transformative self-fashioning challenges our modern assumptions about sexuality and subjectivity as being intrinsically internal and psychological (rather than practice-based).

The second part of the chapter then explains how early Christians of late antiquity inherited this ascetic outlook on sexuality and raised the stakes by renouncing sexuality altogether. Christians democratized practices of sexual restraint by making them part of a model of self-cultivation that men and women alike, from any socioeconomic background, could practice. The chapter explains how early Christians' practice of opting out of sexuality severely disrupted population rates in the Roman Empire and challenged cultural expectations surrounding family and civic life. Consequently, early Christian sexual renunciation came to be perceived as subversive and antisocial; many early Christians were executed because of it. The chapter concludes by discussing how early Christian antisocial "asexuality" may contribute to queer theory's antisocial thesis.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two explores the topic of medieval apophatic mystical theology—in other words, "that speech about God, which is the failure of speech" (Turner 1995b:20). In contrast to our modern-day assumption that medieval mystics "experienced" remarkable supernatural, esoteric encounters with God, this chapter demonstrates how

medieval apophatic theology, otherwise known as "negative theology," actually highlighted the *impossibility* of ever experiencing God in full. Rather, one could only unite with God by hitting the limits of the human capacity (in other words, *failing*) to experience, articulate, and conceive of the limitlessness of divinity; and this brush with the limits of the human capacity generated desubjectivation. One could only unite with God through disarrangement of the self, and, for this reason, apophatic mystical theology was commonly regarded as a "Christian theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found" (Turner 1995b:8, emphasis in original). As this chapter will argue, asexuality in the form of chastity was the most crucial practice—a prerequisite—for renouncing the self and thus coming closer to uniting (unknowingly) with God. The chapter will conclude by discussing how medieval apophatic mystics' embrace of disarrangement and failure constituted a historically specific pre-modern Christian version of what Jack Halberstam (2011) calls "the queer art of failure." Chapter Two demonstrates historical linkages between asexuality and desubjectivation that ultimately challenge the modern notion of asexuality as a form of sexual subjectivity.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three somewhat counterintuitively explores the sexualization of asexuality via the mechanisms of early modern demonic possession and late modern hysteria. This chapter aims to challenge our thinking on sexuality by demonstrating how many of our modern conceptualizations of sexuality actually derive from early modern Christianity—namely, its emphasis on confession and its articulation of "the flesh" as the constant internal movement of desires, sensations, and feelings within the body. The

chapter also seeks to demonstrate how asexuality first became part of sexuality via linkages to demonic possession in early modernity followed by subsequent associations with nervous illnesses of a sexual etiology during late modernity.

The chapter starts out by demonstrating shifts in the landscape of mysticism. Here I show how mysticism was democratized during the early modern period and became much easier for men and women—including laity of any social and economic background—to practice and achieve access to God without the help of the Church. By cutting out the Church, practitioners of the new mysticism came to be regarded by clergy as dangerous and insufficiently qualified to practice mysticism. Consequently, their claims to divine access to God came to be questioned and were ultimately disparaged through accusations of demonic possession. The most popular way of disparaging these "antisocial," heterodox mystical practices, this chapter argues, was by stereotyping them as feminine and therefore weak and prone to demonic possession and sexual promiscuity. Asexuality in the form of sexual renunciation got worked up in these accusations of demonic possession and sexual impropriety (specifically among women who practiced heterodox forms of mysticism) because it was one of the most central ascetic practices along the mystical path to God; sexual renunciation, as practiced by unskilled mystics, came to be perceived as rendering the soul vulnerable to demonic forces.

The second half of the chapter explores how demonic possession and its foremost symptom of convulsion eventually found their way into late modern medical science on nervous illness. This section highlights the rise of the Christian confessional and the notion of "the flesh" as the internal circulation of desires and feelings within the body. This section hypothesizes that compulsory chastity and compulsory confession (of

internal sensations and desires) may have produced internal conflict (namely within female mystics and nuns) that likewise manifested as demonic possession and convulsion. The chapter charts how late modern medicine began its construction of "sexuality" by first drawing upon early modern Christian perceptions of the flesh, concupiscence, and the body. The chapter speculates that asexuality, by means of demonic possession, may have found itself incorporated into nervous sexual illness—especially hysteria—by the late modern period. This chapter engages with antisociality by revealing how purportedly "antisocial" and heterodox mystical practices first became responsible for asexuality's sexualization and subsequent pathologization.

Chapter Four

If Chapter Three demonstrates how asexuality first became sexualized due to its antisocial associations with demonic possession, this chapter, by contrast, explores the late modern "death of God" and how, according to Foucault, it foreclosed the possibility of there being such a thing as an "outside" to sexuality. In other words, this chapter explains how sexuality became the social and how asexuality, in turn, had to become part of it in order to remain intelligible. This chapter, in other words, is about how asexuality lost a great deal of its antisocial potential by becoming part of sexual identity.

Through Foucault's "Preface to Transgression" essay (1963), this chapter tells one specific narrative of how increased incitement to discourse about sexuality and increased exploration of our sexual desires became the core means of attempting to overcome the spiritual limitations that arose upon the death of God's limitlessness during the Age of Reason. In an age of positivism, we no longer believe in the limitlessness of God but rather in limited rationality. As such, rather than dissolving into the

limitlessness of God, today we can only attempt to overcome our limitations, and this occurs most often, according to Foucault, by taking sexuality to the extreme. In the absence of limitlessness, however, such exploration of sexuality (which is perhaps the modern analogue to pre-modern spirituality) can only take us to the limits of ourselves, thus constituting the extent of our psychological interiority. In other words, this chapter historicizes the conditions of the emergence of modern psychological subjectivity and its association with sexuality. By revealing this history, I hope to induce in the reader a skepticism toward the ubiquity of sexuality so that we may no longer take the inherency of sexual orientation and identity for granted. This chapter, being a close reading of only one essay by Foucault, presents this "history" not as fact but rather as a rhetorical tool for inducing such skepticism in the reader.

## Chapter One: Antisocial Asexuality: Politics of Christian Sexual Renunciation in Late Antiquity

Is asexuality to antisociality as sexuality is to sociality? This chapter tells the story of a queer fledgling religion, early Christianity, which initially endured overwhelming persecution due to its seemingly antisocial withdrawal from and opposition to mainstream social mores. More specifically, the chapter homes in on asexuality (in the form of sexual renunciation) as the central "antisocial" religious practice that gave early Christians leverage to resist Roman societal norms surrounding family life, civic responsibility, and reproduction. In what follows, I explain why sexuality became suspect to early Christians and discuss how asexuality emerged, consequently, as a disruptive political force to be reckoned with during the first few centuries A.D. In turn, this chapter will demonstrate how such antisocial religious practices, carried out through sexual renunciation, demonstrated at that time the *queer potential* of asexuality and Christianity to challenge the demands of mainstream sociality. The existence of this historically specific model of antisociality, which is uniquely asexual and disruptive of sexuality, demonstrates why queer theorists should pay more attention to the history of asexuality, Christianity and their linkages.

To this effect, the first section, "The Care of the Self," goes back to the ancient Greeks and Greco-Romans and historicizes how treatment of sexuality became increasingly more austere as time went on. Leading up to early Christianity, this section demonstrates how, by late antiquity, sexuality came to be associated with danger and evil; consequently, many early Christians took ascetic practices of sexual austerity to the extreme—renouncing sexuality altogether. The second section, "Christianity, Asexuality,

Antisociality," continues along this trajectory by demonstrating how early Christian practices of sexual renunciation severely disrupted the civic, social, and biological reproduction of the Roman Empire during late antiquity. Consequently, early Christians were regarded as antisocial, subversive, and noncompliant in a way that mirrors the objectives of modern antisocial strands of queer theory. The section concludes with an intervention into queer theory by demonstrating the capacity of religion and asexuality (at certain historical and cultural moments) to challenge the dominant social order in a manner compatible with the goals of the antisocial thesis.

In sum, by exploring asexuality in the context of late antique Christianity, the chapter demonstrates alternative historical perceptions of sexuality and asexuality (as practices to be stylized, mastered, and renounced) that destabilize modern perceptions of sexuality (as timeless, universal, and biologically inherent). In the process, the chapter pinpoints a historically specific kinship between asexuality and antisociality that contributes to modern antisocial strands of queer theory.

**The Care of the Self**

In order to understand why asexuality was popularized during late antiquity in the form of sexual renunciation, it is necessary to look back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. First, one must explore: 1) how sexuality became problematized in the first place; 2) how this occurred in a way that made sexuality (and pleasure more broadly) an *ethical* problem; and 3) how ancient Greco-Roman ethical behavior increasingly favored moderation and austerity—not in a prohibitive, repressive sense but rather as a form of self-mastery over one's pleasures (i.e. care of self or *epimeleia heautou*). To do so, I conduct an explication of philosopher Michel Foucault's Volumes Two and Three of the

*History of Sexuality* series (1985, 1986). Here my primary goal is to demonstrate how a historically specific mode of individuation—"care of the self," "arts of existence," "asceticism"—"traversed and permeated ancient philosophy up to the threshold of Christianity" (Foucault 2005:10). I argue that this historically specific perception of "self"—"self as self-cultivation…produced by recursive, ascetic practices of self-care" (Huffer 2014:444)—demonstrates a radically different relationship between sexuality and subjectivity that helps us rethink our modern assumptions about the supposed inherency and primacy of sexual identity. More specifically, whereas modern subjectivity privileges knowing oneself—that is, having a coherent, internal sense of self-certainty or stable identity—ancient Greek asceticism presents subjectivity as an ongoing practice self-fashioning, through which one is transformed and acquires spiritual truth.[17] This is significant because modern subjectivity, which is, in part, rooted in "the psychological self as personality with interiority or depth," regards sexuality as the internal, stable truth of who we are—an identity or orientation already "inside" us, waiting to be discovered—whereas ancient Greeks and Romans took up sexuality as an "aesthetic material" to be stylized and refashioned in a way that actually *transforms* us (Huffer 2014:444).

It is precisely this alterity of the past—this non-identitarian, practice-based way of thinking about sexuality in ancient times—that exposes our modern, ahistorical perceptions of sexuality as *actually* radically historically contingent and therefore capable of being challenged. To this effect, it is by focusing specifically on Christian asceticism

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[17] According to Foucault, this self-transformation, carried out through ascetic practices of self-care, is a necessary precondition for access to spiritual truth "that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his very being" (Foucault 2005:15-16).

and practices of sexual renunciation in late antiquity that we can begin to recognize how early Christians perceived of sexuality in radically different ways—namely, as non-identitarian, non-universal, and capable of being overcome through deep ascetic work on body and soul. Here asexuality was regarded not merely as a *lack* of sexuality but rather as a self-transformative practice of renunciation that gave early Christians access to the *presence* of divine spiritual truths. Clearly these radically different perceptions of sexuality directly challenge our modern assumptions about how sexuality is constituted today as biologically inherent, universal, and central to personal identity (for more on the structuration of modern sexuality, see Chapter Four).

First I will discuss how sexuality became a central ethical concern during classical antiquity. Following this, I will discuss the importance of sexual austerity and moderation to the ancient Greeks and how it played into their concept of asceticism. Subsequently, I will trace how treatment of sexuality became increasingly more austere—eventually coming to be associated with danger and evil by the start of late antiquity. It is under these conditions that early Christian sexual renunciation emerged.

Sexuality as an Ethical Problem

To "speak of 'sexuality' as a historically singular experience," according to Foucault, one must analyze "the peculiar characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that constitute it: (1) the formation of sciences (*savoirs*) that refer to it, (2) the systems of power that regulate its practice, [and] (3) the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of this sexuality" (1985:4). Foucault explains how his research on medicine, psychiatry, and disciplinary practices provided him the necessary tools to explore sexuality in its relation to power and positive

knowledge; what eluded him up until that point, however, were the "modes according to which individuals are given to recognize themselves as sexual subjects" (5). To this effect, in Volumes Two and Three of the *History of Sexuality* series, Foucault fills this gap by conducting what he calls a "history of desiring man" (1985:6), going back to the ancient Greeks in Volume Two (1985), followed by an exploration in Volume Three of the Greco-Romans of the first two centuries A.D. (1986). In doing so, Foucault aims to make explicit the "games of truth" and the history by which becoming a subject came to mean cultivating and recognizing oneself as a "subject of desire": "to discover, in desire, the truth of [one's own] being, be it natural or fallen" (1985:6). For Foucault, this is intrinsically a question of ethics, which he defines as "the elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct" (1985: 251)—in other words, the government of self by self and how this interfaces with one's relation to others (see also 2001:1033). For this reason, one of the primary questions for Foucault in these volumes is "why is sexual conduct, why are the activities and pleasures that attach to it, an object of moral solicitude? Why this ethical concern—which, at certain times, in certain societies and groups appears more important than the moral attention that is focused on other, likewise essential, areas of individual or collective life, such as alimentary behaviors or the fulfillment of civic duties?" (10). To answer these questions Foucault looks back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and explores how and in what forms they constituted sexuality as an object of "moral solicitude":

> But in raising this very general question, and in directing it to Greek and Greco-Roman culture, it occurred to me that this problematization [of

> sexuality and sexual conduct] was linked to a group of practices that have been of unquestionable importance in our societies: I am referring to what might be called the "arts of existence." What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria…In any case, it seemed to me that the study of the problematization of sexual behavior in antiquity could be regarded as a chapter—one of the first chapters—of that general history of the "techniques of self." (1985:10-11)

In other words, Foucault's goal for Volumes Two and Three is to "show how, in classical antiquity, sexual activity and sexual pleasures were problematized through practices of the self, bringing into play the criteria of an 'aesthetics of existence'" (1985:12). To this effect, the goal of this particular section will be to take the key findings from Foucault's Volumes Two and Three and then apply them to an analysis of early Christian asceticism and sexual renunciation during late antiquity (i.e. the first four and a half centuries A.D.). This necessitates a consideration not only of the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman problematization of sexuality through recursive practices of self-care but also a consideration of the specific ways in which early Christians of late antiquity "carried out

a restructuration of the forms of self-relationship and a transformation of the practices and techniques on which this relationship was based" (Foucault 1985:63).[18]

Sexual Austerity

One of the primary themes of Foucault's second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality* series is the notion of austerity, restraint, or moderation. At first glance this may seem odd, as we often "like to credit the Greeks with a great liberty of morals" (1985:39). Compared to Christians of the Middle Ages or Europeans of Victorian times, one is quick to acknowledge that the ancient Greeks "accepted certain sexual behaviors much more readily" and felt much less scandalized by sexual misconduct in general (36).

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[18] Indeed, this discussion of early Christian changes in "the forms of self-relationship" and their accompanying practices was to be included in Volume Four, *Confessions of the Flesh.* This final installment to the *History of Sexuality* series exists in the form of a manuscript but has remained completely restricted from public access by the executor of Foucault's estate (Huffer 2010:11). However, Foucault still provides hints throughout Volumes Two and Three of his intentions for the final installment to the *History of Sexuality* series. He outlines his plans most explicitly in the final paragraph of Volume Three: "Thus, as the arts of living and the care of the self are refined, some precepts emerge that seem to be rather similar to those that will be formulated in the later moral systems [of Christianity]. But one should not be misled by the analogy. Those moral systems [of Christianity] will define other modalities of the relation to self: a characterization of the ethical substance based on finitude, the Fall, and evil; a mode of subjection in the form of obedience to a general law that is at the same time the will of a personal god; a type of work on oneself that implies a decipherment of the soul and a purificatory hermeneutics of the desires; and a mode of ethical fulfillment that tends toward self-renunciation. The code elements that concern the economy of pleasures, conjugal fidelity, and relations between men may well remain analogous, but they will derive from a profoundly altered ethics and from a different way of constituting oneself as the ethical subject of one's own sexual behavior" (1986:239-240).

Even so, Foucault argues, the fact remains that "the representation of sexual acts that they [the ancient Greeks] suggest in their written works—and even in their erotic literature—seems to have been characterized by a good deal of reserve" (39). Ultimately, Foucault attributes this "reticence" or "reserve" to the ancient Greek conception and treatment of *aphrodisia*—in other words, "the acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure" (39-40). For the ancient Greeks, pleasure was not associated with evil as it was for the Christians. Nor were the ancient Greeks suspicious of sexuality in the same way as early Christians who regarded it as "a stealthy, resourceful, and dreadful power" (41). Rather, for the ancient Greeks, sexuality was regarded as a force (*energeia*) that was "natural and indispensable" since "it was through this activity that living creatures were able to reproduce, the species as a whole was able to escape extinction, and cities, families, names, and religions were able to endure far longer than individuals, who were destined to pass away" (48).[19] The downside to sexuality, however—as well as the reason it needed to be restrained—was that sexuality was "excessive by nature" (50).[20] If not kept in check, it was believed, men would become slaves to their pleasure, thus demonstrating excess and passivity in a way that would call into question their "active"

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[19] Interestingly, some late antique eastern versions of Christianity (the Encratites, Gregory of Nyssa) will completely flip this logic, arguing that reproduction *prolongs* the cycle of mortality and diverts people from investing in the necessary practices of self-care (namely, self-renunciation—including sexual renunciation) that would set them on the right track toward achieving otherworldly salvation. I address this briefly below.

[20] In fact, this ancient Greek emphasis on the excessive nature of sexuality also shows up again later in nineteenth century sexology (e.g. the work of Heinrich Kaan), in which sexuality was regarded as excessive and therefore easily prone to perversion (see Foucault 2003).

role as men as well as their status as humans as opposed to mere brute animals. Again, the reason for sexual austerity "was not that sexual activity was a vice, nor that it might deviate from a canonical model" but rather that it was prone to excess and therefore required practical precautions to keep it in check (Foucault 1985:50). Consequently, battling to control one's pleasures became a sort of "exercise of freedom that took form in self-mastery…in the self-restraint he displayed in his virile activity…[and] in the way he related to himself in the relationship he had with others" (93).[21] Importantly, however, there were no "laws" or strict codes (as there later would be in medieval Christianity) governing the proper use of the pleasures; rather, there existed various medical and philosophical recommendations and prescriptions for "stylizing" the use of pleasure: "stylizations within dietetics, understood as an art of the everyday relationship of the individual with his body; in economics as an art of a man's behavior as a head of family; and in erotics as an art of the reciprocal conduct of a man and a boy in a love relationship" (93). As we will see in a moment, it is this same emphasis on austerity and stylization of self-conduct that is also clearly functioning in late antique Christianity. The major differences, however, will consist in a transformation of the self-relationship that now requires decipherment of desire (rather than mastery over pleasure) as well as purification and deliverance from concupiscence via even more extreme practices of self-

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[21] With respect to ancient Greece, Foucault points out how self-mastery was regarded as an ethics that pertained solely to free male citizens. Women and slaves were not included here; as such, Foucault does not regard this as a viable ethics that we could adopt today. This exclusionary dynamic will change, however, in early Christianity via a democratization of practices of sexual renunciation, which were open to women and men alike, from all different social backgrounds. I address this shift in the next section.

denial—especially sexual renunciation (see Foucault 1985: 93, 254; Foucault 1986: 239-240).

The Shift from Greco-Roman to Early Christian Sexual Ethics

The shift from ancient Greek to Greco-Roman to early Christian sexual ethics is one constituted by increasingly austere perceptions of sexuality. As the previous section discussed, ancient Greeks saw sexual austerity as necessary in order to master one's pleasures and not fall victim to excess. However, from the classical period to late antiquity, "a very long time had passed during which concern for the body and for health, the relation to wives and to marriage, and the relationship with boys had been motifs for the elaboration of a severe ethics" (Foucault 1986:237). As a result, we see shifts in perceptions of sexuality that end up redefining which ascetic practices are deemed capable of achieving mastery over pleasure. During late antiquity the primary change in Greco-Roman perceptions of sexuality, according to Foucault in Volume Three, is a major shift from the preoccupation with excess to a new concern with human frailty and the body's vulnerability to sexually caused illness: "Now, in these modifications of preexisting themes one can see the development of an art of existence dominated by *self-preoccupation*. This art of the self no longer focuses so much on the excesses one can indulge in and that need to be mastered in order to exercise one's domination over others. It gives increasing emphasis to the frailty of the individual faced with the manifold ills that sexual activity can give rise to" (1986:238, emphasis added). Consequently, this new articulation of the art of the self "emphasizes the importance of developing all the practices and all the exercises by which one can maintain self-control and eventually arrive at a pure enjoyment of oneself. It is not the accentuation of the forms of

prohibition that is behind these modifications in sexual ethics. It is the development of an art of existence" (238). Even so, in reading these words—speaking of the natural frailty and vulnerability of the human body jostled around by the manifold detrimental effects of sexuality—one cannot help but see the foreshadowing of an eventual Christian morality associating sexuality with evil, mortality, and human suffering. To similar effect, Foucault speaks of a "dual phenomenon" characteristic of the ethics of pleasure during the first years of late antiquity:

> On the one hand, a more active attention to sexual practice is required, an attention to its effects on the organism, to its place and function within marriage, to its value and its difficulties in the relationship with boys. But at the same time as one dwells on it, and as the interest that one brings to bear on it is intensified, it increasingly appears to be dangerous and capable of compromising the relation with oneself that one is trying to establish. *It seems more and more necessary to distrust it, to confine it, insofar as possible to marital relations…Here sexual activity is linked to evil by its form and effects*, but in itself and substantially, it is not an evil. (1986:239, emphasis added)

As such, at this point we are very close to an early Christian conceptualization of sexual ethics. The distrust of sexuality and the compulsion to confine it as much as possible are present in Greco-Roman writings just as they are in early Christian writings. One of the primary distinctions that remains, however, is the stance on evil. Whereas Greco-Romans associated sexuality with evil due to the negative health effects it produced, early Christians, on the other hand, incorporated sexual sin into the very origin

of humanity—as evil in and of itself. John Bugge in his *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Idea* (1975) traces this phenomenon back to the Christian origin myth—the story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace—which, as he argues, is heavily influenced by Gnostic thought: "If monastic spirituality shows a general allegiance to the East, so in the matter of the celibate life its principles can be traced to a distinctively Christian-gnostic tradition on sexuality…the most fundamental of which is a radical metaphysical and anthropological dualism in which the spiritual is practically equated with good and matter with evil" (7).[22] Under this logic, Bugge argues, the fact that humans exist in material fashion is an indication of a "primeval fall" from an original spiritual "condition of perfect felicity" (9). Or, "as [Paul] Ricoeur puts it, 'The being of man is itself the result of a drama anterior to man; the evil is that there are human beings; the genesis of evil coincides with anthropogony'" (9). Consequently, when trying to determine *how* humans fell to Earth—in other words, how they were *produced* as material beings—pagan Gnostics and early Christians alike logically looked to sexual reproduction. More importantly, they searched deeper for the possible hidden sinful

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[22] On this point, in his 1986 essay, "'Allas! That Evere Love was Synne': Sex and Medieval Canon Law," historian James Brundage clarifies that "aversion to sex lay in the mainstream of patristic writing" and that this was true even of those authors with no apparent ties to Gnosticism (9). He states, "Their animus toward sex may have been part of their reaction against the sexual practices of pagan society…But early patristic loathing of sex ran deeper than mere revulsion of pagan sexuality" (4-5). Rather, "Christian hostility to sex sprang in large part from the sexual morality of the late ancient philosophical schools, especially from the vulgarized Stoicism current in the late Roman Empire" (5-6). In the tradition of Stoicism, sexuality was relegated to the category of the "lower appetites," which were often perceived as tempting men to turn away from true reason (6).

motivation behind this physical act: lust and desire (i.e. temptation). In this way it came to be recognized that the origin of humanity, which is also the origin of mortality, is linked back to an original *sexual* sin:

> In the *Poimandres*, it is the disintegration of human nature into male and female that prompts God's command to increase and multiply. Under such a dictum, however, it is hard for man to "recognize himself as immortal and know the cause of death is *love*." The *Gospel of Mary* describes Christ as teaching that because of "what is of the nature of fornication, which is called 'sin,'…you come into existence and die." The unavoidable inference is that, just as sexual intercourse provides for the replenishment of physical life, it also ensures the continuation of death. In the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, to the question "How long shall we die?" the Lord replies, "So long as women bear children." (Bugge 1975:11, emphasis in original)[23]

Under these circumstances of increasing sexual austerity in which sexuality had become increasingly dangerous and evil, it is no wonder that so many Christians during late antiquity opted to renounce sexuality altogether. By doing so, not only were they

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[23] On connections between women and death see also Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949): "Death is woman, and women mourn the dead because death is their work" (166). On this point, Sara Heinamaa's essay "The Sexed Self and the Mortal Body" (2010) is also very helpful. Furthermore, this emphasis on connections between childbirth and death can also be interpreted from a structural-functionalist perspective. Here, restrictions on (or renunciations of) sexuality would have "functioned" as a form of self-preservation within a cultural and historical context in which reproductive technologies were close to non-existent and death rates were high.

staying healthy, maintaining dignified social status, and avoiding sin, but they were also instrumental (so they thought) in ending the cycle of death and human frailty caused by there being people in the world who continue to reproduce.

**Christianity, Asexuality, Antisociality**

As the previous section indicates, the trajectory from ancient Greek to Greco-Roman to late antique Christian sexual ethics is one marked by increased austerity and attention to the perils of sexuality. In the case of late antique Christianity, this is compounded with early Christian interpretations of *Genesis* (heavily influenced by Gnosticism) that the original sin—the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden due to giving in to temptation—was an intrinsically sexual sin. Consequently, many early Christians regarded sexuality (even in its married heterosexual form) as evil and responsible for the origination and perpetuation of mortality and human frailty. Temptation (the snake in the *Genesis* story) was that sneaky, slithering, surreptitious force that made it so difficult to return to blissful, immortal, immaterial heaven. For these reasons:

> in the Christian morality of sexual behavior, the ethical substance was to be defined not by the *aphrodisia*, but by a domain of desires [temptations] that lie hidden among the mysteries of the heart…Subjection was to take the form not of a *savoir-faire*, but of a recognition of the law [of God; of the Bible] and an obedience to pastoral authority. Hence the ethical subject was to be characterized not so much by the perfect rule of the self by the self in the exercise of a virile type of activity, as by self-renunciation and a purity whose model was to be sought in virginity. (Foucault 1985:92)

Elsewhere Foucault calls this “a morality of non-egoism” which paradoxically employs care of the self—especially in the form of practices of sexual renunciation—in order to renounce oneself and, by extension, society as well (2005:13).

Building on this, here in this section I will explore the real life social effects Christian self-renunciation had on the Roman Empire during late antiquity. In particular, I focus on a sexual renunciation which was, as historian Peter Brown argues in *The Body and Society* (1988), “at the heart of a debate over the very meaning of Christianity’s place in the world. The pioneers of Christian virginity, in denying the material demands the social order placed on their sexual capacity, transformed themselves into intermediaries of an otherworldly order. Acts of the flesh were burdened with a symbolism they had never known before” (Harper 2013:2). The argument I present, building on the work of historians Peter Brown (1988) and Kyle Harper (2013), is that by renouncing sexuality and withdrawing from society (which many Christians perceived, anyways, as already corrupt and sexually depraved), early Christians came to be regarded by the Roman Empire as antisocial, noncompliant, and subversive. Consequently, many early Christians were executed in bloody fashion during the first few centuries A.D. Their sexual morality, as Harper explains, “is the sexual morality of a persecuted minority in strident dissent from mainstream society” (2013:13). In turn, by challenging social norms so drastically, in such an antisocial fashion, one begins to notice a potential synergistic relationship between this queer fledgling religion (which practiced asexuality as sexual renunciation) and modern antisocial strands of queer theory.

In what follows, I flesh out this historical narrative of early Christian social noncompliance via practices of sexual renunciation. Upon explaining how early

Christians came to adopt sexual renunciation and how it drastically impacted mainstream Roman society, I insert this narrative of social noncompliance into broader queer studies debates surrounding the relationship between queerness and antisociality. In an ironic twist, I argue that the negativity of antisocial queer theory and the purported negativity of early Christian asexuality are highly compatible—both being forms of antisocial politics despite their stark contrast concerning the role of sexuality in producing or achieving antisociality. Whereas the modern antisocial thesis relies on sexuality—particularly homosexuality and risky, disruptive forms of sex—the example of early Christian sexual renunciation demonstrates how complete withdrawal from the sexual order can also have antisocial effects that likewise undo the self and society alike.

## The Rise and Impact of Early Christian Sexual Renunciation

From a modern day perspective, the state of sexuality in Christianity looks bleak. As the story goes, the rise of Christianity marked the downfall of sexual freedom as Christians cordoned off sexuality, reserving it only for heterosexual "marriage for procreative purposes…[as long as] the pleasurable aspects [were] not enjoyed too much" (Rubin 1984:148). This chapter demonstrates, however, how this view of Christianity is misleading; this is the view of a much later medieval and modern Christianity. The case of late antiquity, on the other hand, "was not careening toward a repressive future. The victory of a stern conjugal morality was not an inevitable triumph, over which Christianity simply happened to be holding the banner" (Harper 2013:3). In fact, Harper argues, quite the opposite seems to have occurred. Whereas "Greco-Roman culture, in the high empire, became profoundly aware of the embeddedness of its sexual norms in society and the consequent tensions between objective and subjective factors in the

judgment of sexual acts…[t]he early church, by contrast, developed a radical notion of individual freedom, centered around a libertarian paradigm of complete sexual agency" (4). To more fully understand why this libertarian paradigm of complete sexual agency was so radical and disruptive, it is necessary to situate the role of sexuality within the context of the Roman Empire, in which sexual reproduction was an unspoken *requirement* of its citizens.

First, to understand why sexuality was so deeply intertwined with Roman society and citizenship in the context of late antiquity, it is necessary to consider the role of death in everyday life. In modern society, under the rubric of biopower (Foucault 1976), life itself is something capable of being fostered and administered through technologies that delay death, such as the eradication of famine and the use of medicine to prolong lives. But, as Peter Brown (1988) makes abundantly clear, the Roman Empire on the other hand was a society "grazed by death":

> Our book is set in a society that was more helplessly exposed to death than is even the most afflicted underdeveloped country in the modern world. Citizens of the Roman Empire at its height, in the second century A.D., were born into the world with an average life expectancy of less than twenty-five years. Death fell savagely on the young. Those who survived childhood remained at risk. Only four out of every hundred men, and fewer women, lived beyond the age of fifty. It was a population "grazed by death." In such a situation, only the privileged or the eccentric few could enjoy the freedom to do what they pleased with their sexual drives. Unexacting in so many ways in sexual matters, the ancient city expected

> its citizens to expend a requisite proportion of their energy begetting and rearing legitimate children to replace the dead. Whether through conscious legislation, such as that of Emperor Augustus, which penalized bachelors and rewarded families for producing children, or simply through the unquestioned weight of habit, young men and women were discreetly mobilized to use their bodies for reproduction. The pressure on the young women was inexorable. For the population of the Roman Empire to remain even stationary, it appears that each woman would have had to have produced an average of five children. (6)

Likewise, as a follow-up and expansion of Peter Brown's work, fellow historian Kyle Harper (2013) reminds us of what is at stake here in this situation in which sexuality was so deeply imbued in power relations and in the regulation of "real human bodies":

> Particularly in societies that lived in the unforgiving grind of high mortality cycles, with limited technologies of reproduction, sexual morality existed within networks of power defined by law, demography, and the control of resources. Sexual morality must be seen as part of the circuitry of a sexual economy constituted by real human bodies. This book is through and through focused on *society*, on its machinery for regulating reproduction and dispensing pleasures and on the place of sexual morality within the fabric of the social order. Seen in this light, the triumph of Christianity not only drove profound cultural change. It created a new relationship between sexual morality and society. (5, emphasis in original)

Consequently, it was under these circumstances of high death rates and extreme social pressures and regulations to reproduce that the practice of complete sexual renunciation came into contact in such a radical, subversive fashion. To undermine reproduction was to undermine society itself.[24] It is for this reason that asexuality in late antiquity (in the form of sexual renunciation) has had much more antisocial potential than asexuality today (in the form of sexual identity).

Another reason why sexual renunciation became so threatening to the Roman Empire was because of its radically democratic view of sexual austerity as a practice everyone could do. As Peter Brown explains, the democratization of mastery of sexuality—a practice formerly reserved for free male citizens—was a strategic way of uniting heterogeneous Christian groups who had very little in common other than "a common human condition, defined by sexual desire…Men and women, and persons of widely different social and religious backgrounds, faced each other awkwardly in the tiny assembly rooms of the churches. A sexual nature was the one thing that they had in common" (1988:60). What's more, sexual renunciation not only forged a common bond among Christians but it also granted powerless individuals access to social prestige and

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[24] In fact, due to such high mortality rates, limited reproductive technologies, and abundant social regulations concerning reproduction, it could reasonably be said that "sexuality" in the context of late antiquity is relatively synonymous with reproduction. Indeed, for most of the pre-modern period, this seems to be the case. This stands in stark contrast to modern times in which sexuality consists of a number of practices, desires, and identities that are much broader than reproduction. This historically specific conceptualization of "sexuality" also contrasts with the goals of many queer theorists who have worked to dismantle heteronormativity and the popular cultural assumption that reproductive sex is the only form of (or reason for) sex (see, for instance, Rubin 1984 and Edelman 2004).

knowledge of the divine, which likely would have been inaccessible to them in earlier times. As Brown explains, in accordance with the ancient valuation of austerity, "whatever exotic associations the gesture of continence might have had for the Christians themselves, outsiders could admire it as a form of physical heroism equivalent to the observed capacity of Christians to face down the chill fear of death" (60). He continues, "sexual renunciation was a *carrière ouverte aux talents*. As Christians, women and the uneducated could achieve reputations for sexual abstinence as stunning as those achieved by any cultivated male. Total chastity was a gesture that cut through the silken web of decorum that swathed the public man: here was philosophical restraint at its most drastic, now made open to all" (61).

Consequently, to expunge this threat from society—women, minorities, and the poor achieving immense social power; population and birth rates rapidly dropping; and entire communities of Christians withdrawing from family and civic life—various Roman emperors had Christians executed in mass numbers over the years. In page after page of painfully detailed accounts, historian Herbert Workman in his *Persecution in the Early Church* (1906) outlines some of the more common forms of execution. Judging from the sheer brutality of these Roman executions, it is no wonder that early Christians perceived Roman society as corrupt and soon to face the Rapture in the Second Coming of Christ. For many Christians, the likelihood of their imminent and bloody death made their belief in an otherworldly afterlife all the more powerful. Likely their resolve to remain pure and chaste only got stronger. To get the full impact of Roman persecution of Christians, I will quote Workman at length:

In the later martyrologies there is a manifest tendency to pile up the horrors. But if we confine ourselves to strictly historical cases, the savagery, though to a large extent part of the ordinary judicial processes of the age, is appalling. Some, suffering the punishment of parricides, were shut up in a sack with snakes and thrown into the sea; others were tied to huge stones and cast into a river. For Christians the cross itself was not deemed sufficient agony; hanging on the tree, they were beaten with rods until their bowels gushed out, while vinegar and salt were rubbed into their wounds. In the Thebais, during the persecution of Diocletian, Christians were tied to catapults, and so wrenched limb from limb. Some, like Ignatius, were thrown to the beasts; others tied to their horns. Women were stripped, enclosed in nets, and exposed to attacks of furious bulls. Many were "made to lie on sharp shells," and tortured with scrapers, claws, and pincers, before being delivered to the mercy of the flames. Not a few were broken on the wheel, or torn in pieces by wild horses. Of some the feet were slowly burned away, cold water being poured over them the while lest the victims should expire too rapidly. Peter, one of the servants of Diocletian, was scourged to the bone, then placed near a gridiron that he might witness the roasting of pieces torn from his own body. At Lyons they tried to overcome the obstinacy of Sanctus of Vienne "by fixing red-hot plates of brass to the most delicate parts of his body." After this he was slowly roasted in the iron chair. Down the backs of others "melted lead, hissing and bubbling, was poured"; while a few, "by the clemency of

> the emperor," escaped with the searing out of their eyes, or the tearing off of their legs. These instances—but a few out of a long catalogue that might be compiled—will show what it cost to witness the good confession; to say nothing of the rack, the bobby-horse, the claws, and other tortures preparatory to the sentence. (1906:131)

Workman then continues to discuss modes of torture specifically designed to shame, embarrass, and sexualize pious asexual Christian women:

> For women there were punishments worse than death, the least of which was their exposure almost naked in the arena. Perpetua was not alone in the horror she felt when she dreamed that "she was stripped, turned into the arena, and rubbed down with oil as they do for the games." In the great persecution under Diocletian in the Thebais, if we may trust Eusebius, women were tied to trees by one foot and there left to perish, hanging downwards, stark naked. They were more fortunate than some of their sisters, many of whom were dragged to the brothels to suffer shame before being led to the stake or cast to the lions. (132)

In sum, the relationship between asexuality and antisociality in early Christianity is uncanny given that practices of asexuality (as sexual renunciation) impeded reproduction, ended family lines, and enabled individuals to remove themselves from public and civic life, which many Christians perceived as corrupt, violent, and hypersexualized. For early Christians, there was no desire to perpetuate what they considered to be a rapidly decaying society. They felt little to no obligation to invest in the future in this world given that the Second Coming of Christ (hence, the end of the

world) was purportedly soon on the way (Abbott 2000:55). Christians, who were executed in droves (becoming martyrs) in the first few centuries A.D., had come to embody death. They served as a nagging reminder of the threat of no future—the looming expiration of society exasperated by high death rates and rampant social noncompliance. With no hope for humanity, many Christians withdrew from society, retreated spiritually into themselves, and sought salvation through an otherworldly power—through God—who, they thought, nullified all humanly notions of life and death itself.

Early Christian Asexuality and its Implications for Queer Theory

Having established a connection between early Christian asexuality and antisociality, I would now like to explore this relationship more broadly in terms of the antisocial thesis of queer theory. To do so, I will define in broad terms the general structure and goals of queer antisociality. Upon doing so, I conduct an inventory of similarities between early Christian asexuality and antisociality that disrupt the popular modern assumption that Christianity *tout court* is aligned solely with heteronormative, monogamous sexuality. In conclusion, I will identify two areas in the antisocial thesis where early Christian asexuality may intervene and further nuance it. These areas are 1) the antisocial thesis' reliance on psychoanalytic sex drive and 2) its rejection of redemptive projects. These issues with the antisocial thesis have foreclosed the possibility of it considering Christianity and asexuality (at certain historical and cultural moments) as viable forms of antisociality.

First, a broad description of the antisocial thesis:

> Recent work in queer theory under the influence of Leo Bersani's definition of sex as anticommunitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian produces a counter-intuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation and towards what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality (Bersani, 1986; Bersani, 1996). I call this shift "counter-intuitive" because it upends our understanding of the interconnectedness of intimacy, romance and sexual contact and replaces it with a harsh but radically realistic recognition of both the selfishness of sex and its destructive power. The sexual instinct, then, within this formulation, nestles up against the death drive and constitutes an oppositional force to what Bersani terms "the tyranny of the self" (Bersani, 1999: p. 4). Rather than a life-force connecting pleasure to life, survival and futurity, sex, and particularly homo-sex and receptive sex, is a death drive that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution; "the value of sexuality itself," writes Bersani, "is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it" (Bersani, 1997 [*sic*, 1987]: p. 222). (Halberstam 2008:140)

Notably, early Christians in their pursuit of otherworldly salvation also adopted an approach to living and worshipping that may reasonably qualify as anticommunitarian,

self-shattering, and nonidentitarian (i.e. antisocial).[25] The reason for this is because of early Christianity's reliance on a form of care of the self that gravitated toward self-renunciation and social withdrawal. Rather than conceiving of interconnectedness solely as a product of human interaction (i.e. sociality or "community"), early Christians (drawing on deep-seated traditions of asceticism and self-care) experienced interconnectedness predominately as the individual's unification with the divine or otherworldly, brought about through practices of self-transformation whose end-goal was complete relinquishment of earthly attachments, including the physical body itself. Ultimately, this relationship to the divine could be achieved within religious community (as it was in many convents, monasteries, and churches); but, in the final instance, emphasis was placed on *otherworldly* salvation, and this could only be achieved by relinquishing connections to *this* world—a world that would soon be facing the Rapture, many Christians thought. Hence, one's achievement of spirituality would be the product of extensive, transformative work on one's own self, whether alone (in the desert, in a cell) or in the presence of others (in church, in a monastery, etc.). Notably, among these practitioners who invested so much in themselves, experiences of selflessness and desubjectivation are surprisingly widespread. This is especially true of mystical traditions where the compulsive focus on ascetic self-care paradoxically moves the "self" *beyond* itself, into the realm of divine infinitude that transcends bodily sensation,

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[25] Concerning this argument, readers way ultimately wonder about the issue of Christianity as a redemptive religion and may question if this makes Christianity incommensurable with the antisocial thesis. I recognize this question and will address it a few pages below.

cognition, and language itself (see especially Chapter Two on mysticism and desubjectivation).

Phrased differently, Christianity in its early days was an extremely ascetic religion; it broke with the classical Greek and Roman emphasis on civic responsibility in favor of forthright renunciation of all worldly attachments. Although mainstream Roman society could relate to and respect the values of asceticism and sexual restraint, Christians did so *not* in the name of the social good but rather in the name of an otherworldly, immaterial divine power. Consequently the Roman Empire came to associate these Christian otherworldly ascetic pursuits with a neglect of "this-worldly" social responsibilities—in other words, with antirelationality, antisociality, and negativity. To the Romans, complete sexual renunciation was perhaps the gravest of all forms of social neglect.

Another main component of the antisocial thesis according to queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004) is its challenging of what he calls "reproductive futurism." Edelman takes Bersani's emphasis on the kinship between queerness and antisociality and nuances it through a precise Lacanian analysis that connects sociality to certain imaginary objects, or symbols, that restrict political meaning. Edelman identifies the figure of the Child (an "innocent" symbol of reproduction of life and society—in other words, futurity) as the core symbol of modern American politics. On the other hand, the "queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligibility" (Halberstam 2006:823); "instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition, he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we [i.e. queer individuals] anyway structurally represent. Edelman's polemic about futurity

ascribes to queerness the function of the limit…while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child" (823). Importantly, Tim Dean clarifies that this does not mean that queer individuals have some innate propensity for unsociability, malfeasance, and deviance but rather that, symbolically, queerness has been perceived as a threat to society "and that it might be strategic politically to exploit that threat" (2006:826). For Dean, "homosexuality can be viewed as threatening because, insofar as we fail to reproduce the family in a recognizable form, queers fail to reproduce the social" (826). This is what is meant by Edelman's "reproductive futurism"—"he means the dominant ideology of the social, which sees it in terms of a future requiring not only reproduction but also protection and that therefore represents futurity in the image of the innocent child" (Dean 2006:826). By not buying into reproduction and traditional family arrangements, queer individuals disrupt and threaten sociality itself: "If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and inevitably, life itself" (Edelman 2004:13, emphasis in original). Generally speaking, throughout *No Future* (2004), Edelman places reproductive futurism symbolically on the side of life whereas queerness occupies the place of death and barrenness of meaning. Edelman's (2004) work is, above all, a critique of goodness and positivity, which constrict the number of possibilities for viable ways of being in society. For Edelman, it seems, antisociality is something worthy of embracing because it disrupts the idealized, constrictive possibilities of social life. And this may open possibilities for alternative ways of being in the world.

Although Edelman's notion of reproductive futurism and the Child pertains to a specific historical and cultural moment—American politics of the late 20th and early 21st century—the issue of reproduction and perpetuation of family legacies was likewise very important (perhaps even more so) to the Greco-Romans of late antiquity. As Peter Brown emphasizes, what gave early Christian sexual renunciation such threatening power was its capacity to exacerbate a situation of already excruciatingly high mortality rates. Hence, if we consider this version of reproductive futurism in late antiquity to be the dominant ideology of the social at that time, then clearly early Christian sexual renunciation also functioned as a highly volatile, radical version of antisocial politics. By adopting sexual renunciation early Christians disrupted societal norms surrounding marriage, family life, reproduction, and civic duty. In fact, this was the direct intention of many radical early Christians:

> By renouncing all sexual activity the human body could join in Christ's victory: it could turn back the inexorable. The body could wrench itself free from the grip of the animal world. By refusing to act upon the youthful stirrings of desire, Christians could bring marriage and childbirth to an end. With marriage at an end, the huge fabric of organized society would crumble like a sandcastle, touched by the 'ocean-flood of the Messiah.' (Brown 1988:32)

Although what was behind this vision was ultimately a form of redemption—a desire for eternal life united with God—I argue that early Christianity's status as a queer fledgling religion (a thorn in the side of mainstream Roman society) ultimately demonstrated how even redemptive projects could destabilize mainstream social mores. The Christian

notion of "the good" (i.e. heaven) was highly at odds with the Roman Empire's own notion of "the good" (i.e. the maintenance of civic and family life), and this resulted in a clash that disrupted reproduction rates, family structures, and civic participation alike. As such, early Christian sexual renunciation, despite its ultimate adoption of redemptive religious beliefs, was highly antisocial from the perspective of mainstream Roman society.

Unfortunately, however, there are several roadblocks installed in the antisocial thesis that have prevented queer theorists from regarding Christianity and asexuality as capable (historically specific) forms of antisociality. First, due to Bersani and Edelman's psychoanalytic reliance on the death drive and its marriage to sexual drive, neither author is capable of identifying asexuality, celibacy, virginity, and forms of nonsexuality as capable of generating antisociality.[26] And, secondly, because of Bersani and Edelman's

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[26] Bersani (1987) and Edelman (2004) rely upon Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks, respectively. Here, the assumption of a universal sex drive or sexual instinct (which, in turn, is connected to the death drive) occludes the possibility of forms of antisociality that are disjointed from sex drive. Forms of antisociality that are disconnected from sex drive may exist because, historically, they predate the modern deployment of sexuality, or because, topically, they are completely unrelated to sexuality. Recent work by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014) seems to have moved away from exclusively psychoanalytic conceptions of antisociality by adopting, instead, the notion of "negativity." As Berlant and Edelman argue, "the very name 'antisocial' disregards our persistent embeddedness in and attentiveness to sociality. It is not a matter for either of us standing outside the social or sociality or against the possibility of creating more capacious social worlds. Rather, we recognize that negativity emerges as resistance to the fixity of social forms that seem to define the possibilities for and the limits of relationality" (xiii). This reframing of the "antisocial thesis" as negativity now allows us to consider how sexuality and its universalizing notions of sex drive, biological orientation, and psychological interiority "define the

issues with "projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation" (Halberstam 2008:140), both authors would be quick to assume that Christianity and asexuality are pastoral, idealized, and overly pure. Consequently, both Bersani and Edelman would likely fail to see the messiness—or even, at times, the bloodiness—of politics of early Christian sexual renunciation that deeply disrupted Roman society during late antiquity. I address both of these drawbacks to the antisocial thesis—1) the psychoanalytic belief in the inherency of sexuality and 2) rejection of redemptive, idealized projects—in the following paragraphs.

The first drawback to the antisocial thesis is its reliance on an ahistorical notion of sexual drive. This is because of the pervasive tendency in antisocial strands of queer theory—whether it be in the work of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, or Tim Dean—to rely on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. In their attempts to challenge projects of redemption, hope, harmony, and futurity that pull the wool over our eyes about the facts of mortality and death, antisocial theorists commonly steer away from perceptions of sexuality as "a life force connecting pleasure to life, survival and futurity" (Halberstam 2008:140). Instead, via Freud (and later also Lacan), antisocial queer theorists commonly

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possibilities for and the limits of relationality" today (xiii). Bersani (1987) and Edelman (2004) effectively challenged heteronormativity but were unable to disrupt sexuality itself due to their reliance on psychoanalytic perceptions of sexuality as a universal instinct. Recent work by Jack Halberstam (2011) on the topic of failure also permits a distancing from these problematic psychoanalytic conceptions of sexuality. By emphasizing failure (as opposed to the death drive and its linkages to sexual instinct), Halberstam's work allows for the possibility of conceiving of antisociality or negativity as a disruption of sociality more broadly. Through the framework of failure, it is possible even to imagine the failure to engage in sexual practices, in the construction of desires, or in the formation of a coherent or stable sexual identity.

emphasize the connection between pleasure and death—pleasure being an insatiable *drive* (quite similar to the ancient Greek notion of *energeia*) that must be managed by culture lest it would bring the individual to the point of death in the pursuit of ultimate pleasure. To this effect, antisocial queer theorists ask, *what happens when we let pleasure get the best of us, when we no longer subordinate it to cultural norms but rather pursue it, selfishly, as far as it can go?* The answer, as it would seem, is that the individual is taken to the very far edges of pleasure and, in a brush with death, experiences a total loss of self-mastery—a complete self-shattering. Consequently, it is argued, any effort to redeem sexuality or to retain it as a happy harmonious interaction denies the (purportedly biological, drive-based) fact that sexuality is excessive and intrinsically capable of destruction.

As the example of early Christianity reveals, however, self-mastery over one's sexuality in the form of complete sexual renunciation also had the same desubjectivating effect without requiring any psychoanalytic notions of sex and death drive (on the medieval mystical version of desubjectivation, see Chapter Two). Firstly, when taken to the extreme, complete self-mastery (i.e. complete renunciation of earthly attachments, including sexual desire) would result in a similar dissolution of self—this is what Foucault is referring to when he calls early Christianity a "morality of non-egoism" (2005:13); it was not a drive toward death inasmuch as it was the *transcendence* of earthly life and death. Secondly, by adopting a "libertarian paradigm of complete sexual agency" (Harper 2013:4) early Christians demonstrated a seemingly paradoxical "selfish self-renunciation" that flew in the face of societal conventions regarding expectations of reproduction and family life. As a consequence, early Christians exposed Roman society

ever more clearly to the threat of no future—in other words, to a society with insufficient capacity to reproduce itself. In sum, the example of early Christian self-renunciation reveals the limitations of the psychoanalytic framework when addressing perceptions of sexuality and subjectivity in other cultural and historical settings.

The second drawback to the antisocial thesis is its disengagement from a more thorough consideration of modes of redemption. Perhaps it is for this reason that Christianity is rarely considered by queer theorists to have any queer potential. With respect to redemption, it may be argued by some queer theorists that Christianity in any historical form (late antique and modern alike) does not sufficiently challenge sociality or does not sufficiently qualify as antisocial due to its symbolic investment in redemptive notions of heaven, paradise, the "good," and everlasting life. This belief is due, however, to the assumption that redemptive investments are a reflection of dominant, normative social ideologies that cover up the existence of less-than-ideal facts of life. Although it is certainly true that the achievement of everlasting life was a goal of unparalleled importance for early Christians, I argue that early Christians' drive toward redemption was a project actually carried out by a persecuted *minority* that was often seen as obstinate, abnormal, and antisocial due to its idealization of non-reproductive, anti-familial practices of sexual renunciation, self-denial, and social withdrawal. Early Christians vastly disrupted the workings of Roman society by pursuing, instead, an idealized otherworldly salvation—a notion of the "good" totally at odds with society. As such, projects of redemption, hope, and futurity need to be situated within their proper cultural and historical context and considered comparatively, in relation to the competing hopes of other groups. To this effect, when Peter Brown states, "the Christianity of the

High and Later Middle Ages—to say nothing of the Christianity of our own times—is separated from the Christianity of the Roman world by a chasm" (xvii), he reminds us that history holds the capacity to challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions in potentially productive ways.

Conclusion

In sum, with this contextualization of early Christianity behind us, we may now establish some general parallels between early Christian asexual antisociality and queer theory's antisocial thesis. First, it is clear that both forms of antisociality take "selfness" to the extreme, resulting in a paradoxical destruction or dissolution of the self—in the form of self-mastery via self-renunciation in late antiquity or in the form of *loss* of self-mastery that is regarded as self-shattering today.[27] Moreover, this process is popularly associated with death—which is the second key commonality between the two. Whereas the AIDS victim or the receptive homosexual male is the deathly figure of antisociality for Bersani, the martyr becomes that figure in early Christian times. Today queer individuals face accusations of pursuing "the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments" which, in the public imagination, are tied to death and disease, no kids, and no future (Edelman 2004:13). Likewise, in the Roman Empire of late antiquity where mortality rates were excruciatingly high, sexual renunciation stung like a death sentence to society; the vast number of brutally executed Christians in the first few hundred years imbued the religion with a long-lasting stigma of death. And finally, both forms of antisociality

[27] Here I use the world "selfness" as opposed to "individuality" to indicate that we are dealing with two radically different perceptions of self from two very different historical periods—one that is practice-based, ongoing, transformative, and quasi-spiritual and the other that is imbued in an internal, unchanging core of which sexual identity and sex drive are core components.

challenge reproductive futurism. The nonreproductivity of homosexuality and asexuality alike are capable of posing as a threat to the social. Unfortunately the tendency of some antisocial theorists to rely on universalizing psychoanalytic notions of sexual drive has prevented such scholars from fully exploring the antisocial potential of forms of asexuality and nonsexuality. Moreover, the ahistorical assumption that Christianity cannot qualify as antisocial due to its redemptive belief system has resulted in an oversight of the radical queer potential of Christian politics of sexual renunciation during late antiquity. Such politics of antisociality, ultimately, seems beneficial to embrace because it challenges and disrupts rigid perceptions of the social. By destabilizing the social, queer antisociality opens up possibilities for other ways of being in the world.

## Chapter Two: Asexuality, Medieval Apophatic Mysticism, and the Queer Art of Failure

In this chapter, I tell the story of medieval apophatic mystical theology: a form of mysticism that deployed all the capacities of language in an attempt to grasp the limitlessness of God. Such attempts by mystical theologians to articulate the entirety of God led, however, to paradoxes of language, moments of silence, and instances of the complete disorder of thought, which unsettled the mystics, thus undoing them. This self-undoing was conducted in accordance with strict adherence to a system of rigorous ascetic and monastic rules, including chastity, compulsory prayer, meditation, alimentary restraint, and incitement to discourse about God. Above all, self-renunciation or self-dissolution was perceived by medieval Western mystics as the pathway to unification with the limitless presence of God that exists beyond human awareness; and cultivation of asexuality (in the form of chastity) was one of the most crucial prerequisites to renouncing the self so that such unification with divine infinitude could occur.

As this chapter will argue, rather than conceiving of this mystical undoing as a sensational and supernatural experience of the divine, medieval apophatic mysticism actually highlights the *limits* of experiencing God. For, one could only access the divine through self-dissolution. Such brushes with the limits of the human capacity, in turn, highlight the transformative potential of *failure* and its ability to suspend normality, including subjectivity itself. This issue of failure and limits (of thought, language, and experience) holds weight today given that asexuals still struggle with the paradox of articulating asexuality as a "sexual" orientation, all the while asserting that asexuals *do not experience* sexual attraction. As I have witnessed firsthand during my previous

fieldwork experiences, asexual group members alternated between paradoxical descriptions of asexuality as a lack and form of sexuality, and this oscillation of contradictory descriptions oftentimes spun out of control to the point of silencing apophatic failure. These moments of silence were an indication, I believe, of an unintentional self-subversion of sexual discourse through its own linguistic mechanisms.

To this effect, then, in the vein of Jack Halberstam's queer antisociality (2011), this chapter will conceive of apophatic mystical theology as *a queer art of failure*. The chapter will demonstrate, moreover, how asexuality (in the form of ascetic sexual renunciation) was a core component of this medieval queer art of failure. Finally, the chapter will conclude by applying these analytical lenses of apophatic mysticism and queer failure to the modern day—that is, to the paradoxical issue of asexuality as a "sexual" orientation. In conclusion, I will present the concept of what I call modern apophatic sexuality: the process of sexual language undoing itself in an attempt to incorporate asexuality. I will discuss the paradoxes of modern asexuality—asexuality as presence and absence of sexuality; asexuality as sexual form and void—and how they may potentially destabilize sexuality by drawing attention to the limits of sexual language and logic. As such, this chapter is not a history *of* modern apophatic mysticism inasmuch as it is, rather, a history that *uses* this topic—especially the notion of apophasis and its linkages to queer failure—to demonstrate (and hopefully exacerbate) the instability of the modern paradox of asexuality as a sexual orientation. By drawing attention to the disruptive potential of paradox, particularly with respect to modern discourse on asexuality-as-sexuality, I seek demonstrate a modern-day example of how the deployment of sexuality may potentially undo itself.

This chapter destabilizes modern sexuality in two ways. Firstly, I work to demonstrate how asexuality (as a form of mystical desubjectivation and spiritual *ability*) disrupts the modern-day paradoxical assumption that asexuality is a form of (sexual) subjectivity with linkages to the *inability* to experience sexual desire. Secondly, I explore the notion of "modern apophatic sexuality" and suggest that modern paradoxes of asexuality as sexuality ultimately culminate in failure, silence, and disruption of sexual discourse.

The chapter will begin with a close reading of historian Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (1995b) and will mount a critique against modern experientialist readings of mysticism by demonstrating how medieval apophatic mysticism was, rather, a form of negativity: a "Christian theological tradition which constantly *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life" (8). From there, via Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), the chapter will conceive of medieval apophatic mysticism as an ascetic mode of queer failure, which desubjectivated practitioners and suspended normality as a result of strict adherence to religious rules. Unlike Halberstam's queer art of failure, which, at times, suggests that failure is a voluntary, *self-preserving* way of opting out of norms (for instance, by simply not trying or giving up), this chapter, rather, will demonstrate how such failure can occur from within norms, as a result of adhering to them so religiously, with vastly *desubjectivating* effects. This critique is significant because it indicates how even those who cannot or do not want to opt out of norms can still end up failing, thus disrupting the norms (and even the notions of selfhood and identity) to which they adhere. In the conclusion, I argue that this may be the case for modern asexuality: although asexuals'

adoption of sexual orientation may tap into normative perceptions of sexuality, the paradoxes that asexuality introduces along the way may hold the capacity to disrupt the very sexual norms and identities upon which contemporary society relies.

**Medieval Apophatic Mysticism and the Negativity of Experience**

In this section, via historian Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (1995b), I will critique the notion of mystical experience and will demonstrate how medieval mysticism was, rather, the negativity of experience—a void that opened up upon the *failure* to grasp the limitlessness of God. Through a close reading of Turner's text, this section will unpack the meaning of medieval apophatic mystical theology, otherwise known as "negative theology," and will demonstrate its philosophical and metaphorical linkages to Christian Neoplatonism. Through a description of Christian Neoplatonism—a medieval theology which deployed "self-subverting," paradoxical metaphors to highlight the impossibility of ever fully experiencing God—this section will demonstrate how language used today to speak of mystical experience (especially language of interiority and transcendence) was initially designed, according to Turner, to *deconstruct* the notion of experience. In other words, medieval apophatic mysticism was designed to highlight the sheer negativity of God—the impossibility of ever reaching God without first devolving into nonsense, silence, paradox, and failure. It was only through this devolution, which culminated in self-dissolution, that one became capable of uniting with God.

With this background in place regarding negativity, the next section, then, will discuss how medieval apophatic mystics embraced paradox, failure, and the limits of experience as a lifelong religious pursuit—a "constantly *organized.*…strategy of

disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found" (8). This strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, which was conditional upon strict adherence to ascetic and religious rules (including sexual renunciation), is reminiscent of Halberstam's notion of queer art of failure, as will be discussed in part two below, entitled "Medieval Apophatic Mysticism as Queer Art of Failure".

The Critique of "Mystical Experience"

In *The Darkness of God*, Turner (1995b) endeavors to answer the question, what is mystical experience? He does so by historicizing and ultimately critiquing the notion of experience as it applies to medieval mysticism.[28] "Mystical experience," according to Turner, is a rather modern concept—likely a product of nineteenth century scholarship (7). Even to this day, in popular culture and in academic writing alike, mysticism is commonly regarded as an *experiential* encounter with the ineffable. When speaking of mysticism, most people have in mind a series of uncommon, strange, and esoteric experiences of inexplicable, supernatural union with the divine. And yet in Turner's reading of actual primary historical sources by Western Christian mystics, the language of experience was profoundly lacking:

> I began by wondering whether or not there was any such thing as "mystical experience." And I wondered about this question because on the one hand there seemed to be a common, informal view around that the "mystical" had something to do with the having of very uncommon, privileged "experiences"; and, on the other, because when I read any of

[28] To be clear, Turner historicizes and critiques the notion of "mystical experience" but it is by no means his goal to conduct a broader history of "experience" itself.

> the Christian writers who were said to be mystics I found that many of them…made no mention at all of any such experiences and most of the rest who…did make mention of "experiences," attached little or no importance to them. (1995b:2)

Consequently, Turner sets out to discover why mysticism is so often mistakenly associated with experience—and not just common everyday experience but rather remarkable, one-of-a-kind experiences. What are the roots, Turner asks, of this experientialization of mysticism? To this end, Turner investigates a handful of central religious metaphors that may have some bearing on this experiential trend:

> I began by supposing that it would be fruitful to look at some elements of the metaphorical lingua franca of Western Christian writing about "spirituality" and "mysticism"—or what Bonaventure rather more engagingly called "the journey of the soul into God." It seemed that there was common agreement…, from Augustine to John of the Cross, in the description of that *itinerarium mentis* as an *itinerarium intus*, a journey of "inwardness"; it was commonly agreed, moreover, that the journey of "inwardness" could also be described as an "ascent," whether of a ladder or of a mountain. And it was commonly agreed that as the soul ascended to God it would approach a source of light which, being too bright for its powers of reception, would cause in it profound darkness. (1995b:3)

In fact, these themes of inwardness and ascent, Turner admits, are still rather familiar to us today: "I do not think we would know how to describe what it is that Christians are to do, or how they are to do it, without some appeal to the language of

'inwardness' and that of 'ascent,' for those metaphors are built into our psychological and epistemological language so intimately that we have, I suspect, quite literally *embodied* them" (3, emphasis in original). In pointing to the commonly shared metaphors of interiority and ascent—both in pre-modern mysticism and in modern times—Turner demonstrates how easy it is to be fooled into thinking that mysticism is fundamentally experiential. But this sort of thinking would be a mistake, Turner asserts. As he explains:

> from my study of the mediaeval mystical tradition, I began to see that not only would it be dangerous to assume that the similarities of language entailed a similarity of purpose, but that it would be actually wrong to suppose this. For the purposes being served by this cluster of metaphors in the mediaeval traditions began to seem very different from those it is serving today and, in one important respect, it looked as if it is serving an *opposed* purpose. (3-4, emphasis added)

Turner goes on to explain how these metaphors function today vis-à-vis medieval times. Due to the complexity (and remarkable number of clauses in each sentence) of his argument, I will quote him at length:

> Put very bluntly, the difference seemed to be this: that whereas our employment of the metaphors of "inwardness" and "ascent" appears to be tied in with the achievement and the cultivation of a certain kind of experience—such as those recommended within the practice of what is called, nowadays, "centring" or "contemplative" prayer—the mediaeval employment of them was tied in with a "critique" of such religious

> experiences and practices. Whereas we appear to have "psychologized" the metaphors, the Neoplatonic mediaeval writer used the metaphors in an "apophatic" spirit to play down the value of the "experiential"; and that, therefore, whereas it would come natural to the contemporary, "psychologizing" mind to think of "the mystical" in terms of its characterizing *experiences*, the mediaeval mind thought of the "mystical," that is to say, the "hidden" or "secret," wisdom as being what the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* called a "divinity" which is "hidden" precisely *from* experience…For though the mediaeval Christian neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and "oneness," he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of "experiences." And the central metaphor of this negativity, of this restraint of "experience," was the apophatic metaphor of "light" and "darkness," of the "cloud of unknowing." (4, emphasis in original)

In turn, Turner supposes that it is our modern loss of grasp on the Neoplatonic dialectical structure (to be discussed below) that is to blame for this experientialization of these medieval mystical metaphors. Turner's goal is to correct modern misreadings of mysticism by reintroducing us to the proper logic of Neoplatonic apophatic mystical theology:

> And, again paraphrasing a complex answer, what is distinctive about the employment of these metaphors within the mediaeval traditions of "mystical theology" is the Neoplatonic dialectical epistemology—its apophaticism [i.e. its quality of self-cancellation via paradox and

> negation]—within which those metaphors are set and by which their employment is governed. What differentiates the medieval employment of those metaphors from ours is the fact that we have retained the metaphors, evacuated them of their dialectics and refilled them with the stuff of "experience." This modern development I call "experientialism."…An ultimate purpose of this book is, therefore, to be an essay in the retrieval of the mediaeval tradition of apophatic or "negative" mysticism. The retrieval I have in mind is their rescue from a contemporary "experientialist" misreading…For as read adequately, they challenge much in contemporary thought and spirituality, in particular they challenge a certain positivism of religious experience. (5)

Turner of course admits that "it is impossible, in advance of telling the long and complex story of mediaeval Neoplatonic mysticism, to state this opposition between the mediaeval and the modern employment of the common language otherwise than thus bluntly and crudely" (4). For, indeed, the logic of apophatic mysticism is winding and inherently paradoxical; apophasis refers to the self-cancelling and undoing of language through paradox and negation. Much of Turner's book, therefore, endeavors to unpack what is meant by medieval apophaticism—in other words, "negative theology"—and its structuration according to the Neoplatonic dialectical epistemology. Thus, it is to a description of medieval apophatic mystical theology and the Neoplatonic dialectic that we now turn. What is at stake in understanding medieval Neoplatonic or apophatic mysticism is the realization that much of our modern experiential language, according to Turner, is rooted (at least in part) in a highly systematic pre-modern philosophical logic

that actually *resisted* experientialism and instead embraced *failure* to experience. As such, Turner demonstrates how what we assume today to be autonomous, unmediated mystical experiences of deep interiority or transcendence are, rather, the product of metaphorical language, produced by a highly systematic and philosophical theology, that was eventually severed of its apophatic, paradoxical qualities and subsequently "refilled…with the stuff of 'experience'" (5). In the spirit of Turner's (1995b) work, this chapter, rather, will emphasize medieval apophatic mystics' *failure* to experience the entirety of God, which seems reminiscent of the modern failure to experience asexuality on its own terms. Following this, I will later demonstrate how the medieval mystical embrace of failure constituted its own historically specific version of a queer art of failure—in the same way, perhaps, that modern paradoxical discourse about asexuality (as a sexual orientation) also results in failure.

The Neoplatonic Origins of Western Mysticism

To understand what makes medieval apophatic mysticism both Neoplatonic and dialectical, first it is necessary "to bring Plato and Exodus together" (Turner 1995b:11). In other words, first we must understand the "impact of converging Greek and Hebraic influences on Western Christian thought" and how they are a key "source for the Western Christian employment of the metaphors of darkness and light and of ascent and descent" (11). Rather than speaking of mysticism as the process of having transcendent and esoteric religious experiences, Turner, following Bonaventure, seems rather content in describing mysticism as "'the journey of the soul into God'" (3) or as "the progress of the soul towards God" (252). And this journey, Turner argues, is not only most commonly described in "metaphors of 'exteriority,' 'interiority' and 'ascent'" but also in terms of an

ultimate "self-subverting imagery" that effectively undoes the chain of all prior metaphors (252). And this ultimate self-subverting image is, most often, "the divine light, which, through its very excess, causes darkness and unknowing to the soul; hence, in that most Platonic of images, it is a light which is also a darkness, a 'dazzling darkness,' a 'cloud of unknowing'" (252).

Because these metaphors (of light and dark; interiority and exteriority; and ascent and descent) are so prominent in apophatic mysticism in the Western medieval tradition, it makes sense why Turner would devote his first chapter to a side-by-side reading of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and the Hebrew Bible's Exodus story (viz. Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai and his subsequent encounter with Jahweh). Turner explains how it was via the writings of the Greek-speaking Syrian Christian theologian Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite[29] (living in the late 5th or early 6th century) that this convergence of Plato and Exodus (i.e. Christian Neoplatonism) was popularized in the Western mystical tradition, thus resulting in the spread of these metaphors:

> [He] forged the language [of Christian mysticism], or a good part of it, and he made a theology out of those central metaphors without which there could not have been the mystical tradition that there has been: "light" and "darkness," "ascent" and "descent," the love of God as *eros*. This is the

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[29] Turner acknowledges that he continues to use "the archaism 'Denys'" rather than "the more modern appellations" such as Pseudo-Denys or Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (13). I, on the other hand, will use the name Pseudo-Denys or "the Pseudo-Denys" since it is, by now, the far more common of the three names (although Pseudo-Dionysius is also sometimes used). To this day, Pseudo-Denys' true identity remains unknown, and even information regarding his birth and birthplace is speculative at best.

> vocabulary of our [i.e. Western] mysticism: we owe it to Denys; and he owed it, as he saw it, to Plato and Moses. (13)

Pseudo-Denys' writings were first introduced to the West by means of the first (intelligible) translation into Latin by John Scottus in the ninth century,[30] and, from there, Pseudo-Denys' works, despite finding "little favour with the majority of monastic theologians" (12), soon became influential "in the theological schools of the urban universities and in the circles of the 'mystical theologians.' Consequently, one has to say that the influence of Denys was principally felt within Western Christianity in the four hundred years from the twelfth century to the sixteenth, and then chiefly within the formation of its systematic and mystical theologies" (12-13).[31] In other words, prior to the twelfth century as well as outside of the urban, academic monastic theological context, mysticism was not a concept significantly formally acknowledged or embraced in the West (although it can be read into the work of prior authors with Neoplatonic tendencies such as Origen and Augustine). Prior to the twelfth century one would likely have better luck turning to the East or Near-East in search of more formal and pronounced treatment of mystical themes and *ars erotica* (e.g. Sufism, Jewish mysticism, the early Christian desert fathers and mothers, and variations of mysticism in Hinduism

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[30] "In fact the first Latin translation of Denys was made by Abbot Hilduin of St. Denis for the Emperor Michael II, who sent a copy as a present to Louis the Pious in 827. But the translation was thought unreadably obscure [oops!] and Charles II, the Bald, asked John Scottus to redo the translation in 860-62" (Turner 1995b:12).

[31] As far as I am aware, the theological schools of the urban universities to which Turner refers were not opposed to the monastic lifestyle (and in fact adhered to strict religious/ascetic rules as well) but rather put a different emphasis on the kind of religious work that needed to be produced.

and Buddhism). Because this dissertation focuses primarily on Christianity and sexuality in the Western tradition, it makes sense, for now, to home in solely on Western mysticism, which is predominantly medieval and Neoplatonic/apophatic (as introduced by way of the Pseudo-Denys).

Plato's Cave and Exodus

In one of Pseudo-Denys' most famous writings, *Mystical Theology*, the Pseudo-Denys tells the story of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai. To Pseudo-Denys' contemporaries (and even to later medieval scholars) it is perfectly clear, however, that Pseudo-Denys is not simply recounting one of the most famous tales of Exodus; rather, he is making an incontrovertibly theological move by blending it together with crucial dialectical metaphors adopted from Plato. In his *Mystical Theology* Pseudo-Denys tells the tale of Moses' ascent to the top of Mount Sinai, which for him is a metaphor for coming closer to and subsequently uniting with God. The Pseudo-Denys discusses how uniting with God requires transcending human faculties of perception and cognition; in other words, desubjectivation is required. Thus, in the final instance, Moses reaches the highest peak of union and slips into the great beyond where he encounters the "brilliant darkness" of God—a beacon of light so bright that it blinds him and casts him into a sea of darkness. He loses all sense of self. He does not perceive, experience, or know in any human sense but rather "knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing" (Pseudo-Denys cited in Turner 1995b:13). Through these metaphors and their dialectical structure (descent/ascent, light/dark, knowing/unknowing) Pseudo-Denys establishes a "mystical theology" that later becomes the foundational structure for medieval Christian mysticism. I will unpack Pseudo-Denys' mash-up of Plato and Exodus in just a moment. But, first,

some background on Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" followed by a brief discussion of Exodus.

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," contained within his seminal work *The Republic*, consists of a dialogue between Socrates and Plato's brother Glaucon. Socrates says this: picture a gang of prisoners, chained in a cave, living out their entire lives facing a blank cave wall. They are unable to move their heads or to see their bodies in any way (this is all hypothetical, of course). A blazing fire sits behind them. In all their lives they have never witnessed anything other than this cave wall and the shadows the fire casts upon it. This is their reality: a cave wall, darkness, and shadows. How could they possibly conceive of anything outside this reality, Socrates asks. But let us suppose for a moment that if one of these prisoners "is released and turned to face the light which throws the shadows, will he not 'feel pain and because of the dazzle and glitter of the light' be 'unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw?'" (Plato cited in Turner 1995b:14). In turning away from the cave wall, the prisoner is effectively stunned by the sheer brilliance and strangeness of the light, which completely disorients him and blinds him for a time. Blinded, "he is unable to see even in his former twilight world" (14). This event is so traumatizing for the prisoner that he cannot proceed and yet he cannot go back. He is petrified and has to be forcibly dragged by the prison guards into the light of the sun. There, at the entrance to the cave where it opens out onto the world, the prisoner looks and sees nothing that makes sense. There is plenty to be seen, of course—after all, the light reveals plenty—and yet the prisoner cannot recognize a thing. "Gradually, however, as his eyes become stronger and more used to the new light, the prisoner feebly glimpses first in shadows and in reflections in pools the objects outside the cave, and then

sees the things themselves…Finally, his eyes being at last fully habituated to the light, the prisoner will, Socrates says, 'be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place'" (14-5). The prisoner, in the final instance, comes to see the world (and eventually its creation) in unmediated form—no longer in "shadows and appearances, mistaking them for reality" (15). Thus enlightened, the prisoner runs back to the cave to share with his fellow prisoners the news of his discoveries. Sadly, though, "the shock of the contrast between the light he inhabits and the gloom of the cave casts his eyes yet again into darkness as he descends" (15); he quarrels and bickers with his fellow prisoners about his discoveries and is ultimately regarded by them as a crackpot. What, then, did this story signify? What message did it teach? To this, Turner responds, "Plato, then, intended this fiction as an allegory of the philosopher's ascent to knowledge" and yet "Christians read it as an allegory of the ascent to God" (15). For Plato, at the pinnacle of this ascent is unmediated access to Knowledge. For Christians, the pinnacle was unmediated union with divinity itself.

And now, Exodus. In the Hebrew story of Exodus, Moses is summoned by Jahweh to ascend Mount Sinai and "to meet with him and…be told of a visitation which Jahweh will make to Moses 'in a dark cloud' (19, 9)" (Turner 1995b:16). The people of Israel, however, are required under pain of death to remain at the foot of the mountain; only "at the appropriate trumpet signal" would they "be permitted to approach the lower slopes" (16). Moses begins his ascent, and, on the third day, a thick cloud of smoke enshrouds the mountain. Threatening looking thunder and lightning descends, and the people of Israel are frightened beyond belief. Meanwhile, upon the mountain, Jahweh

reveals to Moses the Ten Commandments (i.e. the Decalogue), and Moses returns (i.e. descends) and introduces them to his people. And yet they are now scared; they lose all resolve. They demand to hear from Jahweh to assuage their fears. So, once again, Moses ascends the mountain back into the thick cloud of darkness indicating the hidden presence of God. It is there that Moses pleads to be shown Jahweh's "glory," and to this Jahweh responds:

> "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'the Lord;' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33, 19-23; cited in Turner 1995b:16)

In essence, then, Moses encounters God in darkness. Like a black hole, Moses cannot see God directly but only through the outline that signifies divine presence—a sort of presence that can only be affirmed non-positively.

With this context in mind, it is now possible to return once again to the Pseudo-Denys. As Turner explains, Pseudo-Denys' "retelling of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai is a pastiche of both the Exodus narrative and Platonic imagery" (14). In his tale, Pseudo-Denys speaks of the steps of Moses' journey as he ascends Mount Sinai and comes closer to uniting with God. At the lowest level, at the foot of the mountain, Moses undergoes

purification with the masses, and, "when every purification is complete, he hears the many voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly" (Pseudo-Denys cited in Turner 1995b:13). Eventually Moses manages to break free of the crowds on the lower slopes and "pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells" (ibid.). At this point, Moses is not capable of "seeing" the invisible God in unmediated form but rather reflects on God using his utmost human faculties: "This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise" (ibid.). But, once more, Moses continues to push on in pursuit of God. Moses continues his ascent until suddenly he slips, unknowingly, into the ineffable great beyond:

> [Moses] breaks free of them [i.e. those things perceived with the eye; material reality], away from what sees and is seen, and *he **plunges** into the **truly mysterious darkness of unknowing***. Here, ***renouncing all that the mind may conceive**, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible*, he belongs completely to him who is ***beyond everything***. Here, being ***neither oneself nor someone else***, one is ***supremely united*** by *a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and **knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing***. (Pseudo-Denys cited in Turner 1995b:15, emphasis added)

And, elsewhere, at the opening to *Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Denys converts this hybridization of Plato and Exodus into a sort of prayer:

> Trinity!! ***Higher*** than any being
> any divinity, any goodness!
> Guide of Christians
> in the wisdom of heaven!
> Lead us up ***beyond knowing and light***,
> up to the ***farthest, highest peak***
> of mystic scripture
> where the mysteries of God's Word
> lie simple, absolute, unchangeable
> in the ***brilliant darkness*** of a ***hidden silence***.
> Amid the ***deepest shadow***
> they pour ***overwhelming light***
> on what is most manifest.
> Amid the wholly ***unsensed and unseen***
> they ***completely fill*** our sightless minds
> with treasures ***beyond*** all beauty.
>
> (Pseudo-Denys cited in Turner 1995b:21, emphasis added)[32]

These two passages are so significant that I have gone a bit overboard italicizing and emboldening the many words and phrases that most explicitly evoke the Neoplatonic dialectic and its apophatic quality (in other words, its constant self-cancellation via paradox and negation). Notably, most of the phrases describe what we today might consider to be not only mystical descriptions but also esoteric experiences (or, in philosophical language, instances of desubjectivation): the plunge into the brilliant darkness of unknowing, being beyond everything, having lost one's sense of self (being neither oneself nor someone else), and yet being *united* and *filled* with something greater than oneself by knowing beyond the mind by knowing nothing. By merging Plato's Cave

[32] Here I've retained the original formatting of the prayer as presented by Turner.

and Exodus, Pseudo-Denys helps introduce not only much of the discursive basis for how we talk about experience today (i.e. metaphors of interiority, depth, and transcendence) but also the structural/logical basis for much of Western desubjectivation (i.e. *eros* as the process of self-dissolution which results in unification).[33] By situating Pseudo-Denys' treatment of experiential metaphors and desubjectivation within the context of a Neoplatonic epistemology, we begin to see, however, that the Pseudo-Denys is dealing not with esoteric experiences of the ineffable inasmuch as he is producing a logic—a *theology*—that is systematic and highly intellectual, geared toward demonstrating the negativity of experience. In other words, what we typically take to be autonomous, unmediated mystical experiences are, rather, descriptions of a particular philosophical logic: Christian Neoplatonism. Here unification with God occurred not through mastery (of language, thought, and experience) but rather through *desubjectivating failure*.

**Medieval Apophatic Mysticism as Queer Art of Failure**

In the previous section, via Denys Turner (1995b), I mounted a critique of "mystical experience"—the notion that medieval mystics "experienced" supernatural,

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[33] This notion of *eros* as "the process of self-dissolution which results in unification" will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four. Briefly, however, according to Turner (1995a), pre-modern Christian *eros*, as introduced by way of the Pseudo-Denys, consists of two components: 1) the erotic outflow from God that is creation of the universe, and 2) the return to God (i.e. the "source" of *eros*), which is obtained through self-renunciation or dissolution of the "private will." Being human (i.e. a discontinuous mortal being that is separated from God by a world of sin, temptation, and private wants), one must overcome such discontinuity through complete self-dissolution and annihilation of personal desires that are separate from those of God's will (see also Brown 1988, especially Chapter Eleven). In other words, one reunites with the limitless continuity of God by shedding oneself of the discontinuity that is inherent to being a human with one's own personal wants.

esoteric encounters with God—and demonstrated how the Western mystical tradition was rooted, rather, in a highly systematic theology that deployed a number of paradoxes indicating the *impossibility* of ever experiencing God in full. In this section, I will expand upon the notion of failure—the failure to experience, know, and speak of God in entirety—and will demonstrate how failure was an indispensable part of the "Christian theological tradition" known as medieval apophatic mysticism, "which constantly *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found" (Turner 1995b:8). Drawing on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), this section will conceive of medieval apophatic mysticism as one historically specific instantiation of a queer art of failure. Unlike Halberstam's queer art of failure, which occasionally resembles voluntarism (i.e. a self-preserving, voluntary opting out of norms via refusal or giving up), this section will argue that medieval apophatic mysticism generated *desubjectivating* failure precisely by adhering so strictly to religious rules, thus taking such rules to their limits. It was only through a lifetime of everyday ascetic practices of prayer, worship, contemplation, chastity, alimentary restraint, and self-renunciation that medieval mystics became capable of reaching the limits of the human capacity to conceive and speak of God, thus leaving themselves silently and thoughtlessly suspended, for a moment, in the infinity of the great divine. Thus, the medieval apophatic queer art of failure is quite literally an art—a way of life and a form of self-fashioning—that is lifelong and geared toward undoing the self as a means of uniting with God.

First, this section will outline the main points of Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and its connection to antisocial strands of queer theory. Following this,

the remainder of the section will conceive of apophatic mystical theology as a queer art of failure—one that is specific to medieval Western Christianity. Here I will elaborate upon the meaning of apophasis as a deconstructive negative theology. By incorporating paradoxical, self-cancelling, failed language about God into everyday religious life, medieval mystics made apophasis into not only a deconstructive mode of thought but also into a desubjectivating spiritual practice. This use of self-subverting language occurred alongside a number of other prerequisite ascetic practices geared toward renunciation of the self; as I will argue, most important among them was asexuality in the form of chastity. The section will conclude by demonstrating how despite apophatic mystics' strict adherence to religious rules, the end result of perfect adherence to such rules was *desubjectivating failure*: dissolution into the limitlessness of God by having hit the limits of human experience, thought, and speech. This failure-through-adherence-to-religious-rules will be juxtaposed with Halberstam's more voluntaristic, self-preserving embrace of simply opting out, not trying. The key contribution of this section is its emphasis on medieval apophatic desubjectivating failure as an example of "antisociality" that avoids the problematic queer studies tendency to oppose or opt out of norms. This section presents a version of antisociality that is not "against" sociality but rather undoes sociality from the inside.

Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*

In his book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) introduces his own particular brand of antisocial queer theory. In the vein of Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Halberstam, as well, sets out to challenge normative perceptions of "the good." However, rather than targeting "the Child," the hallmark of goodness according to

Edelman, Halberstam instead focuses on "all of history's losers" who disrupt the good by so frequently falling short of perfection (see dedication page). To this effect, Halberstam's book emphasizes the productivity of queer "failure, stupidity, and negativity, not to mention loss, lack, and SpongeBob Squarepants" (xi). Through the lens of failure, Halberstam seeks to explore how queers and queerness challenge mainstream narratives of success, goodness, and perfection. Above all, in addition to regarding failure as a common facet (if not also a fact) of life, Halberstam seeks to operationalize failure as an art form or a way of life: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life to cite Foucault" (2). To this effect, the goal for the remainder of this subsection will be to articulate this style or way of life (according to Halberstam) in more concrete terms. I will argue that Halberstam's queer art of failure verges on self-preserving voluntarism: opting out of norms to escape the inevitability of failure that always occurs by virtue of trying. Following this, the subsequent subsection will juxtapose Halberstam's modern queer art of failure with the medieval apophatic strategy of disarrangement as a way of life.

To understand Halberstam's notion of queer failure as a style or way of life, first it is necessary to understand how Halberstam thinks failure will disrupt "the good." Above all, Halberstam discusses a number of scenarios in which failure "allows us to escape…punishing norms" (3). According to Halberstam, failure

> can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon "trying and trying again." In fact if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards. What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development…And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (3)

While I acknowledge that Halberstam's argument is somewhat more complex than I make it out to be, I seek in this section merely to identify possible slippages in Halberstam's argument regarding norms and how they function. Although there are times in his book when Halberstam does indeed acknowledge the workings of failure that occur in the grooves of everyday life, the fact remains that Halberstam often operationalizes failure as a voluntary "way out" of norms. Interestingly, Halberstam speaks of queer failure in practice-based terms—a style, a way of life, and a form of art—while arguing, rather, that failure entails escaping norms and all the "trying and trying again" that one does in order to adhere to them. This is significant because although Halberstam does indeed critique notions of perfection and normative ways of life, his formulation of queer failure as "a way out" ultimately leads to self-preservation that doesn't require much practicing. Unlike Bersani's (1987) conceptualization of antisociality as a form of self-shattering or Edelman's (2004) association of queerness

with death, Halberstam's queer art of failure produces an intact subject who *shelters* him or herself from the very norms that make failure possible. In other words, the desubjectivated subject who is so central to queer antisociality is missing from Halberstam's (2011) work. For, indeed, it is quite easy to succeed at not trying to succeed. It is perhaps even more comfortable for some people.

In addition to the issue of Halberstam's queer art of failure being "the practice of not doing stuff," I also take issue with his conceptualization of norms as something one can voluntarily escape. Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980), Judith Butler's "the heterosexual matrix" (1990), Foucault's conceptualization of "the deployment of sexuality" (1976), and numerous asexuality studies scholars' writings on "compulsory sexuality" (see esp. Gupta 2013) all point to the fact that norms are often something we cannot escape and, in fact, *must* follow to some degree in order to maintain a modicum of social intelligibility. As Butler (2004) states (via Hegel) on the topic of intelligibility and norms:

> it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings. That view has its allures and its truth, but it also misses a couple of important points. The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human (2)

For Butler especially, gender and sexuality are so constitutive of modern subjectivity that one cannot be recognizable or intelligible without adhering to some degree to norms of gender performance and sexual identity. This does not mean that there is no wiggle room (after all, people fail at sexual and gender performance in major and small ways all the time), but it does mean that *opting out of such norms is not a possibility*. To this effect, Butler states, "if gender is a kind of doing, an *incessant* activity performed, in part, *without one's knowing and without one's willing*, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is *a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint*" (1, emphasis added). In this sense, then, Halberstam's call for queer individuals to escape norms is not a practical or viable option. It is seemingly impossible to shed oneself of sexual and gender norms at will, as if they were clothes simply to be taken on and off whenever one pleases. And if one were even capable of doing so, opting out would seemingly do nothing to disrupt "the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (Halberstam 2011:3) because such disruption would be utterly unrecognizable.

In the next section, to mend some of these slippages in Halberstam's (2011) treatment of norms, I present pre-modern apophatic mysticism as an alternative version of a queer art of failure—one that does not opt out but rather adheres so closely to religious rules that they become maxed out, thus sparking desubjectivation.

## Disarrangement as a Way of Life

In order to understand what makes medieval apophatic mysticism a queer art of failure, it is necessary to do three things. First, it is necessary to understand how this medieval form of mysticism generated *failure*. Secondly, it is necessary to understand

how such failure produced *queer effects*. And, thirdly, it is necessary to know how medieval apophatic queer failure functioned as a systematic art form or *way of life*.

To this effect, this section starts out by returning, once again, to the philosophical logic of Christian Neoplatonism with all its self-cancelling paradoxes and self-subverting language. This section will focus on apophasis (i.e. self-cancelling discourse) because paradoxical language and disordered thought—in other words, *failure*—was the inevitable result of mystics' attempts to say and think everything about God. Such failure made way for desubjectivating union with God. Here I will discuss how the medieval apophatic mystical compulsion to say everything about God (until the point of desubjectivating failure) demonstrates one particular historical example of how one can suspend or disrupt normality from within compulsory systems, within the grooves of ordinary life. Finally, with respect to failure as a *way of life*, I will demonstrate how apophatic theology—in other words, "that speech about God which is the failure of speech" (Turner 1995b:20)—was "embodied in a life" of perpetual religious worship and was "couched in…the rhythms of common religious ritual" including liturgy, sacraments, the Eucharist, and various ascetic practices of renunciation (258). Central to this lifestyle, I argue, was asexuality (in the form of chastity) among other practices of self-detachment that brought the practitioner closer to desubjectivation and, thus, closer to uniting with God.

To understand medieval apophatic mysticism's linkage to failure, first it is necessary to explore the dialectical structure behind this mysticism and how it culminates not in sublation but rather disarrangement. Apophatic theology, which Turner defines as "that speech about God which is the failure of speech" (20), is unique in that it produces

endless discourse about God (i.e. cataphasis) while recognizing that the culmination of such discourse is ultimately paradox and disorder (i.e. apophasis). Medieval mysticism inherited this mode of Christian theology from Neoplatonism, which often employed paradoxes of ascent/descent, light/dark, and knowing/unknowing:

> We could describe that common narrative structure as "dialectical." In both the Allegory and in Exodus, there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress, and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in Exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess—therefore a "luminous darkness"…Light is darkness, knowing is unknowing, a cloud, and the pain of contemplating it, is the pain of contemplating more reality than can be borne: "man may not see me and live." (Turner 1995b:17-18)

Notably, such paradoxes do not point to an absence or void but rather to an *excess* too painful to contemplate. In fact, in Exodus, "the price of the pure contemplation" is death itself: "the pain of contemplating more reality than can be borne: 'man may not see me and live'" (18). Therefore, the limitlessness of God is not in any way capable of being experienced, felt, thought of, or articulated in human terms. Rather, the contemplation of God ends in the *failure* of the human capacity: dissolution of subjectivity—one that is akin to death. This process starts merely with language—with "the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can express, *a fortiori*, in bits of

collapsed, disordered language, like the babble of a Jeremiah" (22)—yet ends in complete disarrangement of the self which inaugurates dissolution into the limitlessness of God.

In essence, what apophatic mystical theology teaches us is that, at least from a pre-modern perspective, there is much, much more to God that exists beyond our grasp. Ultimately we are bound to fail to conceive of this divine excess, as the pain of contemplating more reality than can be born is the pain of death—metaphorical death for sure (i.e. the death of the subject) and perhaps even physical death itself. Hence, in alignment with the antisocial thesis's critique of "the good," medieval apophatic theology likewise annihilates any hope of a future in a happy afterlife—that is, an afterlife in which one presumably "lives on," intact and self-preserved. If this apophaticism is taken to its fullest extent, it ends, if lucky, in babbling nonsense and failure; if not so lucky, trauma and death. In fact, these mystical brushes with desubjectivation, trauma, and death can be so painful and so intense as to often require articulation in erotic terms—resembling a sort of pre-Lacanian *jouissance*, or even a mystical version of Bataille's obsession with the gruesome painful pleasure of *lingchi* (death by a thousand cuts). (See Chapter Four for a more in depth comparison of pre-modern and modern conceptions of the erotic.)

Thus far, however, this has all been very abstract. To give a more concrete sense of how this dialectic functioned in everyday life and how it always ended in discursive failure, I will cite Turner (1995b) at length. Here, in this quotation, Turner discusses the cataphatic (i.e. "the verbose element in theology") and, in the following quote below it, explains how such verbosity bred paradox and self-subverting descriptions of God (i.e. apophasis):

> The cataphatic is, we might say, the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character, causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse, whether of science, literature, art, sex, politics, the law, the economy, family life, warfare, play, teaching, physiology, or whatever. It is its cataphatic tendencies which count for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened.*…For in its cataphatic mode, theology is, we might say, a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes. (Turner 1995b:20, emphasis in original)

A deployment of all the resources of language was instrumental for the mystics to reach a fuller understanding of God. This pre-modern incitement to discourse about God may seem quite odd, however, given Pseudo-Denys' foremost investment in the apophatic (which always culminates in silence). And yet talk of God was crucial and, indeed, prerequisite to reaching the apophatic:

> We could say that the predicament for theology is rather like that of the verbose teacher, who in shame at having talked too much in the class, lapses into an embarrassed silence. Good theology, Denys thinks, has the same outcome, for it leads to that silence which is found only on the other side of a general linguistic embarrassment…But that embarrassment has to be procured, and to reach that point—this is the essence of the

> cataphatic—it is necessary for theology to talk too much. (Turner 1995b:22-23)

And this Chatty Cathy mode of Christian mystical theology ends up being quite queer in the end—not only in a queer art of failure sort of way but also in producing utterly absurd, surprising, and sometimes even lewd conceptions of God that ultimately destabilize the speaking subject:

> [We] name God from his effects and are justified in doing so *because* he is their cause…We can *justify* describing God as "a gentle breeze" because we know that God has caused all the gentle breezes we feel…[Moreover,] to name God adequately, we not only may, but must, name God by all the names of creatures: only the "sum total of creation" adequately reflects the superabundant variety of God…[And] whatever constraints an apophatic theology may impose, they cannot justify the restriction of theological language to just a few, favoured, respectful, "pious," names…In a pious vocabulary of unshocking, "appropriate" names, lies the danger of the theologian's being all the more tempted to suppose that our language about God has succeeded in capturing the divine reality in some ultimately adequate way. Tactically preferable is the multiplicity of vulgar images which, because they lack any plausibility as comprehensive or appropriate names, paradoxically have a more uplifting efficacy…A "golden and gleaming" God is too like what we might choose to praise; a God "enraged," "cursing" and "drunk and hungover" [these are all actual descriptions made by the Pseudo-Denys!] might have greater power to

> shock us into a sense of the divine transcendence by the magnitude of the metaphorical deficiency…[Likewise,] for every ground we have for describing God as male there is another for describing God as female. And exclusive use of male descriptions is therefore a misdescription of God by exclusion…The second reason why the description of God as male is inappropriate…[is because] it is perfectly obvious that God is not the sort of being who could have a gender at all. (Turner 1995b:24-25, emphasis in original)

Consequently, the attempt to unite with God is, ultimately, a life's work—one that requires mulling over an endless chain of paradoxes and descriptions that always fall short. One must devote every living moment to thinking and speaking of God to the extent that it is humanly possible. To think how humbling it must feel, however, to walk the long path to God only to discover, after a life of perpetual worship, that one was on a treadmill this whole time: for, it "follows from the *unknowability* of God that there is very little that can be *said* about God or rather…what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God *mean*" (20, emphasis in original). Ultimately this is why Turner calls medieval apophatic mystical theology a "Christian theological tradition which consciously *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found" (8, emphasis in original). Paradoxically, one was only successful when one failed; apophatic mystical theology was, in essence, the religious art of deconstruction—the art of self-undoing as a means for unification with God.

Consequently, throughout the Middle Ages from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, a number of metaphors and strategies were devised to describe and undergo this deconstructive, desubjectivating process: Eckhart's notion of "detachment," the anonymous *Cloud* Author's emphasis on the practice of "forgetting," the process of simplification via an "ascent of denials," or the complete opposite—the breakdown of discourse via an excess of affirmations in the style of Bonaventure or Julian of Norwich (257). Notably, all of these techniques and strategies culminate in silence via discursive attenuation and/or breakdown. Yet Turner cannot emphasize enough that these strategies and practices of mysticism are not to be mistaken for voluntarism (i.e. the practice of willfully attempting to "have" experiences of the ineffable by willfully attempting to fail). Rather, for Turner, the apophatic is "couched in…rhythms of common religious ritual"—especially the liturgical, sacramental, and Eucharistic elements of everyday religious life (258). This is crucial: unlike modern deconstruction which is almost exclusively an academic mode of critique (commonly employed by poststructuralism, postmodernism, and queer theory), "in the Middle Ages, apophaticism was no mere intellectual critique of discourse, but was *in addition* a *practice* which was expected to be *embodied in a life*" (8, emphasis added).[34] If one had an "apophatic moment" in medieval times (my phrase), it was, at best, fleeting—a sort of liminal break, a feeling of being lost in the moment unbeknownst. Such a moment of apophasis was not something *out of the ordinary* but rather a suspension of normality occurring *within the ordinary*. So, medieval apophatic mysticism was never purely academic; apophasis was indeed

[34] Of course there are some exceptions to this assertion—for example, Butler's (1990) discussion of "doing" gender differently so as to expose the naturalness of gender as, rather, social construction.

embodied—albeit never experienced—spontaneously, by means of a lifetime of devotion to the *ordinary everyday practices* of the Christian way of life. This desubectivation and destabilization, which occurred through strict adherence to religious life, drastically differs from Halberstam's call for "escaping" norms. Overall, medieval Western apophatic mysticism destabilizes notions of 'the good' while being "considerably more exoteric" and "negative" than we often give it credit for:

> the deformations of the "experientialist" derive from the mistake of reinterpreting as a first-order practice *of* Christian piety that which is the second-order dialectic practised upon and *within* that piety;[35] from the error of understanding that which is a "moment" of reserve, of denial and unknowing within worship, prayer and sacrament as if it were a rival practice which displaces that Christian ordinariness. "Experientialism" in its most extreme forms is therefore the displacement of a sense of the negativity of all religious experience with the pursuit of some goal of achieving *negative experiences*. Experientialism is, in short, the "positivism" of Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic, rushing to fill it with the plenum of the psychologistic. It resists the deconstructions of the negative way, holding fast to

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[35] By first-order and second-order dialectic, Turner is referring to, respectively, "the cataphatic employment of conflicting negative-and-affirmative images at the first-order level and the apophatic negation of the negation between those first-order descriptions at the second-order level" (1995b:252). Thus, there is no such thing as cultivating practices of desubjectivation in medieval mystical theology. Rather, one practices the ordinary Christian life and encounters aphophaticism quite spontaneously and involuntarily as a result of adhering to this way of life.

> suppositious experiences *of* the negative. (Turner 1995b:259, emphasis in original)

Medieval apophatic mysticism complicates Halberstam's queer art of failure by not only demonstrating how failure may occur within compulsory systems but it also challenges notions of "the good" (e.g. a paradisiacal afterlife) via its embrace of desubjectivation, deconstruction, non-positivity, and negativity of experience.

The Role of "Asexuality" in Medieval Mysticism

Having just explored medieval apophatic mysticism's status as a compulsory way of life, it is now possible to contextualize asexuality and to demonstrate its central role within this way of life. As I argue here, asexuality in the form of chastity played an indispensable part in the medieval mystical way of life due to its status as a compulsory practice for monks, clergy, and mystics of all kinds. This is because chastity, up until the sixteenth century Reformation, was regarded as one of the most crucial practices of ascetic self-renunciation through which the path to the divine could be attained. Cultivation of "asexuality," albeit compulsory, was not regarded as easy and, in fact, was equated with immense spiritual ability once finally attained—the kind of ability that, through self-renunciation, could eventually lead to mystical moments of apophatic union with God. This section will briefly unpack the logic behind chastity's crucial role in enabling medieval mystics to achieve a level of perfection and self-undoing sufficient for union with God.

According to Foucault's 1982 essay, "The Battle for Chastity," complete absence of sexuality (in body, mind, and soul) was one of the most telltale signs of being close to the divine. According to Foucault's reading of Cassian, one of the founding figures of

monasticism, “fornication” was regarded as the root cause of all sin. Not only was fornication a sin in itself, but it also bled into other forms of vice. According to Foucault, among the eight vices of this world—fornication and greed; pride and vainglory; sloth and acedia; and avarice and wrath—Cassian identifies fornication as that which heads “the causal chain” and thus causes a domino reaction of “backsliding [into vice] and turmoil” if not kept under wraps (1982:190). This is because “of the eight sins fornication is the only one which is at once innate, natural, physical in origin and needing to be as totally destroyed as the vices of the soul, such as avarice and pride” (190). For this reason, then, asexuality in the form of chastity was regarded as the cornerstone of medieval Christian asceticism; it kept all other forms of sin and vice in check. For any mystic to truly be devoted to the mystical way of life, first “asexuality” had to be achieved. As such, asexuality-as-chastity was the most crucial precursor to desubjectivation and unification with divine limitlessness. I bring up this point to demonstrate how, within the context of the Western Middle Ages, “asexuality” was not regarded as a disability, pathology, or lack but rather as a *spiritual ability* that made way for desubjectivating access to divine excess. This will later be juxtaposed with Chapter Three, which explores asexuality’s connections to disability in late modernity, and Chapter Four, which explores asexuality’s connections to lack today.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored medieval apophatic mystical theology, a “Christian theological tradition which constantly *organized* a strategy of disarrangement as a way of life, as being that in which alone God is to be found” (Turner 1995b:8, emphasis in original). The chapter has demonstrated how medieval mystics’ attempts to articulate

and conceive of God's entirety resulted, rather, in failure: the failure of the human capacity to grasp the limitlessness of God. The result of such failure was desubjectivation, which enabled mystics to dissolve into (thus uniting with) God. In turn, this chapter has worked to articulate this medieval apophatic mystical theology as a queer art of failure—one that is conditional upon a lifetime of strict adherence to religious rules, including asexuality in the form of chastity. By demonstrating medieval apophatic theology's capacity to challenge subjectivity and normalcy *through* compulsory adherence to religious rules, this chapter has worked to amend antisocial queer theorist Jack Halberstam's notion of the queer art of failure as a self-preserving "way out" of norms.

In conclusion I seek to apply these aforementioned analytical lenses of apophatic mysticism and queer failure to a modern-day issue: the issue of asexuality as a new "sexual" orientation. In the attempt to make asexuality fit, today, within the discursive confines of modern sexuality, a whole set of paradoxes has been produced—form/void, presence/lack, and asexual sexuality—that, rather than bolstering sexuality, poke holes in the floundering logic of sexuality. I refer to this process—that is, the process of sexual language undoing itself in an attempt to incorporate asexuality—as "modern apophatic sexuality." During my previous ethnographic fieldwork, I witnessed a number of offline asexuality community members and online forum participants discuss asexuality. Conversations always cycled between describing those things about sexuality that group members "lacked" and, on the other hand, supporting the claim that asexuality is a new form of sexual identity or orientation. In my own efforts to articulate asexual experience, I found that I circled endlessly between these paradoxes of asexuality as a lack and form

of sexuality—and this left me silent, with nothing to say about the actual experience of asexuality itself (other than, of course, its paradoxical relationship to sexuality). My experiences as an anthropologist attempting to study asexuality often culminated in apophatic moments, in which I was silenced and startled by my failure to represent asexuality on its own terms. In fact, this seemed to be a common feeling for some of the other group members as well, who clearly felt similar frustrations trying to articulate themselves within the trap of the modern-day asexual paradox. These feelings, though difficult to articulate, pointed to the limitations of sexual language and logic to fully account for asexuality. As I argue, identifying such limits of sexual language and logic is a key step toward destabilizing the presumed universality of sexuality that presently constrains how asexuality gets experienced today. The incitement to discourse about modern asexuality as a form of sexuality culminates in numerous paradoxes, which, ironically, lead to failure, silence, and the realization that sexuality indeed has limits.

Although such a concept as modern apophatic sexuality is not perfectly apophatic in a medieval Christian Neoplatonic sense, (after all, modern apophatic sexuality does not lead to desubjectivating spiritual encounters with God), it does reintroduce the importance of paradox and its capacity for self-subversion via contradictory language and thought. Likewise, although we do not have the same emphasis on religious practices today (e.g. a whole set of rituals, modes of worship, and forms of ascetic self-denial) modern apophatic sexuality nevertheless holds the capacity to challenge the compulsory practice of incitement to discourse about sexuality. Through countless dead-ends and failures of speech and logic concerning asexuality as a "sexual" orientation, I'd like to think that modern apophatic sexuality will, someday, destabilize sexuality enough to

open new pathways for how we articulate, conceive of, and perhaps even experience asexuality.

## Chapter Three: The Sexualization of Asexuality: Demonic Possession and Sexual Pathology

*As far as the hysteric is concerned, finally stripped of her borrowed halo, she has lost her rights to the stake or to canonization. She has the honor today of being a sick person, and depends directly on the doctor*

Legrand du Saulle, quoted in Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria,* 1996, 14

By which historical twists and turns did asexuality become part of sexuality? Whereas Chapters One and Two explored the radical discontinuity between pre-modern and modern conceptions of (a)sexuality, this chapter (as well as Chapter Four) explores the start of a continuity with modern-day notions of sexuality. Chapters One and Two utilized the alterity of early Christian versions of sexual renunciation in order to disrupt modern notions of asexuality as 1) a form of identity (as opposed to an ascetic practice); 2) a form of sexual subjectivity (rather than a component of desubjectivation); and 3) an inability to experience sexual desire (as opposed to being a spiritual ability). The remainder of this dissertation, by contrast, hypothesizes potential pathways by which "asexuality" first became part of the modern deployment of sexuality; it does so in order to make the reader skeptical of the modern-day assumption that asexuality has always been part of sexuality in the form of a biological orientation that is separate from the contingencies of history. The language of "hypothesis" or "conjecture" is crucial to these final two chapters, as the conceptual stories I tell here are intended as strategic skepticism-inducing narratives (to destabilize our present views on sexuality) rather than empirical claims about the past. There are many potential narratives to be told about the rise of modern sexuality or about the sexualization of asexuality; this chapter tells just one of those narratives.

The chapter starts by telling the story of the diminution of "asexuality's" connection to the divine and its new linkages to evil and sexual impropriety around the turn of early modernity (roughly the 1500s and 1600s). Through the example of demonic possession of early modern female mystics and nuns (mostly in Catholic Italy, France, and Spain), I will elaborate upon the historical circumstances that opened up a particular form of mysticism (and its ascetic and "asexual" practices) to new associations with evil, antisociality, and aberrant female sexual behavior.

In particular, I focus on a controversial early modern form of mysticism known as "passive interiority" which, through passively letting God enter the soul (by undergoing ascetic self-renunciation), enabled even the most unskilled of practitioners access to the divine. Passive interiority helped democratize mysticism by making it much easier for not just men but now also women (including laity) of any social and economic background to practice mysticism and achieve access to God without the help of the Church. The problem, however, was that passive interiority equally made oneself vulnerable to possession by demonic spirits, which lay practitioners were purportedly unequipped to identify or combat. Consequently, clergy came to perceive of the new mysticism as dangerous both to the Church and to the individual practitioner; and women's claims to divine access to God therefore came to be questioned and were ultimately disparaged through accusations of demonic possession. In other words, the Church perceived of practitioners of passive interiority as "heterodox" or "antisocial" because they followed a form of mysticism that disrupted Church authority and often led down the path to evil, so they thought.

In turn, the most popular way of disparaging these antisocial, heterodox mystical practices during early modern times was by stereotyping them as feminine and therefore weak and prone to demonic possession and sexual promiscuity. By the end of the early modern period, this "crisis" of female mysticism resulted in numerous outbreaks of convulsion and (accusations of) sexual impropriety in monasteries and amongst laity (especially among women)—outbreaks which today we might call "hysterical." The chapter will conclude by suggesting that "asexuality's" early modern sexualization via demonic possession possibly led to its late modern pathologization under the rubric of hysteria and nervous illnesses with a sexual etiology. In other words, the chapter charts, in sum, a shift from asexuality-as-ability to asexuality-as-disability. In the concluding pages, the chapter will conceive of this asexuality-as-disability as a form of queer antisociality due to its early modern connections to heterodox mystical practices that disrupted the Church's social authority, thus launching a chain of events leading to demonic possession and "asexuality's" eventual sexual pathologization.

The chapter presents two hypotheses about "asexuality." Firstly, that asexuality (a mystical practice of sexual and self-renunciation) became sexualized among women through its connections to "feminine" passive interiority and demonic possession in the early modern period. My hypothesis is that sexual renunciation, as the most crucial practice toward achieving self-renunciation (see Chapter Two), was indispensable to the practice of passive interiority and therefore came to be linked, quite paradoxically, to aberrant female sexual behavior at the same time when passive interiority started to be disparaged. I do not attempt to make any conjectures about chastity among male clergy but only present a small hypothesis about "asexuality" among early modern female

mystics and its paradoxical sexualization via accusations of demonic possession. My second hypothesis, which is an extension of the first hypothesis, conjectures that demonic possession (of which "asexuality" was a part) eventually entered the domain of late modern medicine, under the rubric of sexual pathology. To reiterate, this hypothesis about "asexuality's" sexualization and eventual pathologization is not an empirical claim but rather a strategic narrative with the intended rhetorical effect of generating skepticism in the reader with regards to our modern ways of thinking about (a)sexuality as a transhistorical instinct or internal force.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I start with an exploration of shifts in the historical landscape as it pertains to mysticism of the late medieval (1200s-1400s) and early modern periods (1500s-1600s). This first section will demonstrate how mysticism was democratized and became much more accessible to both women and men (including laity) from all backgrounds. As the second section (entitled "The Problem of Demonic Possession in Early Modern Mysticism") will demonstrate, this democratization of mysticism became problematic to Church authorities in the early modern period because it promoted a radical equality between male and female practitioners of mysticism, and it also enabled mystics of any social standing to access God without much need for the Church. This section will unpack what is meant by "passive interiority"—a particularly scandalous form of mysticism—and will show how most of the accusations of demonic possession and stereotypes of female weakness and sexual misbehavior were directed toward this specific version of mysticism. The second half of this section, in turn, will historicize how demonic possession and convulsion, as well as Catholic practices of confession and changing conceptions of "flesh" and body, were eventually inherited by

late modern medicine—particularly psychiatry and its study of sexual pathology. The chapter conjectures that asexuality was first absorbed into the modern deployment of sexuality by way of demonic possession, convulsion, and their inheritance by late modern medicine. I conclude with some notes on asexuality-as-disability and will discuss how it was via passive interiority's disruption of the social structure of the Church that such accusations of sexual impropriety and demonic possession were first launched.

**Changes in the Landscape of Mysticism**

In this section I will historicize shifts in the landscape of Western late medieval and early modern mysticism, ranging from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries approximately. The section will discuss three main areas: 1) the democratization of mysticism; 2) the rise of female mysticism; and 3) the popularization of vernacular, nonintellectual language in mystical theology. In sum, these three areas demonstrate the popularization of mysticism that occurred starting in the late medieval period and how it enabled unskilled and informally trained practitioners to achieve a level of divine connection previously reserved only for Christian male elites. It was in response to these changing conditions of mysticism that the demonic possession scare of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries took place.

Democratization of Mysticism

Starting in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and proceeding into early modern times, perceptions of mysticism began to change. Mysticism became much more democratic, much more sensationalistic, and very less intellectual. Whereas mysticism was previously solely a theological and monastic endeavor rooted in a complex philosophy (i.e. Neoplatonism and apophasis), Christians were now beginning to think of

mysticism as something anyone could "do." As Denys Turner states, "from the late fourteenth century, the canon of those now called 'mystics' ceases to include theologians of repute and, *e converso*, from that time to our own the canon of theologians includes no mystics" (1995b:7). This shift, according to Turner, coincided with a growing anti-intellectualist movement amongst Christians during the late medieval period—a growing belief that the path to uniting with God occurs not through our own intellections *about* God but rather through God's love *for us* (222). Previously one could not "do" mysticism but could only slip into divine limitlessness involuntarily, by means of adhering religiously to the Christian monastic theological way of life: that is, through "moments of affirmation and…negation" and "moments of the construction and…deconstruction of experience, whether in worship, private prayer, sacramental or liturgical action" (272). Now, however, as historian Bernard McGinn makes clear, anyone anywhere could achieve divine grace by merely incorporating ascetic practices into ordinary daily life:

> This emphasis began to change in the early thirteenth century with the first stirring of a process of democratization and secularization that was to grow over the next five centuries. By democratization, I mean a conviction that it was *practically* and not just theoretically possible for all Christians, not just the *religiosi*, to enjoy immediate consciousness of God's presence. By secularization, I mean that flight from the world was not a necessary precondition for attaining such divine grace—God could be found in the secular realm and in the midst of everyday experience. (1996:198, emphasis added)

To this effect, McGinn explains, thirteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart "speaks of the ineffable joy that God takes in *any person* who leaves or abandons himself and all things in perfect detachment[36] or 'separatedness'"—a self-renuciation that could be achieved by anyone, and not just the elite male *religiosi* (Eckhart cited in McGinn 1996:200, emphasis added). The key point here is that *anyone* could now achieve God's ineffable blessing, for God cannot resist the purity of detachment:

> the very best thing about love is that it compels me to love God, yet detachment *compels God to love me*. Now it is far greater for me to compel God to come to me than to compel myself to come to God; and that is *because God is able to conform himself, far better and with more suppleness, and to unite himself with me [more] than I could unite myself with God.* (Eckhart quoted in Turner 1995b:172, emphasis added)

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[36] According to historian Moshe Sluhovsky (2007), for medieval and early modern mystics the notion of "detachment" or "contemplation" was relatively synonymous with self-renunciation or desubjectivation. This is very different than the modern notion of contemplation as "just thinking" or "reflecting." As Sluhovsky states, contemplation "is radically different from meditation, and only this stage should be called mystical. While meditative prayer involves active production of images, feelings, and words, contemplative prayer is nondiscursive and nonvisual. At its peak it is not even felt, and the soul stands in a state of suspension. As such, it is obviously extremely problematic to try to explain or even describe it in words…Hence, the transition from meditation to contemplation is also a transition from activity to passivity, from designing a course of prayer to abandoning the soul to be acted upon by God who would infuse it with the only thing still active in this stage, beyond words and images and beyond thinking and understanding, pure love" (101).

Furthermore, as McGinn follows up with a discussion of fourteenth century mystic Catherine of Siena, the fact that God *comes to us* means that God can be found anywhere—"not only in private [i.e. secluded monasteries] but also in the public forum of worldly activity" (1996:200). This new discovery of God in public life did not overturn the foundational premises of Christian asceticism but rather reinterpreted them:

> this form of *unio mystica* in no way contradicts the ancient tradition, insisted on by the monks, of combining action and contemplation as the highest form of spiritual attainment. Still, action and contemplation had traditionally been seen as successive aspects of a total life dedicated to God, aspects often in tension with one another; they had not been conceived of, as in Catherine's case, as being capable of fusion within the sphere of public activity. (200-201)

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries divine grace of God could be achieved anywhere and by anyone willing enough to practice internal contemplation (otherwise known as self-renunciation or detachment) whether it be at church among others, at home alone, or in any other place. No longer did practitioners of mysticism have to adhere to the strict rules and harsh setting of monasticism. The bar for receiving the divine grace of God was set much lower. No longer were monasticism and theology the sole gatekeepers of mysticism. God's love would penetrate the souls of anyone who adhered to the principles of self-renunciation; and, in the absence of monastic requirements, this could be achieved through much easier techniques, such as passive interiority (to be discussed in the next section below).

To this end, in an anti-intellectualist religious environment that had lost its grip on Christian Neoplatonism and the negativity of experience (see Chapter Two), one no longer slipped into the ineffable involuntarily but rather *voluntarily* paved the path to God through practicing asceticism on one's own in public (and even secular) life. Rather than undergoing the secluded, lifelong intellectual and monastic pursuit of God (which always culminated in desubjectivating failure), the new mystic had only to open him or herself to God, through detachment, for God's love to enter and possess the soul. And anyone anywhere could achieve this. In fact, in the most radical and heretical of cases, the complete "abandonment of the soul to the love of God" authorized the abandonment of proper religious responsibilities, such as "good works, external acts, and even rites and ceremonies" which were previously compulsory under monasticism (Sluhovsky 2007:106). As we will see later on, this abandonment of religious responsibilities especially wreaked havoc upon the early modern era when demonic possession was in full swing.

Female Mysticism and Vernacular Language

Most characteristic of late medieval mysticism was its sudden democratization. In turn, this democratization had immense implications for women's ability to participate in and to be recognized for their contributions to Christian mysticism. According to Bernard McGinn, "only after 1200 did women begin to take a prominent place in the mystical tradition" (1996:201). Aside from "a few pieces of hagiography" and "the writings of one or two remarkable women (like Hildegard of Bingen),…there is little in the recorded tradition" about or by female mystics prior to the thirteenth century (201). For this reason, "nothing is more striking about the new mysticism beginning about 1200

than the important role that women assume, both in terms of hagiographical accounts and texts produced by women themselves" (201). Although McGinn acknowledges that much of the writing about medieval female mystics actually "comes from the pens of their male admirers," he does point out that women mystics made their voices most heard strategically in dialogue with men, recorded in the form of "an overheard conversation" (203). In these overheard conversations, "the contributions of male and female voices [were] both present in varied ways, often in a mutually enriching fashion" (204). Hence, at a time in which "it was virtually impossible for women to create new ways of living the gospel without the cooperation and approval of men," these dialogues offered an outlet for Christian women's contributions (204). In turn, this dialogic model sparked "new forms of cooperation between women and men, both in terms of a shared dedication to the pursuit of the *vita apostolica*, as well as a joint concern for attaining the 'loving knowledge of God'" (203). McGinn calls this turn of events "unprecedented" and "remarkable," as something like it had not even come close to occurring in all the centuries since Christianity's emergence.

Along with this newfound cooperation and dialogue between men and women which expanded the scope of mysticism, there came new, more accessible vernacular forms of mystical language (205). Whereas theologians and monastics of yesteryear had spoken "the common learned language of a largely male cultural and religious elite," by the thirteenth century "the picture was to grow more diverse, more striking and flamboyant, at times more extreme, and certainly far more controversial in the world of vernacular mystical theology" (205). Most characteristic of this "vernacularization" of mystical theology was *hyperbole*. McGinn provides two examples of the use of

hyperbole in vernacular mystical theology: hagiography (the writing of the lives and miracles of the saints) and visionary recital (the recounting of visions, often with accompanying religious commentary). According to McGinn, "all the forms of medieval theology tried to be true to two goals: deepening the understanding of faith (*intellectus fidei*) and enkindling charity (the *experientia caritatis*), so that one could arrive at the higher understanding of love (*intelligentia amoris*)" (206). In accomplishing this, vernacular mysticism of the 1200s just so happened to employ sensationalistic genre elements (miracles, visions) to give mysticism that supernatural experiential quality which we still associate with it today. This contrasts with medieval apophatic mystical theology which, instead of articulating visions and miracles, utilized a number of paradoxical descriptions to demonstrate the *negativity* of experience. Whereas vernacular mysticism was sensationalistic and supernatural, medieval apophatic mysticism was, rather, intellectual and deconstructive. I will briefly discuss hagiography and visionary recital below. Such information about the hyperbolic qualities of late medieval mysticism will better prepare us to interpret exaggerated and highly stylized accounts of early modern demonic possession in the next section.

As McGinn explains, "most saints' lives…involve[d] a heightening of the presentation of events according to certain norms that were as well understood by their medieval audience as the conventions that contemporary viewers accept in film" (207). In other words, hagiography was a commonly understood genre with not just educational but also entertainment value. For this reason it was not unusual within medieval hagiography to read accounts of supernatural and miraculous acts—and the unbelievable quality of such accounts did not invalidate hagiography but rather bolstered it. For

instance, it was not uncommon to hear stories of Mary of Egypt, a prostitute who, upon hearing the word of God, crossed the river Jordan where she repented, walked into the desert with only three loaves of bread, and lived out the rest of her long life worshipping in solitude; a monk, Zosimas, encountered her in old age and witnessed many miracles, including her walking on water (across the Jordan) to take communion, and the complete incorruptibility of her body upon death, as if she had never died. Another of the most famous of hagiographies throughout the Middle Ages would be Athanasius' account of the trials of Anthony of Egypt and his miraculous fasts and battles with demons. Medieval audiences therefore expected exaggeration as part of the genre, and, indeed, this tendency to exaggerate even extended into early modern times, into many of the Catholic possession narratives that seem farfetched to us today. To this effect, historian of demonic possession Moshe Sluhovsky argues:

> that questioning the accuracy of this literary genre…is not to argue that early modern theologians and propagandists were disingenuous in their reports. Asking whether events "really" unfolded as they were recorded is a *question mal posée*. The parting of the ways between history and story and the "Birth of Fact"…was still in its infancy…The reports were true because they were possible and because they represented moral and theological verisimilitudes, while at the same time entertaining and instructing. They told a story that was, in fact, more truthful to the events than the events themselves because their hyperbolic truth told a version that was edifying, more coherent, and that made better sense of the events. (2007:24)

In fact, according to Bernard McGinn, this tendency toward exaggeration in hagiography is actually common throughout most of the Middle Ages although "there were also innovations in the period after 1200, such as the 'autohagiographies' created by Henry Suso and some other mystics" (1996:207). As such, the distinction between fact and fiction is really beside the point up until the Age of Enlightenment around the mid-eighteenth century (on this topic as well as a discussion of the late modern "death of God," see chapter four). In turn, this point—regarding the battle over fact and fiction on the cusp of the late modern period—will be crucial to subsequent sections of this chapter as we explore conflicting religious and scientific interpretations of the hyperbolic ailment dually known as "demonic possession" or "hysteria."

In addition to the commonly practiced tendency to exaggerate in hagiography, the new democratization of mysticism, starting in the thirteenth century, was beginning to lead to grand accounts of supernatural and divine visions. Many of the post-thirteenth century female mystics fit into this genre of vernacular mystical theology: "the visionary compendium…[of] mystics like Hadewijch of Brabant in the thirteenth century and Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth," the "spiritual diaries…[of] Margarite Ebner…[and] Agnes Blannbekin," and "the use of prose or poetic versions of courtly dialogues, as we find in the case of Mechtild, Hadewijch, and Marguerite Porete among the women, and Henry Suso among the men" (207-8). At a time when "the vernacular [i.e. non-Latin] languages …were just beginning to become literate in the full sense," the vernacular medium of visionary recital granted mystics—especially women—a great deal of creativity as well as authority. By "visionary recital" McGinn is referring to the written and spoken accounts of messages, visions, thoughts, and sometimes also sensations

obtained from God, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and/or the Holy Spirit—oftentimes during a mystical trance. A few examples include Hadewijch's one-on-one dialogues with Christ; Julian of Norwich's sixteen revelations on the Passion of the Christ and the Virgin Mary (which came to her during a near-death experience when she was gravely ill); and Agnes Blannbekin's highly erotic accounts of tasting the foreskin or "Holy Prepuce" of Christ.[37] Although "there was no institutionally approved way by which a woman could gain the authority to teach in an official way," nevertheless, "given Christian belief that the Holy Spirit is the true source of all divine truth, women could not be totally excluded from all forms of teaching" (208-9). In this way, female mystics gained much of their authority by claiming to relay messages from the divine that appeared to them in visions. By inserting their own theological commentary (either written or oral; sometimes recorded by their male admirers) about such visions, Christian women had greater leverage to make theological claims even in the absence of (access to) formal religious education and ecclesiastical clout. In this way:

> Vernacular theology, then, employed different genres from the scholastic and monastic theologies and was put forth according to new modes of claiming authority *ex beneficio* [by means of divine grace rather than ecclesiastical power]. It also was directed to a different audience—one both wider and narrower than that of the technical scholastic Latin. The vernacular audience was wider, of course, because it addressed any person, male or female, high or low, who was literate in the particular

[37] Jesus was circumcised according to the Gospel of Luke (2:21). The Holy Prepuce—the cut off foreskin of Christ—was a popular religious relic during the Middle Ages.

> vernacular employed. But the audience was also narrower because it did not use the learned language which guaranteed texts a universal dissemination across linguistic barriers. (McGinn 1996:210)

In sum, mysticism of the late medieval (1200s-1400s) and early modern periods (1500s-1600s) can best be characterized by a drastic increase in democratic participation. Late medieval and early modern mysticism was democratic in three main respects. Firstly, it was secular. Christians no longer believed that monasticism or a secluded life-long pursuit of God was necessary to feel God's grace. Instead, individuals could live reasonable public lives while still adhering to the basic tenets of asceticism, such as detachment, contemplation, and celibacy. God's love would come to them as long as they did so. In fact, in certain more radical sects of the new mysticism, participation in church social and intellectual functions was regarded as totally irrelevant to the greater pursuit of achieving God's love. Secondly, mysticism during this period became democratic through the adoption of vernacular language and genres. Sensational and exaggerated accounts of God written in the vernacular appealed to the general public (as educational and spiritual entertainment) and were widely understood by everyone. Likewise, the use of the common tongue rather than Latin enabled individuals with limited formal religious education to still make powerful contributions to mysticism. And, thirdly, late medieval and early modern mysticism was democratic in the sense that mystics increasingly drew their authority *ex beneficio*—in other words, from the divine grace of God or the Holy Spirit directly. In this sense, visionary recitals not only appealed to the public's desire for exaggeration but also enabled mystics—especially women—to authorize their arguments without going through official ecclesiastical routes.

As we will discover in the next section, however, this democratization of mysticism—particularly its embrace of divine, hyperbolic possession by God—ended up having deadly consequences for mysticism by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In particular, booming numbers of unskilled mystics proclaiming direct access to God led church members to question if such mystics were actually experiencing divine or, rather, demonic possession.

**The Problem of Demonic Possession in Early Modern Mysticism**

In this section I explore the phenomenon of demonic possession, which plagued Catholic mysticism throughout most of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries in Italy, France, and Spain. I do so by drawing upon the work of two scholars, Moshe Sluhovsky and Michel Foucault, respectively. I draw upon these two authors because their work, when combined, paints a fuller picture of demonic possession—particularly its connections to femininity (in Sluhovsky) and its later connections to hysteria and sexual pathology (in Foucault).

In his *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (2007), historian Moshe Sluhovsky explores the question of *who* demonic possession affected and *why*. In particular, Sluhovsky is interested in understanding why demonic possession in early modern mysticism was predominantly regarded as a female affliction. To this effect, Sluhovsky looks at early modern cultural perceptions of gender differences, as well as the gendering of new forms of early modern spiritual practices in the West. On the other hand, in Lectures Seven and Eight of his *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (2003), philosopher Michel Foucault is interested more in exploring *how* demonic possession came about. In other

words, what were the historical conditions within Western Christianization that gave rise to the possibility for demonic possession to occur as it did? In this way, Sluhovsky gives us a better sense of the actual (feminized) practices and gender perceptions that led many nuns and female mystics to be denounced as demonically possessed. Foucault, on the other hand, focuses little on the analytic of gender within his *Abnormal* (2003) lecture series but instead looks into broader formations within the Catholic Church—the pastoral, the confessional, the government of souls, and the regulation of bodies, pleasures, and desires—that ultimately triggered an explosion of conflicts internally within the body of the nun and externally between the nun and her confessor.[38] Foucault charts how early modern demonic possession, which most often manifested in the form of convulsion, eventually became "a privileged object for medicine" starting in the eighteenth century (2003:222). In particular, Foucault documents how the convulsing, demonically possessed nuns of seventeenth century France later became the hysterics and hystero-epileptics of nineteenth century French psychiatry.

Here is how this section will unfold. Because hysteria was often regarded as an almost exclusively female disorder, it is important to look into the gender dynamics at

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[38] I recognize that for Foucault gender is built into his conception of sexuality. For instance, Foucault uses the term *le sexe*, which refers to both sexuality and sex/gender simultaneously. My point here is, rather, that Foucault pays less direct (or less explicit) attention to gender, unlike Sluhovsky, and this is namely a matter of scale. Sluhovsky investigates on a micro level a specific spiritual technique--passive interiority—and how it was commonly stereotyped and degraded for being "feminine." Foucault, on the other hand, looks much more broadly at macro processes within the Catholic Church—for instance, the confessional and "the moral physiology of the flesh"—that ultimately gave rise to modern sexuality.

play in early modern Christianity leading up to the switch point[39] at which demonic possession became, rather, a nervous illness with a sexual and instinctual etiology (i.e. sexual pathology; I will unpack this line of reasoning below). For this reason, I begin with Sluhovsky (2007) by delving into the gendered aspects of early modern Catholic mysticism as well as the changing perceptions at that time concerning how mysticism could and should be practiced. More specifically, I will demonstrate how a particular early modern spiritual practice—passive interiority—vastly disrupted Church authority by making mystical union with God easily accessible to all (namely, by bypassing rules and religious expectations put in place by the Church). As a result, the Catholic Church harshly berated the technique of passive interiority, and, in an effort to destroy it, resorted to labeling the technique as feminine and therefore weak and predisposed to demonic possession and sexual impropriety. As this section will show, by the seventeenth century nearly all female practitioners of mysticism (and not just the practitioners of passive interiority) came to doubt "the sources of their own inspiration," and this led to more and

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[39] This notion of the "switch point" comes from Foucault's notion of the *échangeur*, mentioned in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and also included frequently in *Abnormal* (2003). A switch point can be likened to a feedback loop, similar to a highway junction (e.g. "spaghetti junction") or a convergence of paths that circle on one another. Foucault uses this term with respect to the existence of two or more institutions, for example, that feed on one another. As I will discuss later in this chapter, there existed a point on the cusp of early and late modernity in which the Catholic Church and medical science relied upon each other. The Church needed medical science to rid itself of the problem of possession whereas medicine, in turn, relied upon Christian notions of the flesh, body, and concupiscence in order to make sense of convulsion and nervous ailments. There occurred a point, however, in which possession and convulsion completely shifted over to the domain of medicine, thus marking the final switching point or end of the feedback loop.

more reported outbreaks of demonic possession (Sluhovsky 2007:99). Given how central asexuality (in the form of sexual renunciation) was to the process of mystical detachment, women's asexuality, then, by the seventeenth century was compromised and reconceived, rather, as predisposing spiritual women to the possibility of demonic possession and sexual misbehavior. This was the pathway (or at least one of the pathways), I believe, by which "asexuality" first became sexualized among women. Following that, I will plot Foucault's story of the rise of the Christian confessional and the Church's increased control over the flesh (i.e. the body of manifold pleasures and desires). Via Foucault I will demonstrate how the confessional technology for the governance of bodies and souls ultimately backfired, culminating in demonic possession and convulsion in nuns and female mystics. In turn, I will demonstrate how the Church eventually pawned off this disorder to the field of medicine, particularly to the study of nervous disorders such as hysteria.

My overall argument, as counterintuitive as it may seem, is that by the time of late modernity "asexuality" became part of sexual pathology—namely as a part of hysteria and nervous (sexual) illness, which hold linkages to the early modern history of Catholic demonic possession. Hence, in the final instance, this chapter uses Sluhovsky (2007) and Foucault (2003) not merely to tell a history about demonic possession and hysteria but rather to strategically highlight and hypothesize about potential historical circumstances under which "asexuality," for women, perhaps first became sexualized and pathologized. Such a narrative about "asexuality's" absorption into sexuality (via the mechanism of pathologization of women's bodies) ultimately makes us rethink our assumptions today about asexuality as an intrinsic, transhistorical part of sexuality.

Sluhovsky's *Believe Not Every Spirit*

In the previous section, "Changes in the Landscape of Late Medieval Mysticism," I charted via historians Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn the new democratization and secularization of Western mysticism—particularly the rise in anti-intellectualism, the rise in unskilled practitioners, booming numbers of female mystics, and the adoption of vernacular, hyperbolic language starting in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In turn, these key features of late medieval mysticism, leading up to the early modern era, form much of the historical basis for Moshe Sluhovsky's book. In his *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (2007), Sluhovsky argues that demonic possession actually "had been a relatively unimportant occurrence" prior to the fifteenth century. As the landscape of late medieval mysticism began to change, however, demonic possession came to be associated with "a blossoming of new forms of spirituality": namely, ascetic practices geared toward achieving "passive interiority," or "detachment," as a means for allowing God to enter the soul (6). According to Sluhovsky, during the early modern period "the number of possessed people increased in correspondence with the number of practitioners of the new spirituality" (6). Sluhovsky's expert attention to female mysticism, early modern anti-intellectualist sentiments, the rise in unskilled practitioners, and hyperbolic accounts of divine and demonic possession are in direct response to this democratizing, secularizing turn of events. Above all, Sluhovsky argues:

> that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spain and Italy, and in the seventeenth century in France, new mystical techniques trickled down to significant segments of the population. Personal experiences were viewed

> by some as more important than theological knowledge, and 'Divine Ignorance' was celebrated. It was almost unavoidable that at some point the church hierarchy would start examining the benefits and dangers embedded in such equality before the divine. The dismissive attitude in some of the new spiritual and mystical schools toward exterior meditations and spiritual exercises during the pursuit of interior passivity was particularly disturbing to the church. The church feared that this perspective could lead to a rejection of all church ritual and devotional practices. And, indeed, as we shall see, there was a geographical and theological connection between the diffusion of new passive interiorized spiritual practices and the discernment of possessing spirits as demonic rather than divine (6).

With respect to discernment of spirits, moreover, Sluhovsky points out how women were more likely than men to have their "psychological/spiritual experiences or somatic afflictions [attributed] to satanic interventions" (8). For this reason, Sluhovsky argues, "the history of possession, discernment of spirits, and female mysticism in early modern Europe…is inevitably a gendered history" (8). There is no way to understand early modern demonic possession without also looking into gender and especially cultural perceptions of femininity. In what ensues, therefore, I will focus via Sluhovsky on two main areas concerning gender: 1) early modern popular cultural perceptions of female psychological and physical disposition, and 2) spiritual practices regarded as exclusively "feminine." I argue that this focus on gender in relation to early modern mysticism and possession is necessary in order to make better sense, later on, of hysteria as a

predominantly female disorder. Moreover, by exploring early modern interpretations of particular female spiritual practices, we are in a better place to understand how a practice like celibacy, which was one among several practices for achieving passive interiority, came to be reconceived over time as a potential pathway to evil and sexual impropriety. In other words, a focus on gender helps illuminate the cultural and historical logic by which asexual nuns of early modernity became, in essence, the hypersexualized hysterics of late modernity. First, however, it will be beneficial to explore for a paragraph the traditional historical narrative regarding the relationship between demonic possession and female spirituality and how it differs from Sluhovsky's argument.

Starting in the later Middle Ages and proceeding into early modern times, "the definition of diabolical possession expanded, and the devil was assumed to possess people (especially women) inside their souls and without showing any purely physiological signs. A woman who had visions or exhibited other forms of uniqueness that she believed to be of divine origins could be found now to be deceived and be, in fact, possessed by demons" (Sluhovsky 2007:97). Ultimately this "growing distrust of some forms of late medieval and early modern spirituality," according to Sluhovsky, "is usually portrayed as a misogynistic attack on female spirituality tout court. The growth of late medieval lay spirituality, so the argument goes, had originally increased women's ability to pursue spiritual life" and now the church was retaliating against this encroachment (97). Consequently, "by the early years of the sixteenth century, women, who had earlier been attributed with divine grace and had been celebrated…were more likely now to be viewed as witches, melancholiacs, possessed by demons, or simulating their sanctity. The idiom of exorcism, which had previously been understood as a healing

technique, was now used to exorcise and thus silence these women" (97). This, according to Sluhovsky, is the traditional historical narrative told about early modern demonic possession and female mysticism. It is a narrative commonly derived from the influential work of Italian historian Gabriella Zarri, whose numerous writings and collections on the rise and fall of early modern female spirituality have "totally reshaped our knowledge of the spiritual and social life of female mystics and nuns in the period" (Sluhovsky 2007:290).[40] Above all, Sluhovsky attributes to Zarri the commonly accepted belief today that female spirituality in Western Christianity can be best characterized by the "paradigm of growth, peak, and decline and the causality for the process as being motivated by misogyny" (97).

While certainly acknowledging the presence of misogyny in early modern critiques of female spirituality (especially in seventeenth century France), Sluhovsky nevertheless seeks to complicate this narrative. He does so by identifying "feminine" spiritual practices and early modern cultural perceptions of femininity "rather than positing a systemic attack on female spirituality per se" (98). Instead, Sluhovsky argues, "what came under suspicion was one new *spiritual technique* that was characterized by an emphasis on passive interiority," and the "school under attack" that promoted this controversial spiritual technique was ultimately "portrayed as feminine and its followers as *femmelettes* or men who let themselves be led astray by women" (98, emphasis added). In other words, Sluhovsky focuses first on the spiritual practice of passive interiority but

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[40] See, for instance, *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Scaraffia and Zarri 1999). On the rise and decline of Christian female spirituality, see also Dyan Elliott's *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (2004).

is interested, predominantly, in understanding how and why this particular practice was stereotyped as "feminine." In making this shift, by "putting spirituality at the center of the examination, rather than gender," Sluhovsky argues that one may "better account for the dominant presence of not a few spiritual women in the early modern period, and to the fact that the centuries that witnessed the censoring of some women were also the centuries of immense female religious creativity" (98). Sluhovsky argues, for instance, that there were many orthodox female mystics, such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, who were warmly embraced by the public and the Church; and this seems to discount the notion that there was a systemic attack on early modern female spirituality tout court. With respect to passive interiority, however, Sluhovsky asserts that we cannot understand how this spiritual technique got linked to demonic possession without first considering the feminine stereotypes that were used to discount it. As such, Sluhovsky still tackles the topic of gender head on, yet he does so by focusing first on spiritual practices (of passive interiority) and how they were stereotyped as feminine in an effort to discredit them.

To illustrate Sluhovsky's point that what was under attack was not women tout court but rather "feminine" spiritual practices, I will focus for the remainder of this section on defining passive interiority and how it tapped into strong cultural stereotypes about female weakness and hypersexuality. These stereotypes even circulated amongst the very women who practiced this spiritual practice, thus generating (typically hyperbolic, stylized) narratives between these women and their confessors about being led astray by evil forces. As the next section will make clear, however, this interpretation of Sluhovsky's is very different than Foucault's, which, rather, emphasizes the Christian

confessional and how it generated "carnal disorder," internally, within the nun, and resistance, externally, between the nun and her confessor.

According to Sluhovsky, "demonic possession was originally a catch-all term that was used in pre-modern times to describe all sorts of both physiological and psychological afflictions" which seemed untreatable or undiagnosable by natural medicine (14). However, in response to an "unprecedented growth of ecstatic behaviors" starting in the late Middle Ages, the distinction between divine and demonic possession became a central topic of concern: "With more people claiming direct interactions with the divine, self-described visionaries, prophets, and prophetesses were scrutinized more and more by the church" (14). Demonic possession became a popular means of explaining, therefore, the strange behaviors of some of these individuals.

Despite the fact that demonic possession became such a popular explanation for unusual ecstatic behaviors, Sluhovsky admits that the meaning of demonic possession itself was not easy to pin down: "overlapping, and at times contradictory, definitions and explanations abounded" and the causes and even the characteristics of demonic possession were not streamlined by the church until the early 1600s (15). However, regardless of the means by which demonic possession was considered to have occurred (for example, whether it occurred in the body or soul), it was still always considered a more common occurrence in women. According to Sluhovsky, "this trend corresponds to an almost universal overrepresentation of women among the possessed in most societies" (16). In other words, the "association between women and physiological and psychological suffering was part and parcel of the cultural imagination" of early modern

Europe as well as elsewhere (16). To this end, then, according to early modern Western medical theory:

> women were considered moist and cold, hence more prone to "contaminations" and "impressions." Their imagination was presumably more active, while their intellect was weaker. Women were assumed to be less rational and to have less control over their bodies. They were therefore viewed as more easily tempted and deluded, serving as a convenient gateway for Satan. Early modernists also believed that women's sexuality was insatiable, and that their wombs might wander into their brains and cause hysteria. All of these notions rendered women more susceptible to the influence of spirits, be they demonic, disembodied, or angelic (16).

In particular, the linkage between women and demonic possession strengthened even further when, in the thirteenth century, "a new form of possession of the spirit ('psychological' or 'spiritual' possession [as opposed to mere bodily possession])" emerged and came to be associated with negative feminine stereotypes (28). (In fact, Sluhovsky states, the earliest hints of this conceptualization of spiritual possession date back to the twelfth century in response to suspicions concerning the validity of Hildegard of Bingen's mystical visions.) Ultimately, "this new understanding [i.e. spiritual possession, or possession of the soul], and the fears and anxieties [surrounding ecstatic behaviors] that created it, gained momentum during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and became even more widespread in the early modern period, when new forms of [vernacular mystical] spirituality…spread from monasteries and convents to city

squares, and when a growing number of laywomen claimed divine interactions" (29). This demonic possession of the soul implicated women not only because it resulted from religious practices women were considered more likely to do (such as passive interiority, discussed below) but also because "diabolic possession of and in the soul implied uncertainty, confusion, lack of control, and the possibility of deception. All of these negative attributes were commonly associated with women. Thus, the spiritualization of possession meant also its feminization" (29).

In fact, by the 1550s, this "growing distrust of new forms of spirituality became completely intertwined…with the development of an elaborate discourse concerning the reliability of women in general and spiritually inclined women in particular" (29). By the seventeenth century, as I will later discuss, even female mystics were liable to distrust their own spirituality and the source (divine or demonic) from which they thought it came (99). Likewise, given that only expert (male) clergy could be tasked with discerning possession, "this created a clear hierarchical relationship between the possessed, whose experience was always open for interpretation, and male theologians, Inquisitors, and exorcists, who claimed a monopoly over knowledge of interior movements" (29). This is not to suggest that these women's experiences were entirely made up or coerced, however. Rather, we are dealing with people who often did indeed show some sort of psychological or physical affliction for which they needed help. This did not rule out the possibility, however, that "a woman who did not exhibit any somatic signs of affliction" would not also be considered possessed (30). In sum, in this way, when Christian female mysticism was at its height, women were now more likely to be perceived as demonically possessed or, even, "to be participating actively in simulation" and deceit (32).

To reiterate, then, these deep-seated gender stereotypes (that women have impressionable minds, bodies, and souls) combined with an "unprecedented growth of ecstatic behaviors" in early modern times (14) and gave the impression of a sort of demonic crisis in female spirituality. This crisis was especially compounded in the 1500s when new spiritual practices known collectively as "passive interiority" came to the forefront and wreaked havoc on the Catholic Church. In his Chapter Four, "La Spiritualité à la mode," Sluhovsky argues that "new directions in Franciscan and Dominican spirituality in the Low Countries, Italy, and Spain [which later reverberated into France] created a climate in which individual believers sought more interiorized and passive routes for interaction with the divine" (98). As Sluhovsky argues, "by the early decades of the sixteenth century, mystical knowledge was often even presented as equal, if not superior to, intellectual knowledge, and a theology of love, affection, and passivity overshadowed a theology of reason" (98); this perspective oftentimes clashed with a history of Church opinion that had long privileged the philosophical and intellectual (98). To this end, within this anti-intellectualist environment, more and more schools of "new mysticism" began to emerge, arguing 1) that "silent prayer was more beneficial than public prayer," 2) "that the smallness of humans compared to…God meant that no human cooperation was possible with the divine," 3) "that only God could participate in an active manner in the process of human salvation," 4) that "mental and intellectual passivity [w]as the right means to experience the divine," and 5) that good works were of no value, for they were not compatible with the pursuit of passive interiority (98-9). These beliefs, which occur on a spectrum but which, altogether, provide a clear picture of passive interiority, created rancor within the Church. It is for this reason that practices of

passive interiority soon crossed paths with demonic possession; and especially common were accusations of sexual impropriety (discussed below). As Sluhovsky contends:

> this was far from being a mere coincidence. The connection between passivity and demonism was referred to implicitly by a number of the leading opponents of the new mystical trends…[B]y the second quarter of the seventeenth century, the connection between the new mysticism and demonic possession was even made explicit…and practitioners of all the new variants of the new spirituality—and not only promoters of passivity—interiorized the anxiety and doubted the sources of their own inspiration (99).

Unique to passive interiority was its reinstatement of a number of eremitic (i.e. hermit-like) tendencies, albeit within a new cultural context that no longer required retreat from the world as a prerequisite to achieving God's love. If late antique hermit life was asocial in the sense that it entailed a withdrawal from society altogether, early modern passive interiority, also known as "Quietism," was asocial in the sense that it often entailed a retreat from the social workings of the Church: "Quietist methods argued that by deliberately giving up attempts to elicit images or emotions during prayer and surrendering to God's presence, the practitioner is more likely to achieve infusion than by meditations" (101). This is because "the transition from meditation to contemplation is also a transition from activity to passivity, from designing a course of prayer to abandoning the soul to be acted upon by God, who would infuse it with the only thing that is still active in this stage, beyond words and images and beyond thinking and understanding, namely, pure love" (101). Notably, the final result of passive interiority is

still self-dissolution, yet, unlike apophatic mystical theology, it is achieved in a way that dismisses the value of intellect, spoken prayer, religious rites, and even charitable works—activities which were all regarded by Quietists as "possible distractions" (102). Ultimately, then, this "distrust of the written word" helped spark the practice of passive interiority and silent prayer, which ensured "a democratization of access to spiritual pursuit" (103). Due to the ease of it, nearly anyone could practice passive interiority; it did not require any academic expertise or elite knowledge of monasticism and theology. It was more spiritual than religious; it required very minimal adherence to Church rules. This democratization of spiritual pursuit, in turn, was threatening in that it cut out the middleman between humans and God: in other words, the Church.

Hence, the Catholic Church came to see passive interiority as a threat—an antisocial threat—which it then sought to discredit through labeling passive spiritual techniques as "feminine" and therefore promiscuous and vulnerable to evil (discussed soon below). The popularization of passive interiority in early modern Christianity "exposed the growing anxiety of more conservative theologians, who witnessed with growing unease the participation of unlettered and unsupervised laymen and laywomen in new forms of interiorized interactions with the divine" (108). As "conservative theologians argued, and the Inquisition concurred in the 1550s,…spirituality had to be restricted to qualified individuals (members of religious orders)" because "passive contemplation was dangerous even for religious people" (113). If not done with proper discretion, passive contemplation would open the soul to countless temptations and demonic forces. But that was not all. Likewise, conservative theologians also protested that:

> in extreme cases…such practices could lead to a rejection of good works, vocal prayer, and other church rituals. This new mysticism was also viewed as undermining the hierarchical and natural order of the world in general, by equating women with men, and the church in particular, by dismissing the central position of learning and reasoning…[To this end,] the accusations against practitioners of the spirituality of abandonment were often collapsed together [into] accusations of Protestantism…[and] sexual immorality. (113)

Likewise, amongst these protests against spiritual passivity, "in France, more than in Spain and Italy, the attack on Quietism soon acquired explicitly misogynistic overtones. Quietism was presented as a new feminine fashion, which was practiced mostly by girls and women" (129). Due to strong early modern cultural stereotypes regarding connections between femininity and weakness, Sluhovsky argues that the best means at that time to discredit such controversial spiritual practices was to associate them with women, and particularly with "female vanity" and "female sexual promiscuity" (134). As French Carmelite critic Jean Chéron argued in 1657, these "fake mystics are full of vanity and self-importance, and suffer from melancholy and an overpowering imagination. Their *imagination hypocondriaque,* fantasies, and lack of control are so powerful that these women are, in fact, in danger of developing epilepsy and insanity" (Chéron paraphrased in Sluhovsky 2007:134). Likewise, these women when they acquired male followers were immediately accused of being "possessed with an evil power to seduce" (135). In sum, then, "by equating Quietism with femininity, lack of control, demonic temptations, and self-delusion, it became possible…to gender the

boundary between orthodox and heterodox forms of mysticism, discrediting Quietism as feminine" (135). In other words, early modern Christian notions of heterodoxy (or antisociality) were mapped onto social stereotypes about female weakness and sexual promiscuity—and vice versa.

To give a concrete example of a scenario of female demonic possession, Sluhovsky cites the case of a mass possession at a Louviers (Normandy, France) convent in 1643:

> They [several men of the Church accompanied by three physicians] witnessed the sisters convulse, fall to the ground, jump from tree to tree, and even float in the well in which some had tried unsuccessfully to drown themselves. During exorcism ceremonies, all the possessed nuns together laughed, sang, cursed, and blasphemed…[Likewise, during the exorcism of one particular nun, Sister Madeleine Bavent, who had been] accused by other nuns of serving as the demon's accomplice, Bavent was first to reveal that years earlier she had been seduced and bewitched by Picard [a male spiritual director at the convent. It was with Picard that she regularly performed] sacrilegious acts on the Eucharist, killed newborn babies, [and even] cannibalized human flesh (151).[41]

Other tales, as well, speak of nuns overcome with burning desire for their confessors. Likewise, some critiques, too, speak of passive interiority as generating "filthy ideas,"

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[41] Interestingly, these very same accusations of sexual impropriety, baby killing, and cannibalism were also commonly waged by the Romans against Christians during late antiquity.

"encouraging men and women to practice masturbation and sexual debauchery" (139), and promoting "vain, impure, and arrogant" behavior (146).

To reiterate, then, Quietism was considered dangerous by the Church because it was democratic (capable of being practiced by anyone of any social class, gender, and level of intelligence), it rejected or at least challenged the social workings of the Church (including its religious rites), and it was regarded as a perilous practice that exposed lay practitioners to demonic temptations that were purportedly too difficult for them to surmount (135-6). Stereotypes of feminine weakness and hypersexuality helped discredit Quietism and also paved the way for new connections to be made between the new mysticism and medical pathology—a topic which we turn to next.

Foucault's *Abnormal*

As the previous section argues via Sluhovsky (2007), the demonic possession scare of early modern Europe took ecstatic behaviors and seemingly antisocial religious practices and mapped them onto stereotypes about female weakness and sexual promiscuity. As a result of associating the new mysticism, and passive interiority especially, with these negative stereotypes about femininity, it became much easier to jump to the conclusion that perhaps demonic rather than divine forces were at play in influencing mystical behaviors. And this was an effective way of discrediting early modern spiritual women (and some men) deemed to have had perspectives out of line with the Church. It also generated implicit linkages between asexuality and demonic possession on the basis that sexual renunciation, as a key practice of ascetic detachment, opened up the soul to potential demonic influence.

In Lectures Seven and Eight of his *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (2003), Michel Foucault, however, approaches early modern demonic possession from a different angle. Foucault's goal in these lectures is to demonstrate how shifts in the Christian conception of the "flesh" and methods for discerning it resulted in the formation of the body of pleasures and desires. By especially focusing on Catholic practices of compulsory confession and self-analysis as methods of discernment, Foucault shows the specific mechanisms by which the Catholic Church achieved "governance" over bodies and souls and all the internal movements (sensations, desires, pleasures, emotions, titillations, and thoughts) that circulate *within* them. In this way, Foucault outlines the conditions of possibility for the formation of modern sexuality (e.g. the incitement to discourse about sexuality; the notion of sexuality as interiority) and depicts how they unfolded out of early modern Christian practices of confession and notions of the flesh, which late modern medicine eventually came to inherit.

But this is not all. As religious studies scholar Mark Jordan states, "Foucault does write the social body [e.g. the modern sexual subject] but also the body straining to be antisocial, to escape control, to transgress the boundary, which is one reason why there are in Foucault, as Blanchot notices, so many of the formulae of negative theology" (2015:38; on negative theology, see Chapter Two). This is especially evident in Foucault's *Abnormal* via the example of demonic possession and convulsing nuns, which is the topic of Jordan's (2015) book. As Foucault states, early modern demonic possession and the "convulsive flesh" is "the resistance effect of Christianization at the level of individuals bodies" (2003:213). It is "the body penetrated by the right of examination and subject to the obligation of the exhaustive confession and the body that

bristles against this right and against this obligation" (213). The conflict between adhering to and resisting compulsory Christian practices (including confession, self-examination, and perhaps also chastity) resulted in internal conflicts and thus also involuntary resistance to Christian rule (see also Chapter Two on medieval apophatic desubjectivation as an involuntary form of disruption within compulsory systems). Foucault discusses how Catholicism eventually transferred over this resistance (i.e. demonic possession and convulsion) to the domain of medicine by the eighteenth century, in which it then became part of nervous illness and sexual pathology—especially in the form of female hysteria.

With this history in mind, this section on Foucault does two things. Firstly, it traces the turn of events leading up to the formation of modern sexuality as interiority. And, secondly, it hypothesizes about the role of asexuality in this process. This section asks, what happens if we think of compulsory sexual renunciation as another component of demonic possession—as being something that nuns also resisted, oftentimes involuntarily, thus producing convulsive effects and sometimes inappropriate outbursts of sexual behavior? Likewise, this section also asks, what happens if we considered the possibility of an internal conflict between compulsory chastity and compulsory confession?

To this effect, I will start out with a discussion of Foucault's exploration of the Christian confessional and its reworking of sexuality. This reworking of sexuality is characterized by a shift from the pre-modern notion of sexuality as rules about legal relations between people (a juridical model) to the early modern notion of sexuality as the moral relationship to one's own body and pleasures (a "moral physiology of the flesh")

(2003:185, 189). Following this, I will discuss how the new moral governance over one's own body and soul was fueled by confessional procedures of introspective analysis and compulsory discourse, which penetrated Catholic mysticism by the second half of the sixteenth century (203). The "aftereffect" of such a "religious and detailed investment in the body" (209), according to Foucault, was possession or "carnal disorder" (201, 205), which made itself manifest internally within the body of the nun and externally between the nun and her confessor—namely, in the form of convulsion. From there, the final step will be to discuss how convulsion (previously a religious symptom) became a central object of study in neurological and psychiatric medicine by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will conclude by discussing the role of sexuality and convulsion in the late modern study of nervous illness—especially that of hysteria. Laced throughout the section will be hypotheses about asexuality (as sexual renunciation) and how it may have interfaced with demonic possession.

At the outset of Lecture Seven, Foucault states that his goal, ultimately, is to discover why, in the mid-nineteenth century, "at the very moment that abnormality became the legitimate domain of intervention for psychiatry, sexuality suddenly became problematic in psychiatry" (2003:168-9). In other words, how and why did abnormality, the primary object of study for psychiatry, become an issue of sexuality? Foucault's preliminary response, which he also expounds upon in *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976), is that the rise of discourse about sexuality in psychiatry and other domains is indicative not of a "removal of censorship" inasmuch as it actually points to "the metamorphosis of a quite positive practice of forced and obligatory confession" (2003:169). By "positive" Foucault is most likely referring, in this case, to the practice of

confession as a *productive* or *generative* activity rather than one that is purely silencing. Thus, having identified the "positive" practice of confession as responsible, in part, for an incitement to discourse about sexuality, Foucault sets out in the rest of Lecture Seven to explore Catholic practices of penance, confession, and pastoralism. Foucault's primary argument in this lecture is that the Christian confessional, and the pastor's authority in eliciting confessions (i.e. the pastoral), resulted in an elaborate system for "the government of souls" (177). And sexuality was a primary object of this governance. By unpacking the contents of several early modern confession manuals, Foucault demonstrates the increasing complexity of confessing one's sexual sins: "Henceforth [by early modern times], the essential problem is no longer the distinction between real action and thought…; it is the problem of desire and pleasure" with all its manifold feelings, thoughts, and sensations nestled in the body and soul (189). First I will expound upon the history of penance and confession before proceeding to a discussion of the role of sexuality in governing souls.

As Foucault makes clear, the practice of penance has long been part of Christianity, although confession was not originally part of this ritual (171). Penance in its original form, in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, was rather different than it is today:

> Penance was a status that one deliberately and voluntarily assumed at a given moment of one's life for reasons that could be linked to an enormous and disgraceful sin, but which could just as well be motivated by a quite different reason. In any case, it was a status that one took on

> and that one took on once and for all in a way that was usually definitive: One could only be a penitent once in one's life. (171)

The life of a penitent was harsh, oftentimes requiring an initial public ceremony, the wearing of a hair shirt and distinct uniform, the "scorning of personal cleanliness," expulsion from the church and its sacraments, the undergoing of long fasts, complete sexual renunciation, and the obligation of burying the dead (171). Public or private confession "was not absolutely required by this ritual" and a broad confession of one's full life sins was inconceivable at this time (172). Rather, one absolved oneself of one's sins not through disclosing them but rather through enduring the penalties and inflictions cast upon oneself (172).

By the sixth century, however, this older model of penitence soon gave way to a "tariffed" model of penitence (initially just in Germany) by which the sinner disclosed each individual transgression to the priest who, in turn, would impose a penance of comparable severity to the transgression (172). In this sense, then, the listing of individual indiscretions and describing them at length became necessary in order for the priest to fulfill his duty. Hence, the priest took on a doctor-like role—listening to the patient (sinner) and prescribing the correct course of action (penance) in order to cure afflictions or sins (173). And, in fact, due to the utter embarrassment and humiliation of disclosing one's sins in detail, often the very act of disclosure was sufficient as penance:

> *Erubescentia*, humiliation, would constitute the very heart, the essential part, of the penalty. Thus, in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, confession to the laity becomes widespread. After all, if there is no priest on hand when one has committed a sin, one can quite simply express one's

> sin to someone…and one becomes ashamed…As a result, confession will have taken place, expiation will have come into play, and God will grant the remission of sins (174).

In turn, as Foucault states, the laity's taking of confession into their own hands resulted, for a while, in a weakening of priestly authority. Thus, by the thirteenth century, the Church worked to regain power by requiring confession as an official ecclesiastical rite: a rite that must be performed "at least once a year for the laity and monthly or even weekly for clergy" (174). In this way, confession became compulsory and, moreover, *exhaustive* in the sense that everything from one confession to the next had to be disclosed. And not only that, the person confessing, moreover, had to divulge everything in complete detail regardless of how big or petty the sin. Clearly, then, to adhere to such painstaking levels of detail in one's confession, one had to make a conscious effort in daily life to practice self-analysis and to make a mental note of each sin as it occurred, as if one were writing a sort of internal diary of indiscretions: a "permanent autobiography" (184). Foucault describes this intense relationship between the penitent and confessor as one of pain and pleasure ("an economy of pain and pleasure") in which the penitent feels pain in confessing and "the confessor suffers pain in listening…but who also consoles himself for the pain he thus gives himself by securing through confession solace for the penitent's soul. It is this double investment of pain, pleasure, and solace on the part of both penitent and confessor that will ensure a good confession" (181). This relationship of pain and pleasure is important, moreover, because it demonstrates how confession was not impersonal but rather deeply involved (albeit, nevertheless, compulsory); the confessor-

penitent relationship, as we will later see, is crucial to the development of early modern demonic possession. To sum it up, then:

> In short, the immense development that takes place from the tariffed penance of the Middle Ages to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tends to double the operation of penance—which initially was not even a sacrament—to a concerted technique of analyses, reflected choices, and the continual management of souls, conducts, and finally bodies. It is an evolution that inserts the juridical form of the law, of offense and penalty, which was originally the model for penance, *within a field of practices that have the nature of correction, guidance, and medicine*. Finally, it is an evolution that tends to replace, or at least to back up, the irregular confession of particular transgressions with *an immense discursive journey* that is *continual passage of a life before a witness*, the confessor or director, who must be both its judge and doctor (184, emphasis added).

As Foucault puts it, this "constant discursive filter of life" or, in other words, "this immense total narration of existence within religious mechanisms" is, ultimately, "the innermost core…of all the techniques of examination and medicalization that appear later" even outside the boundaries of religion (184).

Upon establishing this background of penance and the rise of the Christian confessional as a technique for governance of souls, Foucault then proceeds to explore the "general procedures of examination" for concupiscence and lust. Foucault homes in on sexuality namely because it is instrumental in bringing about changes in the self as a result of new techniques of confessional self-examination starting in the early modern

period (I will unpack this below). First, Foucault briefly compares the issue of sexuality within medieval penance vis-à-vis that of the early modern confessional. Whereas the confession of sexuality "in the period of 'scholastic' penance between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries" was best characterized by its "juridical forms" (e.g. legal and relational ties between people; rules of permissible and forbidden acts), early modern confession of sexuality involved, rather, "the movements, senses, pleasures, thoughts, and desires of the penitent's body itself" (185-6). This is significant for Foucault because it marks a shift from a legal, external, relational model of sexuality to one that is now mostly internal, about not just the acts of sex but also the manifold thoughts, sensations, desires, and pleasures within the body and soul (regardless of whether one acted on them or not). In other words, within Catholicism, it was much easier to achieve asexuality (i.e. sexual renunciation) prior to the institutionalization of the confessional when the primary issue was not yet thoughts/feelings but rather acts between individuals. Whereas the "old examination was essentially the inventory of permitted and forbidden relationships," the "new examination is a meticulous passage through the body, a sort of anatomy of the pleasures of the flesh…The body with its different parts and different sensations, and no longer, or much less, the laws of legitimate union, constitutes the organizing principle of the sins of lust. The body and its pleasures, rather than the required form for legitimate union, become, as it were, the code of the carnal" (186).

Clearly then, under conditions of compulsory confession and endless, deep self-examination, sexuality is now found to be brewing constantly within the body both physically and mentally. To this effect, Foucault states, "you can see that the body is like the analytic principle of the infinite sins of concupiscence" (187). Sexuality is now

presupposed to be inside us all. In other words, what we are seeing here, at the start of early modernity, is the sin of the flesh being:

> newly focused on the body. Sins are no longer distinguished and ordered in terms of illegitimate relationships but rather by the body itself. We are witnessing the flesh being pinned to the body. Previously, the flesh, the sin of the flesh, was above all breaking the rule of union. Now the sin of the flesh dwells within the body itself. One tracks down the sin of the flesh by questioning the body, by questioning its different parts and its different sensory levels. The body and all the pleasurable effects that have their source in the body must now be the focal point of the examination of conscience… (188-9)

In other words, sins of the flesh are no longer external (i.e. illegitimate relations with others) but rather internal (i.e. the movements of concupiscence and little sensations inside the body that are used to discern one's own conscience). Now, sins of the flesh can start with something as simple as an emotion—an emotion which spirals out of control into "sensual enticement" (Habert paraphrased in Foucault 2003:190). This enticement of the senses, in turn, begets "a sweet feeling localized in the flesh" as well as "titillation and inflammation" (ibid.). From there, one thinks about pleasure, which begets even more pleasure—including the pleasure of thought itself—and, finally, the will is corrupted, which may or may not result in sinful action (ibid.). In sum, then, "with this new technology there is the formation or development of a series of new objects that pertain to both the soul and the body at the same time: *forms and modalities of pleasure*. Thus we pass from the old theme that the body [materiality] was at the origin of every sin

to the idea that there is concupiscence in every transgression" and that such concupiscence must be rooted out through "this technology, with all its procedures for analysis, recognition, guidance, and transformation" (Foucault 2003:192).

After a rather dense and schematic Lecture Seven, Foucault then proceeds in Lecture Eight to produce a sort of case study of the symptoms (or aftereffects, as he calls them) of the new governance of souls. To reiterate, Foucault in Lecture Seven identified how the "body of concupiscence"—in other words, the body of pleasures and desires—is "the correlate of this new technique of power": the examination and articulation of all transgressions across one's life, conducted "within a relationship of authority, a power relation" between the penitent and confessor (202). Moreover, this relationship between penitent and confessor is *exclusive* in the "sense that everything must be said to the director or to the confessor, but it must be said *only* to him…As a result, when the flesh becomes the object of an unlimited analytical discourse and constant surveillance, it is linked both to a procedure of complete examination [with the confessor] and the establishment of a closely related rule of silence" around everyone else (202, emphasis added). Foucault, then, is interested in Lecture Eight in exploring the real life ramifications of this "apparatus of confession-silence" and he does so by focusing on early modern Catholic mysticism and, more specifically, on outbreaks of demonic possession that occurred in women's monasteries in seventeenth-century France. It is Foucault's contention that demonic possession in seventeenth-century France was the outcome of "technologies for the government of souls and bodies" having gone drastically wrong (211).

This backfiring occurred in two primary ways. Firstly, the extreme attention to self-introspection of body and soul resulted in oversensitivity to internal movements, which led to "carnal disorder" that was interpreted as demonic (201). And, secondly, the apparatus of confession-silence triggered resistance (e.g. the nun not wanting to say some things to the priest, or wanting to say some things to others that were forbidden); this resistance was, as well, interpreted as demonic. Ultimately, then, Foucault argues that the resultant triangle of resistance that emerged between the nun, the confessor, and the devil produced a splitting within the nun that yielded convulsive and hysterical symptoms. These symptoms and their sexual etiology later became the bread and butter of the scientific study of nervous illness. The remainder of this section, therefore, will discuss: 1) Catholic mysticism's adoption of the new confessional procedures of examination and the effect of carnal disorder that they had on female practitioners; 2) resistance to the rule of confession-silence as it played out in cases of purported demonic possession; and 3) the entrance of formerly demonic symptoms such as convulsion and sexual impropriety into the late modern study of nervous illness.[42] Although Foucault himself does not mention it of *Abnormal* (2003), I conceive of sexual renunciation, as well, as a crucial component of compulsory Catholic practices that also may have been resisted by some nuns.

At the outset of Lecture Eight, Foucault makes it clear that throughout the lecture he will focus exclusively on Catholic mysticism within the context of the monastery for

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[42] To be clear, however, Foucault does not put forth an explanation as to *why* it was female nuns and mystics rather than males who were most likely to be affected by demonic possession and carnal disorder. For an explanation of the feminization of demonic possession, see the section on Sluhovsky (2007) above.

two main reasons. Firstly, because "this difficult and subtle apparatus of control [i.e. confession] and the body of pleasure and desire that is born in correlation with it obviously only concerns that thin strata of the population that could be reached by these complex and subtle forms of Christianization: the highest strata of the population, seminaries and monasteries" (203).[43] And, secondly, Foucault focuses especially on Catholic mysticism because "the theme of the flesh was very important" to it, and, in fact, because Catholic mysticism was "no doubt developed on the basis of this technique [of confession-silence] in the second half of the sixteenth century and, especially in France, in the seventeenth century" (203).[44] Having said this, however, Foucault nevertheless suspects that "we see this body of desire and concupiscence appear more broadly, or at least more profoundly, in certain more extensive strata of the population" beyond the domain of mysticism (204). This is because although such techniques for the governance of souls were "developed in the seminaries, that is to say, in those institutions that were imposed…by the Council of Trent" in the sixteenth century (191), "all the treatises on the passions published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries freely borrowed from this landscape of the Christian pastoral…[And thus] the vast majority of the elites of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a deep knowledge of these concepts, notions, methods of analysis, and grids of examination peculiar to the confession" (192).

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[43] Foucault, however, does acknowledge that demonic possession had spread to the laity and to other mystical groups by the later part of the early modern period. This trend may be due to a general familiarity at that time with confession and self-examination as common practices.

[44] Here I will add that sexual renunciation was also crucial and, indeed, compulsory to early modern Catholicism—unlike Protestantism, which had already begun to question the value of chastity.

Before diving into the issue of demonic possession of nuns, however, Foucault argues that first one must distinguish between "the great waves of possessions that took place from the end of the sixteenth century until the beginning of the eighteenth century" and, on the other hand, "the great epidemics of witchcraft that took place from the fifteenth century until the beginning of the seventeenth century" (204). According to Foucault, both witchcraft and demonic possession of nuns "emerge within a kind of historical continuity," and both forms of interaction with the demonic, in turn, should be "situated as general effects" of Christianization (204). As such, differences between possession and witchcraft will help point to transformations in the deployment of Christianity between the late medieval and early modern periods. Above all, Foucault paints the distinction between possession and witchcraft as one of center and periphery, good versus bad, and voluntarism versus involuntarism. The witch, who is typically female, is "the bad Christian" living on "the outskirts of the village and at the edge of the forest" in areas in which Christianization has not yet fully reached (205). The possessed individual, on the other hand, who is also typically female, differs from the witch in that she is not "denounced by another person [as evil]" but is rather "someone who confesses, and who does so spontaneously" (205). She is "a woman of the town…[but] not just any woman in the town; she is the nun and it is to the superior or the prioress within the convent that she speaks" (205). Likewise, whereas the witch voluntarily embraces the devil and receives supernatural powers through him (typically procured by means of a pact sealed through a "transgressive sexual act") the nun, instead, senses an involuntary "invasion" or "impregnation"—that is, an "insidious and invincible penetration of the body" by a slow and unwelcome onset of "strange sensations" (208). At first, the nun's

supernatural powers, unlike the witch's, are ambiguous: potentially of either divine or demonic origin. Additionally, whereas the "witch's will is really a juridical type of will" procured through contractual agreement, the possessed nun's will, on the other hand, is a will "charged with all the ambiguities of desire" (209). In an "infinite game of substitution" the nun, "seeking help from the outside, opens her mouth to receive the host, [and] the devil, or one of them, Beelzebub, suddenly takes her place" (209). For the nun, unlike the witch who willfully submits, this does not occur, however, without a fair amount of "battles, conflicts, interactions, and resistance" (209). And yet there are moments when the nun's will gives way. The nun's possession consists of an ebb and flow of consent and resistance: "the subtle play of the will on itself, both asserting itself and immediately giving way" (210). And, ultimately, according to Foucault, "sensations are introduced through a game of little pleasures, imperceptible sensations, tiny consents, and a sort of permanent slight connivance in which will and pleasure are entwined, somehow twist around each other and produce a deception" in which, for awhile, sin hides or even, occasionally, masquerades as the great divine (210). Perhaps it is for this reason that, in the early modern period, the preternatural abilities of some (female) mystics later came to be exposed as evil in disguise.

At this point one begins to see Foucault's line of reasoning. The governance of souls resulted, in effect, in hypersensitivity to movements in the body and to the pleasures circulating therein. Foucault puts forth the argument that early modern nuns who were demonically possessed experienced such possession as a result of Catholic techniques for the governance of souls, which made nuns particularly sensitive to internal movements and sensations. (Although Foucault does not explore the topic of sexual renunciation in

*Abnormal*, it is interesting, as well, to note the potential emergence of a new conflict emerging here between the compulsion to remain chaste and the compulsion to be constantly mining one's own body and soul for evidence of little pleasures. This battle between "asexuality" and "sexuality," I suspect, is yet another crucial component of what Foucault calls the "convulsive flesh," discussed below.) Unlike the witch who is left whole and intact by fully embracing the devil, the nun gives in and enjoys the "game of little pleasures, imperceptible sensations, [and] tiny consents" only, later, to realize her mistake and resist. The ebb and flow of consent and resistance, voluntarism and involuntarism, results, Foucault suggests, in a splitting of the nun.

This splitting, Foucault argues, is projected onto the body of the nun. According to Foucault, in early modern demonic possession, the nun's body functions as "a theatrical stage" in which "different powers and their confrontations manifest themselves" (211). The nun's body "is a fortress body that is surrounded and besieged. It is a citadel body, the stake in a battle between the demon and the possessed body that resists, between the part of the person possessed that resists and the part of herself that gives way and betrays her. It is a battle between demons and exorcists and directors and the possessed person herself who sometimes helps them and sometimes betrays them" (212). It is the body as "physiological-theological theater" in which complex theological battles and harrying physical resistances are waged at (and by) the body of the nun (212). And it is convulsion, *par excellence,* that is the most tangible and most characteristic physical manifestation of all this theater. In essence, "convulsion is the plastic and visible form of the struggle taking place in the body of the possessed" (212). Yet convulsion entails not only "tremors" and "purely mechanical effects of the struggle" but

also "a series of involuntary but meaningful actions: struggling, spitting, adopting negative attitudes, and uttering obscene, irreligious, blasphemous words, but always automatically" and involuntarily (213). And in its most drastic forms, it is "choking, breathlessness, and fainting [that] indicate the point when the body is destroyed in the struggle by the very excess of the opposing forces" between good and evil occurring inside the nun (213). According to Foucault, this "convulsive flesh" is the logical "endpoint, the abutment of the new investment of the body established by the government of souls after the Council of Trent" (213):

> The convulsive flesh is the body penetrated by the right of examination and subject to the obligation of the exhaustive confession and the body that bristles against this right and against this obligation. It is the body that opposes silence or the scream to the rule of complete discourse, the body that counters the rule of obedient direction with intense shocks of involuntary revolt or little betrayals of secret connivance. *The convulsive flesh is at once the ultimate effect and the point of reversal of the mechanisms of corporeal investment* that the new wave of Christianization organized in the sixteenth century. *The convulsive flesh is the resistance effect of Christianization at the level of individual bodies.* (Foucault 2003:213, emphasis added)[45]

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[45] Interestingly, this convulsive flesh that is "the resistance effect of Christianization" also resembles, in a way, medieval apophatic mystical desubjectivation. Medieval apophatic mysticism entailed such extreme investment in monastic rules that mystical practitioners ultimately stumbled into desubjectivation, thus disrupting the very system of rules to which they adhered. In other words, medieval apophatic mysticism constituted an involuntary subversion of compulsory monastic rules. Early modern demonic possession

On this basis—that early modern Christian spiritual techniques generated and exasperated the issue of "convulsive flesh"—Foucault argues that "the problem of the possessed and their convulsions, therefore, should not be seen as forming part of the history of illness" (214). Foucault is emphatic on this point: "A history of Western physical and mental illness does not enable us to understand the appearance of the possessed and their convulsions" (214). Rather, "in order to understand how and why the new phenomena of possession appeared at this time, taking over from the earlier phenomena of witchcraft, I think we need a history of the relations between the body and the mechanisms of power that invest it. The appearance, development, and supporting mechanisms of possession form part of the political history of the body" (214).

And yet we know that convulsion (and nervous illness more broadly) certainly became part of the domain of Western physical and mental illness by the eighteenth century. And, thus, the next step for Foucault is to trace the transfer of convulsion and nervous illness from its original role in religious mechanisms of power to its newer role as part of late modern medical science. To this effect, therefore, Foucault presents one final case study for Lecture Eight: the Loudon affair. The Loudon affair of 1632, popularized more recently in France by the publication of Michel de Certeau's *The Possession at Loudun* (1970), consisted of a rare and hybrid occurrence of demonic possession and witchcraft within a French monastery known for its encouragement of mysticism. Foucault highlights the case of Loudon (albeit very briefly) because it is perhaps the most emblematic example of the Church identifying problems with the

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and convulsion of female nuns is, similarly, a mode of involuntary resistance to compulsory confession-silence—although it manifested as an internal self-splitting rather than as a form of desubjectivation.

"aftereffects" of its own spiritual techniques of confession (217). It is one of the first examples of the Catholic Church exploring the issue of how one can "maintain and develop the technologies for the government of souls and bodies" while simultaneously "avoiding the consequences that are its aftereffects: those resistance effects whose most visible climactic and theatrical forms are the convulsions of the possessed" (217). The Loudon affair marks the moment when the "aftereffects" of demonic possession are finally shunned by the Church and are slowly turned over to the domain of medicine.

I will provide just a few sentences of short synopsis. In the case of Loudon, an outbreak of demonic possession occurred in typical fashion amongst the nuns. Foucault characterizes the outbreak as a classic case of "carnal disorder" in which nuns began to experience the slow penetration of strange sensations within their bodies (215). What makes this case unique, however, is how, rather than turning to exorcism, the Church reverted to the older model of the witch-hunt to pinpoint a single individual to be sacrificed in the name of ending the controversy. To this day, the Loudon case remains one of the most well known cases of demonic possession and witchcraft amongst historians of Christianity. It is Foucault's contention that "the Loudon case was so scandalous…because it represented the most systematic and the most desperate attempts, doomed to failure, to retranscribe the phenomenon of possession, absolutely typical of the Church's new mechanisms of power, in the old liturgy of the witch-hunt" (215). Phrased differently, "when the Church was confronted with these phenomena that both followed the trajectory of its new techniques of power and were, at the same time, the moment or point at which these techniques came up against their limits and point of reversal, it sought to control them" (215). Yet, because the Church at that time "lacked the means to

control these effects of the new mechanism of power it had installed, it reinscribed the phenomenon that it was forced to observe in the old procedures of control typical of the witch-hunts" (216). Ultimately, the priest of Loudon, Urbain Grandier, was "consecrated as witch and sacrificed as such" (216). But this occurred at high cost to the Church: each time a mass outbreak of possession occurred, the re-invocation of the witch-hunt brought nothing more than "self-mutilation" to the Church—the execution of its own clergy (216).

Consequently, in the late seventeenth century, the Church installed new, less drastic mechanisms for addressing the issue of convulsion. Among these were: "attenuating principles" (e.g. the staging of the confession box as dark, with a divider for limited contact—that is, to limit sexual impropriety); laxity (e.g. less rigid forms of penance and less compulsion to speak in full—that is, to limit resistant speech); and, finally, the practice of outright expulsion from the church (219, 221). Here, the last of these three mechanisms—expulsion—is what concerns us most, because such ejection from the Church, according to Foucault, marks the "point that the major and famous transfer of power to medicine begins" (221): "Now ecclesiastical power itself appeals to medicine in order to rid itself of this problem, of this question and trap that possession raises against the spiritual direction established in the sixteenth century" (221). Above all, this insertion of medicine into the problem of demonic possession marks the new "jurisdiction of medical knowledge into the order of the flesh" (222). As such, the flesh—the control over bodies and pleasures—is now split between the Church and "another mode of analysis and management of the body, by a different, secular, and medical power" (222). According to Foucault, by the eighteenth century the Church

relinquishes responsibility for convulsion, thus constituting "a radical break" that allows for the new medical codification of convulsion as an "autonomous and foreign phenomenon" (222). This codification becomes especially necessary by the turn of the eighteenth century when convulsion breaks out of the confines of the convent and goes on to affect alternative mystical groups in "low social strata of the population" and even some Protestants (222).

Finally, then, by the start of the eighteenth century, convulsion becomes "a privileged object for medicine"—especially in "that extensive domain that is so important and fruitful to doctors: nervous illnesses, vapors, [and] crises" (222). Thus, the body and the flesh, which were previously just under the purview of Christianity, are now, in the eighteenth century, a prized medical object. In this way, through this odd turn of events surrounding possession, medical science inherits convulsion and nervous illness; along with it, medicine inherits all of possession's sexual underpinnings that come by way of Christianity:

> medicine did not discover the domain of illnesses with a sexual connotation, origin, or support by extending the traditional considerations of Greek and medieval medicine on the uterus or the humors. Medicine began to become an institution claiming scientific status for its hygienic control of sexuality only inasmuch as it inherited the domain of the flesh demarcated and organized by ecclesiastical power. (223)

This point, made by Foucault, is huge: although traces of ancient Greek and medieval medicine (especially the work of Galen) do appear in late modern medical texts on sexuality and nervous illness, the emphasis on sexuality at this time comes, rather, from

the early modern Christian version of the flesh. (Thus, the purported hypersexuality and sexual impropriety of early modern female demoniacs is closely related to the symptomatology of late modern scientific classifications of nymphomania, hysteria, and other feminine nervous illnesses.) According to Foucault, the importance of "nervous illness" that characterizes eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medicine "is due precisely to the fact that it served as the first major anatomical and medical codification of the domain of the flesh that the Christian art of penance had until then explored merely with the help of notions such as 'movements,' 'tickling,' 'titillation,' et cetera" (223). And because "concupiscence was the sinful soul of the flesh…The nervous system takes the place of concupiscence by right. It is the material and anatomical version of the old concupiscence" (223). In other words, the eighteenth-century study of nervous disorders takes all the abnormalities of movements, sensations, desires, and pleasures in the body (i.e. sexuality) as its primary object of analysis. By the mid- to late 1800s such study of abnormalities of internal movement becomes the central focus of psychiatry and is reworked into the concept of sexual instinct or drive: "Psychiatry takes instinct and its disorders, all the confusions of the voluntary and the involuntary, as its own domain" (223). In this way, "the flesh of concupiscence, recodified within the nervous system by way of the convulsion, provides a model for the conceptualization and analysis of instinctual disorder. This model is convulsion as the automatic and violent release of basic and instinctual mechanisms of the human organism. Convulsion becomes the prototype of madness" (224).

In conceiving of instinct, now, as an internal, omnipresent locus from which sexuality emanates, it can now be said that sexuality is universal. This notion of instinct

as a universal internal force is crucial to the modern deployment of sexuality. Due to the ready capacity for internal conflict, however, sexuality comes to be perceived as easily corruptible and therefore prone to pathologies, perversions, and abnormalities (i.e. madness). Due to hysteria's preeminent symptoms of convulsion and internal conflict, I suspect that hysteria, especially, was one of the most direct descendants of demonic possession. Moreover, although it can only be hypothesized, I suspect that asexuality (as sexual renunciation) played a key role in this process due to its early modern association with demonic possession of female mystics who followed heterodox mystical techniques of self-renunciation and passivity. Firstly, "asexuality" was a way of opening up the soul via self-renunciation (i.e. detachment), thus rendering spiritual women and female mystics vulnerable to divine and demonic forces (or so it was thought by male clergy). And, secondly, I suspect that compulsory adherence to chastity within early modern Catholicism may have eventually clashed with compulsory confession and its assumption that sexuality is always circulating within the body and soul. As such, a conflict between remaining chaste and uncovering one's sexuality could have resulted in an internal conflict within the nun that may have also contributed to convulsion. Thus, when Freud later concludes that hysteria is a conflict between sexual repression and the omnipresent sexual instinct, he seems, perhaps, to be drawing upon the early modern conflict between Christian chastity and the flesh. I present this hypothesis (that there are linkages between asexuality, demonic possession, and hysteria) as a topic for further academic exploration within queer studies, psychoanalysis, disability studies, and the history of medicine. My intention in conjecturing on asexuality's entrance into the modern deployment of sexuality is intended, in this chapter, to have the effect of making readers suspicious of

the modern-day claim that asexuality has always been part of sexuality as an internal biological orientation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter is less about asexuality inasmuch as it is about the *foreclosure* of asexuality through its sexualization. This foreclosure occurred by means of 1) the sexualization of particular forms of mysticism via demonic possession, and 2) late modern medicine's inheritance of demonic possession, convulsion, and early modern Christian notions of the "flesh," which became the basis for the modern notion of sexual instinct and its tendency to become disordered. By early modernity and, most definitely, by late modernity, sexuality is unavoidable. It is the omnipresent and unending circulation of tiny movements, sensations, feelings, and desires inside the body itself—movements that are *precarious* and easily prone to "carnal" and "instinctual" disorder. But I believe that "asexuality" does not disappear. Rather, I suspect that it becomes *part of* sexual disorder.

As this chapter has conjectured, asexuality in the form of sexual and self-renunciation may have held linkages to female demonic possession because it was perceived as having made the soul of female mystics—especially practitioners of passive interiority—vulnerable to demonic intervention and sexual promiscuity. Likewise, although I have only brushed upon the idea, I wonder if, perhaps, "asexuality" may have also conflicted with the practice of confession and its compulsion to always be searching inside oneself for the movements of desire. Could it be the case that such an internal conflict between "asexuality" and "sexuality" may have contributed to the "convulsive flesh" and its characteristic outbursts of "inappropriate" sexuality? If so, is this why (by

the time of late modernity) many "asexual" female mystics and nuns were to be conceived as hypersexual, pathological, and hysterical? Hence, the opening quote of this chapter, from Henri Legrand du Saulle, a doctor and contemporary of Charcot's at La Salpetrière: "As far as the hysteric is concerned, finally stripped of her borrowed halo, she has lost her rights to the stake or to canonization. She has the honor of being a sick person, and depends directly on the doctor" (Legrand du Saulle, quoted in Mazzoni 1996:14). By late modernity, it seems, female "asexuality" no longer held linkages to divine ability or access to God but rather led to demonic possession and conflicts with the new Christian conceptions of the "flesh," which were later to be interpreted as medical illness and sexual pathology. In other words, there seems to be a shift here from asexuality-as-ability (i.e. the mystical ability to commune with God) to asexuality-as-disability (i.e. asexuality as sexual pathology).

Asexuality's connection to disability is important in this regard because it is also linked to queerness—and especially antisocial queerness—in the sense that asexuality first became part of demonic possession (and later also sexual pathology, I conjecture) as a result of disrupting social norms within the Church during the early modern period. As I have argued via Sluhovsky (2007), rising trends of anti-intellectualism and democratization of mystical practices—especially passive interiority, which promoted gender equality and questioned the utility of participation in religious rites—resulted in backlash by the Church. Critics of the new mysticism commonly discredited it by resorting to stereotypes and tropes of female disability: weakness, vulnerability, limited will power, uncontrollable sexuality, and so on. Calling the new mysticism "feminine" was a strategic way of discrediting it while also opening the floodgates for divine

mystical intervention to be more likely interpreted as demonic. In sum, because new forms of mysticism—particularly passive interiority—posed a threat to the stability of the Church, they were regarded as heterodox and antisocial. Whereas late antique Christian practitioners of sexual renunciation were often executed due to their disruption of the social functioning of the Roman Empire, early modern female mystics (particularly the practitioners of passive interiority), on the other hand, were disparaged and typecast as demonically possessed and sexually promiscuous due to their disruption of the social functioning of the Church. Christianity, in other words, went from being a queer fledgling religion to one that became central to sociality—and accusations of sexual impropriety became a key way by which the Church labeled things as heterodox or opposed to the social. It is interesting to note how "antisocial asexuality" of late antiquity—which was an effective yet dangerous way of challenging Roman society—later became a thorn in the side of the stronghold of Christianity. Though sexual renunciation was not the only component of mystical ascetic practices of passive interiority in the early modern period, it was a central one, and it therefore acquired connotations, I believe, of antisociality and demonic possession that I suspect persisted in the form of late modern sexual pathology.

In sum, this chapter has presented a genealogical reconceptualization of asexuality and how it became sexualized through the historical mechanisms of early modern demonic possession and late modern medicine. In presenting this information, I have aimed to show how modern conceptions of sexual instinct and interiority do indeed have a history in which Christianity played a major role. An acknowledgement of the historical construction of sexuality (and asexuality's place within it) contributes to the

broader goal of destabilizing modern-day beliefs in the presumed biological inherency and universality of sexuality. Such destabilization of sexuality, in turn, opens up the possibility that asexuality, one day, could be understood on different terms.

## Chapter Four: Asexuality, Eroticism, and the Death of God

If the previous chapter demonstrates how asexuality first became incorporated into sexuality as a result of its connections to antisociality (in the form of demonic possession), this chapter, then, will tell the story of how asexuality eventually lost its antisocial edge as a result of this absorption into sexuality. This chapter, in other words, tells a story of the rise of the deployment of sexuality, with especial attention to the production of sexuality as "the social" and the incorporation of asexuality into "the social" by means of having become a sexual orientation and form of sexual identity. In particular, the chapter focuses on the historical production of sexuality as psychological interiority—the core of our intelligibility—and presents this history as a means of making the reader skeptical of the modern-day assumption that sexuality has always been central to sociality, identity, and our understanding of ourselves.

This chapter argues that in order to understand the modern lack of asexual experience—in other words, the modern notion that there is nothing experienced beyond or outside of sexuality—first we must better understand the relationship between Christian theology and Western sexuality. More specifically, we must understand a particular historical moment: the "death of God" moment during the Enlightenment (c. mid-1700s) and how it launched immense changes in the shape of sexual discourse and in the structure of experience and subjectivity. Above all, the chapter will tell a narrative which argues that modern sexual subjectivity—the notion of sexuality as psychological interiority—derives, in part, from the death of God moment and our attempts to recover from it by taking sexual discourse to the extreme. This sexual discourse, in turn, was inherited from a much older theological tradition of erotic talk about God. As this

chapter will argue, the death of God moment helps us to understand how sexuality became a prerequisite part of language and subjectivity and how asexuality, in turn, had to become part of sexuality in order to become recognizable. In this way, by merging with normative perceptions of sexuality, asexuality lost much of its resistance effect—that is, its capacity to challenge social norms. Like the other chapters, my argument regarding the death of God and the rise of sexuality (as psychological interiority and the basis of modern sociality) is presented not as an empirical claim but as a strategic rhetorical narrative with the capacity to challenge the modern emphasis on sexual identity. This chapter explores connections, linkages, or continuities between pre-modern Christian eroticism and late-modern sexuality yet demonstrates how eroticism was drastically transformed in the late-modern period upon the death of God.

Here is how the chapter will unfold. Through a close reading of Foucault's (1963) "Preface to Transgression" essay on Bataille, this chapter will argue that whereas asexuality once held links to divine limitlessness (typically articulated by mystics in erotic spiritual terms), the late modern death of God ultimately severed those links, thus redefining eroticism in terms of sexuality and its limits. A primary goal of this chapter is to historicize the notion of "eroticism" and how it played out in pre-modern Christianity as compared to late modern sexuality after the death of God. This chapter will articulate the impact that the late modern death of God has had on modern sexual discourse and its relationship to subjectivity.

In the first section, through a discussion of Mark Jordan's "Religion Trouble" (2007) and Foucault's "Preface to Transgression" (1963), I will demonstrate how there existed a great deal of erotic discourse (as well as talk of the "flesh") within pre-modern

Christianity which came to be inherited and put to a different use during late modern times. This section argues that a historicization of the shift from pre-modern Christian eroticism to modern sexuality should matter to queer theory because the modern discursive deployment of sexuality in fact derives from pre-modern Christian erotic discourse and how it got reworked upon the death of God. As this section will argue, queer theory has inherited much of its discourse on sexuality from Christian theology without recognizing or being very critical of it (Jordan 2007:573). As a result, sexuality and queer studies risks producing work that may ultimately feed back into this discursive deployment of sexuality.

In the second section, "Pre-Modern Christian Eros," I will historicize the notion of eroticism within the pre-modern Christian context. More specifically, I will home in on mystical eroticism of the late Middle Ages and early modernity and will explain its connections to "asexuality" and the divine. As I will argue, pre-modern Christian *eros* is the process of uniting with God via desubjectivation. Historically, such self-dissolution was achieved under conditions of strict adherence to ascetic self-renunciation, including chastity. Through renouncing the self, mystics dissolved into the vast limitlessness of God, which, they thought, existed beyond us, exterior to being. As this section will demonstrate, "asexuality" and *eros* in pre-modern Christian mysticism are both linked to self-dissolution and to the unknown access to spiritual infinitude that such dissolution allows. Therefore, despite a preponderance of mystical discourse which, from today's standpoint, might seem highly sexual, pre-modern Christian *eros* is, rather, deconstructive and self-dissolving. As I argue, pre-modern Christian erotic discourse is the language of desubjectivating union with God.

Conversely, in the third section, "The Death of God," I will explain how eighteenth century French Enlightenment and Revolutionary thinkers, through their adoption of rationalism and positivism, "killed" God, thus installing restrictions on the range of human spiritual capacity. I will demonstrate via the Marquis de Sade in particular how a proliferation of language about sexuality became the core means of attempting to overcome the spiritual limitations that emerged upon the death of God. Upon the death of God, eroticism no longer points to something *beyond* ourselves (i.e. divine limitlessness); rather, in the absence of God, sexual language fills us up as interiority (i.e. the limits of ourselves). In this way, the chapter tells the story of the death of God and how its aftermath led not only to a greater proliferation of discourse on sexuality but also to the production of interiority, or psychological subjectivity, in which sexuality plays in indispensable role. Modern sexual discourse is, according to this story, the language of our interiority—the articulation of who we are.

In conclusion, the chapter will argue that nowadays asexuality no longer holds linkages to desubjectivation and divine limitlessness; now asexuality is only intelligible to the extent that it is internalized and articulated as sexual identity. This is, in other words, a story about the rise of sexuality as the grid of our intelligibility and asexuality's place within it; the chapter tells the story of how asexuality became no longer an antisocial, disruptive force but rather a relatively socially adjusted (albeit paradoxical) sexual orientation. By demonstrating how asexuality reached the point of becoming an internal "sexual" disposition or orientation as a result of this aforementioned historical trajectory, this chapter seeks to uproot the modern assumption that sexuality (including asexuality) has always been an intrinsic psychological substance.

**Theology and Sexuality**

Central to this chapter is the notion that in order to better understand modern sexuality and how it functions, first it is necessary to investigate modern sexuality's roots in Christian theology. In particular, one must understand that there existed a great deal of erotic discourse and talk of the "flesh" in pre-modern Christianity, and this is something that modern society has inherited (albeit to a different end). This section provides a general outline of the linkage between theology and sexuality and why it should matter to queer theory.

Whereas desubjectivating union with divine limitlessness constituted pre-modern Christian *eros* (to be discussed in Section Two below), "what is at issue" with modern sexuality, according to Foucault, is "the overall 'discursive fact,' the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'" (1976:11). Via the Christian confessional, the writings of Sade, and countless studies from the likes of Samuel-Auguste Tissot, Heinrich Kaan, Malthus, Krafft-Ebing, and Freud, sexuality has been put into discourse relentlessly. And it continues today to be discussed *ad infinitum*—not only by the likes of sexuality and queer studies scholars but by all individuals who put sexuality at the heart of who they are. Sexuality, Foucault argues, has become so discursively ubiquitous and so engrained in thought that it is now prerequisite to our capacity to recognize and be intelligible to ourselves; sexuality is, according to Foucault, the crux of modern subjectivity (1976:155-6). Foucault, in turn, identifies the early modern Christian confessional and its compulsory discourse on the body and the flesh (i.e. the body of pleasures and desires) as the historical source from which late modern scientific notions of sexuality first emerged (see Foucault 1976 and 2003). As Foucault states in *Abnormal* (2003):

> medicine did not discover the domain of illnesses of a sexual connotation, origin, or support by extending the traditional considerations of Greek and medieval medicine…Medicine began to become an institution claiming scientific status for its hygienic control of sexuality only inasmuch as it inherited the domain of the flesh demarcated and organized by ecclesiastical power. (223)

In other words, medicine inherited the flesh, which was both constructed and governed through the early modern discursive practice of compulsory confession. As Mark Jordan (2007) states, commenting on Foucault's 1963 "Preface to Transgression" essay, modern sexuality therefore is constituted primarily through the *eroticization of language,* which stems from this Christian history:

> Long before *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault suggested, in praise of Georges Bataille, that discourse on sexuality had been shaped to fit a space left by the death of God. 'Sexuality is not decisive for our culture except as spoken and to the extent that it is spoken. Our language has been eroticized for the last two centuries: our sexuality, since Sade and the death of God, has been absorbed by the universe of language…' It is not a long step from this suggestion to the suspicion that the speech of sexuality, at least in the cultures of a former Christendom, satisfies longings once elicited and addressed by Christian theology. (563-4, ellipsis added)

This point concerning the death of God is something that I will return to in Section Three below. For the purposes of this section, however, I seek merely to draw attention to Jordan's point that those "longings once elicited and addressed by Christian

theology" have found their way into modern sexuality by way of Sade and the eroticization of language. This eroticization of language is something that first happened in early modern Christianity via its emphasis on compulsory confession and the disclosure of all of one's lustful desires and thoughts. To this effect, Section Two will outline the contours of those erotic "longings once elicited and addressed by Christian theology" and Section Three, in turn, will demonstrate how talk of these longings (upon the death of God) came to form the basis of late modern (as well as modern) sexual subjectivity. This is not to say that pre-modern Christian eroticism and late modern sexuality are the same thing. Rather, this chapter will historicize the concept of pre-modern eroticism and will demonstrate its transformation into modern sexuality/subjectivity after the death of God. The historicization of this shift from pre-modern Christian eroticism to modern sexuality should especially matter to queer theory because, as Mark Jordan (2007) argues, queer theory has inherited much of its discourse on sexuality from Christian theology—albeit without recognizing or being very critical of it (564, 573). Queer theory, Jordan states:

> covers much of the area of Christian theology. It takes over theological topics and tropes. It has the mixed disciplinary status of theology, as criticism and exhortation, analysis and revolutionary proposal. Queer theory studies the effects of the modern sciences that displaced Christian pastoral theology, *but it also depends on them*…Queer theory engages and imitates the contemporary discourses that took on the rhetorical roles, the linguistic energies, formerly allotted in the West to theology. (573, emphasis added)

This point that queer theory studies the effects of modern sciences by utilizing topics and tropes "formerly allotted in the West to theology" is significant (and ironic) because it illustrates how queer theory is utilizing, against the sciences, some of the very same language responsible for the construction of modern sexuality in the first place. Jordan seems to suggest, therefore, that engagement with Christian theology is just as important as engagement with the modern sciences and processes of normalization with which queer theory today seems much more concerned. By focusing on pre-modern Christianity and its impact on the formation of modern sexual subjectivity and language, this chapter aims to show how sexuality/queer studies needs to think more critically about its Christian past and how it has shaped how queer theory functions as a discipline today. By becoming more self-aware of the place of Christianity and theology in modern queer theory, scholars of queer studies will have more likelihood of avoiding an accidental recycling of the discursive deployment of sexuality. This proliferation of sexuality is worth avoiding due to modern sexuality's multifarious connections to the regulation of populations and individual behaviors (i.e. biopower). Likewise, further deployment of sexuality is problematic because the expansion and strengthening of sexuality (as the asexual paradox already demonstrates) puts constraints on how asexuality and possibly other ways of being and feeling get interpreted.

In the next section, I will go into more historical detail concerning the function of eroticism and erotic language in pre-modern Christian mysticism. Following that, in the third and final section I will discuss the late modern death of God and how it transformed the purpose and effect of erotic language; more specifically, this section will discuss how

increased sexual discourse led no longer to God but rather to the limits of ourselves—in other words to the limits of our own psychological interiority.

**Pre-Modern Christian Eros**

In his "Preface to Transgression" (1963), written over a decade before *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976), Michel Foucault muses upon the relationship between sexuality and Christian theology. Drawing heavily upon the work and vocabulary of Georges Bataille, the preeminent theorist of the spiritual edges and limits of experience, it is difficult throughout the essay to decisively pinpoint where Bataille's voice ends and Foucault's begins. Bataille is no stranger to talk about sexuality. Pervasive throughout Bataille's work is his discussion of connections between eroticism and spirituality, and it seems that Foucault's goal in this essay is, in essence, to coax out the modern implications that Bataille's work holds for how we understand eroticism today, as compared to pre-modern Christian times.

In this section I will conduct a close reading of "Preface to Transgression" with the objective of historicizing and contextualizing pre-modern Christian *eros*. My goal is to understand the relationship between asexuality and divinity and why it was often articulated throughout the Middle Ages and early modernity in seemingly contradictory erotic language. This section asks why erotic language was so common among pre-modern mystics in the Western tradition despite their strict adherence to an ascetic lifestyle that included sexual renunciation. The answer, I suspect, is that pre-modern Christian erotic language, despite appearing rather sexual by today's standards, actually articulates the process of *self-dissolution* into God's limitlessness. Pre-modern Christian *eros* describes, therefore, the trauma and the passion of desubjectivation. The next

section, “The Death of God,” on the other hand, will demonstrate how erotic language in the absence of limitlessness became the internal *limit* of ourselves—the basis for modern sexual and psychological subjectivity.

First I will discuss potential reasons for the prevalence of erotic language within pre-modern Christian mysticism, despite the compulsory nature of sexual renunciation. Following this, I will discuss how pre-modern Christian erotic language describes not sexuality in a modern sense but rather the feeling and intensity of desubjectivation, which is achieved, in part, through practices of sexual and self-renunciation. Pre-modern Christian *eros* is, in other words, the process of desubjectivating dissolution into divine limitlessness, otherwise known as “mystical union” with God. This will be then be juxtaposed in the next section with modern eroticism, which is the process of taking sexuality to the extreme in an attempt to experience the *limits* of ourselves.

Prevalence of Erotic Language in Medieval Christian Mysticism

Foucault commences his 1963 essay on Bataille from the standpoint of our modern-day outlook on sexuality: “We like to believe that sexuality has regained, in contemporary experience, its full truth as a process of nature which has long been lingering in the shadows…until now, that is, when our positive awareness allows us to decipher it so that it may at last emerge in the clear light of language” (58). Here, as the story goes, sexuality has always been a process of nature, merely lingering in the shadows, awaiting scientific discovery, so that we may now speak and embrace the truth of its natural yet latent being. Indeed, to readers of Foucault, this story sounds all too familiar. It is the story of how sexuality has been implicated in positive knowledge production and “incitement to discourse” (see Foucault 1976). Yet, here, in “Preface to

Transgression" (1963), Foucault looks much more precisely at the history of Christianity. Whereas Foucault does indeed make fleeting references to the Christian confessional in *History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976), here Christianity takes the spotlight.[46] Foucault foregrounds Christianity, in part, to dispute the popular notion that sexuality was merely "lingering in the shadows" prior to modern times. Quite to the contrary, Foucault argues, "never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater 'felicity of expression' than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin" (1963:57). With respect to pre-modern understanding of "sexuality," Christian theology had long been the primary source of production of discourse and knowledge.[47] In countless pre-modern texts Christians elaborated upon the many dangers of fornication and the vices it incites (see Foucault 1982). Likewise, throughout the Middle Ages, Christians embraced the practice of introspection for identifying all the ruminations and sensations of the body and mind (see Foucault 1980, 1982). This eventually made way

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[46] See also Foucault's *Abnormal* (2003) and *On the Government of the Living* (2014) for much more detailed historical explications of the rise and function of the Christian confessional and its impact on modern sexuality.

[47] Here it is important to point out how Foucault's use of the term "sexuality" with respect to pre-modern Christianity is not fixed but rather fluid and variably defined from one historical period to the next. For instance, Christians of late antiquity regarded anthropogony—the existence of humans in material form—as the genesis of evil. This evil, in turn, was considered to have been propagated through reproduction itself (i.e. original sin), regardless of whether it occurred within marriage or through fornication (see Chapter One). Throughout most of the Middle Ages, sexuality was structured according to licit and illicit sexual acts that occurred *between* individuals (see Chapter Three). Christians of early modernity, on the other hand, regarded sexuality as the "flesh" and "concupiscence": all of the ruminations, feelings, sensations, and desires circulating *within* their own bodies (see Chapter Three).

for the creation of the Christian confessional during early modernity and its policing of the body and the "flesh" (see Foucault 2003). Thus, despite (or perhaps because of) its infamous status, "sexuality" knew no greater felicity of expression than in early Christianity. Perhaps then, Foucault insinuates, this may be why the rhetoric of desire, sensation, and ecstasy saturates Christian spirituality, even seeping into the realm of "experience." As Foucault argues, this sort of language is central, presumably, not only to "the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin" but also to religious experience itself:

> The proof is in its [Christianity's] whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself (57).[48]

Brides of Christ, penetrated by the Holy Spirit; the many voluptuous, erotic depictions of Saint Teresa of Avila in her various states of rapture; centuries of commentaries on *The Song of Songs*' elucidation of erotic union with God. All of these are examples of the fact that "the language of the love of God in the Western Christian tradition is notably erotic" (Turner 1995a:25). Central to Christian mysticism starting with the Pseudo-

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[48] Here Foucault uses the term "experience" ("of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring") but acknowledges that, in the final moment, such experience "leaves us spent" (57). In other words, such experiences *lead* to desubjectivating union with God but do not, in and of themselves, constitute experiences *of* desubjectivation. This seems to align with Denys Turner's (1995b) argument that medieval Christian mysticism emphasized not the "experience of negativity" but rather the "negativity of experience."

Denys is the belief that "the dynamic of the soul's return to God is one and the same with the erotic outflow from God which is our creation. The soul returns to God as *to* the source *from* which it flowed…[hence,] the dynamic of creation is *eros* and the dynamic of return of creation to its source is *eros.* There is just one *eros,* a single, homogenous stream in contrasting movements of flow and ebb" (Turner 1995a:49-50; emphasis in original). Creation of the universe *ex nihilo* by God is an erotic act—and just as well is union with God the *return* of God's *eros* to its source. And just as the capacity of God's creation is limitless, the return to God is limitless as well. This is because God—divine love itself—is unbounded; there is no origin or end-point at which this *eros* stops. It is "without interruption or limit," as Foucault puts it. Or, as Bataille would put it, *eros* is continuous (Brintnall 2011:12). Union with God is a movement from discontinuity (i.e. earthly separation from God) to one of continuity (i.e. reabsorption into God's limitlessness): "eroticism, like religion, is a search for lost continuity" (Bataille paraphrased in Brintnall 2011:12).

All of this goes to show that "sexuality" in the form of *eros* pervades pre-modern Christianity. And this seems especially true for medieval and early modern mystics who, Foucault says, "experience" all "the *continuous* forms" of desire, rapture, penetration, ecstasy, and outpouring that line the path to God (1963:57, emphasis added). But doesn't this finding seem odd when we keep in mind how critical Christianity is of sexuality? This, at least from a modern perspective, seems at first glance to be one of the crucial paradoxes of Christian mysticism: what we see occurring here is a seemingly paradoxical eroticization of (re)union with God within a religion that is highly critical of sexuality and, indeed, which *requires* sexual renunciation to achieve this erotic outcome. Isn't it

rather "puzzling that men dedicated to a life of celibacy should find so natural a mode of expression for their spiritual aspirations in the erotic…" (Turner 1995a:19)? And isn't it even more puzzling how sexual renunciation becomes, *par excellence,* the dominant spiritual pathway to the erotic? How do we account for this "apparent anomaly" in which love for the "celibate condition" and "enthusiasm for the spiritually erotic" are so welcomingly intertwined (17)?

To answer this question, let me reiterate: within pre-modern Christianity one could not get away from "sexuality" in its various historical forms (e.g. original sin, fornication, the flesh, concupiscence), for it was everywhere. Nevertheless, early Christians were expected to do everything in their power to resist the temptations all around them. From the earliest of days, starting in late antiquity, control over one's own reproduction and sexual practices had become the linchpin of Christianity (see Chapter One). Sexual renunciation and purity were the rallying point of many early Christian congregations as well as the primary practical means of intervening politically in late Roman society. Likewise, the medieval ritual practice of introspecting one's own bodily and mental movements made sexuality impossible to avoid. Even in renouncing sexuality, practitioners of celibacy remained constantly vigilant of errant sexual impulses that could potentially re-emerge at any time (see Foucault 1982). This is especially true of the early modern period, as demonstrated by the previous chapter's discussion of demonic possession as the product of *compulsory* Christian confessional practices gone awry. Thus, in an unending feedback loop, all of this focus on sexuality in its various historical forms triggered a need for extreme vigilance, which, in turn, drew more attention to sex and to the dangers it creates. So, in sum, all the worries about "fallen

bodies and of sin" did indeed cause a great "felicity of expression," and this familiarity with "sexuality" in all its pre-modern Christian forms is perhaps what made it possible for erotic language to feel so at home in pre-modern Christianity.

Desubjectivation and Eros

But there is perhaps another explanation for the prevalent use of erotic language in pre-modern Christianity (especially during late medieval and early modern mysticism). Here I will discuss how pre-modern Christian erotic discourse was, in its own historical context, intended to describe the mystical process of desubjectivation. More specifically, mystical desubjectivation consisted of dissolution into divine limitlessness exterior to being. Such dissolution was an encounter with limitlessness—a reunification with continuity—beyond the human grasp. In other words, desubjectivation entailed the complete negativity of human experience, feeling, thought, and speech—a complete loss of self. It was akin to traumatic death of the self, but also ecstatic bliss since it entailed a complete loss of separation or discontinuity between the human and the divine. As such, pre-modern Christian erotic language described not sexuality in a modern sense but rather the *intensity* (both traumatic and ecstatic) of dissolution into the limitless continuity of God. In this section, via Kent Brintnall's *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-In-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (2011), I will conduct a brief explication of Bataille's conceptualization of eroticism and its relationship to religion. Here what is most crucial to recognize is that eroticism, unlike how we popularly conceive of it today, is not be confused with mere sexuality. Rather, for Bataille, eroticism has roots in desubjectivation. The *intensity* of desubjectivation, I argue, is what has led it to be so commonly articulated in sexual terms.

As Bataille states, "the meaning of eroticism escapes anyone who cannot see its *religious* meaning! Reciprocally, the meaning of religion in its totality escapes anyone who disregards the link it has with eroticism" (cited in Brintnall 2011:12, emphasis in original). As Brintnall states of Bataille's work, eroticism as a religious phenomenon consists, namely, of a "quest for continuity"—a quest to unite with the limitless continuity of the divine, which is in stark contrast to our human existence as discontinuous beings *separate* from God (12). As such, "the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives…Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like waves of a stormy sea" (Bataille cited in Brintnall 2011:12). For this reason, "the meaning of eroticism also escapes anyone who equates it with the sexual act itself. Unlike sexual acts that have reproduction as their goal, and are therefore fully consistent with utilitarian aims [for societal preservation]," eroticism is, instead, a *desire to lose the self* (12). As Brintnall states, "*erotic* actors must be aware that they are violating the imperative for productive behavior and must experience a disruption of their discontinuity" (13, emphasis in original). In this way, eroticism is reminiscent of sacrifice: "Expenditure of self in passionate abandon links eroticism to sacrifice…[D]esire for and identification with the erotic object culminates in dissolution of the self's physical and psychological boundaries, giving rise to an experience of intimacy through and with the other" (13). In this process of self-sacrifice, "an ecstatic terror accompanies the slipping away of one's self and the dissolution of the other in one's presence. But the 'warmth of pleasure and sensuality' accompanies this anguish, both suspending and intensifying it: Bataillean anguish, in both sacrificial and erotic

violence, is never in complete opposition to, or wholly separate from, happiness" (13). In other words, "sacrifice, then, is a consumptive practice that fosters identification with death and destruction, an identification that ruptures…time and bounded existence"; but, because such dissolution entails erotic unification or continuity with the other, it is, as well, ecstatic (12).

Therefore, when modern society labels medieval and early modern mystical encounters as a form of "sexual experience," it fails to sufficiently account for the loss of self that occurs in mysticism. In turn, this mystical loss of self and subsequent return to continuity nullifies any humanly notions of sexuality itself. Christian mysticism exceeds the human capacity for comprehension. When we conceive, therefore, of Teresa of Avila's states of rapture or Agnes Blannbekin's orgasmic reactions (to feasting on the body of Christ) as merely "sexual," we do a disservice to the rigorous process of spiritual desubjectivation and how it in fact disrupts humanly notions of sexuality. Likewise, in failing to account for *the ascetic process, practices, and techniques* through which one achieved mystical desubjectivation (and instead obsessing over the purported "sexual" outcome of such desubjectivation), we lose sight of the fact that mysticism, in the pre-modern Christian context, was rooted in rigorous religious rules. Foremost among them, as I have argued in Chapter Two, was chastity or sexual renunciation, which was one of the most crucial ascetic practices along the journey to self-renunciation. Therefore, as I argue, the seemingly "sexual" outcomes of pre-modern Christian mysticism would not have even been possible without the contribution of asexuality (as sexual renunciation) and the self-dissolution it helped allow.

**The Death of God**

Despite the copious amount of pre-modern Christian language on "sexuality"—for instance, the abundant language on "fallen bodies and of sin" and the robustness of language on erotic union with divine limitlessness—why is it that in "Preface to Transgression" (1963) Foucault seems so much more critical of the copious language of modern sexuality? In this section I will explain how Foucault identifies the "death of God" moment in late modernity as responsible for a constriction in the range of human spiritual capacity. Through Foucault's highly specific example of the French Revolution and the writings of the Marquis de Sade I will demonstrate how, upon the death of God, "sexual" language became no longer an erotic way of describing the intensity of union with God's limitlessness but rather a strategic means of attempting to overcome the spiritual limitations that emerged upon God's death. And this still persists today. In an attempt to overcome the loss of the sacred, modern eroticism now deploys endless linguistic permutations of sexuality in the hopes of overcoming our spiritual limitations.

Central to the argument of this section is that, in a world with no God (in other words, in a secular world of limits), sexual language no longer points to something *beyond* ourselves (i.e. divine limitlessness) but rather fills us up as psychological interiority. As Foucault argues, today "sexuality is only decisive for our culture as spoken, and to the degree it is spoken" (Foucault 1963:70); and this sexual language, in turn, is the pathway to interior knowledge of ourselves (see also Foucault 1976). To this effect, this section will outline the historical circumstances surrounding the death of God—Enlightenment rationalism, the Age of Reason, and the French Revolution—and will demonstrate through Sade how increased incitement to discourse about sexuality became 1) a means of trying to keep God dead and 2) an attempt to lift the spiritual

limitations caused by God's death. In Sade's attempt to take sexual language and scenarios to the extreme, he uncovered, instead, the path to deeper knowledge of our sexual desires and our own personal limits. With nowhere for sexuality to go other than to the limits of ourselves, sexual language came to fill us as psychological interiority. In this way, this section points to the means by which sexuality came to be perceived as the heart of our intelligibility. In other words, sexual identity became the social, and asexuality, in turn, had to become part of it. This is, therefore, a story—one among possibly many—of how asexuality became severed from its spiritual linkages, became sexualized, and ended up losing its antisocial edge.

Sade

Since the "death of God" is the switch point for Foucault (from Christian *eros* to modern sexuality), I will start by contextualizing it. The "death of God," as Foucault uses it in his essay, is rooted in the work of Bataille who, in turn, links the death of God to events surrounding the French Revolution. As French studies and comparative literature scholar Allan Stoekl (2015) explains, by the time of the French Revolution there was great suspicion of God: "He is, instead, a fiction, a con-job, a lie" (203). Circulating, instead, among French Enlightenment authors of the period (e.g. d'Holbach, La Mettrie) was the "radical materialist" notion that "fully explicable means alone caused the rise of physical beings and conscious minds" (203-4). In fact, at that time "a number of revolutionaries actually sought to disband the Church and establish 'Temples of Reason' that celebrated the absence of God and the overwhelming importance of that which is, apparently, least divine: human reason" (204). This sacralization of "natural" (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) reasoning by these revolutionaries took on an

almost sarcastic, blasphemous quality as they continued beating the dead horse that was God: "But what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed*? Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee he does not exist—certainly a cause for laughter" (Foucault 1963:59; emphasis in original). And it was the Marquis de Sade, above all, who "pushed this tendency furthest, arguing that the only true pleasure in life is physical…and that physicality arose from following the dictates of Nature, which commanded violent pleasure, such as murder…And not only murder, but *the ever-repeated murder of a fictitious God in and through blasphemous orgasm.*…For Sade the ultimate physical pleasure was to be found in orgasmic cursing of the non-existent God" (Stoekl 2015:204, emphasis added).

On the one hand, then, the "death of God" is a story of the rise in valuation of reason and positive knowledge. On the other hand, though, it is a story—many stories, actually—of sadistic murder. It was not nearly enough to claim God as dead and simply move on. Rather, the death of God had to be continuously relived and reasserted; and no one took more pleasure in this than Sade in all his writings. Most significant about Sade is the way he associates the death of God with sexual profanity of any and every possible kind. As Foucault indicates, the continuous killing of God is conducted, for Sade, through sexual "profanation without object"—in other words, through the supposed radical irreverence of sexuality that is sustained by re-enacting, through blasphemous orgasm, the killing of what is already dead (1963:57). And this re-invocation of the killing of God is, paradoxically, an attempt by Sade to move beyond God and the limitations of God's moral "law." Hence, "as conveyed by the writings of the Marquis de Sade, sexuality now is a profanation that 'links, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits

to the death of God'" (Foucault cited in Stoekl 2014:511). And this is exactly how Foucault defines modern eroticism: "if it were necessary to give, in opposition to sexuality, a precise definition of eroticism, it would have to be the following: an experience of sexuality which links, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God" (1963:59). Whereas sexuality (in the form of *eros*) once pointed to a greater power (i.e. the continuous, limitless God), modern sexuality (i.e. sexuality since Sade) "points to nothing beyond itself" but rather takes us to the limits of language in an attempt to overcome the loss of limitlessness caused by killing God (Foucault 1963:57). Phrased more simply, sexual language and sexual scenarios become Sade's strategy to overcome the limits to the death of God. Ultimately, then:

> through the endless permutations of Sade's novels, written in the mode of blasphemy, directed precisely against a God who does not exist, we come to recognize that sexuality, rather than something outside us (as biological or cultural imperative), setting our personal limits,…instead "*marks the limit within ourselves and designates us as limit*." Endlessly written sexuality is now *internal*,…it turns on itself, always generating new permutations, new senseless variations. (Stoekl 2014:511, emphasis added)

Hence, now our sexuality is only limited to the extent that we are incapable of speaking and conceiving of it: "sexuality is only decisive for our culture as spoken, and to the degree it is spoken" (Foucault 1963:70). Likewise, the limits to the human capacity to speak of sexuality now mark the limits of ourselves: the limits of human subjectivity and experience itself. And thus "the death of God does not restore us to a limited and

positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits" (Foucault 1963:59). As Stoekl explains, it is by thoroughly articulating our desires that we come to achieve depth, or, in other words, a sense of interiority—a sense of knowing ourselves and where our limits lie (2014:511). In medieval mysticism—particularly in negative, apophatic traditions—hitting the limits of the human capacity to speak of God resulted in desubjectivating dissolution into divine *limitlessness* (of which asexuality-as-sexual-renunciation played a key part). With Sade, however, hitting the limits of the human capacity to speak of sexuality resulted merely in the discovery of the limits of ourselves: in this way, according to Foucault, sexuality as psychological interiority was formed.

**Conclusion**

With asexuality's former connections to erotic dissolution (into divine limitlessness) having been completely severed by the death of God, what does this mean for asexuality today? If incitement to discourse about sexuality is central, so the story goes, to the production of our own interiority (i.e. modern subjectivity), then asexuality (i.e. *lack* of sexual attraction/desire), it seems, is only intelligible to the extent that it is articulated, paradoxically, in sexual language. And indeed, to this effect, asexuality today is commonly described in interior psychological terms: an identity, a sexual orientation, and an internal disposition despite its claims to *lacking* sexuality. Asexuality, it seems, no longer disrupts society or the self, and it no longer leads to divine *presence* through the process of desubjectivation. Rather, asexuality now feeds in to sexuality, through which it achieves its intelligibility *but also* its paradoxical characterization as *a lack that is contingent upon sexuality*. In other words, this chapter tells the story of asexuality's interiorization as sexual identity and how it may be a function of this late

modern turn of events that were instrumental in producing sexuality and its discursive deployment as the basis of our modern episteme.

In this manner, by telling this highly specific and partial story of asexuality's sexualization, I aim to instill in the reader the suspicion that perhaps the modern notion of asexuality as a "sexual" orientation is rooted not in a transhistorical, internal disposition but in an historically specific turn of events. By working to destabilize our taken for granted assumptions about sexuality in this way—through a strategic narrative that historicizes the rise of modern sexual subjectivity and asexuality's place within it—I seek to open a space for things to be otherwise. I do so in hopes that asexuality will be capable of being articulated and experienced in other ways that are less contingent upon notions of sexual identity as we know them today.

## Conclusion

This dissertation started out in anthropology with the goal of understanding and representing asexual experience. As I became steeped in the asexual community, however, I began to recognize that there were limits to accessing asexual experience. Asexual group members with whom I interacted all defined asexuality in paradoxical terms: "asexuals do not experience sexual attraction," and "asexuality is a sexual orientation." What struck me most about this "asexual paradox"—that is, *lack* of sexuality as a *form* of sexuality—was the fact that during my entire time researching asexuality, it was never described on its own terms but always *in relation to* sexuality.

As our group discussions taught me, asexuality was not about the presence of experiences of asexuality. Rather, group members were most preoccupied with experiences of *lacking* sexuality in our modern Western society, in which so much emphasis is placed on sex. Asexuality was often articulated through examples of hardship that the group members experienced while going about their everyday lives in sex-saturated society. Members discussed pressures to form sexual relationships and pursue dating, pressures to marry and have children, and pressures to pursue medical treatment to "cure" how they felt. Likewise, members of the group often discussed the ways in which non-asexual people attempted to delegitimize asexuality through a number of stereotypes and insults: "you were abused as a child," "you're in denial," "you're repressed," "you're an evolutionary freak of nature," and so on.

No matter what we did, it seemed that our group could not get away from the language and logic of sexuality. In the rare moments when group members attempted to describe their asexuality as separate from sexuality (that is, as neither a lack nor form of

sexuality), I witnessed them struggle. "I do lack sexual attraction, but I feel like asexuality is *more* than just a lack…" "I feel like there's more to us…I don't know how to describe it…" "It just seems wrong saying that asexuality is a sexual orientation…" "Am I making sense?" After a lot of stuttering and starts and stops, our conversations would eventually collapse like the speech of an apophatic mystical theologian on the edge of failure. I got the impression that we, as a group, had a sense of what this feeling was, but the language used to describe it always failed us. We'd go silent for a moment, and then back to our usual ways of talking about asexuality. I was convinced, however, that those moments of collapse and silence (which resulted from our group attempts to articulate asexuality on its own terms) were the closest we ever came to understanding and expressing asexual experience.

This project has always been about modern asexual experience and my desire to represent and understand it. Indeed, this claim may seem odd given the relative absence of modern asexuality from the bulk of this dissertation. It may seem counterintuitive to conduct a history of asexuality if my goal, ultimately, is to understand asexual experience today. However, my findings from anthropology only seemed to confirm the commonly accepted tenet within WGSS that modern-day subjectivity is sexual subjectivity, or that sexuality currently (*but not intrinsically*) constitutes the grid of our intelligibility. Whereas Foucault's notion of the "deployment of sexuality" and asexuality studies scholars' notion of "compulsory sexuality" seem to paint a totalizing picture of sexuality in which there appears to be no escape, I have worked to demonstrate in this dissertation that the past can strategically be put to use to disrupt our modern-day ahistorical

assumption that sexuality is universal and inside us all. In this way, this dissertation has attempted to render sexuality less pervasive and less familiar to us today.

The most important part of the theoretical frameworks of the "deployment of sexuality" and "compulsory sexuality" is that they acknowledge that sexuality is a sociohistorical construct. As totalizing as sexuality may seem, there is still the possibility that things could be otherwise—if only we could strip away the modern illusion that sexuality is unaffected by history, as this dissertation has attempted to do. By conducting a genealogy of asexuality that has set its sights on defamiliarizing modern ahistorical conceptions of sexuality, this dissertation has attempted to open a space for asexuality to be experienced, perceived, and articulated in new ways. Although my original goal of exploring asexual experience necessarily had to be deferred, I hope that such a defamiliarization of sexuality will open new paths so that such an exploration of asexual experience can be done.

Due to the sterile modern-day paradox of asexuality as a sexual orientation (which first came to my attention via previous ethnographic research), I was compelled in this dissertation to *bypass* modern times. In doing so, this dissertation has sought to distance itself from universalizing thinking on sexuality that currently constrains how asexuality is experienced and expressed. In particular, this dissertation has argued that the history of pre-modern Western Christianity has been an ideal place to look for other historical forms of "asexuality" as well as alternative conceptions of "sexuality" and subjectivity that make us rethink our modern views. Likewise, aspects of early and late modern Christianity have also been indispensable to the task of demonstrating how asexuality first became part of the modern deployment of sexuality. By demonstrating the radical

alterity of our pre-modern Christian past with respect to its views on "sexuality" and "asexuality," this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate how modern asexuality-as-sexual-orientation is not fixed and transhistorical but rather subject to historical and cultural influences. Likewise, this dissertation has attempted to use this alterity of the past to defamiliarize taken for granted perceptions of sexuality today. With respect to early and late modern Christianity, this project has discussed several potential beginnings to asexuality's sexualization, which have been used to instill in the reader a skepticism toward the modern-day assumption that asexuality has always been part of sexuality. Above all, "since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made" (Foucault 1983:450).

This genealogy of asexuality allows us to imagine that sexuality is not intrinsically internal and psychological; it gives us the chance to imagine a world in which sexuality is less pervasive and no longer presumed to be universal or something we all "have." Rather, this genealogy allows us to conceive of sexuality as an object to be shaped, transformed, and even overcome through ascetic practices. It allows us to think of asexuality not as a lack of experience (or an experience of lacking sexuality) but rather as a pathway to the presence of the divine. It allows us, as well, to ponder the possibility of asexuality as a mode of self-renunciation and desubjectivation rather than a form of subjectivity and identity. Furthermore, by demonstrating how asexuality first became part of sexual pathology via several unique historical twists, this genealogy makes us question the modern assumption that asexuality has always been part of sexuality (as a biological orientation). Finally, by considering how sexual language became crucial to the rise of modern-day psychological interiority (upon the death of God), this genealogy

has worked to make us skeptical of the assumption that sexuality is intrinsically at the core of human identity.

What would it mean, instead, to experience ourselves through rigorous ascetic work? How would it feel to lose our own sense of self, and to have it open out onto "divine presence" that is exterior to our being? What would it be like to overcome, to lose, to suspend, to forget, or to utterly misrecognize sexuality? If something such as this occurred, what impact would it have on asexuality and how it is felt, experienced, articulated, and perceived? What paths would open or close for subjectivity and identity? These are the kinds of questions that can only be answered through estranging ourselves from sexuality and the grasp it presently holds on how we come to experience and know ourselves today. As such, this dissertation cannot rightfully offer predictions or prescriptive advice. It can only gesture to the strangeness of the past and the possibility of using this strangeness to disjoint the present. This dissertation has been experimental. In place of the "traditional" dissertation that makes empirical claims and outlines "next steps," this project is an exercise in language and thought with the intention of disrupting the sexual basis of modern subjectivity and experience. This project, above all, has worked to tell a set of strategic narratives (regarding the history of asexuality, sexuality, and subjectivity) with the intended rhetorical effect of uprooting modern thinking on sexuality. We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, people will no longer quite understand all this fuss about sexuality. We need to ponder the chance that eventually people will no longer know why sexuality constituted such a tremendous part of our subjectivity and experience. We need to consider the possibility of asexuality

being experienced, felt, perceived, and articulated in different ways, other than through the asexual paradox.

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