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"The Joy of Consent" and the misery of Compulsory Sexuality

Living a (non)sexual good Life: An Asexual Perspective on Manon Garcia's "The Joy of Consent"

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1 Introduction

Even with the rise of the visibility of the sexual orientation of asexuality and its increasing presence in many disciplines, including feminist and queer studies, there has been a systematic epistemic exclusion of and ignorance towards asexual thought within feminist philosophy. As a result of a continued attachment to compulsory sexuality, which is "the idea that sex is universally desired as a feature of human nature, [...] and that there is something fundamentally wrong with anyone who does not want to", asexual perspectives have not been properly incorporated or acknowledged in concepts and hermeneutical resources within feminist philosophy.[1] This, in turn, has led to a lack of hermeneutical tools within philosophy that are attuned to them. As I demonstrate in this thesis, once one takes seriously the perspective of asexual people and thus works against the existing ignorance of asexual thought, it becomes hard to justify the investments feminist theorist have in the promises of sex, the sexual good life and compulsory sexuality. The ignorance of asexual thought is thus a necessary component of these investments. This ignorance towards asexuality also leads to the exclusion or discrimination of asexual people and asexual theory within feminist philosophy.[2] Many of the shared resources, beliefs, goals and theories within feminist philosophy reproduce compulsory sexuality, which further marginalizes asexual people. One of these goals, through which many sex positive theorists like Garcia - due to their limited view on sexual autonomy that is prominent in sex positive spaces - are prone to reproduce the oppression of asexual people, is the goal of sexual liberation. In the spirit of Talia Mae Bettcher's exploration of trans philosophy, this thesis asks: "if the asexual were to speak, what would they say?"[3] Specifically, what would they say about this commitment to sex and about feminist theories on sexual consent?

To this end, I am going to analyze how the influential and contemporary theory of sexual consent Manon Garcia presents in her book "*The Joy of Consent*" reproduces the oppression of asexual people. Garcia states that "consent can [...] serve freedom and autonomy. Within it lies the promise of a sexual revolution that, this time, could be a liberation for all."[4] Manon Garcia wants to redefine consent based on two targets she aims for. "The goal [...] is to know how to have good sex, in the double sense of sex that is not impaired by unjust social norms [...] and sex that fosters a good life."[5] Asexual theorists urge us to be careful with projects that link the good life to and sometimes even define the good life through sex. Ela Przybyło explains that "[s]ex promises love and pleasure, and it also promises a particular way of life, a narrative of health and success in a neoliberal regime of desire bound up with ideals of the good life, the

[1] Brown, Sherronda J. *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality. A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture*. North Atlantic Books, 2022, p.7.

[2] One example of this can be found here: Anderson, Ellie. "A Phenomenological Approach to Sexual Consent." In: *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 8.2 (2022), pp. 1–24.

[3] Cf. Bettcher, Talia Mae. "What Is Trans Philosophy?" In: *Hypatia* 34.4 (2019), pp. 644–667.

[4] Garcia, Manon. *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*. Harvard University Press, 2023, p.219.

[5] Ibid., p.187.

white middle-class life, the coupled and reproductive life. Overrun by such promises, sex thus also becomes a site of anxiety, an anxiety that if one fails at its performance, one will lose the trappings of the good life."[6] Przybyło's work contests that there are a lot of "erotic forms [...] left unexamined in a quest for recognizing the happy and celebratory aspects of sexual identity."[7]

In chapter 2, I explain some key concepts, like asexual and nonsexual, as well as my methodology. In 2.1 Asexual/Nonsexual/Aromantic 101, I will explain some key terms of asexual and aromantic communities. Then, in 2.2 Learning From Bettcher: Methodology For Asexual Feminist Philosophy, I will briefly sketch out some relevant aspects of the methodology of this thesis, drawing on Talia Mae Bettcher. In the final subsection of this section, 2.3 Compulsory Sexuality And Acephobia: The Reason Consent Is Relevant To Asexual People, I will explain the term compulsory sexuality in detail, and clarify why consent is relevant for asexual and nonsexual people, and why understanding asexual/nonsexual perspectives is essential for a proper theory of consent.

In chapter 3, I will explicate parts of Przybyło's book "*Asexual Erotics*". In 3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex, I will explain what Przybyło means with the term "asexual erotics" and how asexual erotics differ from sexual erotics. Subsequently, in 3.2 Asexuality and Asexual Erotics: Undesirable And Unthinkable, I will describe the ways in which asexual erotics are constructed as undesirable or unthinkable by queer theorists and dominant society alike according to Przybyło's analysis. Chapter 4 On "The Joy Of Consent" will include a brief summary, as well as a more detailed reconstruction of two chapters of Manon Garcia's book "*The Joy of Consent*".

Finally, in the last chapter called "Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent"", I will show that Garcia's theory relies on compulsory sexuality and in turn reproduces asexual oppression. My critique is structured around four central themes that reoccurred within Garcia's work: The specialness of sex, intimacy and sex, the sexual good life, and sexual autonomy. Each subsection will give a reason as to why Garcia's theory reproduces compulsory sexuality. I will argue that the way Garcia theorizes the goals of "sex that fosters a good life" and achieving "a sexual revolution for all" is emblematic of a narrow conceptualization of sexual autonomy that is prevalent in most sex positive research. This narrow conceptualization of sexual autonomy as the "freedom to be sexual", without the freedom "to not be sexual" is especially damaging for asexuals, as this understanding of autonomy reinscribes compulsory sexuality.[8] Her understanding of liberation and emancipation only include the liberation of sex (which oftentimes is used as: the freedom to have (better) sex and freeing sex of harmful norms), without theorizing what the freedom

[6] Przybyło, Ela. *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. Ohio State University Press 2019, 2019, p.64.

[7] Ibid., p.87.

[8] Cf. Winer, Canton. "The Freedom Not to be Sexual: Asexuality, Compulsory Sexuality, and Sex Positivity." In: *Journal of Positive Sexuality* (forthcoming).

from sex could look like. Further, I argue that Garcia does not leave any room for emancipatory asexual or nonsexual subjects.[9] This strengthens the link between sex and good life, as a good life outside of sex becomes unthinkable. Therefore, Garcia's theorization of sexual consent and sex is deeply embedded in asexual/nonsexual stigma and compulsory sexuality.

As will become apparent within my thesis, I argue that if we want to understand how and change that sex and sexuality have inhibited all our autonomy, we need to start at a more fundamental level: with relationships, intimacy, vulnerability, modes of relating and erotics. An understanding of intimacy, relationships and erotics that takes asexual, nonsexual (as well as aromantic) perspectives seriously, forces us to rethink and critically engage with the emancipatory potential ascribed to liberating sex. Przybyło's understanding of asexual erotics is an example of a framework emerging out of asexuality studies that takes seriously the ways in which sex has been made special while highlighting the plethora of modes of relating to one another that are structurally made difficult or have been prevented from existing. I will argue, drawing on Przybyło and by extension, Audre Lorde, that transforming the way we relate to each other needs to be a key goal within our emancipatory projects. We need to liberate intimacy, relationships, sensuality and erotics **from** narrow conceptions that reduce them to sex and sexuality. In such a project, sex practices are only one set of practices among many.

There are two main reasons why I engage with Garcia's theory in particular: 1. Garcia's work is very explicit when it comes to the connection between good life and sex. Many theorists make this connection implicitly as part of the common ground. It would have made writing this thesis even more challenging if I had engaged with a theory that is more implicit about this connection. 2. I believe that from an asexual perspective, there are still things to appreciate about Garcia's theory: her explanation of the difference between wanting and desiring and the Kantian approach to consent, just to name a few.

I would like to read a version of Garcia's work that is attuned to asexual and nonsexual perspectives. But this will only become possible once Garcia acknowledges the ways her theory reproduces compulsory sexuality. She would need to reject the idea that sex is especially important for a good life, that sex is something special, that sex has a special liberatory/emancipatory potential or that sex should have a heightened relevance in emancipatory struggles. In short, for Garcia's theory to be able to do emancipatory work that is inclusive towards asexual perspectives, it needs to be liberated of Garcia's beliefs about what sex is, which are rooted in compulsory sexuality. For this reason, I am invested in unpacking how Garcia's work is rooted in compulsory sexuality, which consequences this has for her theory and why we need to reject the idea rampant in sex positive spaces, which is also present within Garcia's work, that there is some especially high intrinsic value for emancipatory projects in liberating sex itself. We also need to reject the connected yet different idea that liberation through sex is especially valuable compared to other ways of emancipation and liberation that do not focus on sex.

[9] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.15.

2 Concepts And Methodology

In 2.1 Asexual/Nonsexual/Aromantic 101, I will explain the terms relating to asexuality and aromanticism that are relevant for this thesis. In 2.2 Learning From Bettcher: Methodology For Asexual Feminist Philosophy, I will draw on Talia Mae Bettcher's thoughts on trans philosophy to explain the methodology of this thesis. In 2.3 Compulsory Sexuality And Acephobia: The Reason Consent Is Relevant To Asexual People, I characterize the term compulsory sexuality and some of its implications in detail.

2.1 Asexual/Nonsexual/Aromantic 101

What does asexuality refer to? A common definition within the asexual community is that someone is asexual "if they experience little to no sexual attraction".[10] Asexuality can mean many different things for different aces (which is an abbreviation of asexual), and as such there are also different definitions and understandings of the term. Importantly, asexuality does not determine what role sex plays in the lives of asexuals. Some enjoy sex, often called sex-favorable, others are repulsed by it, while some are indifferent to sex. Some asexual individuals are sexually active, some are not.[11] People who do feel sexual attraction in the normatively ascribed amount and form are called allosexual, or allo for short.[12] Compulsory sexuality is the system that, amongst others, oppresses asexual people and nonsexual people, while amatonormativity is the system that oppresses aromantic people (who feel little to no romantic attraction) and people that do not conform to the norms of romance.[13] While the two systems are analytically separable, they are deeply linked in practice, as sexual and romantic attraction are seen as identical in dominant society. A refusal of amatonormativity is also implicitly part of this thesis, but to keep things simple, I am going to primarily refer to compulsory sexuality.

Canton Winer states that "[a]sexuality differs from celibacy, virginity, and 'involuntary celibacy' both because it is a sexual identity and because it is a label that is defined by attraction rather than by behavior."[14] Some asexual people do live lives that are "nonsexual", which means that they don't engage in sex. But they can also understand what is typically understood and perceived as sexual as nonsexual for themselves.[15] Though the terms nonsexual and asexual are often distinguished by the "lack of action" and "lack of attraction" of people who identify with nonsexuality and asexuality respectively, the lines of this distinction are muddy and this

[10] Cf. Winer, Canton. ""My Gender Is Like an Empty Lot:" Gender Detachment and Ungendering Among Asexual Individuals." In: *OSF* (2023), Preprint.

[11] Cf. ibid., p.2f.

[12] Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.8.

[13] Cf. Brake, Elizabeth. *Minimizing Marriage. Marriage, Morality and the Law*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

[14] Winer, ""My Gender Is Like an Empty Lot:" Gender Detachment and Ungendering Among Asexual Individuals," op. cit., p.3.

[15] Cf. Sloan, Lorca Jolene. "Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice." In: *Sexualities* 18.5/6 (2015), pp. 548–563.

distinction might not exist in the actual lived experiences of asexual and nonsexual people. Asexual people might understand their nonsexuality as an important part or even defining factor of their asexuality.[16] When talking about nonsexuality, I will not be talking about temporarily abstaining from sex for reasons that are part of a sexual narrative. Christian "purity cultures" also strengthen compulsory sexuality, as abstaining from sex is part of the sexual narrative of "being pure" for marriage.[17] Involuntary Celibacy (Incels) could also be understood as nonsexual. Incel ideology is deeply embedded in racist and misogynistic sexual narratives.[18] To exclude said cases, I am not going to theorize for nonsexualities that are anchored in sexual narratives in this thesis.

Instead, I am focusing on nonsexual experiences broadly conceived in the way Przybyło explicates them. Przybyło actively blurs the lines between nonsexual experiences and asexual identity in their book "*Asexual Erotics*", claiming that having an asexual identity is not necessary for being existentially at odds with the way society deems sex necessary for everyone. Przybyło uses the term nonsexuality in addition to asexuality in their work, drawing on Kristina Gupta's usage, to create space for allosexual people to understand their lives as nonsexual. This allows them to understand their relationships in ways that are less bound up in sex.[19] This does not mean that there are no differences between the two, it just means that the importance of taking up a specific identity is lessened. Ultimately, the terms nonsexuality and asexuality become very closely intertwined in Przybyło's understanding. But nonsexuality does not replace asexuality: while Przybyło understands asexuality less in terms of identity, it remains connected to a framework of sexual identity, which differentiates asexuality from nonsexuality.

2.2 Learning From Bettcher: Methodology For Asexual Feminist Philosophy

To prevent a lot of possible misinterpretations, I need to say something about the methodology I use within this thesis. Neither the methodology of feminist philosophy or asexuality studies on their own describe the methodology of this thesis. In an important sense, this thesis is a contribution to a field that does not exist yet: asexual feminist philosophy. There is no set methodology for working at the intersection of feminist philosophy and asexuality studies. Drawing on Talia Mae Bettcher's paper "What is Trans Philosophy?", I will present some provisional thoughts on a potential methodology for asexual feminist philosophy, most of my

[16] Cf. The Ace Couple. *Ten Year Anniversary Q&A (Part 2)*. retrieved: 23. December 2024. published: 26. June 2024. URL: https://theacecouple.com/episode144, Courtney Lane: "However, there is also a certain percentage of Aces who do think that their lack of desire to engage in sex is a fundamental component of their Asexuality."

[17] Cf. Winer, "The Freedom Not to be Sexual: Asexuality, Compulsory Sexuality, and Sex Positivity," op. cit., p.11f.

[18] Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.137f.

[19] Cf. Gupta, Kristina. "Picturing space for lesbian nonsexualities: rethinking sex-normative commitments through The Kids Are All Right." In: *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17.1 (2013), pp. 103–108.

thoughts here are applications of Bettcher's thoughts on "trans philosophy" onto "asexual feminist philosophy".

Just like Bettcher, I believe that my position between multiple disciplines enables me to question and put pressure on basic assumptions taken for granted within feminist philosophy. One of these assumptions is that sex has an inherent heightened liberatory and emancipatory value which makes sex one of the most relevant fields of emancipation. The "liberation of sex", understood in this way, is often seen as the driving force of "a liberation for all". Intuitions within asexuality studies however differ: scholars of asexuality studies treat projects to liberate sex with suspicion, because they have often entailed a dehumanization of asexuals in the process, as I will explicate in 2.3 Compulsory Sexuality And Acephobia: The Reason Consent Is Relevant To Asexual People. Thus, one goal that can get derived from asexuality studies is the goal of breaking the reliance on sex for community, politics, relationships, intimacy and a fulfilled life. This creates a major tension between feminist philosophy and asexuality studies, and it shapes this thesis in important ways. This also shows itself through the fact. Garcia and I have different goals, different understandings of the world we live in, and different intuitions that motivate our conceptual analyses, and those partly mirror the differences between feminist philosophy and asexuality studies.

One could easily misread this thesis as "just a critique" of Garcia's book. After all, this is what the title suggests. This thesis certainly contains a critique of Garcia's theory, but I do not think it defines this thesis. This thesis aims to illuminate the WTF Questions asexual people experience in their daily lives.[20] First, I will explain what WTF Questions are, and then I will state the WTF questions I deem relevant for this thesis. Bettcher writes: "We trans people live an 'everyday' shot through with perplexity, shot through with WTF questions. We live in the WTF. We did not need philosophy to uncover its perplexity. It was already there."[21] "Why do people want to kills us?" is one example of an WTF Question Bettcher gives.[22] Trying to illuminate these WTF questions in a way that is helpful to trans people can be one of trans philosophy's many goals.[23] This does not mean that critique and intervention within specific discourses is off the table: Illuminating the WTF requires a critique of "prevailing theoretical models [...] and taken-for-granted assumptions that impede our capacity to sheds light on the WTF".[24]

I understand this thesis in those terms: My aim is to illuminate some of the WTF questions of asexual everyday life, and my engagement with Garcia's work in this thesis is characterized by said illumination. Drawing on Bettcher, I argue that if one constructs the intuitions of asexual and nonsexual people as irrelevant, because one favors an existing or imagined common ground,

[20] Cf. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" Op. cit., p.651.
[21] Ibid., p.651.
[22] Cf. ibid., p.651.
[23] Cf. ibid., p.652.
[24] Ibid., p.652.

this is a shutdown of a philosophical conversation with asexual/nonsexual people. As I am going to show in 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent", this is exactly what happens in Garcia's work. Asexual perspectives need to be taken seriously, and a theory like Garcia's that shuts down these perspectives is exclusionary towards asexual people and casts them as irrelevant, displaying a non-philosophical attitude similar to the one Bettcher describes for trans people in the process. My goal is to illuminate the ways in which Garcia's theory is at odds with projects that try to illuminate the WTF questions asexual/nonsexual people might have and because of this, I want to focus on what Garcia's philosophy *does*, not what she *says*. Bettcher states that "[w]e must philosophize with our eyes wide open: Whose interests are being served? To what end? What work does it perform?"[25] A critique that understands itself solely as part of feminist philosophy would need to engage with the intentions of the text it critiques, and it would need to engage with the current discourse of the discipline. But I am not doing a critique that is "just" part of the discipline. I want to illuminate the multiple WTFs an asexual reader might encounter when reading Garcia's work, which is a project that is primarily grounded in asexuality studies and not in the current philosophical literature.

The first cluster of WTF Questions which are relevant to my project which asexual people might have, includes: "Why are (allo)sexual people/why is society so weird about sex?" "Why are asexual people seen as broken?" "Why do people want to kill us?" "Why do people feel entitled to ask intrusive questions?" "Why do people want to fix us, through therapy or sex?" These questions require us to start with an examination of the reason for the oppression of asexual people: the system of compulsory sexuality. I will explain what compulsory sexuality is in 2.3 Compulsory Sexuality And Acephobia: The Reason Consent Is Relevant To Asexual People. The second cluster, which is as much an aromantic as an asexual cluster of WTFs: "What even is an intimate relationship?" "Why are sex and romance so important for it?" "What if they weren't?" For this, I will look at Przybyło's explications of asexual erotics in 3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex. The last cluster of questions might include questions like: "WTF does sex even mean, what defines sex?" "Does sex consist of certain actions, is it a certain emotion, is it a cluster of social norms, is it a relationship, is it a vibe, is it an intention?" "What differentiates sex from non-sex?" With regard to these questions, in 3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex, I will explore how asexuals who engage in acts that are deemed sexual defy the expectations one might have about what defines sex. The important question that arises from that, that I will not answer on its own and that is beyond the scope of this thesis is: "What would a consent theory look like if it took asexual/aromantic/nonsexual ways of relating and compulsory sexuality seriously?" Instead, I will illuminate this question in the negative. By understanding how Garcia's consent theory is unable to take asexual/aromantic/nonsexual ways of relating and compulsory sexuality seriously, it will shine some light on the pitfalls of sexual

[25] Ibid., p.661.

consent theory, and what one would need to do to theorize consent from the perspective of asexual/aromantic/nonsexual people.

Finally, when talking about the relevance of engaging with philosophical literature for being understood as engaging in philosophy, Bettcher states: "For those of us who live under theoretical pressure, philosophical critique doesn't always flow from some philosophical penchant for asking questions. It's life and death once 'the literature' starts to have material consequences in our lives. It's about outright survival. It's about clearing space."[26] Applying this to my thesis reveals that my engagement with asexuality studies is not a substitute for philosophy, but that it asexuality studies are a needed perspective to anchor this thesis within the lived reality of other asexual people. An engagement with "the philosophical literature", within which these perspectives have never been taken to be relevant, is not essential to the work of this thesis and most likely would have failed in clearing space for asexual perspectives.

2.3 Compulsory Sexuality And Acephobia: The Reason Consent Is Relevant To Asexual People

So why and how is sexual consent even relevant to asexual people? Well, this depends on which asexual people one is talking about. If the asexual person is engaging in sex, then they need a consent framework as much as any other person engaging in sex. Attraction does not determine whether one has sex or not. The asexual community acknowledges a plethora of reasons one might engage in sex and sees them as reasons that are equal to sexual attraction as reasons for engaging in sex.[27] For this group of aces, consent is clearly very important.

As a critique of the impossibility of a nonsexual good life within Garcia's theory is central to this thesis, sexually active asexuals are not going to be the focus of my thesis. Still, their perspectives inform this thesis in many important ways.[28] I am going to focus more on nonsexuality and the perspectives of asexuals who are not engaging in sex. One might think that for them, theories on sexual consent are not relevant. But, drawing on the concept of compulsory sexuality, I argue that consent and sexual autonomy are of utmost importance for people who do not engage in sex, and that the engagement with asexual theories about compulsory sexuality is crucial for good consent theories. Because of this, I will explain the term compulsory sexuality in this section, using the work of Kristina Gupta and Ela Przybyło. Following this, I explicate how compulsory sexuality relates to consent, drawing on Sherronda J. Brown's work.[29]

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[26] Ibid., p.660.

[27] Cf. Asexuality Archive. *An Asexual's Guide To . . . Having Sex*. retrieved: 26. November 2024. published: 14. December 2014. URL: https://www.asexualityarchive.com/an-asexuals-guide-to-having-sex/.

[28] Cf. Sloan, "Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice," op. cit.

[29] Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit.; Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality. A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, op. cit.; Gupta, Kristina. "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept." In: *Signs* 41.1 (2015), pp. 131–154.

Asexuality studies scholars use of the term "compulsory sexuality" that aims to highlight the marginalization of asexual people. The term "compulsory sexuality" highlights the ways in which society makes sexuality compulsory: by marginalizing non-sexuality and “compel[ling] people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity”, as Gupta explains.[30] Przybyło states that compulsory sexuality "suggests that sex is necessary, liberatory, and integral to happiness and well-being."[31] Brown spells out that "compulsory sexuality is the idea that sex is universally desired as a feature of human nature, that we are essentially obligated to participate in sex at some point in life, and that there is something fundamentally wrong with anyone who does not want to – whether it be perceived as a defect of morality, psychology or physiology."[32]

Compulsory sexuality is best understood as a system that regulates the behavior of everyone, not just those who identify as asexual. The concept aims to highlight that our society is broadly constructed through sexuality, and not "just" heterosexuality.[33] One of the reasons that asexuality studies scholars use the term compulsory sexuality instead of terms like compulsory heterosexuality or patriarchy, is that asexuality is often not thought about when people draw on these terms. Challenging patriarchy and heterosexuality opens up the possibilities for some non-normative sexual identities to become visible, which can help people explore sexual identities and engage in sex differently. But this broadening can and often does happen without challenging the assumption that everyone is "a sexual being" and that "sex is what makes us human". These links between sex and humanity are crucial components of the dehumanization asexual people face. Compulsory sexuality can be enforced both by dominant cis-heterosexual society and feminist and queer contexts. For example, the pressure to understand oneself as sexual and engage in sex also exists in queer spaces, which can exclude asexual people from them.[34] For this reason, compulsory sexuality should not be reduced to terms like compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy, because they have not been used in ways that make the oppression of asexual people visible.

This does not mean that feminist and queer theorists do not contribute to our understanding of the ways in which sex is compulsory in society. Gupta situates compulsory sexuality as a concept that is built on works of feminist scholars.[35] She takes feminist scholarship on compulsory heterosexuality to be part of the evidence for compulsory sexuality.[36] With reframing this research, she changes the way we think about compulsory heterosexuality, and it’s influence when it comes to sex. Compulsory heterosexuality becomes part of the body of literature on compulsory sexuality. As a result, when one uses a term like compulsory heterosexuality within

[30] Idem, “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” op. cit., p.132.
[31] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.8.
[32] Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality. A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, op. cit., p.7.
[33] Cf. Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” op. cit., p.135.
[34] Cf. Winer, Canton. “Uncertain Belonging: Asexuality and Queer Nightlife.” In: *The Sociological Quarterly* (2025); Cf. Winer, Canton. “Is Asexuality Queer?” In: *Contexts* (forthcoming).
[35] Cf. Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” op. cit., p.133.
[36] Cf. ibid., p.135.

Gupta's framework, one always has to think about its relation to compulsory sexuality. This allows for asexual people to be visible and central in feminist theorizing. Compulsory sexuality is not framed as a niche add-on to feminist theory. Taking Gupta's explication of compulsory sexuality seriously would necessitate a broader reshaping of feminist theories in a way that includes asexuality. The broad application of compulsory sexuality and the focus on asexual lives reveals feminist and queer entanglements with compulsory sexuality and highlights that asexual people have not been thought about when feminist philosophers used terms like patriarchy or compulsory heterosexuality.

In western societies that enforce compulsory sexuality, deviations from the "right kind" of sexuality and the "proper amount" of sex are seen as unnatural, unhealthy and unhuman. In a study from 2012, interviewing Canadian students and people in online spaces, asexuals were deemed robot or animal like, students expressed more stigma than against asexuals than against heterosexuals, homosexuals or bisexuals. They desired less contact with asexuals and were less willing to hire them or rent them an apartment.[37] In "I don't know if this counts, but..." Kate Wood shows that roughly one third of the Australian asexual respondents experienced intimate partner violence (verbal and financial abuse, physical violence, coercive control etc.), while roughly a fifth experienced sexual violence (sexual harassment, stalking, rape threats, sexual assault and rape). Furthermore, a fifth of those that experienced sexual violence reported that there was more than one perpetrator. A third of those that experienced sexual assault did not know they were asexual at the time.[38] In a recently published UK based study by Sanders, Hirneis and Benoit, a third of respondents believed that asexuality can be cured by therapy.[39] Asexual and nonsexual people are affected by the medicalization and pathologization of deviations from the norms of "having a healthy sex drive" and "engaging in a healthy amount of sex".[40]

Centering the effects of compulsory sexuality enables asexuality studies scholars to make sense of the mentioned acephobia and discrimination against nonsexual people: compulsory sexuality is the structural basis for this discrimination. The way compulsory sexual societies demands that everyone engages in sex is oppressive to everyone, and shapes all of our relationships in a way that is harmful to many. Compulsory sexuality is quite inhibiting for (allo)sexual people as well, especially in the dominant conjunction of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity. Sex is often understood as a necessity for romantic relationships. The pressure to not fall out of the norms placed on sexual desire and behavior effects everyone. Due to this, many people

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[37] Macinnis, Cara C. and Hodson, Gordon. "Intergroup Bias toward 'Group X': Evidence of Prejudice, Dehumanization, Avoidance, and Discrimination against Asexuals." In: *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 15.6 (2012), pp. 725–743; Cited from: Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," op. cit., p.138.

[38] Cf. Wood, Kate. *"I don't know if this counts but…" Asexual Lived Experiences Survey 2021: Final Report*. Second Edition, revised 2024. Ace & Aro Collective AU & ACT Aces, 2023, p.107ff. and p.130ff.

[39] Cf. Sanders, Michael and Hirneis, Vanessa and Benoit, Yasmin. "Asexuality in the UK. Public attitudes towards people who experience little to no sexual attraction." In: *Policy Institute, King's College London* (2025), p.19.

[40] Cf. Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," op. cit., p.137.

fear that their relationship might break because they are not having enough sex, fearing that the sexless phase might become permanent. These anxieties are a direct result of fearing the loss of the promises of sex that are ingrained in societies in which sex is compulsory, as I will show in 3.2 Asexuality and Asexual Erotics: Undesirable And Unthinkable.

However compulsory sexuality does not entail that sex and sexuality are expected of and valued for everyone, which Przybyło explicates drawing on Foucault's notion of biopower. Przybyło explicates that sexuality is a system that categorizes desire, which "arose as part and parcel of capitalism, modernity and colonialism."[41] Sexuality constructs the "normalcy and deviancy" which "forward[s] the interests of colonialism, whiteness, wealth, ability, and normality, at the expense of sexuality's "others"".[42] Whether or not one's sex or sexuality gets valued in terms of biopower, depends on one's status in terms of colonialism, race, class, (dis)ability, gender and sexuality.

Przybyło states that "[s]exuality is harnessed in this way by biopolitics toward the regimentation and disciplining of bodies, the reproduction of the health of the population, rendering sex compulsory for some (through compulsory sexuality) and banning it for others (through desexualization)" and I would argue, also through hypersexualization.[43] Desexualization, which sadly has often been described as being "constructed as asexual" by feminist and queer theorists, positions people as either not capable to have sex or undesirable to have sex with.[44] Disabled and many racialized people, lesbians, children and older people are being desexualized within western societies. Desexualization "imposes an absence of sex and sexuality not as an erotic possibility but as a biopolitical strategy, dispensing the promise of sex only to those who are understood as having a right to it", according to Przybyło.[45]

Hypersexualization, on the other hand, constructs people as "excessively sexual and lascivious and thus in need of "population management.""[46] Gay and Black men have been hypersexualized within western societies.[47] But hypersexualization and desexualization are not mutually exclusive and go hand in hand in controlling the reproduction and sexuality of oppressed populations.[48] Patricia Hill Collins work on controlling images shows that black women are desexualized and hypersexualized depending on the controlling image that is used to distort

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[41] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.21.
[42] Ibid., p.21.
[43] Ibid., p.21.
[44] Cf. ibid., p.15.
[45] Ibid., p.67.
[46] Ibid., p.16.
[47] Cf. ibid., p.16.
[48] Owen, Ianna Hawkins. "On the Racialization of Asexuality." In: *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014); Kim, Eunjung. "Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy." In: *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014).

their actions.[49] Desexualization and hypersexualization together control the lives of people and enforce compulsory sexuality. They control and govern the reproduction and sexualities of oppressed groups, in turn enhancing and protecting the colonial, white, able-bodied, allo, bourgeois, cis, hetero male privileges, that have very real material influence in people's lives.

The promises attached to sex - health, a good life, but also liberation and emancipation - are inherently tied to biopower under capitalism, and no amount of pushing the boundaries of who can claim the rewards for complying to compulsory sexuality will change that fact. The seemingly emancipatory goal to liberate sex for all is destined to go wrong if one does not take seriously the implications compulsory sexuality has for biopolitics in capitalist and colonial societies: liberation of sex can never be a liberation for all under these circumstances, and the attempt to do so just strengthens the oppression of asexual/nonsexual people and all those who are not seen as the subjects of sexual liberation.

Gupta states that "[t]he concept of compulsory sexuality should prove useful to the extent that it provides a reminder to both scholars and activists to avoid positing the liberation of sexuality as necessary to either the empowerment of women or the destabilization of oppressive norms."[50] This comment makes clear that compulsory sexuality as a term is also an expression of the asexual skepticism regarding the liberatory projects often tied to sexuality, which more often than not strengthen acephobia. Gupta's statement also addresses the real dangers of not taking the complex nature of biopower that is enforced through compulsory sexuality seriously, of conflating sexual liberation with liberation per se, and understanding sexual liberation to be achieved through sex: one can enforce compulsory sexuality while believing that one follows a liberatory project, in turn strengthening the hold sexuality has on our lives. Canton Winer describes the ways in which sex positive frameworks that aim for "elevating sexual pleasure, freedom, diversity, and the empowerment of sexual minorities while also pushing back against sex negative forces like guilt and shame" have inadvertently reproduced compulsory sexuality.[51] They showcase that often within sex positive research, the common understanding is that "the history of western society is steeped in negativity, thus many people may feel guilt and shame regarding their sexual curiosities and desires."[52] What this type of understanding misses is that a) even within sex negative environments, sex gets repressed and compelled at the same time and b) especially asexual people might feel shame for not desiring and not having sexual curiosities.

This reveals that a narrow conception of sexual autonomy and sexual liberation can be dangerous for asexual and nonsexual people. The anxieties around sex exist because there is something one can lose, which are the promises of sex: the good life, health, liberation, emancipation etc.

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[49] Cf. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Edition. Routledge, 2000, p.173-199.

[50] Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," op. cit., p.142.

[51] Winer, "The Freedom Not to be Sexual: Asexuality, Compulsory Sexuality, and Sex Positivity," op. cit., p.2.

[52] Ibid., p.4.

"The dreaded state of sexlessness" and the "fear of an asexual life" (which means a life without sex and the promises attached to it) are direct results of putting too much hope, optimism and expectations onto sex. This optimism is more often than not cruel: it is optimism that ultimately harms us, because we can't get what we want.[53] It is a hope to achieve the sexual good life, which as long as compulsory sexuality exists, will always bring with it the fear of an "asexual life". This fear hinders further emancipatory change. If we take acephobia, the stigmatization of a nonsexual life and the role of biopower within a colonial capitalist society seriously, it becomes clear that we are far from achieving this liberation for all that a sexual revolution/liberation promises. Asexual perspectives show that liberation of sex must be accompanied by liberation from sex. Liberatory accounts that focus on sex do not serve all of us, and that by design: such a liberation can't be for all, but only for a particular demographic. [54]

When looking at society through a lens critical of compulsory sexuality, it becomes clear that the oppressive system of compulsory sexuality, that in many important ways shapes what sex means right now, needs to be abolished. We need to break the connection between certain acts, that are deemed sexual, and their cultural value and meaning, which is produced and upheld by compulsory sexuality. The sexual modes of relating need to be decentered. I firmly believe that we should focus on people and their emancipation and liberation. Oftentimes, theorists ascribe a special value to the "liberation of sex" in a way that makes it an end in itself. A connection between sex and liberation is not a given feature: Theorist need to properly show that connection. Many theorists fail to produce a clear connection between the liberation of sex and the liberatory value this liberation of sex has in people's lives. One should not start from the assumption that "sex" is a good on its own. It should not matter, if one engages in sex or not. An autonomy that enables us to choose if and in which kinds of sex and under which conditions one wants to engage in sexual activities is valuable. This is an autonomy that includes the freedom to have sex and the freedom to not have sex. For a full picture of sexual autonomy, the liberation from sex is as relevant as the liberation of sex. This autonomy is valuable in itself, independent from one's relation to or engagement in sex. Nearly all projects that aim to liberate sex do not take seriously the negative impact that their primary or sole focus on the perspective of (allo)sexual people can have on their theories and on asexual/nonsexual people. If all approaches to sexual consent focus on the liberation of sex and none properly aim for the liberation from sex, this eventually leads to problems. Liberation of sex cannot stand on its own. Without the liberation from sex, in a way that allows for a nonsexual good life, it eventually reproduces the oppression of asexual/nonsexual people. This imbalance is a massive systematic issue, which needs to be addressed.

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[53] Cf. Berlant, Lauren and Edelman, Lee. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Duke University Press, 2013, p.1-34.

[54] This includes the coercive control of sexuality through race, class, disability etc. and is not limited to the distinction of sexual and nonsexual.

I argue that when these charges I make here are taken seriously, it enables (sexual) consent theory to become a better and more inclusive emancipatory project. We should focus on enabling people's autonomy, so that they can choose freely: this means that we should focus on the freedom to have sex in the way one wants, the freedom to not have sex at all, as well as the ability to live fulfilling lives whether or not one engages in sex. (Sexual) autonomy needs to entail the ability to properly choose, and one option that has been undertheorized and been made challenging to even pursue is to live a good nonsexual life: a life in which one does not engage in sex at all.

Because of this, a good account of consent that takes the real world seriously and aims towards emancipation needs to be sensitive to the material effects of sexuality, compulsory sexuality, asexual oppression and the possibility of people choosing not to engage in sex whatsoever. Sexual liberation needs to include the liberation from sex. Sex positive researchers need to take seriously that if they don't enable people to live a good nonsexual life, they are prone to conflate liberation of sex and liberation as such. If one can't life a nonsexual good life, then there is only one option left: the sexual good life, which further strengthens the anxieties I mentioned earlier.[55] Because of this, we need to start from a position of "sex without optimism": a detachment from the optimistic expectation that sex will be the vehicle for liberation and emancipation.[56]

If we want consent to work as a tool against oppression, then we need to consider the ways in which people are coerced into sex by compulsory sexuality. As Sherronda J. Brown puts it:

> "I also believe that challenges made against the existence and validity of asexuality are inherently challenges to sexual boundaries and consent as a whole. It's a deep, shared denial among acephobes that creates the insistence that asexuality cannot or should not exist, and that it must therefore be "fixed" by them. The fundamental belief at the root of this denial of asexuality is the lie that none of us truly have the freedom to set boundaries that honor our own bodies and sexual autonomy because we live in a society in which sex is expected of us. The boundaries around sex that asexuals set are often indefinite ones."[57]

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[55] Cf. Densmore, Dana. "Independence from the Sexual Revolution." In: *Notes from the Third Year: Women's Liberation* (1971), pp. 56–61, p.58; Cited from: Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.57.

[56] Cf. Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, op. cit., p.1-34.

[57] Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality. A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, op. cit., p.23f.

Here we can see that consent and the indefinite refusal to sex that many asexuals perform are deeply connected. Instead of framing asexuality as a sexuality not liberated yet, which is an often-used acephobic rhetoric, Brown turns the relationship on its head: Having a strict nonsexual boundary within a compulsory sexual society is actually a display of full sexual autonomy. This means that living a nonsexual life needs to be understood as an equally valid expressions of one's sexual autonomy as living a life in which sex is central to one's self expression is. The oppression of asexual/nonsexual people thus becomes linked to attacks on sexual autonomy, on sexual boundaries and on consent.

The way we understand consent has major implications for people who do not want to engage in sex. Consent is a societal hermeneutical resource and this resource impacts how we understand refusals to work. Refusals concerning sex are mostly understood as one individual action: Person X refuses to have sex with Person Y in this specific moment/under these specific circumstances. Refusing having sex for some time is at least in theory understandable: Not having sex until marriage, not having sex during and/or after pregnancy. But refusing to engage in sex whatsoever breaks our understanding of what sex is: it breaks with the assumption that every person wants to have sex and that sex is a vital part of any good life. If we want sex to be compatible with a good life like Garcia does, then a good life without it needs to be possible as well. Otherwise, we can't be sure if one has consented because of the mounting pressures of compulsory sexuality, or because they really wanted to.

A good theory of consent acknowledges that a nonsexual good life needs to be possible, so that consent can be an expression of autonomy. As we can see, consent is relevant to everyone, and especially to all aces, one way or the other. The way asexuals perceive consent is deeply important for understanding (sexual) consent. The oppression of asexual people through compulsory sexuality highlights the necessity for theories of consent to think about those who do not want to engage in sex. Creating theories of consent that are inclusive of asexuality and nonsexuality and which take asexual critique seriously is crucial for better sexual ethics. Drawing on Przybyło's analysis in their book "*Asexual Erotics*", I will explain how queer theorists' attachments to sex are linked to the oppression of asexual/nonsexual people, which I will then draw on in 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent"to explain how Garcia's similar attachments to sex also reproduce the oppression of asexual and nonsexual people.

3 Asexual Erotics: On Possibility And Invisibility

In this chapter, I am going to present and interpret the parts of Ela Przybyło's book "*Asexual Erotics*" that are most relevant for my thesis. In 3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex, I am going to describe the way Przybyło understands asexual erotics, which is heavily influenced by Audre Lorde's understanding of erotics. In 3.2 Asexuality and Asexual Erotics: Undesirable And Unthinkable, I will draw on Przybyło's critique of feminist and queer theory, which illustrates the many ways in which asexual erotics are made impossible.

3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex

In their book "*Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*", Ela Przybyło envisions what asexual erotics can look like. Asexual erotics are not defined as "the erotics of asexual people". As described earlier, they understand their work to not be bound by "identificatory frames" such as the community definition of asexual identity.[58] Asexual erotics are not limited by sexual narratives and compulsory sexuality. Asexual erotics aims to be a useful concept for those that are "done with sex", those who hate the pressures put on sex, those that want to find ways of relating that are outside sexual norms, those who want a good life that is not dependent on sex. Przybyło's refusal to confine the analysis to an identificatory framework of asexuality makes it possible to envision asexual erotics as accessible options for everyone and to critique compulsory sexuality as a widespread societal phenomenon. This leads to a more fluent understanding of modes of relating that are not grounded in sex. "'Asexual erotics,'" Przybyło states, "is a phrase I use to think about the critiques, forms of reading, and modes of relating that are made possible when asexuality is centralized."[59]

Because of this, Przybyło heavily draws on Audre Lorde's understanding of "the erotic". Audre Lorde's understands erotics as something that "imagines intimacies with other women as exceeding sex and decentering sexual desire."[60] For Lorde, erotics are not inherently sexual.[61] Przybyło argues that in Lordean erotics "if anything, it is the reverse: The erotic fuels sexual desire rather than sexual desire being at the base of the erotic"[62]

Lorde sees our dominant understanding of erotics as "superficial erotics", grounded in male modes of power.[63] Lorde also critiques uses of the word erotic that only allows for use in the realm of sexuality, as well as usage that allow for the "abuse of feeling" done in dominant narrow

[58] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.3.
[59] Ibid., p.26.
[60] Ibid., p.75.
[61] Cf. ibid., p.22.
[62] Ibid., p.22.
[63] Cf. Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. originally released in the United States of America by Crossing Press 1984. Penguin Random House UK, 2019, p.43.

understandings of the erotic.[64] Lorde's understanding of the erotic runs counter to dominant modes of understanding erotics as synonymous with "the sexual/the bedroom".[65] Lorde "is suspicious of sexuality as it exists in Western paradigms", because it hinders ways of relating deeply with one another and denies women access to the power of real erotics.[66] The erotic in Lorde's sense thus becomes a "life energy of refusal", which enables the critique of oppressive systems that deny us or drain our erotic energy.[67] Audre Lorde's use of the erotic is about the possibilities of relating and feeling with others in the face of oppressive social structures.[68] Lordean erotics are political: the current societal system is hostile towards all kinds of erotics that do not serve it and therefore we are hindered from understanding ourselves and from learning how we could relate to one another differently. If we relate deeply with on another and if we, in Audre Lorde's words "risk sharing the erotics electrical charge without looking away" this "can give us the energy to pursue change in the world".[69] Relating and feeling with others has the potential for liberation from oppressive structures. We can break the distortions that have been placed on us. Authentic meaningful connections can be forged through any means. Sexual activities can create meaningful connections, but they are not special in this regard.

Lordean erotics are defined in an expansive way: these erotics can also be found in the mundane, in "dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea."[70] Importantly, these erotics are done "for self and others, deeply and with purpose".[71] Within Lordean erotics, sex gets de-emphasized as "the most deep, meaningful, or erotic activity out there".[72] Sex becomes only one site of many to feel meaningful connection and to gain erotic energy from. "[A] Lordean erotic unlocks an attention to both the mundane and the revolutionary, at once relational and rooted in self-empowerment on feminist terms" which "allows us to think about the erotic beyond the sexual, which allows for "an alternative to sexual identity models."[73] Therefore, Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic goes beyond sexual erotics.

Przybyło argues that a lot of relating in feminist, queer and especially lesbian spaces is not inherently sexual, but rather underpinned by asexual erotics.[74] Przybyło states, drawing on Sue Katz:

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[64] Ibid., p.48f.
[65] Cf. ibid., p.47.
[66] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.23.
[67] Idem, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.23; Cf. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit., p.45.
[68] Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.23.
[69] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, op. cit., p.49.
[70] Ibid., p.46.
[71] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.23.
[72] Ibid., p.23.
[73] Ibid., p.24.
[74] Cf. ibid., p. 27.

> "If anything, lesbian feminism was articulated in distinction to sex and as sensuality. For example, Sue Katz wrote: 'For me, coming out meant an end to sex. It's dead and gone in my life. [...] Physical contact and feelings have taken a new liberatory form, and we call that "sensuality" [...] There is no set physical goal to our sensuality. There is no sex. The whole language is oppressive. [...] Sensuality is formless and amorphous. It can grow and expand as we feel it ... The sensuality I feel has transformed my politics, has solved the contradiction between my mind and my body because the energies for our feminist revolution are the same as the energies of our love for women' [...] She [Sue Katz] grounds erotics in sensuality, in creative and not necessarily sex-based forms for relating to others intimately. These erotics are about the feeling of revolution grounded in spending time with other women toward building communities of resistance. Erotics surface here as rooted in a praxis of asexuality/celibacy that enabled vital erotic energy for other pursuits, including the making of a revolution."[75]

Przybyło thus convincingly argues that asexual erotics have been a part of political feminist struggles for quite some time. The term "asexual erotics" is based on a refusal of sex as the dominant institution in which we experience erotics, emotional connection and intimacy. Przybyło asks us to think about the "erotic forms [that] are left unexamined in a quest for recognizing the happy and celebratory aspects of sexual identity", suggesting that changing our framework might reveal forms of erotics and modes of relating that have not yet been possible.[76]

These other forms of erotics can be found in but are not necessarily defined by engaging in acts that are currently understood as nonsexual. Asexual erotics are about feeling with others in the face of oppressive social structures and asexual erotics exist within nonsexual and in solitary actions: asexual erotics can be found in political organizing or in "reading. [...] Peeling back the skin of a grapefruit. Watching the old man who lives in my backyard smoke weed until he becomes his lawn chair. Oatmeal. Wet paint. Strong coffee. Cheap whiskey. Riding my bike away from parties, how the night swallows me like a dragon. The wet heat of one body alone" as Cameron Awkward-Rich states in his poem "A Prude's Manifesto".[77]

But people can also engage in acts understood as sexual in dominant society and queer spaces in a way that draws on asexual erotics. This opens up the possibility of "nonsexual sex": of engaging in acts that are usually deemed sexual in a way that is nonsexual for the individual(s) engaging in them. This is a prevalent theme within the asexual community, who defy the assumptions of

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[75] Katz, Sue. "Smash Phallic Imperialism." In: *Out of the Closets: Voice of Gay Liberation* (1974). Ed. by Jay, Karla and Young, Allen, pp. 259–262, p.60; Cited from: Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.260.

[76] Idem, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.87.

[77] Cf. Awkward-Rich, Cameron. *A Prude's Manifesto*. Button Poetry 2015. URL: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nInAqWF0tt4`; Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.33f.

what should count as sex and what should count as sexual in a myriad of ways. As filmmaker Zanah Thirus describes in their blogpost about their journey to asexuality: "[s]exual intimacy, when rooted in love and care, doesn't feel sexual to me at all—it feels like love"[78]

Asexual BDSM practitioners might explicitly engage in acts that are understood as sexual for others, but that they experience as nonsexual.[79] Sloan states that

> "they [some asexual BDSM Practitioners] seek conceptual frameworks that enable them to creatively ascribe new meanings and implications to the affections that they experience and the activities that they enjoy. Their experiences encourage further exploration of how individuals, in the midst of a cultural emphasis placed upon sexual desire and a proliferation of scripts characterizing its expression, might disarticulate and reconstitute the sexual implications of their acts – creating spaces in which even sex can be experienced as non-sexual."[80]

It is therefore very important that we take seriously that asexual people can understand their own actions as nonsexual. This means that one should be careful with what one describes as sexual. All of these actions *can* be expressions of asexual erotics in Przybyło's sense, yet they do not automatically become asexual erotics just because some asexual people took part in them. Asexual erotics are a different way of relating to the world, oneself and others, and these erotics are not defined by specific acts, but by a deep relation that is at odds with sex as the "prima facie experience of love, bodily pride, and self-affirmations".[81]

3.2 Asexuality and Asexual Erotics: Undesirable And Unthinkable

Przybyło's argument also reveals that asexual erotics have been distorted and made unthinkable or undesirable. I am going to engage with two chapters of Przybyło's book here. In 3.2.1 Undesirable: The Fear Of An Asexual Life, The Promises Of Sex And Lesbian Nonsexuality, I am going to show how asexuality/asexual erotics are understood as undesirable through an attachment to the promises of sex, drawing on Przybyło's analysis of the trope of lesbian bed death. I will explicate the ways asexuality is made unthinkable engaging with Przybyło's analysis of childhood erotics in 3.2.2 Unthinkable: Desexualization And The Asexual Child. Since these topics are vital within Przybyło's analysis to a degree that makes it hard to fully separate the analysis from the topic, I am going to explain lesbian bed death and childhood erotics as much as is necessary, but I will not make it about these topics themselves. In 3.2.3 Recap: Asexuality Seen As Desexualization In Disguise, I will summarize the findings of those sections, which I will draw on in 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent".

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[78] Thirus, Zanah. *My Journey to Asexuality: A Path to Self-Discovery and Meaningful Connections*. retrieved: 09. March 2025. published: 21. October 2024. URL: `https://www.zanahthirus.com/blog/aceweek`.

[79] Cf. Sloan, "Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice," op. cit.

[80] Ibid., p.562.

[81] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.24.

3.2.1 Undesirable: The Fear Of An Asexual Life, The Promises Of Sex And Lesbian Nonsexuality

The term lesbian bed death describes the media trope and pervasive myth that lesbian couples have less sex the longer their relationship goes on, which supposedly creates unhappiness in the relationship and ultimately is the reason why they break up.[82] That the trope of the lesbian bed death "refuses to die" is not, according to Przybyło, because it describes reality, but because it describes a "true anxiety".[83] Critiques of lesbian bed death from lesbians are often aimed at reinstating or upholding the value of sex within lesbian communities. Commenting on one of those instances, Przybyło writes: "Striving to celebrate lesbianism, the piece seeks to creatively replace one memorable trope of lesbianism, lesbian bed death, with another—“an eye that embodies sexual desire and identity in one fell swoop.""[84] This in turn binds "successful" lesbian relationships to sex, making a non-sexual lesbian identity undesirable. The desexualization of lesbians has thus often been countered by lesbians with the deliberate "sexualization" of said identity. This reclaiming of sexuality is bound up in narratives of sex and the good life. Przybyło explains that

> "[t]he promises of sex are manifold and specific to various contexts. Sex promises love and pleasure, and it also promises a particular way of life, a narrative of health and success in a neoliberal regime of desire bound up with ideals of the good life, the white middle-class life, the coupled and reproductive life. Overrun by such promises, sex thus also becomes a site of anxiety, an anxiety that if one fails at its performance, one will lose the trappings of the good life."[85]

The anxiety around lesbian bed death and the fears of desexualization thus are embedded in the fear of losing the promises of sex: the good, healthy, successful life. The promises of sex and the good life are also deeply tied to class, race and disability. [86]

The "dreaded state of sexlessness" is thus more about the fear of losing the good life sex promises than about sexual acts themselves. It also shows that a good sexless lesbian life is unimaginable within these discourses. The desexualization dominant society places on lesbian identity threatens access to the promises of a good life that are tied to sex. The emphasis on sex by queer theorists exists in part to fight this desexualization. In turn, however, desexualization and asexuality/nonsexuality get mixed up. Przybyło argues, that "[t]here is persistent slippage in queer and nonqueer work alike between the terms ’asexuality’ and ’desexualization’ in that

[82] Cf. ibid., p.64.
[83] Ibid., p.68.
[84] Ibid., p.63.
[85] Ibid., p.64.
[86] This often creates a discursive silence around disabled or racialized asexuals, strengthening the marginalization and oppression of these intersectional identities in the process.

both come to, unfortuitously, mean one and the same."[87] That many queer theorists equate a nonsexual lesbian relationship with desexualization is "indicative of an almost religious and certainly moral investment in the promises of sex and a chronic anxiety around its breakage."[88] Przybyło goes on

> "Since one aspect of the promise of sex is that it "vitalizes and strengthens the bonds of queer and national community," its absence breaks this queer circuit and forsakes the community. The failure of the long-term lesbian couple to have sex thus becomes not only their failure but the failure of lesbianism itself. [...] Lesbian bed death, I am arguing, is a threatening cultural formation because it speaks of a threat to the promises of sex"[89]

Since they are equated with the "dreaded state of sexlessness" and are seen as a threat to the good life that is promised through sex, nonsexual lesbian relationships are therefore constructed as undesirable within dominant society and seen as a threat to lesbian identity by some lesbians. While the way this construction of undesirability is specific to lesbian identity, we can learn something more broadly applicable here. When a strong attachment to those promises of sex is present, asexual and nonsexual ways of life that are at odds with those promises of sex are seen as undesirable. The way we understand the sexual good life thus has major implications for asexual and nonsexual people.

3.2.2 Unthinkable: Desexualization And The Asexual Child

There are two competing views on child sexuality. The first is a desexualizing notion dominant within the mainstream under which the child's sexual purity and innocence is considered to be in need of protection.[90] The second view critiques the desexualization of children, insisting on "the child's right to sexual agency, sexual subjecthood."[91] Queer theory has been particularly critical of the desexualization of children happening in mainstream contexts.[92] From this perspective, the desexualization and strict distinction between childhood and adulthood serve to make queerness unobtainable during childhood, thus systematically separating queer children from queer adults.[93]

But since this second view sees desexualization and asexuality/nonsexuality as identical, asexual children become invisible and ultimately unthinkable in terms of queer theoretical approaches to childhood, as I will show in this section.[94] Asexuality, caught up in a queer dependence on sexual

[87] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.93.
[88] Ibid., p.73f.
[89] Ibid., p.74.
[90] Cf. ibid., p.89.
[91] Ibid., p.90.
[92] Cf. ibid., p.90.
[93] Cf. ibid., p.96.
[94] Cf. ibid., p.92.

relations and fights against desexualization becomes "constructed as an immature, underdeveloped, and incomplete form of pre-sexuality suffering from stunted growth", as Megan Milks writes.[95] Milks goes on to say that "[a]fter all, sexual liberation is ultimately a maturity narrative, a progress myth moving toward an endpoint of total sexual agency that is both individualized and linked to a vision of social transformation; and sexual politics serves a pedagogical, almost messianic role in shepherding its disciples toward this future of transcendent autonomy."[96] From Milks' critique of sexual liberation narratives, we can learn that sexual liberation and maturity are deeply linked: One becomes mature only if one obtains the promised sexual agency. But this specific agency is only understood in terms of sexual activity. Not engaging in sex wholesale is not seen as using one's liberated sexual agency, but as regressive, done by subjects who are "not liberated yet".

Within these sexual liberation narratives, nonsexuality can't be understood as an expression of one's sexual autonomy. Asexuality gets understood as "stunted growth", as prudish, as neither liberating nor liberated. "[B]eing subsumed into the negative force of desexualization, asexuality comes to signal a sexuality taken away, a sexuality denied, a sexuality forbidden" Przybyło says.[97] People who are still asexual after childhood are seen as developmentally behind, tying asexuality to the ableist idea of proper functioning.[98] Asexuality, within those terms, becomes a problem that needs to be overcome. "Expectations that adults will grow into being sexual—that is, grow into being interested in sex and propelled by sexual desire—are grounded in ideas about the naturalness of sexuality and reproduction as emblems of a fit, able, and willing white citizenry."[99] These ableist and racist ideas are the natural conclusion of an unspoken principle: "the presumed inherentness of sexual desire" and the inextricable link between humanness and sex.[100] "The message that surfaces is that sexual desires and experiences are a positive, recuperating, queer force, whereas asexuality is a conservative, potentially violent dictum that prevents children from being whole.", Przybyło writes.[101]

Theories that use asexuality and desexualization interchangeably, obscure the way desexualization harms asexual children. The argumentation used against the desexualization of children often relies on the assumption of an inherent sexual desire, that is being repressed through desexualization. The harms done by desexualization to asexual children and asexuality as a positive identity thus become unthinkable. Asexual children that grow into being asexual adults

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[95] Milks, Megan. "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation." In: *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (2014), pp. 100–118, p.101; Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.92.

[96] Milks, "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation," op. cit., p.101; Cf. Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.92.

[97] Idem, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.93.

[98] Cf. ibid., p.93.

[99] Ibid., p.93.

[100] Ibid., p.96.

[101] Ibid., p.97.

become unthinkable. Asexual children are, much like any queer child, separated from asexual adults and are prevented from building a positive identity in a world that desexualizes children. The coercive control of both desexualization and hypersexualization do not only take effect for those that feel sexual attraction or engage in sex. One should not assume that "repressive" desexualizing environments are "free of sexuality": in fact, sexuality becomes most relevant in those spaces.[102] Controlling through shame and fear, sex negative environments only allow the "right kind of sexuality" to be seen as valuable, while any other way of living is constructed as bad and unnatural. Sexual Autonomy needs to include both the freedom to be sexual and the freedom to not be sexual, both of which are limited by compulsory sexuality and, by extension, desexualization and hypersexualization. This goes to show that understanding desexualization only in terms of suppressed sexual desire is too limited. Desexualization can oppress asexual people without suppressing their sexual desire.

3.2.3 Recap: Asexuality Seen As Desexualization In Disguise

In this section, I summarize the key points of 3.2 Asexuality and Asexual Erotics: Undesirable And Unthinkable, so that I can draw on them in 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent". We can see that the responses of queer theorists tend to reinforce compulsory sexuality and understanding asexuality/nonsexual forms of being as undesirable or unthinkable. Asexual and nonsexual lesbian relationships as well as asexual children are thus in a double bind: on the one hand, the pressures of dominant culture desexualizing lesbians or children, while on the other hand, lesbian/queer answers to desexualization reinforce compulsory sexuality. Asexual/Nonsexual ways of being and relating can't be understood in discursive structures that tie humanity and the good life that closely to sexual activity.

Sexual liberation narratives construct asexuality as childish and immature. Przybyło states that "[a]sexuality is rendered, at best, irrelevant and unnecessary to queer analysis, and at worst, bad politically, functioning to undercut sex and sexuality's centralizing energy in queer community and politics."[103] Because asexuality is under suspicion of being "desexualization in disguise", asexuality is seen as backwards, antisocial, conservative, prude and possibly anti-queer.[104] The often tight-knit connection between sexuality and queer politics positions asexuality/nonsexuality as not transgressive or not political.[105]

Przybyło's argument reveals that feminist and queer theorists reinforce compulsory sexuality quite regularly. As I will show in 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent", Manon Garcia reinforces compulsory sexuality along similar lines. One of the most important findings is that queer theorists constantly conflate asexuality/nonsexuality and desexualization, leading

[102] Cf. Winer, "The Freedom Not to be Sexual: Asexuality, Compulsory Sexuality, and Sex Positivity," op. cit.
[103] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.92.
[104] Cf. ibid., p.98.
[105] Cf. ibid., p.97.

to asexual stigma. Understanding asexuality as synonymous with desexualization, asexuality becomes synonymous with the bad, conservative, anti-queer ways in which desexualization is used.[106] This creates a double bind for nonsexual and asexual people alike, being stuck between the constant desexualization of queer identities and childhood by dominant society, while queer theorists' rebuttal to desexualization often portrays sexual desire as inherent to humans, thus dehumanizing asexual people and invalidating nonsexual lives. Due to this, sex also becomes embedded in notions of the good life. A good life without sex becomes unthinkable, especially against the backdrop of desexualization. This instills the fear of an "asexual life", which would deny one access to the promises of sex.

Compulsory sexuality is connected to the ways in which a good life is only imaginable through systems of sex and sexuality. The promise of a good life and the fear of losing it is what makes compulsory sexuality such a pernicious system. Thus, we need to fight this link between the good life and sex, and this means challenging the promises to sex. Only once we are able to disentangle the good life from the promises made through sex, can we envision a nonsexual good life. Przybyło thus correctly asserts that "we need to release our hold on the sexual as the default mode of relationality" and that we need to "attend [..] to asexually erotic forms of relating."[107]

[106] Cf. Kim, "Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy," op. cit.
[107] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.77.

4 On “The Joy Of Consent”

Now that we know what asexual erotics are and how they have been made unthinkable and undesirable, we can look at Garcia’s book "*The Joy of Consent*" in more detail. In 4.1 A Summary Of "The Joy Of Consent", I will give a very brief summary of "*The Joy of Consent*". In 4.2 Why Consent To Sex Is Special, I will reconstruct the first chapter of "*The Joy of Consent*". In 4.3 Consent As A Conservation And Sexual Projects, I will present the last chapter of "*The Joy of Consent*". Although I will primarily work with these two chapters in the rest of this thesis, the summary of "*The Joy of Consent*" is nevertheless important, as it sheds light on the function and significance of these two chapters, and highlights aspects like Garcia’s work on a Kantian notion of Consent, BDSM and Foucault which will be relevant for 5 Asexual Critique Of “The Joy Of Consent”.

4.1 A Summary Of "The Joy Of Consent"

"*The Joy of Consent*" is characterized by the double goal: "[H]ow to have good sex, in the double sense of sex that is not impaired by unjust social norms [...] and sex that fosters a good life.”"[108] Garcia states that: "consent can [...] serve freedom and autonomy. Within it lies the promise of a sexual revolution that, this time, could be a liberation for all."[109] It is important to note here, that the original French tile of "*The Joy of Consent*" roughly translates to "The Conversation of the Sexes". The English title obscures something important about Garcia’s book: that the book focuses on gendered oppression that is linked to (cis)heterosexism. Therefore, a lot of *The Joy of Consent* is dedicated to explaining this gendered oppression to a broader audience. The two goals of her book are being negotiated simultaneously throughout the book, because sex that is impaired by unjust norms also impairs the ability for sex to foster a good life. For this reason, there is no neat separation between the two goals within the book.

In the introduction, Garcia questions the prevalent intuition that we simply know what consent is. She argues that sexual consent has a lot of nuances we need to consider. Rape myths, the gray zone and the effects of patriarchy make sexual consent less clear than it may seem. [110] Garcia thus describes her goal as reinterpreting consent "to show how it can contribute to the normative and emancipatory enterprise that sex can and should be"[111] Garcia ends the introduction stating that her ambition is "to respond to a pressing question: Can consent help us achieve good sex lives?"[112]

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[108] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.186.
[109] Ibid., p.219.
[110] The term "gray zone" draws attention to all those sexual experiences that are morally and politically problematic but are not necessarily rape.
[111] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.15.
[112] Ibid., p.18.

In the first chapter "Saying Yes to Sex Is Not Like Saying Yes to a Cup of Tea" Garcia distinguishes sexual consent from other types of consent, such as legal, political and general consent.[113] The goal of this chapter is to show that consent to sex does not function like other types of consent, and that we therefore need to explain sexual consent on its own. I will reconstruct this chapter in 4.2 Why Consent To Sex Is Special. To trouble the public understanding of consent that distinguishes good sex from bad sex, and sex from rape, in the second chapter "How Does Consent Make Things “Good”?", Garcia introduces the distinction between permissible and good. Consent can be morally permissible/formally valid, but that does not make it morally good. She maps the distinction of right and wrong onto liberal consent, and the distinction between good and bad onto Kantian consent. Garcia wants her notion of consent to be able to distinguish between good and bad sex, but this means that one needs to fulfil the criteria for Kantian consent: to "engage the morality and humanity of the consenting party".[114] When Garcia draws on the distinction between liberal and Kantian consent, she states that people within the dominant discourse on consent want liberal consent models to distinguish between good and bad, which Garcia convincingly argues is something that liberal consent models are not able to do.[115] In a liberal sense, one might give valid consent to all kinds of things that are against one’s dignity or don’t respect one’s personhood. Consent might be valid without being morally good. Kantian consent is more demanding than "just asking for permission": Kantian consent demands that we are attentive to the other person(s), facilitating their consent and treating them as (a) person(s) with their own goals and desires.

To illustrate the difference between liberal and Kantian consent, in “Hit Me Baby One More Time”, Garcia shows that BDSM Practitioners "draw the blood of kantian, moral consent".[116] In "Sex is Political", she argues that "neither of these two goals — discerning sex from rape and achieving genuine sexual autonomy — can be pursued through liberalism’s individualist register"[117] To show this, she draws on Foucault. Foucault crucially rejects the claim that "sex has been the object of continuous oppression, secrecy, and prohibition".[118] Garcia explicates that "sex talk happens all time, through an ever-increasing production of discourses"[119] These discourses shape and produce the subject: Discourses of sex seemingly tell us who we are, but in reality they create and define the self. Foucault shows that power and sex are linked and that biopolitics need to control sex so that they can control life.[120] Therefore, an individualistic approach will not work: such an approach cannot take seriously the ways in which sex is intrinsically linked

[113] Cf. ibid., p.19f.
[114] Ibid., p.45.
[115] Cf. ibid., p.60.
[116] Cf. ibid., p.82.
[117] Ibid., p.85.
[118] Citation of: idem, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.90; Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books, 1978, p.10f.
[119] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.90.
[120] Cf. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, op. cit., p.145.

to power. Importantly, Foucault understood BDSM as undertaking a “a creative enterprise" which enable pleasure to be "freed from the power of the dispositif of sexuality"[121] To Foucault, resistance against the dispositif of sexuality would need to "“[c]ounter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”"[122]

Garcia, like many feminist philosophers, takes issue with Foucault’s lack of work on heteropatriarchy or more specifically, the domination of women by men through sex. Garcia writes: "when he talks about the power relations intrinsic to sex, there is a surprising omission: he barely mentions the core manifestation of those relations, which is the social domination of women by men. The feminist politicization of intimacy — whereby consent cannot be understood as involving strictly the two or more people engaged in a specific sex act—is therefore the third crucial step in the evolution toward a political analysis of sex".[123] Garcia states that "[w]ith the feminists who arose during the sexual revolution, we can say something further: through sexuality, a certain form of social domination is played out—that of men over women. Some feminists have called this heteropatriarchy, and it constitutes the last phase of the intellectual history reconstructed here."[124] For this reason, the next two chapters ("Is Consent a Woman’s Problem?" and "Rape Is Not Sex Minus Consent") and arguably the rest of the book, focus on heteropatriarchal domination of women by men through sex. In the last chapter "Sex as a Conversation", Garcia explains her positive understanding of sexual consent, which makes it possible for sex "to foster a good live" and which enables sexual autonomy under these non-ideal circumstances of oppression under which we live. I will reconstruct this chapter in more detail in 4.3 Consent As A Conservation And Sexual Projects.

By design then, in "*The Joy of Consent*", Garcia is less interested in non-heterosexual relations, which includes nonsexual and asexual relations. Her explanations of structural hindrances to sexual autonomy are primarily about heterosexual cisgender women. This is not a problem on its own. But this focus creates problems once she moves from an analysis of the oppression of heterosexual women (the negative aim) to redefining consent in a way that fosters a good life (the positive aim). Implied by this move is the assumption that everything that we need to learn about the world, or as Garcia calls it, "the realities of sex we need consent to respond to", can be learned from looking at the oppression that heteropatriarchy inflicts on (cis)heterosexual women.[125] Or at least, that an analysis from every other type of position can be made compatible with her analysis of patriarchy, male domination and compulsory heterosexuality.[126] But, as

[121] Idem, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, op. cit., p.165; Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.103.

[122] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, op. cit., p.157; Cf. Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.103.

[123] Idem, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.99.

[124] Ibid., p.99.

[125] Ibid., p.187.

[126] Cf. ibid., p.149.

stated earlier, asexuals use the term compulsory sexuality because asexual oppression is not considered within analyses that focus on compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy. Focusing on compulsory sexuality precisely draws attention to the fact that asexual oppression has been invisible within theories that rely on compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy, and that many sex positive theories are incompatible with an emancipatory understanding of asexual life. In 5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent", I will look at the ways Garcia's ignorance towards asexual perspectives and compulsory sexuality impacts her analysis. Because of this, I am going to look at sections that are helpful for understanding why Garcia's reinterpretation of consent relies on compulsory sexuality and why this means that her theory is incompatible with the lived reality of asexual/nonsexual people.

4.2 Why Consent To Sex Is Special

In the first chapter of "*The Joy of Consent*", Garcia distinguishes sexual consent from other types of consent, such as legal, political and general consent.[127] She starts off the chapter this way: "Why are we intuitively convinced that there is something about sex that makes it different from other activities we do with other people, like going on a hike, or drinking tea together?".[128] This intuition gets positioned as a common and shared one, using the "we". As Garcia identifies, how "we" understand sexual consent in relation to other types of consent is crucial:

> "[I]f we understand sexual consent as a particular case of general consent, then we can draw lessons about our sex lives from analyses of political and legal consent, and from moral consent to mundane actions like lending one's bike or agreeing to join another person for a cup of tea. But if sexual consent is radically different from these other types of consent, then analyzing sexual consent on the basis of thought experiments about our nonsexual lives—as some analytic moral philosophers do—is likely to lead us astray."[129]

Because of this, Garcia compares sexual consent to legal, political and general consent, to see if sex is special, because this would entail that sexual consent could not be understood by looking at other types of consent.[130]

Garcia argues that consent to sex is different from legal consent. The domain that uses legal consent the most is contract law, according to Garcia.[131] Contract law understands consent to create an obligation, so something one must do. Sexual consent, however, does not create an obligation, but is generally understood to make an act permissible. Because of the obligatory

[127] Cf. ibid., p.19f.
[128] Ibid., p.19.
[129] Ibid., p.20.
[130] Cf. ibid., p.31.
[131] Cf. ibid., p.26.

structure of contractual consent, one can't withdraw contractual consent, like one should be able to do with sexual consent.[132]

According to Garcia, sexual consent also isn't like political consent either, since "consent in politics is primarily intended as an answer to the question of why one is obligated to obey the law."[133] She draws on Locke's notion of tacit consent, which states that "anyone within the territory of a government can be taken as having given their tacit consent."[134] This type of consent becomes passive, which is "far from the voluntary and active conception at the heart of sexual consent", according to Garcia.[135]

At the end of the chapter, Garcia addresses comparisons to sexual consent with "innocuous, everyday forms of consent".[136] She draws on two examples: the first is a video that shows the do's and don'ts of sexual consent using the analogy of consenting to a cup of tea. The person in the video describes different situations, like a person being unconscious or having consented to tea some days ago. They answer the question whether a person in this situation consented to a cup of tea or not. About this video, Garcia states: "The problem with such analyses is that they rest on the presupposition that the two actions to which one consents are comparable. In the case of sex, that presupposition goes against our intuitions: at first sight, having sex and agreeing to a cup of tea are utterly different actions."[137] The second example is from a philosophy professor, who drew a parallel between having sex when not being in the mood and giving one's children a good-night-kiss when not being in the mood. To this, Garcia states: "The question underlying the suspicion that such a comparison is bad (and maybe wrong) is whether there is something exceptional about sex: Is there some special quality of sex that would make it impossible to reason about sexual consent from other kinds of consent?"[138] According to Garcia, we need to realize that sexual consent is different from the consent in "anodyne interactions between individuals in daily life."[139] In summary: Garcia is not a fan of these comparisons, and sees them as problematic.

Garcia finishes the chapter with the following remark:

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[132] Cf. ibid., p.27.
[133] Ibid., p.29.
[134] Locke, John. *Two Treatise of Government*. cited from: The Works of John Locke. A New Edition, Vol. V.. Rod Hay, 1823, originally published in: 1689, p.157, §119; Cited from: Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.30.
[135] Idem, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.31.
[136] Ibid., p.34.
[137] Ibid., p.31.
[138] Ibid., p.32.
[139] Ibid., p.35.

> "It is difficult to say whether this view — that sex is special in some way that both makes sexual violence more serious than other violence and justifies special protection against sexual violation — is legitimate.[...] But one pragmatic way of resolving this issue is to recognize that, to the extent that our laws, institutions, norms, and practices give sex a particular importance and make sex a sphere of activity that engages one's autonomy and vulnerability in a particularly acute way, sex occupies a specific moral position — whether or not that position is justified by reason.[...] This specificity must be accounted for in analyses of sexual consent, if these analyses are to be relevant to the way people actually feel and live. [...] Moreover, sexual consent often takes place in the context of affective and intimate relationships that are not necessarily well analyzed when examined without taking into account their specificity: the role of feelings, the duration of a relationship, and other factors often involved in sex plausibly make sex qualitatively different from other sorts of acts to which one might consent."[140]

Garcia positions herself as agnostic in regard to the "real" specialness of sex, wanting to theorize the social specialness that has been attributed to it by laws and social norms. She argues that sex occupies a special moral position, which one needs to take seriously when theorizing sexual consent. The special position of sex also creates a special engagement with autonomy and vulnerability. According to Garcia, sex also is special, because it is often part of affective and intimate relationships. Because sex occupies a special moral position, sexual consent is special in regard to other types of consent. Because of this, one should not analyze sexual consent by drawing analogies to these other types of consent.

4.3 Consent As A Conservation And Sexual Projects

In the last chapter of "*The Joy of Consent*", "Consent as a Conversation", Garcia starts off by explaining the goals of her work: "The goal of this moral and political study of sex is to know how to have good sex, in the double sense of sex that is not impaired by unjust social norms—such as the norm of female submission, which prevents women from asserting what they want and like—and sex that fosters a good life."[141] Consent should respond to the specifics of sexual situations, and Garcia states that she has used detailed case studies and hypotheticals throughout the book "because, in these details, we find the realities of sex that we need consent to respond to."[142] Consent needs to sensitive to the details of a specific situation as well as to larger power structures within society. Otherwise, consent will fail to grasp the realities of sexual encounters.[143] People having sex need to be enabled to become so attentive to one another that

[140] Ibid., p.33f.
[141] Ibid., p.186f.
[142] Ibid., p.186f.
[143] Cf. ibid., p.187.

"they [can] break the silence and mystery, and the sense of antagonism, that surrounds sex"[144] The solution, according to Garcia, is that people need to talk to one another.[145] Garcia states that "if the aim is to contest gender injustices [...] then sexual consent, conceived as an erotic conversation, is the future of love and sex."[146]

We need to understand consent that stems from erotic conversations as relational, as a mode of cooperation, in which both parties are involved in the project. Together they decide what they are going to do. Garcia argues that sexual/physical desire is not enough to determine good sex. "It is not clear why it would be morally unacceptable to engage in sex for a morally good purpose other than sex itself—for instance, in order to please someone or to relax."[147] With this, Garcia acknowledges that there are many different reasons one might engage in sex, which is compatible with the different reasons sexually active asexual people might engage in sex.[148] Because of this broad approach to reasons one might engage with sex, Garcia draws on the term "sexual project" from Jennifer Hirsch and Shamus Khan.

> "A sexual project encompasses the reasons why anyone might seek a particular sexual interaction or experience. Pleasure is an obvious project; but a sexual project can also be to develop and maintain a relationship; or it can be a project to not have sex; or to have sex for comfort; or to try to have children; or because sex can advance our position or status within a group, or increase the status of groups to which we belong. A sexual project can also be to have a particular kind of experience, like sex in the library stacks; sex can be the goal rather than a strategy toward another goal. People don't just have one sexual project. They can have many. Wanting intimacy doesn't mean not wanting other things, like to hook up from time to time."[149]

This idea is fused with Kantian consent, which means that we need to think of consent as enabling us to respect the person as a person, treat them with dignity etc. To Garcia, this means that we need to envision consent as a type of erotic conversation in which the sexual projects of all parties are taken seriously and thus everyone is recognized as a person. To Garcia, erotic conversations are emancipatory, because we are "learning about our desires and our pleasures and those of our partners", which will enable us to have better sex in the future. Erotic conversations could also enable new language around sex, which would be helpful for many people, as it "breath[s] new language into the world".[150] Therefore, erotic conversations are Garcia's answer

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144 Ibid., p.187.
145 Cf. ibid., p.187.
146 Ibid., p.187.
147 Ibid., p.192.
148 Cf. Asexuality Archive, *An Asexual's Guide To … Having Sex*, op. cit.
149 Hirsch, Jennifer and Khan, Shamus. *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*. W. W. Norton, 2020, p.xiv (p.14 of the Introduction); Cited from: Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.193.
150 Idem, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.203.

to the question of how one can enable "good sex, in the double sense of sex that is not impaired by unjust social norms [...] and sex that fosters a good life."[151] The liberatory potential of erotic conversations therefore lies in the ability to seek and have good sex, free from unjust social norms. Garcia therefore suggests that sex is able to forster a good life when we engage in erotic conversations, fueled by a Kantian understanding of consent, in which the sexual projects of all participants are taken seriously.

[151] Ibid., p.187.

5 Asexual Critique Of "The Joy Of Consent"

As I will show in this section, from an ace perspective, neither the connection between intimacy and sex nor the specialness of sex that Garcia draws out are all that intuitive. Often times, Garcia's arguments only seem convincing if one already believes that sex has special properties that justify special treatment. In turn, Garcia's argument makes all nonsexual relations and erotics invisible or less relevant in one fell swoop. In 5.1 The Specialness Of Sex, I critique the way Garcia reproduces the specialness of sex. I will especially critique her argument within the chapter "Saying Yes to Sex Is Not Like Saying Yes to a Cup of Tea". In 5.2 How Intimacy And Sex Become One And The Same, I criticize the conflation of intimacy and sex in "*The Joy of Consent*". I will look at a specific section that on my reading, co-opts the normative force of intimacy and pastes it onto sex. In 5.3 Good Sex, Good Life?, I show how talking about good sex and the good life in conjunction has oppressive implications for a nonsexual good life. I argue that Garcia separates "sex life" and "nonsexual life" through a problematic ascription of positive terms to "our sex life". In 5.4 A Strong Separation Entails A Wrong Understanding Of Sexual Autonomy, I argue that Garcia's understanding of sexual autonomy is not inclusive towards asexual/nonsexual people.

5.1 The Specialness Of Sex

In 4.2 Why Consent To Sex Is Special, I reconstructed Garcia's argument that should show that sexual consent is special in a way that differentiates it from consent to law, politics and mundane everyday activities. In this section, I am going to critique Garcia's argument. Garcia argues that because sex is special, we should not look at other types of consent in order to understand sexual consent. Analogies to sexual consent from other types of consent were framed as especially problematic.

At the heart of the fallacy about the specialness of sex lies an is-ought distinction that Garcia refuses to draw: If it were the case that "sex" (whatever we mean by it in this instance) is intrinsically special, does this justify the special place we give sex in society? If sex *is* special, we can still ask the question: *ought* we position sex as special? This is by no means clear, and many years of feminist literature have taught us that these type of fallacies are the most pervasive in instances of naturalized ideology.[152] The existent biological differences of our bodies, for example do not logically imply a system of gender. What we *should do* is not determined by the "*is*". What we *ought* to do is a moral/social question. Because of this, the "realness" or "inherentness" of the specialness of sex is not as important for answering the question of what we should do as Garcia makes it out to be. Even if we found out that sex *is* indeed inherently special, it does not follow from this that we *ought* to treat it that way. I agree with Garcia that

[152] For Example: Young, Iris Marion. "Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality." In: *Human Studies* 7 (1980), pp. 137–156.

when we need to take seriously the ways in which sex has been constructed as special when we theorize consent, if we want sexual consent to be relevant for people here and now. The ways in which sex has been made special creates specific challenges for consenting to sex that do not exist for other types of consent. There are a lot of nuances to consider when it comes to sex. But that sex has been made special within society also creates challenges for nonsexual intimacy/asexual erotics and makes them harder as well. There are also a lot of nuances here that we need to consider. Taking seriously the special position of sex within society does not mean that we need to theorize it in a way that keeps sex special, which is what I argue Garcia ultimately does.[153] The naturalization of this specialness of sex and the challenges that sex's special position creates for nonsexual intimacy needs to be addressed properly by sexual consent theorists like Garcia. Garcia, as I show in this section, fails to do so.

Garcia argues that sexual consent is special in a way that differentiates it from political consent. Sexual consent also isn't like political consent, because political consent is passive (drawing on Locke), and this is not what sexual consent should be. But this argument fails to show how that differentiates sexual consent and political consent. If anything, she shows that the real difference is the difference between Kantian and Liberal Theory.[154] Following the same steps Garcia did, but with inverted roles, would look like this: We start off with active (Kantian) political consent in which each decision must understand the people it effects as people with goals on their own, with dignity and humanity. We want political consent to be active and for it to be an expression of our autonomy. Liberal conceptions of sexual consent, on the other hand, are too passive and in its worst form they reproduce the sexist idea that a man always asks for consent and that it is a woman's job to refuse. If she does not refuse it means that she consented. [155] Liberal conceptions of sexual consent therefore are too passive. This would, if we were to follow the way Garcia constructed her argument, lead us to the conclusion that political consent is totally different from sexual consent, because political consent is special and should not be conflated with sexual consent. The argument functions the same, which is to say, it does not work at all. But it does not work in all the ways that Garcia's argument also does not work. It would be far more reasonable to argue that a Kantian approach is more demanding and that the difference between Kantian and Liberal Consent makes them incomparable. Maybe we just do not want Liberal Consent Theorists to apply their understanding of Consent onto cases that require Kantian Consent, like Garcia argues in the second chapter? This would be a far more reasonable conclusion from Garcia's argument, but this is not what Garcia argues for. At least partly then, what she tries to give off as the difference between sexual consent and political consent in reality boils down to the difference in theories used.

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[153] Cf. Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.33f.

[154] Cf. ibid., p.36f.

[155] Garcia explicitly critiques how the "intuitive liberal view of consent disguises the inequalities of a patriarchal world". (ibid., p.119)

I also find the idea of separating our understanding of political consent and sexual consent in this way especially strange, since we need a more demanding view on political consent in order to achieve sexual autonomy. The personal is political.[156] Understanding "consent in politics [...] primarily intended as an answer to the question of why one is obligated to obey the law" is therefore lacking nuance.[157] Sexual consent and political consent rely on each other, as attempts to reduce bodily autonomy by criminalizing abortion clearly indicate. Garcia's argument fails to take the complexities of political consent into account and therefore also fails to convincingly differentiate sexual and political in a way that would legitimate the specialness of sex.

I now move to the last kind of consent Garcia distinguishes from sexual consent, which is innocuous, mundane everyday consent. What does Garcia want when she is trying to show that sexual consent is not like any other "innocuous, everyday" consent? On the one hand, she wants to prevent that disingenuous parallels can be drawn between consent in some different area and sexual consent. This is a reasonable concern: A lot of bad analogies have drawn, and many of them draw an analogy between having sex with another person and interacting with an object, which constructs the other person as an object with no agency of their own. We need to be careful about what our analogies imply, and to what goal someone draws an analogy. I am totally on board with that, but that just means that we need to be careful in how we construct an analogy. However, that we should be careful does not mean that there is something special about sex that would make it very hard to draw analogies between sex and "everyday life", which is what Garcia seems to be suggesting.

Garcia defends the specialness of sex by proving some sort of distinction between "everyday life" and sex. I want to draw attention to the fact that this distinction between sexual and "mundane" everyday consent is arbitrary, gerrymandered, allo-centric and deeply embedded in compulsory sexuality. With describing specific actions as mundane and not of great importance, Garcia assumes that these actions are always mundane and cannot foster intimacy, which in turn means that for Garcia, sex has an inherent capacity for intimacy. It is very important to distinguish the claim that 1) certain activities are typically understood as not of great importance for intimacy while others are and the claim that 2) certain acts are in themselves incapable of fostering intimacy. The second one is to be rejected outright, because it seems far too limiting for human experiences of intimacy: Some people might feel deep intimacy when washing the dishes with someone, while other people might experience it as the most boring experience one could have. The first claim, that some activities are typically understood as more enabling for intimacy, seems to be far more reasonable. I certainly would not argue against the claim that it is more common that people find sexual activities to be more intimate than washing the dishes. I am also not debating that some activities might be better suited for fostering intimacy than others. Things like spatial and emotional closeness, as well as many other factors, certainly play

[156] Ibid., p.84.
[157] Ibid., p.29.

a role in that. But it is not at all clear that sexual activities in themselves are best positioned to foster intimacy. Rather, it seems like the oppressive norms of compulsory sexuality position them as special in this regard. This positions other possible modes of intimate relating, like asexual erotics, as invisible and undesirable, which makes it harder to foster intimacy through them.

It also does not follow from this that these activities are *inherently* intimate or *inherently* mundane. Some people might relate to certain acts subsumed under the label sex more like a "mundane" nonsexual experience. Asexual people compare all kinds of activities that are constructed as mundane to sex and they also explain their relationship to sex while drawing on "mundane" things, like food.[158] From a nonsexual/asexual perspective, it is not at all clear why understanding sex as special should be privileged over understanding it as something mundane. Just because sex *has been* understood as special, does not mean we need to uphold the norms that give it that status. Allowing people to describe their experience and relation to sex in terms of "the mundane" is crucial for legitimate consent: It is a form of silencing to expect asexual people to adhere to the norms of allosexual, compulsory sexuality infused discourses about sexual consent. To some people, engaging in sexual activities might actually be like we typically understand washing the dishes to be: mundane and tedious.

Garcia also does not stay consistent within her rejection of examples "from the mundane", oftentimes drawing on examples of our "innocuous, everyday life" when it fits her. She writes: "[f]urthermore, it is not the case that the only good sex is sex we desire. Consider the following comparison: it is universally recognized that, in everyday life, people take actions they do not wish to because these actions, though themselves unwanted, are means to desired ends."[159] She explains this that way: "Although, as noted elsewhere, it is widely appreciated that sex is special in some ways—distinct from mundane activities—I see no reason to believe that sex should be thought of differently in this context."[160] I agree with the result of Garcia's argument here. But the real problem is that Garcia decides which analogies are allowed and which ones are not solely based on her intuitions, which are guided by an allonormative understanding of the world. Due to this, Garcia can just rely on "the shared assumption of what sex is" to declare a particular analogy as bad. To her, some analogies "from the mundane" would constitute an improper conflation of sexual and nonsexual life, based on allocentric intuitions about sex, we supposedly "all share". She believes that her analogies allow for an exception to the rule: This is arbitrary and relies on allosexual shared intuitions of what sex is which she assumes are shared by everyone. This is inherently exclusionary and oppressive for asexual people as their reality becomes invisible: they might describe sex in terms of actions that are considered mundane.

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[158] Cf. Chen, Angela. *Ace. What Asexuality reveals about desire, society, and the meaning of sex*. Beacon Press Books, 2020, p.21f.

[159] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.192.

[160] Ibid., p.192.

Asexuals are also actively decentering sex and critiquing the heightened value placed on it with memes and common phrases like "Cake is better than sex" or "Yeah, Sex is great, but have you ever...", which place activities that are "mundane" and nonsexual above sex, placing sex as one of many experiences one could have, that is not inherently better than any other experience one could have.[161]

I am not suggesting that differences in the way one experiences sex are irrelevant or easy to navigate for individuals in practice. Far from it, I think these differences are crucial for consent, and very hard to navigate in allonormative societies that enforce compulsory sexuality. Maybe the person describing their relation to sex more in terms of "washing the dishes: neutral while doing it but feeling relieved and happy afterwards" and the person who understands sex to be "essential to who they are" should think twice about having sex. Valuing everyone's dignity in the sexual encounter might be hard under these conditions. Maybe some ways of relating to sex do not match well together and maybe sometimes consent is just very difficult to facilitate. But precisely because of their effect on consent, we need to be able to articulate these differences so that consent and erotic conversations can even become possible. Especially those asexual people who are in relationships with allosexual people need to be able to articulate these differences in a way that will be heard by the allosexual person. Policing what we can compare to sex is unhelpful for these asexuals.[162]

Nothing about this makes sex special compared to "mundane activities": Imagine the situation where one person is playing a game of cards in a way that is more competitive, memorizing every card played, while another person just does not want to think at all, and desires to play some cards and chat with friends without focusing too much on the game. This situation increases the possibility of arguments and hurt feelings arising and might not be what both people wanted it to be. Maybe they misunderstood what "playing cards" meant for the other person and would not have consented if they knew the way the other person viewed "playing cards". But it is on them to decide, and they can only properly choose if they actually understand their differences. It is thus not a problem inherent to sexual activities, but a problem that emerges when dealing with the plethora of ways people relate to different activities. Enabling us to articulate those differences and understand what they entail is essential for good consent.

A lot of functions are not inherently special to sex or consent to sex. Sex has been *made* special, and thus sexual consent *needs* to account for that in the here and now. But, if one rejects this special position sex has been given in our society, it becomes less clear why analogies from the

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[161] Cf. Reddit. *I'm confused, what's with all the "cake" talk?* 2023. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/Asexual/comments/15265hx/im_confused_whats_with_all_the_cake_talk/?rdt=56075; Cf. Reddit. *yeah sex is cool but...* 2023. URL: https://old.reddit.com/r/aaaaaaaccccccce/comments/x6git6/yeah_sex_is_cool_but/.

[162] Cf. Reddit. *Relationships with allosexual people...* 2019. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/asexuality/comments/bomb2f/relationships_with_allosexual_people/.

mundane should be regarded as dangerous. Why does sex get this special treatment of being overly protected against "bad analogies"? In a sense, every analogy also includes a disanalogy: The unsaid parts might not be analog in the same way. In a sense, the point of analogies is to compare things that are not the same.

People use analogies for various reasons: The video about consent and tea that Garcia criticizes uses the analogy to show something that needs to be taken seriously: If you are able to understand consent in "mundane activities", why are you excusing your shitty behavior with regard to sex with "I could not tell whether this was consent or not"? Because, and that is where the analogy draws its power from, the distortions placed on sex by making it special obscures the fact that if we replace "sex" with "benign activities", most people would provide a clear answer, while they might excuse analog behavior when it comes to sex. The analogy is also much more clear-cut in the video than it seems in Garcia's reconstruction. "If you're still struggling with consent, just imagine instead of initiating sex, you're making them a cup of tea."[163] Offering them a cup of tea is an invitation to have sex, them saying yes is them consenting. From this point onwards, the video goes through different scenarios: If they are now unconscious, don't make them drink the tea, if they have consented a week ago, they have not consented right now, and so on.

The power that lies within comparing sex to "everyday activities" gets lost on Garcia, because she is so focused on the way consenting to tea is not like consenting to sex. Of course there are disanalogies left, right and center. The social norms placed on consenting to a cup of tea are different from consenting to sex: the way gender, race, class etc. influence the outcome are different and it is for the most part, easier to reject tea then it is to refuse sex. This isn't the point of the video though, and wanting every analogy to be perfect only makes it so that no parallels can be drawn at all. The point of the video is: "Hey you, if you understand consent in everyday life, then don't excuse yourself with shit like "I didn't realize they were asleep". This is oversimplistic, but this does not mean that the analogy is without any merit. Garcia even has a passage in a different part of her book that would especially benefit from the key point of the video, in which she states: "After all, verbal exchange during sex often enhances the excitement; yet talking about consent during sex is supposed to be an insurmountable cure for desire? This representation is especially problematic because it implies that respect for and attention to the other, though necessary in nonsexual interpersonal relationships, is not necessary in sex and should even be absent."[164] This is exactly what the analogy of consenting to a cup of tea is trying make clear, and Garcia can't acknowledge this, because it would acknowledge the ways in which consent to sex is very much like any other type of consent.

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[163] Blue Seat Studios. *Tea Consent*. retrieved: 09. March 2025. published: 12. May 2015. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8&t=1s.

[164] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.195f.

I would like to think that at this point it is clear that there are plenty of good reasons of why we should not reproduce the "specialness of sex", even and especially when produced through social norms we can agree on. The specialness ascribed to sex within our society is bad and damaging for most people and severely impact all of our lives. Understanding sex as special with regard to one's good life and liberatory and emancipatory practices has caused a lot of harm and makes invisible a lot of possibilities to relate to other people, as I have shown in 3 Asexual Erotics: On Possibility And Invisibility. When we ascribe a specialness to sex, everything gets more important: one's sense of self gets tied to one's sexuality, violations of one's sexual autonomy can become life-destroying events. Even suggesting that there could be some nature of sex that would explain why sex is inherently special and on which one remains agnostic is a cop-out. It explicitly goes against the idea of an unbreakable Link between power and sex, which is, according to Garcia's reconstruction of Foucault, the primary point of Foucault.[165]

Remaining ignorant to the real damages that this specialness of sex produces, especially for asexual/nonsexual people, but also for everyone involved, is deeply misguided. Garcia's supposed impartiality about "the real specialness" of sex deeply affects the way she handles the socially constructed specialness of sex. The whole fuzzy language on the "specialness of sex" protects something: the belief that there is something about sex, that would make it inherently special.

5.2 How Intimacy And Sex Become One And The Same

The embeddedness of Garcia's argument in compulsory sexuality becomes even more apparent when she talks about sex as being an "intimate relationship". "Although consent is initially a legal term, it is nowadays a core notion in three different domains: law, politics, and intimate interpersonal relationships, in particular those of marriage and sex."[166]

Sex *is* not an intimate interpersonal relationship in itself: sexual activities are oftentimes understood as *constitutive* for intimate interpersonal relationships. A relationship can be *sexual*, but a relationship isn't *sex*. Sex is relational, but typically we mean something more specific when we use the term relationship. Relationships can be profoundly shaped by or constituted through "sex". But the relevance people give sex in their relationship can differ drastically and subsuming all relationships that involve sex under the term "sexual relationship" leaves no room for these complexities. Calling some relationships "sexual relationship" might constitute a wrong, as it defines the relationship in terms that might be in opposition to how the people in that relationship understand their relationship. It tells them that their relationship only holds particular value because it involves sex.

[165] Cf. ibid., p.89.
[166] Ibid., p.21.

Garcia's slippage between sex as an activity and intimate/sexual relationships, which is all too common, is one of the many reasons why nonsexual/asexual modes of relating become invisible and devalued. The way "sexual relationships" are ascribed might also make nonsexual intimate relationships even harder to conceptually grasp. It obscures the fact that nonsexual ways of relating are oftentimes already part of relationships that are called "sexual relationships". This usage of "sexual relationship" makes invisible the nonsexual parts of these relationships, it distorts the way we think about relationships and makes it impossible to understand the value of a relationship besides sex. It is therefore to be rejected. [167]

Garcia also displays this problematic usage every time she uses the term "intimate relationships" interchangeably with terms like "sex" and "sexual relationships". The constant conflation of intimate relationships with sex also makes it hard to see how nonsexual intimate relationships could ever be meaningful. Nowhere within the book are nonsexual intimate relationships actually relevant to Garcia's usage of words like "intimate relationship" or "intimacy". One sentence from Garcia that encapsulates this conflation like no other, is the following: "[i]n essence, feminists were unsettling the rape/sex binary and suggesting that perhaps we should think of *intimacy occurring along a continuum from the most desired sex to the most violent rape.*"[168] This is nothing Garcia challenges. In fact, this is her positive summary. This creates a deep link between sex (and rape) and intimacy. Nonsexual intimate relationships, like the lesbian relationships Sue Katz describes in terms of sensuality, become invisible. Garcia lets intimacy become identical to sex (and deeply linked to rape).

This deep link makes it impossible to think of intimacy outside of "sexual relationships". I believe that intimacy is what holds normative relevance here: negotiating intimacy, boundaries and vulnerability definitely raises moral questions, especially those related to autonomy. Sexual interactions typically need to negotiate intimacy, boundaries and vulnerability. But sexual interactions don't have this normative relevance on their own. It is only to the extent that intimacy gets negotiated. By conflating sex and intimacy, Garcia co-opts this normative relevance of intimacy and depicts it as something that is inherent to sex. Intimacy becomes sex, sex becomes intimacy. Garcia argues that because sexual consent "often takes place in the context of affective and intimate relationships" it makes "sex qualitatively different from other sorts of acts to which one might consent".[169]

This argument leaves a lot to be desired. If it is only through the fact that sexual relationships are often thought of as and also often are part of people's intimate relationships, then this does leave open the question if having sex is necessarily intimate. This means that intimacy is the category that does the heavy lifting for consent in this instance. Garcia's argument does not

[167] This particular train of thought has massively benefited from discussions with Luna Powierski.
[168] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.101f. Emphasis added.
[169] Ibid., p.33f.

show that sex is special, but that intimacy has moral significance. After all, if we follow her argument, sex that does not take place in affective and intimate relationships would have less of a reason to be seen as special than, for example, washing the dishes together in affective and intimate relationships would have. In a way, Garcia recognizes that relating through sex in itself does not have the normative force she needs for her argument. Sex does not inherently produce this moral relevance. Because of this she uses the commonly assumed link of sex and "intimate relationships" to suggest that sexual relationships in themselves have this normative force, which further suggest that her theory has an obligation to save sex, for the sake of intimacy. For Garcia, sex and sexual relationships are inherently deeply intimate, in a way that "plausibly make sex qualitatively different from other sorts of acts to which one might consent". Garcia does not try to understand the connection between "nonsexual" types of intimacy and intimacy within sexual relations to be of any importance.

Garcia endorses a narrow understanding of liberation: liberation of sex without liberation from sex. This narrow understanding is connected to the way she handles the specialness of sex: because she lacks the perspective of a future in which sex is not special, and because intimacy and sex are inextricably linked in her theory, liberation from sex becomes unthinkable. In Garcia's framework liberating ourselves from sex would probably also entail losing most intimacy. Sex and intimacy *stay* inseparable in a project that otherwise is committed to changing our terminology for the better. Within Garcia's theory, it would have been possible for sex and intimacy to be understood in terms that don't conflate the two.[170] That Garcia chooses not to decouple the terms intimacy and sex shows that breaking this link is not relevant to her project.

Garcia wants "to take seriously the impact of gender norms and patriarchy on our **sexual lives**." and asks, in the same section, "[h]ow can we fight against the perpetuation of oppressive and unjust norms in our **intimate lives**?"[171] This is a conflation of sex and intimacy, and does not happen in the sense of broadening the conversation. The sexual life is synonymous with the intimate life here. She also states that "**intimacy** may be the best way to obtain that particular kind of understanding and knowledge of the other's circumstances and particular abilities that are prerequisites for treating them as persons." and quite literally the next sentence is: "**Sex is thus morally risky** because of the temptation to use the other person—to deceive them and to play on the intimate knowledge that one has of them to achieve one's ends."[172] Much like before, it would follow from this that one would need to look at (sexual) intimacy, and not at sex itself in more detail. But Garcia already conflated the two in such a way that they are no longer separate things: intimacy is sex, sex is intimacy. Through this conflation, asexual erotics and nonsexual intimacies become unthinkable.

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[170] Cf. idem, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.218. As Garcia draws on Haslanger here: Cf. Haslanger, Sally. *Resisting Reality. Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

[171] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.13f. Emphasis added.

[172] Ibid., p.58. Emphasis added.

5.3 Good Sex, Good Life?

In the previous section, I used a quote from Garcia in which she talked about "our sexual life". In this section, I draw attention to the way the distinction between "sex life" and "nonsexual life" within Garcia's theory is created. Garcia's uses terms like pleasure, intimacy, and joy when she talks about sex and "our sex lives". Garcia for example uses the phrase "the joys of sex" in two occasions, one of which I will criticize in 5.4 A Strong Separation Entails A Wrong Understanding Of Sexual Autonomy.[173] "Nonsexual life", and "nonsexual actitivties", however, are associated with being mundane, anodyne, innocuous, everyday, daily life activities.[174] As reconstructed in 4.2 Why Consent To Sex Is Special and criticized in 5.1 The Specialness Of Sex, Garcia argues that sex is special in contrast to "mundane activities". Very importantly, pleasure, intimacy, and joy never refer to "nonsexual life", while mundane is never used in relation to "sexual life". This suggests that the distinction between sex life and nonsexual life is more than "just and analytical distinction" in Garcia's book: She constructs sex life as "joyful" and nonsexual life as "mundane".

This ascription Garcia establishes comes awfully close to producing the idea "that sexual desires and experiences are a positive, recuperating, queer force, whereas asexuality is a conservative, potentially violent dictum".[175] Garcia's separation of "sex life" and "nonsexual life" through the terms attached to them reproduces the "specialness of sex". The binary created by this suggests that pleasure, intimacy and joy are special features of "sex lives". This leads to blurring the distinction between a good life and a good sex life. When attributes that we deem relevant for a good life are constructed as features that are specific of "sex lives", then "good sex" becomes a necessary condition for "a good life".

The distinction between "sexual life" and "nonsexual life" that Garcia's terminology creates conveys the idea of a clear distinction between sexual and nonsexual life, which is pernicious in two ways. First, it obfuscates the real differences people might have in understanding some acts as sex or as sexual.[176] Second, in upholding this strong separation, erotics and intimacy ultimately get limited to sexual erotics and sexual intimacy.

Erotics and intimacy are not *inherently sexual*. It is of upmost importance that erotics and intimacy can be understood as asexual/nonsexual. Otherwise, all intimacy becomes part of a sexual narrative, which creates a lot of problems for nonsexual ways of relating. If one reduces erotics and intimacy to sexual erotics and sexual intimacy, one will miss the emancipatory and liberatory value of (asexual) erotics: of not being determined by the difference between sexual and nonsexual. Of being able to create deep and meaningful connections beyond the framework

[173] Cf. ibid., p.104 and p.216.
[174] Cf. ibid., p.19.
[175] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.97.
[176] Cf. Sloan, "Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice," op. cit.

of sex. The value in the fluidity of erotics and intimacy that defy the distinction between sexual and nonsexual gets lost if we understand erotics and intimacy as inherently sexual. [177]

Garcia's conflation of intimacy and sex makes invisible any type of intimacy that is not about sex: asexual erotics, friendships, nonsexual intimacies and various other modes of relating. They get constructed as less liberatory, less emancipatory and less (politically) meaningful within her account. Thus, Garcia's theory excludes asexual perspectives and does not take seriously the very real impact of the specialness of sex within society. Because of this, Garcia's work entails a rejection of deep intimacy within our "nonsexual life", which makes it deeply entangled in compulsory sexuality.

A strong separation of sex and non-sex is not a particular feature of Garcia's theory. In fact, I argue that this separation is needed for the biopolitics of sex to function. The promises of sex - a healthy good life, liberation and emancipation and all the other hopes and material goods attached to sex - need sex to have a clear boundary. The distribution of these goods happens along those lines, and when these promises of sex should keep their motivating factor for engaging in sex intact, then this relies on distinctions like sex and non-sex. The promises of the "sexual good life" create the fear of a sexless life. The anxieties surrounding sex are linked to the gatekeeping of the promises of sex in the realm of sex: The "dangerous place" of sexlessness is a motivator for the investments in sex. Understanding joy, pleasure and good life as inextricably linked to sex results in an anxiety of losing them: the fear of "being asexual", so to speak.

The separation of sex and non-sex, the promises of sex and the anxieties of living a "sexless life" are thus deeply linked: if the promises of sex hold less power over us, the distinction between sex and non-sex would matter less. Lessening the impact and relevance of these promises of sex is an important step in reducing the "regimentation and disciplining of bodies [and] the reproduction of the health of the population [which] render[s] sex compulsory for some [...] and banning it for others"[178] If the clear boundary between sex and non-sex would not exist, our modes of relating - to ourselves and to others, to our bodies and our health - would fundamentally be different, as it would allow for types of asexual erotics and nonsexual intimacies that can't exist in today's world to take shape. Thus, in a world without these promises of sex, sex would be something entirely different from what it is today, and maybe it would even cease to exist entirely. Garcia's problematic separation of sex and non-sex thus also upholds the promises of sex and prevents this form of observation and critique of biopolitics, which limits our political horizon of possibilities, because nonsexual intimacies cannot properly take shape under these conditions.

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[177] This particular train of thought has massively benefited from discussions with Luna Powierski.

[178] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.21.

5.4 A Strong Separation Entails A Wrong Understanding Of Sexual Autonomy

A separation between sex life and nonsexual life that ascribes intimacy, pleasure and "everything valuable" to the sexual life and nothing of importance to the "nonsexual life" is fertile ground for a "fear of a sexless life". As explicated in 3 Asexual Erotics: On Possibility And Invisibility, desexualization and asexuality often become mixed within feminist and queer critiques. Because of this mix-up, the fight against desexualization, which is very important, might end up devaluing asexuality/nonsexual ways of living. Garcia's lopsided understanding of sexual autonomy reveals that she thinks about desexualization as something that denies access to the "joy and pleasure of good sex".[179] Because of this, it is of upmost importance for her to give everyone access to the "joy and pleasure of good sex" and to "enabl[e] more people to have sex lives". This is a narrow understanding of sexual autonomy that does not take seriously the ways in which the autonomy of people who never want to engage in sex can also be limited by desexualization.[180] Garcia sole focus on the need for "a model of consent that is embedded in the real world—and the bedroom: consent that responds to the specifics of sexual situations" misses that it is also important that consent responds to the specifics of nonsexual situations. Sexual consent that is thought of as separate and distinct from nonsexual consent misses the way nonsexual ways of relating shape and are shaped by sexual ways of relating.[181]

Because she keeps a rigid separation between sex and non-sex, Garcia primarily thinks about the effects of desexualization in terms of the impact it has on "sex lives" and does not consider the harms desexualization produces independent of some "sex life". Because of this, she misunderstands the harms produced by desexualization and misconstructs sexual autonomy in a way that can't take the sexual autonomy of potential life-long or long-term refusals to sex seriously. It is by no means clear, like Garcia suggests numerous times, that the primary harm of desexualization lies in the limited access to sexual activities: Such an approach would make the harms of people who do not want to engage in sex invisible. If one detaches from the idea that desexualization is a harm "in the sexual sphere" that requires an answer from "the sexual sphere", we can see that the harm produced is primarily one of oppression, of constructing a group as less valuable than others. This means that the desexualization of asexual/nonsexual people causes them harm whether they want to have sex or not. An answer to desexualization that sees the harm done as an excess denied to the "the joys of sex" can't recognize the harms that desexualization causes independently of "the realm of sex", and thus especially not those harms of desexualization that asexual/nonsexual people experience.[182] Brute forcing access to a party does not make one part of the in-group, and giving access to "the joys of sex" likewise

[179] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.201.
[180] Ibid., p.216.
[181] Ibid., p.186.
[182] Cf. ibid., p.216.

does not fix the problem of desexualization. This becomes especially apparent when we look at nonsexual people: if their desexualization rested on them not having access to "the joys of sex", then we might run into some issue here: the access to "the joys of sex" is not important to them, it does not change anything of importance in their lives.

To give an example: Garcia states that

> "[s]cripts might also be useful in creating conditions for more people to have sex lives. As it stands, people who are socially awkward or cognitively different from the norm are often unable to experience the joys of sex because they are not perceived as potential partners, because they perceive themselves as unworthy of sex, because they have never been introduced to sexual practices, or because they are uncomfortable pursuing sex. Such people, to the extent that they want sex, could benefit from access to education within a society that provides opportunities for sexual autonomy.“[183]

"Being unable to experience the joys of sex" is not what constitutes the wrong in this situation and therefore helping socially awkward people or those who are "cognitively different from the norm" as Garcia calls it, to experience "the joys of sex" does not combat the wrong. If anything, it would be more a result of having fought the oppression that creates this exclusion than a step in itself. The harm inflicted lies in positioning people as inferior/less valuable and oppressing them not just when it comes to sex. The exclusion from sexual practices is only one particular, albeit quite telling, instantiation of this oppression. It is therefore by no means clear that desexualization can be countered through the inclusion in sexual practices. In fact, fighting desexualization in the "realm of sex" might actually be the most unhelpful place to start at. Quill R. Kukla explicates relevant conditions for consent under non-ideal circumstances, such as: meaningful epistemic agency which includes basic testimonial credibility and a broader social context that does not undermine agency and competent uptake.[184] This would actually help those who want to have sex as much as those who don’t want to: Because it would actually fight the oppression that is inflicted and enhance people’s autonomy. A stark separation of sexual life and non-sexual life also makes our political answers to the harms that get inflicted by desexualization inapt. In focusing on the injustice of "being unable to experience the joys of sex" instead of the oppression that makes this exclusion, Garcia values the inclusion in sexual practices over autonomy that allows for us to not engage in sex.

A sexual project, which is essential to Garcia’s notion of sex as an erotic conversation, is defined by Hirsch and Khan "as the reasons why anyone might seek a particular sexual interaction or experience."[185] While I appreciate the broadness of this category, the framing that the term

[183] Ibid., p.216.
[184] Cf. Kukla, Quill R. “A Nonideal Theory of Sexual Consent.” In: *Ethics* 131.2 (2020), pp. 270–292, p.286.
[185] Hirsch and Khan, *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*, op. cit., p.xiv (p.14 of the Introduction).

"sexual projects" produces slightly misses the mark: understanding a project to be sexual is more than just listing the reasons someone might engage in an activity that is deemed sexual: it is to assume that this act is also sexual for the person. As shown in 3.1 Asexual Erotics: Erotics That Exceed Sex, some asexual people understand their engagement in acts that are deemed sexual by society as nonsexual, which would make it "a nonsexual project", that is achieved through acts that are deemed sexual by others. "Not having sex" is also listed as "a sexual project", which is confusing to me. I fail to see how "not engaging in sex" is one reason one might seek "a particular sexual interaction or experience". This sentence only makes sense if "not having sex" is itself understood as "a particular sexual interaction or experience". This would be an expression of the totality of sex: nothing gets to be outside of sex and sexual projects, not even not engaging in sex, or refusals.

This understanding of sexual projects also entails that BDSM would need to be understood as seeking a particular *sexual* interaction or experience. This means that Garcia's understanding of BDSM ultimately becomes a sexual practice, in the sense that she can't take seriously the ways in which asexual people might relate to practices understood as sex in a nonsexual way.[186] Her understanding of consent being about erotic conversations and sexual projects reduces the focus onto sex again, which is far from achieving Foucault's vision to "counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and know ledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sexdesire, but bodies and pleasures."[187] BDSM understood as sex can't become something that escapes sexuality and gives us access to "the pleasures of the body and not those of sex".[188]

Garcia's primary focus is to enable people to have the sex that they want, which can be a meaningful goal. But she does not consider the struggles of refusing sex for one's whole life asexual/nonsexual people face as relevant to her theory. Refusing sex more often than not means to refuse intimate connection with others: precisely because sex and romance are seen as the pinnacle of intimacy, deep nonsexual/nonromantic intimacy become devalued within society. This is not something that a structural account of (sexual) consent can ignore. As stated earlier: A third of those asexuals that experienced sexual assault did not know they were asexual at the time.[189] How is a model of consent that does not take serious the silences created around nonsexuality/asexuality going to be helpful for them?

Garcia cites Hirsch and Khan, who state that almost none of the college students: "reported an experience in which an adult sat them down and conveyed that **sex would be an important and potentially joyful part of their life**, and so they should think about what they wanted from sex,

[186] Cf. Sloan, "Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice," op. cit.
[187] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, op. cit., p.157.
[188] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.104.
[189] Cf. Wood, *"I don't know if this counts but. . . " Asexual Lived Experiences Survey 2021: Final Report*, op. cit., p.107ff. and p.130ff.

and how to realize those desires with other people in a respectful way."[190] Hirsch and Khan's comments are an exemplary display of the effects of research that is inattentive to asexuality. First, no one needed to tell those students that sex would be deemed important: one can't seem to go through this world without realizing this. Hirsch and Khan's assumption that it would be necessary to tell college students that sex would be an important part of their life assumes that "sex has been the object of continuous oppression, secrecy, and prohibition", which is the exact hypothesis Garcia rejected drawing on Foucault earlier. Second, there is an inevitability of having sex at play here that is very reminiscent of Przybyło's analysis I reconstructed in 3.2.2 Unthinkable: Desexualization And The Asexual Child. *If* one wants sex to engage in sex is not asked here. It is assumed that one wants to. Przybyło writes about the "hidden curriculum, which takes for granted that children will transform into sexual adults."[191] By focusing on the when and how and not on the if, it is taken for granted that everyone will have sex, and even more so, that everyone has sexual desires.

Still, I would argue that Garcia's theory of sex as a conversation has many interesting elements that are helpful for asexuals. She allows a variety of reasons for why someone might engage in sex, which is really helpful. Many asexual people have a variety of reasons to engage in acts commonly understood as sex. I also believe that Kantian consent is a good step in the right direction. A lot of consent that asexual people give would not pass as Kantian consent, but I think this only speaks to the ways in which society does not enable asexual people to consent on their terms, and I would argue that this is an upshot of Garcia's work, as it highlights the already existing coercion of consent to sex that asexuals deal with. Garcia's picture of relational consent which puts the emphasis on sex beyond predefined sets of practices and allows for erotic experimentation is a step in the right direction and this could be tremendously helpful for asexuals. This approach has the potential to allow asexual perspectives to become part of the discussion. If she would develop these parts further, she could do a lot of work that could be helpful for asexuals/nonsexuals and their interpersonal relationships. But her theory, as it is right now, is not able to this work, as she precludes the opportunity for a nonsexual good life. She stays rooted in the language of sex, she stays rooted in allocentric assumptions about the world, and above all, she stays rooted in compulsory sexuality and the promises of sex.

In no other section does this become more apparent than in this one:

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[190] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.214. Emphasis added.
[191] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.93.

> "How can we have good sex if good sex requires an art of erotic conversation that we do not already possess? I believe that this is where consent could be emancipatory. When we practice this erotic conversation, we are not only practicing better sex, we are also learning about our desires and our pleasures and those of our partners, thus creating conditions for better sex in the future. Most importantly, we are progressively inventing a way to talk about these pleasures and desires, and this way of talking can be transmitted to others. My hope is that the more people practice erotic conversation with partners, the more comfortable they will become at talking about sex, during sex and outside of it. When we talk comfortably about sex, we are breathing new language into the world, which others can use to help themselves have better sex, know themselves better, and in turn contribute to a collective capacity to talk about sex. One of the important obstacles to good sex is the discomfort most of us feel when talking about sex and the lack of vocabulary that goes with it: we need language to describe what feels good and what doesn't so that we can achieve knowledge of ourselves and of others as sexual people."[192]

This section contains many of the good and many of the harmful parts of "*The Joy of Consent*". Fostering intimacy, connection, "learning about our desires and our pleasures and those of our partners" are good goals, which are very much in line with asexual perspectives and (asexual) erotics: but not if intimacy is synonymous with sex. Every time she says something one might interpret in a positive way for asexual/nonsexual people, she narrows her claim to sex. Garcia puts up numerous "Do not enter"-Signs for nonsexual people in this section, always circling back to the usefulness her approach has "for sex". The liberation of erotics, of pleasures, of desires, of our bodies and the way we relate to one another are all relevant goals and they could be understood as deeply resonant with asexual erotics. But for Garcia, it is not about asexual erotics, and it is very much "so that we can achieve knowledge of ourselves and of others **as sexual people**". It is liberation *through* sex, and not *from* sex.

Erotics are seen through an (allo)sexual lens: they are tasked with producing better conditions for better sex in the future. Within this section "sex" and sexual acts are still not one way of many to achieve these goals they are **the** way. This section ends with one of those sentences which is at the same time very relevant and deeply oppressive for asexual/nonsexual people: "One of the important obstacles to good sex is the discomfort most of us feel when talking about sex and the lack of vocabulary that goes with it: we need language to describe what feels good and what doesn't so that we can achieve knowledge of ourselves and of others as sexual people."[193]

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[192] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.203f.
[193] Ibid., p.203f.

We desperately need language that describes what feels good and what does not feel good: we need to understand ourselves and others better. But not merely as "sexual people", but as people. Przybyło mentions "a poster, circulated in 1970s feminist communities, a pair of women lie entwined in bedcovers under a poster that reads “LESBIANS UNITE!” The photograph, [...] proudly indicates that “SISTERHOOD FEELS GOOD” [...] While it is difficult not to read the poster from today’s vantage point as a celebration of a sexual lesbianism, or a celebration of lesbian sex, “SISTERHOOD FEELS GOOD” is evocative of a moment in lesbian feminism that was not strictly sexual—that is, a moment resonant with an asexual politics and erotics."[194] That example, "sisterhood feels good", is also a type of knowing what feels good and what does not feel good. This type of knowledge is also liberatory and emancipatory. And it is, sadly, not what Garcia means, because she stays in the framework of "good sex" and "sexual people". Ultimately, Garcia leaves the oppressive system of compulsory sexuality intact. Garcia’s understanding of what should count as an erotic conversation remains exclusionary towards people who are nonsexual/asexual. It defends intimacy as something that is inherently better in sexual relations. As she clings onto the distinction between "sex" and "non-sex", she makes the emancipatory aims that I stated as resonant with asexuality, such as liberating intimacy, erotics etc. from compulsory sexuality, impossible. Garcia’s argument refuses to see erotics as something fluid: neither defined by "the realm of sex" or "our nonsexual lives".

When we look at "the discomfort most of us feel when talking about sex and the lack of vocabulary that goes with it" through the lens compulsory sexuality, it becomes clear that what is also hindering "good sex" is the very notion of "good sex". The promise of a good sexual life breeds the anxieties that create the discomfort to talk about sex Garcia mentions. And those anxieties, which Garcia should have an interest in getting rid of because they hinder good sex, remain intact within her theory.

Sexuality and compulsory sexuality place very specific constraints on fostering intimacy: for example, one becomes vulnerable when talking about sex, because sex has held this "special place" in western societies. Yet, the same system that produces these constrains also privileges sexual relationships, and it is the same system that makes asexual erotics undesirable, unthinkable and invisible: compulsory sexuality. Garcia attaches the hopes of liberation and emancipation onto sex when she states that "consent can [...] serve freedom and autonomy. Within it lies the promise of a sexual revolution that, this time, could be a liberation for all".[195] Garcia reproduces the promises of sex, the "fear of an asexual life" and ultimately, compulsory sexuality.

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[194] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.33.
[195] Garcia, *The Joy of Consent. A Philosophy of Good Sex*, op. cit., p.219.

6 (Sexual) Liberation Should Be For All!

This thesis was motivated by the question: "[I]f the asexual were to speak, what would they say?"[196] So, what did the asexual say about feminist commitments to sex? As I have shown, Garcia's analysis and the aims that she tries to achieve in "The Joy of Consent" are deeply embedded in compulsory sexuality and in harmful narratives of sexual liberation, which strengthen the oppression of asexual/nonsexual people within society. Garcia offers no way out: there is no way to live a nonsexual good life when sex has such a high relevance for being happy, for being liberated, for being emancipated. She does not take seriously the effects that the promises of sex she endorses have for nonsexual ways of relating. Even more so, Garcia doubles down on the value and the promises of sex, which is oppressive to nonsexual/asexual people. Preserving the specialness of sex, conflating intimacy and sex, talking about the good life and sex and sex life as if they mean the same thing and misunderstanding the harms of desexualization show that Garcia creates a theory that is hostile towards asexuality and non-sexual modes of relating.

Yes, sex and sexuality have held a special position for very long. This does not mean that we should endorse this position in projects that rethink what sex and consent *should be*. Sex is not *inherently* special. It is **made** special through the social norms attached to the practices we now call sex.

Starting from a broader conception of relations and relationships, places acts we understand as sexual in this society as one of many possible ways of fostering intimacy. This in turn would leave room for a more dynamic and open understanding of our relationships. This in turn could facilitate new ways of relating that are outside our current compulsory sexual framework, and this could enable asexual erotics that have been made impossible to become possible. Following emancipatory goals and understanding sex as relevant to one's individual good life needs to remain possible within current western societies, as this is the lived reality of many people. But we need to reject the structural reasoning for the heightened relevancy of sex because it opens up the possibility for new modes of relating to exist and become visible, in the present and in the future. Those modes of relating are the ones that have been made undesirable, unthinkable, or impossible: the ones fueled by asexual erotics.

I believe that on a structural level, we need to focus on the liberation from sex, as it has been undertheorized: we need a vision for a world without compulsory sexuality and sex (at least what we currently refer to as sex). We need to properly detach from compulsory sexuality, which means that we should not be reinscribing the value of sex again and again. The actions (and a lot of material things, like specific body parts) that are deemed sexual need to be separated on an analytical level from the social structure that gives them meaning, which is sex, sexuality or the dispositif of sexuality if one wants to be Foucauldian. The abolition of these structures

[196] Cf. Bettcher, "What Is Trans Philosophy?" Op. cit.

and the needed disinvestment from sex as the "default mode of relationality" this would entail is something that is often not taken seriously enough when theorists focus on the liberatory and emancipatory potential of sexual practices. The promises of sex need to be fought in all of their forms: that also means resisting the urge to describe sexual relationships as special for liberation/emancipation. Only focusing on acts deemed sexual or "the realities of sex" within our society misses the important part: That we also need to attend to "our nonsexual life" and the ways in which all of our relations have been shaped by the importance of sex within our society, which constructs "nonsexual" modes of relating as inferior to sexual modes or as modes that are understood as being unable to foster intimacy.

A narrow conceptualization of sexual autonomy as the "freedom to be sexual", without the freedom "to not be sexual", will never be sufficient for sexual liberation/emancipation. There are valuable projects that are often negotiated in theories that attempt to bring about the sexual revolution: liberating our bodies, our pleasures, our relationships, our erotics, our intimacy. But none of these can be achieved when our theories (including those of consent) reproduce compulsory sexuality. None of these aims needs to be achieved through sex and some of them only become achievable when we do not focus on sex.

I hope that this work has fulfilled its promise of illuminating the WTF Questions asexuals might ask, such as: "Why is society so weird about sex?" "What even is an intimate relationship?" "Why are sex and romance so important for it?" "WTF does sex even mean, what defines sex?". I hope that this thesis has made clear, why "we need to release our hold on the sexual as the default mode of relationality"[197] The question that I could not answer here but that desperately needs to be theorized is the following: "[w]hat if sex and romance weren't that important in society?" I hope that it is clear that attending to asexual erotics and asexual forms of relating will be beneficial for many of us. Within it could lie the potential of a (sexual) liberation for all.

[197] Przybyło, *Asexual Erotics. Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, op. cit., p.77.

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