

Asexuality in Young Adult Fiction



Noah O'Connor



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ABSTRACT: The Asexual Exile trope positions asexual characters outside of society by portraying them as loners, inhuman, or adjacent to death.

This research identifies trends in these portrayals by considering a corpus of forty-two traditionally published novels of Young Adult fiction featuring asexual protagonists. A distant reading of this corpus finds that the Asexual Exile trope is employed in approximately two-thirds of cases. The author analyses how this trope permutes across genres, and the frequency of its endorsement and subversion by these narratives. Presenting the first extensive investigation into the Asexual Exile trope in YA fiction, this research investigates how asexual characters are Othered as not truly alive, and how these messages then rebound into necropolitical cultural understandings of asexual people as expendable. The results prompt the questions: How does the Asexual Exile trope influence Young Adult readers in the formation of their ideologies? How can publishers do better?

KEYWORDS: asexual, young adult, literature, sexuality, representation

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Foreword

I remember exactly how I first began this research. I was moving through a list of book recommendations with asexual characters, screening each one in preliminary research to ensure the asexual character in question was a main character in the narrative. It was this pursuit which led me to a blog post by Karen Healey, author of *Guardian of the Dead* (Healey 2009). In this post, Healey argues for her minor asexual character, Kevin, to be removed from online user-made recommendation lists of asexual characters in literature for young adults (2017). She reasons that Kevin is not the focus of the story, and that the representation his character provides has more or less been a stepping stone toward the more intricate, community-driven representations seen in the Young Adult (YA) fiction published since, largely by authors who self-identify as asexual themselves:

Kevin's coming out is too much like a confession, my terminology inaccurate and out of date, my explication of his sexuality too glib and misleading. He disappears from the narrative at the halfway point, which works fine for the plot, but is terrible for representation purposes . . . Kevin's writer isn't ace. (Healey 2017:para.9–10)

Healey's reasoning is sound. She is aware of Kevin's shortfalls while simultaneously aware of how important her character was, regardless of them, to a representation-starved asexual audience. She goes on to recommend *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016) by Seanan McGuire, a Hugo Award-winning YA fantasy novella starring an asexual main character. I saw no fault in this mature self-reflection, until I reached the comment section:

Reccing Every Heart a Doorway is EXACTLY why [non-asexuals] shouldn't rec asexual content. Members of the asexual and aromantic communities have been hurt by that book's representation with matters like linking asexuality with death yet again. (Oliver 2017:para.1)

This, to put it lightly, surprised me. The comment makes no mention of the levelheadedness and support I felt Healey had displayed by asking to retract Kevin. All goodwill seemed to have evaporated when she mentioned *Every Heart a Doorway*, a book which I had personally read and been delighted by. I struggled to see the offense. Like a lot of people, *Every Heart a Doorway* was the first book I had ever read with an asexual main character. To see my identity spelled out for the first time in fiction was revelatory.

Every Heart a Doorway is a post-portal fantasy starring Nancy, a girl who has returned from her own personal wonderland, a place she refers to as the Halls of the Dead (McGuire 2016). Nancy's struggles to readjust to life in the mortal world act as a metaphor for the asexual struggle to find personal peace in a compulsorily sexual society. For example, Nancy's narration describing what it is like to be an asexual person on the romantic spectrum, alienated from sexual traditions and rituals, rings true for many real-life asexuals in the same state: 'She *liked* holding hands and trading kisses . . . It wasn't until puberty had come along and changed the rules that she'd started pulling away in confusion and disinterest' (2016:121; emphasis in original). And notably, at the end of the novella, in a moment of empowerment, Nancy gets her happy ending. She returns to the Halls of the Dead, the one place where she has ever felt truly accepted: 'Like a key that finds its keyhole, Nancy was finally home' (2016:168–169). This is perhaps the most noteworthy moment in the book, because Nancy has complete control over her future. She has the agency to make her own choice, and she chooses the Halls of the Dead. Suggesting that McGuire somehow equated asexuality and death seemed ridiculous to me, especially since *Every Heart a Doorway* reframes death as a positive force to the protagonist. Additionally, death more generally is a staple of YA. Roberta Seelinger Trites, a pioneer of this theory, links the commonality of death as a theme in YA to how adolescent readers in the intended age bracket are beginning to understand for the first time the inevitability of death as 'another biological imperative' (2000:117). In this line of thought, death acts as a rite of passage, typically marking a step toward adulthood. So how could there be something wrong with Nancy's storyline? What could be upsetting about Nancy's happy ending – in a novel targeted toward young adults, primed

to accept role models through their fiction – where she abandons the world of the living, the world of her family and friends, to become the still, breathless, thanatoid girl she has always longed to be? What was so wrong about an asexual calling a death world ‘home’?

And then I started to understand.

1 Introduction

Asexuality encompasses a range of identities describing people who do not experience sexual attraction, or who do experience this attraction but at low or negligible levels. Like many sexualities, asexuality is a spectrum. While asexual people experience sexual attraction to no one, they may still experience romantic attraction, often desiring romantic relationships which de-emphasise sexual intercourse. Aromantic people, by contrast, are the other way around, experiencing romantic attraction to no one. Likewise, aromantic people may experience sexual attraction in its stead, often desiring sexual relationships along these lines.

This research investigates the overwhelmingly negative trend in asexual character representations, presenting the first academic investigation into depictions of asexual characters as Other in YA fiction. As a concept, the Other dates back to Lacanian discourse of the unconscious Other (1977) and Foucauldian condemnation of the othering perpetuated by mental institutions and early psychiatry (1975), with these efforts solely devoted to the making of “‘abnormal’ people normal’ (Nodelman 1992:35). Put more plainly, the Other is ‘that which is opposite to the person doing the talking or thinking or studying’ (Nodelman 1992:29): ‘The people more written about than writing, more spoken about than speaking . . . the culturally invisible or diminished . . . powerless to take part in the conversations of cultural and other forms of political activity’ (McGillis 1999:xxi). The Other, then, is the voiceless: the invisible. A rich body of scholarship has turned this concept toward reading women as Other, particularly women of colour (Varga-Dobai 2013); reading the migrant as Other; and even reading the child as Other. Perry Nodelman writes on both of these latter examples at once in ‘The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature’ (1992), ruminating on how diminutive language around children follows the same imperialist Othering standards as language on people of Asian ancestry (1992).

As one means of directing attention toward a theoretical asexual Other in turn, asexual researchers such as Claudie Arseneault (2017) and Lynn O’Connacht (2018, 2019) have given portrayals of asexuality-as-lifelessness a formal name: the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. It is this same lifelessness that

Kennon alludes to in 'Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity' (2021), noting the trope of asexuals 'estranged from society and ... somehow bound to/with death and being dead' (2021:16), though not properly attributing the originators of this critique. Here, I interrogate the frequency, sources, consequences, and potential future of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, expanding O'Connacht's existing theory that this is but one branch of a broader representational tree: that of Asexual Exile (2018). In Asexual Exile tropes, asexual characters are separated out of 'normal' society. This is achieved not only through depictions of lifelessness but through equivalent depictions of ostracisation, which typically take distinctive forms depending on the genre in which they are located. In the contemporary genre, for example, an asexual character may appear as a friendless social pariah, constituting the Loner Ace trope. In science fiction, the same trend takes the form of the robot or alien asexual character; this exile from personhood is the key feature of the Inhuman Ace trope. My research provides the first ever academic review of Asexual Exile tropes in YA, particularly as they manifest in the fantasy genre in the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. I argue that this is the most severe Asexual Exile trope, demonstrating an exile from life itself.

Through a literary survey of forty-two novels featuring asexual protagonists, I analyse the presence of Asexual Exile tropes across a broad corpus, particularly analysing the negative trends and positive potentialities of these representations. Ultimately, I distinguish the difference between instances of exile that are endorsed by the text compared to those that are subverted, making this assessment through a key query of each case: Does the asexual character enter *into* an exile, or do they instead exit *out of* that exile? And as I discuss at length in [Chapter 2](#), are there characters for whom there was never an exile at all? By paying careful attention to each character's narrative and which side of these questions they fall under, I was able to determine the rates of these trends, appraising the ratio of Asexual Exile subversion narratives compared to endorsement narratives. I have found that overall, 38 per cent of this corpus contain Asexual Exile tropes which are subverted; meanwhile, 29 per cent are left unquestioned, going on to perpetuate Asexual Exile tropes without attempting to reclaim them. On the heels of a deeper examination of these figures, I then provide a reading of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope through the political theory of

necropolitics, analysing the dark and unconscious implications of Asexual Exile tropes through their most severe form.

Ultimately, my work here investigates how Asexual Exile tropes operate and what they suggest asexual people are believed to be deserving of under a regime of compulsory sexuality. I argue that these tropes act as a canary in the coal mine: an early portent of an insidious acephobia eager to witness our erasure not only from cultural representations but from society altogether. I go on to explore the ways Asexual Exile can be interrupted, contending that these tropes are fundamentally defeatist. By justifying my interpretation of the potential necropolitical motives behind the popularity of Asexual Exile, interrogating the commonalities of these tropes and theorising potential reclamations of them, it is my hope that this work may provide the beginnings of a path away from the toxic standard of our representation.

1.1 *The Community on the Page*

There has not been a lot of attention paid to asexuality in seminal works of critique and theorisation about Young Adult literature and its queer inferences. This is largely because these seminal works significantly predate awareness of asexuality entering the mainstream. Patricia Kennon writes on this phenomenon as it pertains to landmark publications by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins, particularly *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006) and its revisions:

The existence or terms of asexual or asexuality are not recognised or included in that influential publication. The same authors' updated and expanded 2018 version, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, does contain a reference to Julie Sondra Decker's 2014 non-fiction text, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction To Asexuality*. However, there is no mention of asexuality in fiction in *Representing the Rainbow*. (2021:5)

Several years on, we remain in a position where despite Cart and Jenkins using "GLBTQ" as an inclusive short-hand term' (2006:xv), asexuality has

not made the cut. The same is the case in Robert Bittner's 'Queering Sex Education: Young Adult Literature with LGBT Content as Complementary Sources of Sex and Sexuality Education', which overviews the presence of 'a spectrum of sexualities' in YA literature, 'including gay, lesbian, and trans sexual experiences' (2012:362). Another example is Logan et al.'s 'Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature' (2014). Here, the authors' representation categories extend to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, once again omitting asexuality from the conversation. Published in 2014, the excuse no longer exists that asexuality had not yet entered the nomenclature. At the very least, we might say it had not yet become common knowledge and verbiage. The privileging of sexual relationships under the banner of 'sexual expressiveness' (2014:34) here remains alienating to asexual people regardless:

Adolescent literature that focuses on sexual expressiveness is viewed as relevant, current, and authentic. Sexuality and gender expression is a de facto part of the human explicitness and expressive of those of typical adolescent literature. (Logan et al. 2014:34)

It is a difficult space to occupy. While queer critique of YA investigates how young people questioning their identity 'turn to the "community on the page" that is found in books' (Cart and Jenkins 2006:xvii), the asexual community is nowhere to be found in these conversations. Instead, these conversations highlight again and again the importance of sexual exploration: 'It is crucial that young people see evidence that a positive future, complete with sexual fulfillment, is possible' (Bittner 2012:371).

I am often asked, 'Why Young Adult?' – a question to which my answer is twofold. For one, YA is a category of literature where asexual characters disproportionately appear – and for another, it is a category of literature where critique has historically left us by the wayside, even though that critique is somewhere we urgently belong. Asexuality may not be mentioned by name, but it feels present thematically. 'Educators should choose literature', advise Logan et al., 'that discourages false images of queer persons and influences healthy perceptions about sexual orientations and

gender expression . . . books that offset stereotyping’ (2014:33). This heralds an earlier call made by Cart and Jenkins: ‘we believe that what is stereotypic, wrongheaded, and outdated must be noted and what is accurate, thoughtful, and artful must be applauded’ (2006:xvii). As I will go on to expose, the oversaturation of harmful stereotype in asexual-spectrum YA is critically overdue for this kind of intervention, especially when delaying any longer in bringing these issues to the fore can have fatal consequences. Cart and Jenkins may not name asexuality in their work, but they do name ‘the power of books to help teen readers understand themselves and others, to contribute to the mental health and well-being of GLBTQ youth, and to save lives – and perhaps even to change the world – by informing minds and nourishing spirits’ (2006:xvii). In other words, visibility can have a life-changing impact to isolated youth desperate for an escape. There is power in a name, as Gabrielle Owen advises: ‘The more we feel we can choose our meanings and name ourselves, the more authentic we feel’ (2023:14). However, it is not hyperbole to say that this power can work just as effectively in reverse, condemning readers in the formative years of their identity development to envision themselves through distorted lenses, slowly corroding their self-esteem and will to live. To intervene, we need to say the name. We need to bring asexuality into the conversations which have heretofore omitted us.

1.2 Positionality Statement

There is a lot of ground that this research does not, and cannot, cover. This pertains most significantly to the pervasion of whiteness in asexual literature, both fictional and non-fictional alike (Kennon 2021; Guz et al. 2022). This whitewashing is regrettably in line with trends across children’s literature: ‘In 2015, an alarming 73.3 percent of books for young people centered White characters; the nonprofit and grassroots organization *We Need Diverse Books* was launched in 2014 in an attempt to address this longstanding deficiency’ (Mason 2021:21). In the asexual sphere specifically, the ‘privileging of White asexual people’ (Kennon 2021:17) is best interrogated by Guz et al.’s ‘A Scoping Review of Empirical Asexuality Research in Social Science’, an article which provides an ‘inventory of the current empirical literature’ (2022:2135).

The authors provide damning findings regarding the sampling of participants in asexual-centric studies:

Descriptive information about the participants included in the literature demonstrates a trend that is presumably cis, overwhelmingly White, and more highly educated . . . intersectional approach was not commonplace in the included empirical literature. (Guz et al. 2022:2139)

This is a troubling indicator for asexuality studies which, as a result of this saturation, ‘neglects to interrogate White as a privileged racial category that likely impacts one’s experience identifying as asexual and participating in online asexual communities’ (Guz et al. 2022:2142). With this in mind, there is something discomfoting about the heavily Westernised list of explicitly asexual protagonists in YA literature, despite the racial and cultural diversity of the characters contained therein. The distant reading this work relies upon is printed almost exclusively between the United States and the United Kingdom, save for one Swedish outlier (Kirchner 2020). This being the case, I would not be comfortable attempting to apply to this corpus the ‘theoretical and methodological attunement to the ways race structurally interlocks with sex, gender, disability and other visible or invisible identities’ (2022:2141–2142) called for by Guz et al. It is my personal belief that I occupy too privileged a position to properly interrogate ‘allonormativity’s complicity in racist regimes’ (Kennon 2021:18) with any kind of authority.

Though there is a level of intersectionality I cannot claim, I maintain that this work is fundamentally #OwnVoices research. #OwnVoices, a term originally coined by Corinne Duyvis (2015), describes works where the under-represented or marginalised characters are written by authors who share in those specific identity categories – as Gabrielle Owen summarises, ‘a call for more diverse characters and diverse authorship in publishing’ (2023:5). In the context of this research, #OwnVoices refers to authors and scholars of asexual characters who self-identify as asexual-spectrum themselves. As is the case in many communities, there has been a push in the asexual community for increased recognition of

#OwnVoices works – that is, for works by authors who understand how best to represent asexuality, often incorporating their own lived experience.

Despite these good intentions, #OwnVoices has been a troubled concept since its inception. The condemnation of non-#OwnVoices authors has repeatedly led to ostracisation, gatekeeping, and – at its most serious – the forced disclosure of identity status (Albertalli 2020; Pulido 2021). ‘The difficulty with the concept of #OwnVoices’, Owen muses, ‘is that it invites questions about who is authorized to write about certain kinds of experiences rather than focusing on the stakes and consequences of the representations themselves’ (2023:7). Treating #OwnVoices authors as immune to fault, able to write representations as they please, compounds these complexities further. I make no secret of my own asexual identity; more specifically, I identify as a homoromantic asexual person on the non-binary gender spectrum. This renders my research project an inherently #OwnVoices endeavour, with my analysis and evaluation being open to the same pitfalls and concerns as any of the novels I critique. That being the case, my research is fundamentally underpinned by the existent field of academic literature into asexuality, particularly sociological research into lived asexual experiences such as accounts of acephobic discrimination and emerging resistance against it. Wherever possible, this research is not a personal outcry tethered to my own instincts and impressions as an #OwnVoices scholar. Rather, it is a project born of what academic literature suggests, and what it would suggest to anyone, regardless of sexuality, should they only care to look. This is not to say that I will erase my asexuality from this discussion by attempting to write clinically about phenomena which fundamentally impact me as part of an asexual collective. Throughout this writing, I use inclusive language to reiterate the innate subjectivity of this research: this is our representation, impacting us. I have not done this to denigrate non-asexual people from this conversation, but rather to remind at all times that this is an asexual conversation, for asexual people, written by an asexual person.

On this note, it is worth dwelling on the fact that *Every Heart a Doorway* is an #OwnVoices novella itself (McGuire 2017). Nancy is not so easily explained away as an unintentionally problematic attempt at representation by a well-meaning allied author. Instead, that character was written by

a biromantic demisexual woman who has presumably experienced firsthand many of the issues facing our community (McGuire 2017). It is not unusual to locate asexual stereotypes in #OwnVoices work in this way, much in the same way that women can write misogynist stereotypes or queer authors can perpetuate homophobia. Again, to reiterate, #OwnVoices authors are by no means somehow rendered immune to representational critique, nor to perpetuating the stereotype so many asexual-spectrum works go on to rally against. Perhaps Owen puts it best: ‘an ethical politics of representation does not rely on #OwnVoices authors’ (2023:1).

This leaves us in an uncomfortable position regarding the impact of *Every Heart a Doorway* and its representation. Asexual authors and creators sometimes write or favour exiled representations of asexual characters like robots and aliens precisely because they are able to see aspects of themselves in those characters, ‘[looking] toward actual robots in solidarity’ (Brandley and Dehnert 2024:1572). After all, it is these desexualised aspects society has labelled us with from the beginning (Sinwell 2014). Perhaps these #OwnVoices exiled representations are a clear response to a ‘boxing-in’ by asexual stereotype categories. In other words, these characters could be an attempt at reclamation by the home team. Nancy might exist in a similar sphere: a girl who removes herself from compulsorily sexual society in order to take back her agency. Whether this self-removal should be taken as a reclamation of agency by an #OwnVoices author, or a surrender toward the negative stereotypes facing our community, is among the thornier questions Asexual Exile tropes ask of us. To address this quandary, I have made a key assessment of whether each instance of Asexual Exile in this corpus goes either endorsed or subverted by the narrative’s end, arguing that these results imply a societal belief that asexuality threatens human futurity and must, therefore, be displaced.

1.3 Acephobia and Death-Adjacent Ace

The Asexual Exile trope I am most interested in is the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, given it is Asexual Exile’s most severe form. To contextualise these death-centric asexuality representations, not to mention the ways in which they have seeded their way into asexuality’s public perception, it is

important to first comprehend the conflation of asexuality with lifelessness in a broader cultural understanding.

The Death-Adjacent Ace trope is specific to the asexual community, and is fundamentally distinct from other death-related queer media tropes such as the Bury Your Gays trope (Hulan 2017), wherein queer characters are treated as disposable to a plot. Often perpetuated by straight authors, Bury Your Gays features the killing of queer characters as an implicit punishment for queerness and a bid for ‘shock value’ (2017:20). Cart and Jenkins describe this same phenomenon when they write of homosexual characters ‘pictures as unfortunates doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest margins of society. Others are portrayed as sinister predators lurking in the shadows of sinister settings’ (2006:xvi). Bury Your Gays and the Death-Adjacent Ace trope may seem similar because they relate to the discrimination of queer people more broadly. But by comparison, the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, as a form of Asexual Exile, sees asexual characters not necessarily killed off but separated from society altogether. We are reconstituted as lifeless husks who do not belong in ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ society. As far as this trope is concerned, asexuals, much like corpses, have never belonged with the living at all.

The Death-Adjacent Ace trope is born from the asexual death association skewing public perception. As previously explored, the asexual community grapples with associations of inhumanity, coldness, and immaturity, with these perceptions pervading right through to fantasy fiction in the form of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. This leads me to my main research questions underpinning the present exploration: What does the Death-Adjacent Ace trope signify regarding the state of asexual representation in YA? How do Asexual Exile tropes work to Other asexual characters? What might reclaiming these tropes look like?

Cara MacInnis and Gordon Hodson’s ground-breaking study, ‘Intergroup Bias toward “Group X”’ (2012), suggests that asexuals are viewed negatively by heterosexual respondents. Their findings indicate that asexuals are also viewed as less capable of experiencing emotion – even, at the most extreme form of this prejudice, perceived as the least ‘human’ of other sexual minority groups (2012:731). The authors point toward a social obsession with sexual attraction as the key rationale behind this prejudice: ‘Asexuality is

operationalized as the *absence* of sexual attraction, and rationally speaking, should not be linked to strong bias . . . it is not overly surprising that asexuals are regarded as more mechanistic and lacking some key qualities of human nature' (2012:739; emphasis in original). This perception of asexuality as an 'absence' or a 'lack' of some important, universal feeling is precisely what enables real-world discrimination against asexuals, more commonly referred to as acephobia. With sexuality and desire seen as innately human characteristics in the modern world, asexuals are viewed as defective, broken, and in need of correcting.

Asexual activist Julie Sondra Decker has spoken out on the sexual harassment she has experienced online, where strangers have told her she 'just [needs] a good raping' (Mosbergen 2013:para.6). She speaks further on surviving an attempted sexual assault by a male friend, who claimed to be able to 'fix' her (2013:para.1), telling her 'I just want to help you' (2013: para.5). This kind of sexual violence against asexuals is enabled by a media and cultural obsession with sex, one which frames intercourse as an essential human need in a cultural staple known more commonly by the name 'compulsory sexuality'. This term describes an automatic assumption that all healthy human beings experience sexual attraction as a fact of life. I expand on this theory at length in my first chapter, properly establishing the theoretical context underpinning my work, before turning my attention toward the current research interrogating compulsory sexuality: in particular, how its magnitudinal impact on asexual lives has led to a trickle-down effect on asexual character representations. We can see the product of this trickle-down most clearly in Asexual Exile tropes, which take these cultural perceptions of asexual people as emotionless, inhuman, and cold, and ingrain them into asexual-spectrum YA. The Death-Adjacent Ace trope is the most severe version of this, and though it does not exist in isolation, its instances are rife. To supplement *Every Heart a Doorway*, another example of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope in action is *Clariel* by Garth Nix (2014). Here, the aromantic asexual eponymous protagonist loses everyone she loves before losing herself to villainy and undeath. Similarly, in *What We Devour* by Linsey Miller (2021), the Gods of the world setting force main character Lorena to continue living in order to punish her, denying her the escape into undeath she so craves.

When viewed through the lens of compulsory sexuality, the insidious problem at the core of these novels begins to emerge. At every turn, difference is seen as something in need of repair. Asexual people are Othered in society, as are the characters created to represent us; emerging awareness of this phenomenon served as the catalyst for initial identification of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope to begin with. While Kennon claims ‘the aphobic association of asexual and acespec characters with death’ as ‘particularly deep-rooted’ (2021:16), she was by no means the first researcher to identify this stereotype. Claudie Arseneault was the first researcher to take the momentum behind compulsory sexuality and use it to interrogate the high rate of asexual characters who ‘belong with the dead’ (2017:para.31). She identifies how a pervasive trend in literature associates asexuality with inhumanity, thereby cementing the perception that asexuals are unfeeling and not truly alive, a perception which becomes all the more rampant given compulsory sexuality primes society to view sex as non-negotiable. Lynn O’Connacht expands this theory, interrogating Arseneault’s ideas, even giving the trope its formal name (2018). She proceeds to identify how death and belonging with the dead act in literature as an Asexual Exile trope, ultimately separating the aberrant, Othered asexual character away from ‘normal’ compulsorily sexual society: ‘at their heart, these stories put forth the idea that the aromantic and/or asexual protagonist is something that is not alive’ (2018:para.26).

1.4 The Multiple Genres of Asexual Exile

Exile representations affirm that if we cannot be cured, then we must be contained. The Death-Adjacent Ace trope is just one method through which this occurs and it is paralleled by a cast of asexual characters either written to be alone, or written to be non-human. O’Connacht suggests that, like a chameleon, Asexual Exile mutates in literature to match genre conventions (see Figure 1). In the fantasy genre, this takes the form of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope; in science fiction, asexuals might instead be Othered as a robot, alien, or some other type of the Inhuman Ace trope (2018). In contemporary writing, exile often manifests in the Loner Ace trope, wherein a socially isolated asexual character struggles to connect with their peers: ‘The trope

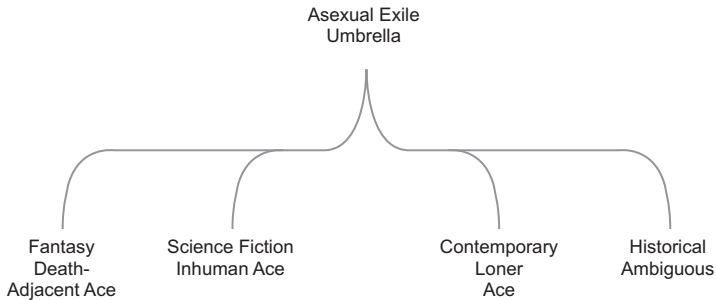


Figure 1 The Asexual Exile trope umbrella

draws these stereotypes to their extremes to explore the ways in which asexuals are not an active part of our societies’ (2018:para.19).

These other forms of Asexual Exile are important when dissecting the overall effect of how these tropes operate. What constitutes all of these variants is a marked separation of the asexual character from a society which refuses to accommodate their difference. This is presented as an ideal solution to asexual difference, usually by asexual characters who, like Nancy, welcome their exile as a happy ending.

I want to be clear: Asexual Exile is not an exile in the usual sense. Rather than being an expulsion or expatriation from a home country, it is instead an intense social alienation serving to sever all community ties between the asexual character and the world around them – as O’Connacht words it, a ‘social exile as the character removes themselves, voluntarily or not, from . . . society’ (2018:para.14). The overall impact of Asexual Exile tropes is that they cement and perpetuate a social understanding that asexuals do not belong. The most severe and violent Asexual Exile trope is the Death-Adjacent Ace trope (see Figure 2), which ‘[allows] writers to make this separation from society literal . . . after all, what is more removed from life than death?’ (O’Connacht 2018:para.13). For this reason, my research is most dedicated to understanding, investigating, and reclaiming this Asexual Exile trope in particular. By taking existing research into asexual representations and applying it to the under-critiqued reading category of asexual-spectrum

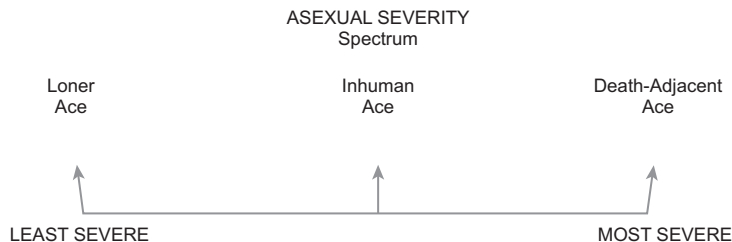


Figure 2 The Asexual Exile severity spectrum

YA, I argue that asexual death-adjacency in this body of literature reaches far beyond the page.

1.5 Chapter Overview: Mapping the Asexual Exile Trope

Through the explorations of my research, I make the argument that Asexual Exile tropes are a portent of an asexual slow death (Berlant 2007), in which an establishmentarian disregard for asexual life and a rank contempt for our frequent childlessness manifests in the persistent messaging that we do not belong, and that our lives do not matter. In Chapter 2, I conduct a literature review to contextualise my research, expanding and deepening the initial points made in this introduction. I define the key term of compulsory sexuality, and establish how it dominates media, culture, and literature as a social framework. From this discussion, I narrow in to summarise the current scholarship into asexual literary representation, particularly critiquing Elizabeth Hanna Hanson's literary theory of asexual narrative (2014).

Chapter 3 focuses on a literary survey of asexual representation in YA, closely inspired by the distant reading methodology pioneered by Franco Moretti (2000, 2005). Distant reading aspires to examine trends across a comprehensive corpus of work broadly, rather than by close analysis: 'fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection' (Moretti 2005:1). My investigation delves into how Asexual Exile tropes have impacted asexual representation across YA and what these representations convey to intended young readers. This undertaking necessitates a methodological strategy able to broadly review the field of YA asexual

representation as a complete picture, rather than by a close reading of two or three novels in an isolated case study. My literary survey inspects forty-two YA novels with asexual protagonists represented explicitly. I analyse how they engage with Asexual Exile, utilising a selection of key texts to achieve a deeper analysis. To this end, I especially scrutinise the messages communicated to the audience about the place of asexuals in society, determining whether each instance of these Asexual Exile tropes is either subverted or left unquestioned.

With the Death-Adjacent Ace trope being the most severe Asexual Exile trope – not to mention the form with the clearest interplay with existing social conceptions of asexuals as less alive (MacInnis and Hodson 2012) – I examine this specific sub-trope in my third chapter, analysing its critical complexities through the lens of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics (2003) and Lee Edelman's death drive (2004). Necropolitics is a political theory identifying how people who hold social and political power are able to dictate which groups are worthy of living and which groups must die (Mbembe 2003). As depictions of asexual characters as lifeless outliers now saturate literary representations aimed at adolescent readers, it is more crucial than ever to interrogate these stereotypes condemning asexuals to a mass grave. I interrogate the excuses used to justify widespread discrimination against asexuals – for example, a biopolitical connection equating sex-aversion with voluntary childlessness. I argue that asexual sex-aversion is seen primarily as a rejection of human reproductive function and that alienation from this 'compulsory reproduction' (Franke 2001) thus encompasses asexuals firmly within Edelman's understanding of future-negating queers (2004:75). I examine whether this constitutes part of why asexual representations are so often connoted with death – because we *are* connoted with death – because the fundamentally queer choice many of us make not to procreate is viewed as a gun to the head of human longevity.

Asexuals deserve better than a legacy of discrimination and disrespect. We deserve more than to have drummed into us and our non-asexual peers at every turn that we do not belong – can never belong – and, therefore, should consign ourselves to the very margins of society in the form of isolation, non-humanity, and undeath. We deserve stories and representation custom-made to intervene into our ongoing social exile, one happening not just in our fiction but, as I go on to demonstrate, in our lived realities, too.

2 Compulsory Sexuality and the Tensions We Inherit

Before we can understand exile, we must understand the aspects of society asexuals are being exiled *from*. In the introduction, I gestured toward the biases against asexuals, the violence of acephobia, and how these attitudes are enabled by the primacy of sexual attraction in everyday life. This primacy has gone by different terms, such as ‘a society of sex’ (Foucault 1976), ‘sexusociety’ (Przybylo 2011), and ‘the sexual assumption’ (Carrigan 2011). However, it is most commonly termed ‘compulsory sexuality’ (Emens 2014; Gupta 2015, 2017; Vance 2018). It is this term that I will go on to use throughout my research.

Compulsory sexuality theory fundamentally informs asexual media critique. This is because compulsory sexuality wields a constant oppressive influence over asexual lives, and thus, over the asexual lives represented in stories about us. Whether an asexual storyline features a surrender to the negative impacts of sex-obsessed culture or a fierce upheaval of these impacts by asexual characters who refuse to conform, these asexual storylines are all foregrounded by the compulsory sexuality asexuals have no choice but to navigate in the real world. This chapter reviews the existent literature into compulsory sexuality, narrowing in on asexual representation in fiction and the commonality of stillness among these representations. Finally, I dispute Hanson’s reading of stillness in emergent asexual literary theory (2014), condemning its harmful impact and latent acephobic connotations.

2.1 *A Brief History of Compulsory Sexuality*

Compulsory sexuality, a relatively emergent way of understanding societal preoccupation with sexual intercourse, draws from the pre-existing theory of compulsory heterosexuality first identified and examined by Adrienne Rich. Rich (1980) argues that the default assumption of women as heterosexual beings, and the simultaneous assumption that women who are not heterosexual are abnormal, operates as a form of social control: ‘compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible’ (1980:632). Similarly, compulsory sexuality assumes that the default human being is a sexual being, an underpinning which not only disadvantages asexual

people but disadvantages everyone. Take, for example, a young person not comfortable experimenting sexually but forcing themselves to do so because that is what all their friends are doing. Similarly, we might imagine someone hesitant to leave an abusive relationship because they have been conditioned to believe that any love, no matter how cruel, is better than no love at all.

Compulsory sexuality prioritises sex, thereby creating expectations around sex as an essential aspect of a romantic relationship and pathologising any absence thereof. This falsely renders sex as an essential part of individual life, a foundational building block of human experience, and people who do not partake of it are thereby seen as wrong, deficient, or even pitiful. This is objectionable for a myriad of reasons, not least because it places sexual attraction on a pedestal, gearing young people toward unhealthy expectations around romantic relationships. This societal refusal to acknowledge or respect romantic relationships not predicated upon sex gestures damningly toward the collapse of sex and love into the same ‘inextricable’ force (McAlister 2020:12). If no-strings-attached sex can be commonplace, then why not no-strings-attached romance?

Studies into compulsory sexuality have been adapted in interesting sociological ways. For example, Elizabeth Emens (2014) tracks the ways through which compulsory sexuality pervades the American legal system, privileging sex and disadvantaging asexuals. Ela Przybylo (2011), by contrast, considers compulsory sexuality from a radical perspective, viewing asexuality largely in terms of its disruptive potential. She argues that discourse surrounding asexuality represents a fundamental attack on dominant social understandings of sexual control, likening the asexual struggle against compulsory sexuality to the struggles of feminists against patriarchy (2011:446). Przybylo goes on to dissect the repeating patterns of a society where sexuality is omnipresent and used to subjugate: ‘The impetus to pathologize those who are not sexual enough, or who do not repeat sexuality faithfully to ‘the norm’, is indicative of which repetitions are favoured by sexusociety . . . [this] embodies sexusociety’s interest in maintaining a society that repeats along sexual lines’ (2011:449). These assertions, while political and labelled ‘unempirical’ elsewhere (Dawson et al. 2018), have been validated by subsequent research. For instance, Kristina Gupta (2017) corroborates Przybylo in her landmark interrogation of

compulsory sexuality's impact on asexual people. She identifies and dissects the four main ways through which asexual-identified individuals from her study saw themselves as disadvantaged by compulsory sexuality: (1) pathologisation by medical professionals, usually by falsely identifying asexuality as a symptom of a health disorder, (2) isolation and invisibility due to a lack of representation in the media, contributing to public ignorance about asexuality as a valid sexual orientation, (3) unwanted sex and relationship conflict stemming from misunderstandings around attraction, particularly the false belief that sex is an essential component of a romantic partnership, and (4) a denial of epistemic authority – the removal of asexual agency by non-asexuals who cast doubt on individual asexual knowledge and self-understanding. This final means of disadvantage is particularly insidious. The asexuals interviewed in Gupta's study reported that they were told 'that they could not know that they were asexual – they were told that they could be late bloomers, they had not met the right person yet, or they were repressing their sexual desires' (2017:1000). This mirrors Gupta's first point of disadvantage, medical pathologisation, albeit with one key difference. Here, we can infer a handing down of this asexual minimisation from medical professionals to everyday peers, whose scepticism in the fact of asexual self-actualisation is given with as much well-meaning cruelty as that by any doctor; the misconceptions of the health system are now reaching into community-level stereotypes. Taken together, we can see that compulsory sexuality ingrains a truth into us, until we know it like we know breathing. If you are not having sex, then you are not truly alive.

Gupta's study also uncovers ample evidence of violent discrimination such as sexual assault (2017:1010), with several more respondents describing engaging in 'consensual but unwanted sex' due to expectations by society or by a partner (2017:998). These represent some of the more traumatic manifestations of acephobia in modern life, the impacts of compulsory sexuality having rendered asexuality so alien and unnatural that sexual assault, unthinkable at any other time, is understood by some to be justified (Decker 2014; Gupta 2015). If asexuality is a defect, then sexual intercourse, whether you desire it or not, must be the correction. Consensual unwanted sex is a world away from the more serious response of corrective rape. However, it remains violent in a quieter way. Both can only occur when

asexual voices are ignored – more specifically, when non-asexuals believe that asexuality is something which can be ‘fixed’. Responses of doubt to asexual self-identifications are made with the same justification. Tiina Vares documents accounts of social isolation as a result of asexual media invisibility, particularly the myriad reactions to asexual self-identification they result in: ‘it doesn’t exist; it’s just a phase; you’ll grow out of it; and you just haven’t found the right person yet’ (2018:526).¹ Here, we can see some of the ways asexual voices are silenced and spoken over, with the right to self-identify and diagnose one’s attractions or absence thereof fundamentally undermined. Like branches of the same tree, these discriminations lead back to the same violence, one which is always rooted in taking away asexual agency. Overall, from the discrimination and biases against asexuals on a cultural stance to the attitudes evidenced from both inside and outside of the LGBT community (Gupta 2017:1000), recent research has taken the implications of ‘Intergroup bias toward “Group X”’ (2012) and further verified them. This justifies these implications as an area deserving of closer cross-disciplinary attention, including in literary studies, to which I now turn.

2.2 Asexual Representation in Fiction

Challenging compulsory sexuality can only be done by identifying its controlling impacts in culture and media. One way of achieving this is by adapting compulsory sexuality critique into new areas of research, such as what Emens has done in legal studies (2014). Inspired by this, I examine compulsory sexuality in fiction aimed at young readers, given that asexual characters commonly critique compulsory sexuality on-page. These characters often rally against these social pressures, struggling to carve out a place for themselves in a compulsorily sexual society which typically serves as a one-to-one import of our own.

It is logical to turn our attention toward YA, where many of these asexual representations are located (O’Connor 2019). However, this is not to say that

¹ Interestingly, Vares turns her attention toward the ‘potentially gendered’ (2018:526) implications of these responses, insofar as they endorse expectations of female passivity and male aggression when pursuing sexual relationships.

there is an overwhelm of asexual representations from which to choose. Indeed, the low rate of asexual representation in the mainstream has a well-documented isolating effect on real-world asexuals. Several of Gupta's respondents spoke about feeling isolated due to a lack of asexual visibility, as well as feeling directionless as a result of no asexual role models to compare themselves to: 'it's hard to figure stuff out just because there's no examples' (2017:998). This link has been corroborated by subsequent research, such as an exploratory study by Erin Hampson in which 'all participants alluded to the invisibility of their asexuality identity' (2020:32), equally noting the burdensome nature of having to 'explain asexuality and justify their identity due to the lack of visibility and understanding of others' (2020:33). It comes as no surprise that scholarly interrogations of the few existing asexual representations in media are sparse. What interrogations do exist unanimously scrutinise the harmful messages these representations often convey (Cerankowski 2014; Przybylo 2016; Osterwald 2017). As the regime of compulsory sexuality in white Western cultures dictates that a life without sex is unacceptable, this cultural messaging seeps through into representations of asexuality. Perhaps the best interrogation of this is Sarah Sinwell's (2014) critique of asexuals depicted as desexualised social aliens onscreen, examining the eponymous, asexual-leaning character Dexter – notably aligned with death, as a killer of other killers (2014:169) – to suggest that compulsory sexuality's Othering of asexuals reaches not just real-world asexuals but even our imaginary counterparts on television.

However, there is little corresponding study into fiction, with media and television asexuals² analysed far more often than their literary counterparts. This seems disproportionate, given that the number of asexual characters in literature vastly outweighs the amount onscreen. My previous research has examined how these literary asexual characters are disproportionately found

² Many of these representations have been pioneered by streaming giant Netflix in a progressive wave loosely originating with Todd Chavez in the adult animation *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020). This trend has continued into other animated characters such as Elijah in *Big Mouth* (2017–), as well as live-action characters such as Florence Simmons from *Sex Education* (2019–) and Douglas “Ca\$h” Piggott from *Heartbreak High* (2022–).

in the YA fantasy genre; of a list of YA titles with asexual main characters compiled by Quiet YA (2016), 43 per cent are primarily shelved under 'Fantasy' by Goodreads users (O'Connor 2019). Nonetheless, there is a second notable coterie of literary asexual representations in *contemporary* YA – 26 per cent of the same Quiet YA list – many of which act as fictional mirrors of real-life asexual coming-of-age stories (O'Connor 2019). For instance, Alex Henderson (2019), a self-identified #OwnVoices asexual researcher, examines the coming-of-age narrative parallels in *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* (Ormsbee 2017) and *Let's Talk about Love* (Kann 2018), two YA novels with asexual main characters. They note how their tropes and structures help 'to normalise asexuality as simply another way to experience adolescence' (2019:2). Likewise, Brittney Miles, another #OwnVoices asexual researcher, examines *Let's Talk about Love* and its value for Black asexuals seeking agency in their representations (Miles 2019). These #OwnVoices contributions to the field endorse positive representations, encouraging additional work to come forward in the same vein.

While it is affirming to see asexual YA critiqued by #OwnVoices research, it is less encouraging to see the harmful commonalities these representations contain more generally. I have already established that asexual representations trend toward social exile, with characters often misrepresented as callous or unfeeling as a justification for their aggressive alienation from the compulsorily sexual 'human' sphere set on rejecting them. Regardless of the content of these representations, their overall frequency remains worryingly low as well. O'Connacht's overview of the current state of asexual representation provides some disheartening figures, including that the approximate overall amount of asexual representation in American science fiction/fantasy fiction is just 0.00007 per cent, and that this figure only rises to approximately 0.43 per cent when looking at speculative fiction specifically (2019:para.29). It is worth noting that the methodology behind these statistics is tenuous. O'Connacht arrives at this figure by a potentially inaccurate averaging of available data, admitting that this is at best an estimation, casting some doubt over her further analysis. She indicates that the Death-Adjacent Ace trope may not actually be overwhelmingly pervasive – instead, it may simply be present in many of the most well-known fantasy titles with asexual characters, causing it to be

disproportionately visible in the mainstream (2019). Despite these methodological issues, what O’Connacht’s figures indicate is a dearth of accurate data into the frequency and visibility of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope and its sibling tropes beneath the banner of Asexual Exile. Without this evidence, it is difficult to gauge at present how endemic these tropes might be. In later chapters, my research provides the first formal academic investigation into the rates of Asexual Exile in YA. By conducting a literary survey examining asexual characters in this reading category, particularly their traits, storylines, and exile status, I go on to make clear assertions about the frequency of Asexual Exile tropes in YA fiction, especially the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. I also assess the subversive representations to be found in this same corpus and how these healthier alternatives to exile can spearhead change in the ways asexuals are perceived, and the ways we come to perceive ourselves. Cart and Jenkins once wrote of ‘novels [which] told readers how gay/lesbian people were viewed by others, but did not tell readers how gay/lesbian people viewed themselves’, pondering whether ‘this literature is finally beginning to be written’ (2006:171–172). It was being written, and it continues to be written. And now, introspective asexual literature lines the shelves alongside it.

2.3 Stillness and the Asexual Narrative

The intersection of asexuality and its inferences in literary studies is not entirely unbroken ground. To foreground my own research into this area, I will now analyse a piece of previous scholarship which ultimately did more harm than good by reinforcing the lifeless asexual stereotype: ‘Toward an asexual narrative structure’ by Elizabeth Hanna Hanson (2014). Hanson supplies the first – and to date, the only – academic theorisation of an asexual narrative structure, pondering what an asexual narrative might resemble. She argues that an asexual narrative is a storyline which is stagnant, lifeless, and ‘stands still’ (2014:349), reliant upon a ‘tendency toward stasis’ (2014:347), and ‘more or less a story in which nothing happens’ (2014:348). The chapter troubles me on a personal level, as it has done for many other asexual and allied researchers. Nathan Snaza surmises Hanson’s reading of asexuality as a ‘threat to narrative structure’ (2020:126; emphasis in original), and KJ Cerankowski disputes Hanson’s claim that ‘asexual narrative is absent of

desire' (2022:237), arguing that these stories are full of desires should the reader only look beyond compulsory sexual expectations. Several of Hanson's passages are troublingly reminiscent of acephobic gatekeeping:³

What asexuals hide is the fact that they have nothing to hide; their sexual secret is that they have no sexual secret. The asexual closet, then, is empty, is not even a closet – although to position asexuality as a sexual secret, as the content of a secret, as a depth concealed by a surface, is to give the asexual nothing the shape of a something. (2014:350)

Hanson's claims continue in the tired tradition of taking the identification of sex as a human motivator (Foucault 1976), then taking this theory a step further by framing sex as a storytelling motivator, too: 'Sex . . . has become the Big Story' (Plummer 1995:4). But by reversing this argument, bypassing the idea of sex as narrative catalyst and instead implicating asexuality as narrative stagnation, Hanson entwines asexuality and lifelessness in the only existing experimentation with asexual literary theory. She makes a slight clarification to justify this language – 'By "nothing," I don't mean literally *nothing* . . . What I mean is something nearer to "nothing of consequence"' (2014:357; emphasis in original). This is hardly reassuring. Hanson is not discussing asexual representation, or even asexuality itself. Instead, she is taking what she sees as the *idea* of asexuality – the idea of asexuality as a lack of something essential, an asexuality rendered through the lens of compulsory sexuality – and transposing this absence into the core of a theoretical narrative structure: 'Asexually structured narrative [opposes] forward movement, closure, and intellectual mastery and embodies stasis, the suspension of desire, the non-event, and indifference to the meaningful narrative end' (2014:367).

³ 'Gatekeeping' here refers to the rejection of asexuals from LGBTQIA+ safe spaces, although in other contexts it can also refer to the policing of these spaces in general against similar minority groups. 'Gatekeepers' commonly alienate asexuals through the claim that asexuals are 'straight-passing' or 'not queer enough', further reifying the false treatment of sexual desire as universal and innate.

Hanson's chapter acts as a further indicator of how pervasive the association between asexuality and lifelessness continues to become. Her work here – again, the foundational work exploring implications of asexual literary theory – gives us a clear picture of how asexuality is often understood: static, still, and anticlimactic. In turn, her endorsement of asexual narratives as 'stories of stasis' only makes the asexual-death box all the harder to break out of (Arseneault 2017:para.10). It is these same assumptions which underpin MacInnis and Hodson's findings explored previously, being that asexuals are publicly understood as emotionless and less human than other people (2012). This leaves us with clear questions. If asexually structured narrative is most easily seen as a non-event, then what does this mean for how asexuality is understood overall in fiction? What follow-on effect do these biases have for young readers? How does this impact the representations we consume, and the representations we create? In order to clarify the problem before us and the mechanics of how it operates, the next chapter begins the work of answering these questions by analysing the Asexual Exile tropes previously described. I overview the key features of each one and their saturation rates in this corpus, determining which percentage of Asexual Exile tropes are endorsement and subversion narratives, respectively.

Constant asexual dehumanisation justifies ongoing acephobic discrimination, contaminating our public opinion and the discourse it generates. Not only do I present academic statistics into the Asexual Exile phenomenon but I scrutinise how it is being perpetuated and how these perpetuations can be interrupted – how they *must* be interrupted, even, in order to break this repeating pattern between *representations* of asexual exile and the *lived experience* of asexual exile happening in real time as a result. Before anything else, we are known as Other. It is in all of our stereotypes and all of our pain. And because this Othering is all people know about us, it overbearingly appears in *stories* about us, which primes readers to accept these stories as truths and go on to perpetuate them in turn. What emerges is an ouroboros of exile, reigning from reality to representation and back again, a snake forever eating its own tail. The only way to make it stop is to cut off the head of the snake.

3 Death, Exile, and Possibilities in Asexual YA Fiction

I begin this chapter by detailing the methodology behind my literary survey, summarising the inclusion and exclusion criteria informing my selections. With this process established, I go on to outline the typical qualities of each exile variant, presenting statistics on whether they are more commonly endorsed (wherein the asexual character is socially exiled without question) or more commonly subverted (where the exile trope is written through a self-aware lens, instead of having the asexual character avert or return from their social exile). This discussion leads me to present the field of asexual representation in YA fiction as one which is by no means unanimously hostile nor unanimously encouraging. Instead, it is complicated, nuanced and rife with the possibility for constructive change.

3.1 Methodology

As outlined in the introduction, the literary survey I conducted follows in the footsteps of Moretti's distant reading methodology (2000, 2005), with my survey corpus containing forty-two YA novels. In each one, asexual protagonists are represented explicitly on-page. All of these novels were published between 2013 (with the appearance of the first explicitly asexual main character in YA fiction) and 2021, with 2018 being the most prolific window for asexual main characters in YA. Twelve of the novels under examination were published in this single year (29 per cent), with nine following in 2019 (21 per cent), and a further seven in 2020 (17 per cent). Combined, this three-year period accounts for 68 per cent of the novels in my corpus. This peak period of asexual-spectrum YA parallels existing research by Ellen Carter (2020). Carter identifies 2016 as the peak publishing window for asexual-spectrum romance novels, with the consequent petering-off by publishers in following years a likely indicator of unsatisfactory market performance (2020:5). It is worth noting that my study inspects multiple genres of asexual-spectrum YA, whereas Carter's research examines asexual-spectrum romance novels encompassing adult markets *and* YA. For this reason, our findings are not completely in lock step. My research indicates 2018 as the major publishing period for asexual-spectrum YA, some two years after asexual-spectrum romance peaked previously

(Carter 2020). Taking our findings in tandem, this suggests a longer range of the asexual 'boom period' in YA compared to in romance. This could indicate that asexual characters are better received by younger audiences. It could also suggest a similar asexual 'experiment' as publishers tested in the romance genre two years beforehand, but with a longer petering-off period to match a longer period of experimentation.

The scarcity of asexual representation in fiction, much like the scarcity of 'GLBTQ content' in decades previous (Cart and Jenkins 2006:169), has resulted in a marked difficulty locating these representations unguided. For this reason, there is an online community dedicated to documenting and sharing these representations when they occur. The two most notable sources I consulted when compiling my corpus shortlist were the AroAce Database created by Claudie Arseneault (2021–) and the 'Books with Asexual Main Characters' master-list compiled and maintained by Quiet YA (2016). I refined this shortlist based on my own personal interpretation of each novel as I read them, excluding from the corpus the instances where I deemed the asexual character's role in the story either too minimal to be considered a main character, or where the representation itself was minor enough that it would likely go overlooked by potential readers.

While I am confident that this corpus is a reasonably comprehensive sample of the existent state of asexual representation in mainstream YA, I by no means make the claim that this sample is all-encompassing. One inclusion criterion I employed was that the novels needed to be traditionally published rather than self-published or solely available online. My rationale for this is that, when analysing the representational lessons young readers might derive from this literature, it seemed sensible to limit this analysis to the representations young readers could easily encounter. This ensures the integrity of this research as a study into asexual representation specifically in the traditionally published YA fiction scene. The result of this stipulation is that some of the publishers in my corpus are more recognisable than others, ranging from imprints of 'Big Six' publishing houses such as HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster all the way to boutique small presses such as Snowy Wings Publishing and Gurt Dog Press.

For each of the forty-two novels under study, I tabled objective data such as title, author, publisher, year of publication, genre, tense, perspective, and focalisation of the work. In addition, I assessed more subjective elements of the works such as the gender identity and sex-aversion status of the asexual characters, most prominently including: the degree of explicitness in the asexual representation, the romantic orientation of the asexual characters under study, whether the work features an Asexual Exile trope and which one if so, and finally, whether that trope is endorsed or subverted by the text. The resultant data from this literary survey gives sorely needed statistical evidence on Asexual Exile tropes. Drawn from a broad sample, my conclusions from this data are strongly suggestive of exile rates across asexual-spectrum YA, reasonably answering the question of just how endemic Asexual Exile tropes truly are in this literature. I made my determinations of whether a work endorses or subverts these tropes by assessing each instance through close reading and applying my own deductive reasoning. I identified which novels included these tropes by referring back to O'Connacht's explications of how each exile variant appears and functions (2018), then assessing each novel against this framework. As for the *nature* of these representations, the distant reading method allowed me to definitively conclude the ratios of endorsed-versus-subverted representations within the field, supported by clear and demonstrable evidence, a rigour which has been heretofore absent from discourse surrounding this subject. Admittedly, there is an inherently personal nature to the issue at hand. I cannot objectively examine a literary trend which serves to equate asexuality with unbelonging, most severely unbelonging as lifelessness. It is worth noting that I have drawn from my own experience and knowledge as an #OwnVoices asexual researcher and academic in order to make my appraisals regarding the corpus at hand, meaning my conclusions are not altogether free from bias. However, I would argue that, given the complex nature of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope and the equivalent tropes it exists alongside, a subjective critique of this phenomenon is the only accountable path forward. These dangerous tropes are an inherently #OwnVoices issue; they implicate us, they were contributed to by us, and it is us alone who can intervene into them and stop them in their tracks.

3.1.1 Explicit Representation

My research analyses and diagnoses the representational pitfalls of asexual representation in YA fiction in order to make the argument that Asexual Exile tropes, most severely among them the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, contribute to an asexual slow death (Berlant 2007). Therefore, it seems prudent to ensure that the asexual characters under consideration in my corpus must be ‘explicitly outed within the text by authors’ (Bittner 2016:202) – that is, that their asexuality is textual rather than subtextual, and not something a reasonable reader could misunderstand or fail to recognise. For this reason, I have ruled out from my literary survey any novels where characters were only confirmed as asexual paratextually by the author after publication, such as *Afterworlds* by Scott Westerfeld (2014) and *No More Heroes* by Michelle Kan (2015).

Of the forty-two novels in my literary survey, thirty (71 per cent) represent asexuality explicitly by using the word ‘asexual’ on-page. I made this a primary inclusion criterion of my literary survey, unless there was a reasonable rationale behind non-usage of the term. The remaining twelve novels in my corpus have such justifications. Four of these twelve instances (33 per cent) appear in works of historical fantasy that omit the term ‘asexual’ as the time setting of the work predates its common usage. But in seven others (58 per cent), the word ‘asexual’ is absent because of a worldbuilding detail, with the term not existing in the fantastical lexicon of the fictional world. An additional one instance (8 per cent) substitutes the term ‘asexual’ for an equivalent word specific to the setting, but for the same reasoning as the previous; that is, that the term does not exist in this immersive fictional setting. I find this to be a perplexing omission considering that other terms from the real world can be imported without question – for instance, words used to describe gender, animals, and body parts. It is my belief that terms describing sexuality can – and should – be imported into fantasy narratives just as readily. With these justifications in mind, it should be noted that in all twelve of these instances, the characters’ asexuality is inarguable even without being explicitly named. These characters verbalise their absence of sexual attraction either through narration or dialogue, and often their absence of attraction is a driving force of the narrative journey, character arc, or both of these things combined.

The forty-two novels of my corpus contain forty-five asexual characters, with the mismatch between these figures occurring as there are multiple asexual characters in some of the novels under consideration. In some cases, these ‘extra’ asexual characters are in supporting roles to the asexual lead. For example, in Alice Oseman’s *Loveless* (2020), aromantic asexual protagonist Georgia meets two other asexual people over the course of her journey to self-acceptance, both of whom help her to overcome her internalised negative beliefs about her sexual and romantic orientations. In others, there are two asexual main characters who steer the narrative side by side. In Calista Lynne’s *We Awaken* (2016), Victoria first learns of asexuality when she enters a romantic partnership with asexual deuteragonist Ashlinn. Victoria quickly realises she is also asexual, and the two girls go on to renegotiate their boundaries with their shared orientation in mind. Three of the asexual characters in this corpus – Katherine from the *Dread Nation* duology by Justina Ireland, and Nadin and Isaak from Lyssa Chiavari’s *Iamos* series – appear in more than one novel. In these cases, I have tabled novel-specific information for each instance but have only counted character-specific data once. As an example, Katherine appears in both *Dread Nation* (2018) and its sequel *Deathless Divide* (2020). Rather than table Katherine twice, I have included her character information just once, with the justification that these instances of asexual character are in fact the same character. In other words, it would be disingenuous to make character-specific claims when this data is skewed by duplicate entries, something I have taken pains to sidestep wherever possible.

3.2 Genre Breakdown and Exile Permutations

Assessing Asexual Exile as a complete picture means assessing each trope cumulatively, rather than in isolation. The Death-Adjacent Ace trope, for instance, can be found in six of the forty-two novels (14 per cent) under examination.⁴ However, this statistic is hardly a fair representation of the

⁴ The frequency of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope may be low, yet the rate of asexual characters and narratives in this corpus impacted by themes of grief, death, and suicidality is startlingly high, numbering twenty-three of the forty-five asexual characters under consideration (51 per cent). In *The New York Times*

broader problem at hand, given that the Death-Adjacent Ace trope is just one form of Asexual Exile. Examining Asexual Exile tropes broadly and across genre, then, is the only accurate means of making a proper assessment of its impact overall.

In literature, the term ‘genre’ broadly describes the styles and categories of works, grouped by common features such as storylines, settings, or character archetypes (Mays 2019). As I have identified, Asexual Exile tropes loosely correspond with genre, with distinct qualities to match the works in which they appear (O’Connacht 2018). My literary survey corpus contains works of YA in the contemporary, science fiction, historical, and fantasy genres. To ensure my methodology is indeed clear, I will now provide a working definition for each of these genres, foregrounding my discussion of each genre’s typical Asexual Exile trope.

As stated, the forty-two novels within my corpus are a mixture of genres, including contemporary (thirteen), fantasy (nineteen), historical fiction (four), and science fiction (six) (see Figure 3). The fantasy genre is the most popular among these by far, accounting for 45 per cent of works studied, or almost half of works that met my inclusion criteria. This is an understandable commonality; fantasy, characterised by the impossible being made real (Clute and Grant 1997), tends to be a prime target for queer representation since disbelief is already suspended. This makes this genre in particular a ‘safe space’ for characters who identify outside of cisgendered heteronormative expectations (Balay 2012), more so than any other. That being said, it is encouraging that the next most popular genre for asexual representation is contemporary fiction, with thirteen instances accounting for 31 per cent of works studied. Contemporary fiction is known for its close resemblance to our real world, meaning no suspension of disbelief is required here to explain away the presence of asexual characters.

bestseller *Before I Let Go* by Marieke Nijkamp (2018), for example, asexual main character Corey grapples with the suicide of her childhood best friend.

Throughout the work, she helplessly attempts to decipher why nobody from their hometown intervened despite her friend’s publicly premeditated plan to end her own life.

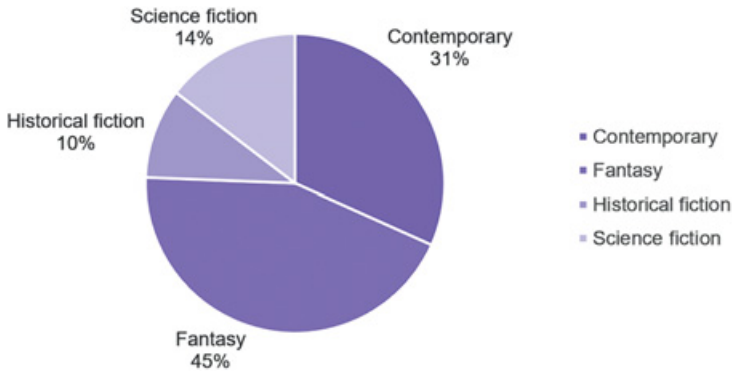


Figure 3 Genre breakdown of corpus

It is in this intersection of genres that we discover another point complicating the issue. When analysing Asexual Exile tropes, it is important to remember that while these genre-based distinctions are common, they are not unanimous. There are several cross-genre trope appearances, most commonly surrounding the Loner Ace contemporary genre trope, which appears in fantasy, science fiction, and historical fantasy genres as well. There is clear value in interrogating these tropes as they occur typically to genre, but it is apparent that these genre-defying instances must still be interrogated to properly understand the true saturation of Asexual Exile tropes overall. For this reason, I will go on to provide commentary not just on the frequency of genre-typical tropes – such as the Death-Adjacent Ace trope which is typical of fantasy, and the Loner Ace trope which is typical of contemporary – but of the broader rates of Asexual Exile for each genre, regardless of variant.

In the typical narratives of these exiles, three things tend to happen to asexual characters, regardless of the specific exile trope being employed. Characters either (1) are Exiled Alone, cast out of society in isolation, (2) are Exiled Together, with a significant other joining them in that exile, or (3) refuse to be exiled and instead remain a part of society in an Exile Refutation. These different permutations are analogous to the two major outcomes of exile representations, being that they either go endorsed without question as

a narrative conclusion, or they go subverted, with exile instead a narrative complication for the protagonist to overcome. It is common for the latter representations to reclaim Asexual Exile tropes by directly centring characters who *heal* from their exile. These characters return to society and forge meaningful relationships, solidifying their place in our world.

3.3 Contemporary Genre and Loner Ace

Contemporary literature is best understood as a somewhat ephemeral means of describing recent writing ‘in our particular contemporary moment’ (Martin 2017:20); ergo, what was contemporary in the 1800s is considered classical literature now. The contemporary fiction of the modern day most closely resembles what we might call ‘chick lit’: reflecting real life, grounded in realism, most commonly overlapping with romance (Cahill 2020). In my research, the contemporary genre refers to works which explore realistic portrayals of everyday life and adolescent experience, showcasing for young readers ways of ‘exploring their own identities and of discovering their place in the contemporary world’ (Knickerbocker, Brueggeman and Rycik 2012:5; emphasis omitted).

The contemporary genre is a largely positive space for asexual representation, with the vast majority of exile storylines ending in an Exile Refutation (see Table 1 and Figure 4). Eight of the thirteen (62 per cent) constitute largely refuted depictions of the Loner Ace trope, with the remaining five of the thirteen (38 per cent) containing no exile tropes. Of the eight instances of the Loner Ace trope, only one of these is an endorsed instance of the Exiled Together permutation, with the remaining seven being Exile Refutation narratives.

One interesting trend of Exile Refutation in the Loner Ace trope occurs after an asexual heroine is excluded via sexual harassment on the schoolyard. My literary survey suggests that, in the contemporary genre novels under examination with female asexual main characters, more than 40 per cent of them are stalked, taunted, or otherwise sexually harassed by their male peers. This frequency of asexual girls being hounded on the schoolyard deserves further interrogation. For instance, in *Switchback* by Danika Stone (2019), Vale is tormented by the male bullies at her school, with female students joining in on her humiliation by circulating explicit photos of her online. Her bullies taunt her with the cruel nickname ‘Valley

Table 1 Exile in contemporary genre corpus

	Loner Ace	Other exile	Non-exile	Total
Endorsed	1	0	N/A	1
Subverted	7	0	N/A	7
Non-exile	N/A	N/A	5	5
	8	0	5	13

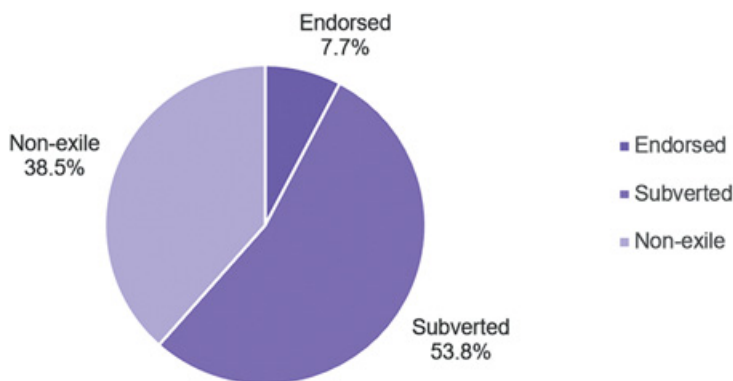


Figure 4 Exile in contemporary genre corpus

Girl' (2019:29), a jibe at her supposed promiscuity, while Vale's lone friend turns a blind eye to their behaviour (2019:73). This torment is steeped in sexism by her classmates, fuelled further by her disinterest in dating. This refrain is a common one in contemporary genre asexual-spectrum YA. Reese, the asexual character in Lillian Clark's *Immoral Code* (2019), experiences the same storyline. However, the origins of this harassment are relegated to backstory with Reese's ongoing persecution being an everyday obstacle by the events of the novel. Other students 'slut-shame' her based on a rumour spread by a spurned admirer, and her resulting reputation at school has become that of 'Reese the Piece' (2019:73). Her peers continually bully her with the accusation that she would sleep with

anyone at all, when in reality she is an aromantic asexual woman without any interest in sex.

Both of these instances are rooted in misogyny. Both are results of what men believe women should be. Reading across these two portrayals, these storylines take inherent misogyny and utilise it as the impetus for an Exile Refutation arc, with both *Immoral Code* and *Switchback* depicting a phoenix motif of female empowerment. Reese's subplot, for instance, culminates when she kicks her main harasser between the legs for groping her without consent: 'I lean down to where he has his face sort of mashed into the floor, hands gripping his groin, and say, "Don't touch me ever. I don't owe you anything. My time. My energy. My anger. And *certainly* not my body"' (2019:274; emphasis in original). Likewise, Vale realises that she is much stronger than she knew after her near-death experience in the second act, skyrocketing her confidence (2019:300). This realisation is cemented when her best friend finally takes a stand with her against her bullies (2019:302–303). In some ways, it seems that these girls' asexuality is being tested by the menacing behaviour of male adolescents, as if it is somehow invalid unless preyed upon and proven. But my reading of these interpretations is that they feature sexual harassment storylines for a key reason: to encourage young people, especially young asexuals, to stand up for themselves and call out this harassment in the real world. The girls in these stories are mocked, taunted, and constantly reminded of the sexual expectations that come with their gender. In *Switchback*, this takes the form of 'full-on trolling' (2019:274), Vale derided as a 'stuck-up little know-it-all' (2019:302); in *Immoral Code*, Reese's persecutor harasses her by 'grabbing [her] chest' (2019:273), telling her not to 'be a bitch about it. It's not like there's much to grab anyway' (2019:274). Their asexuality is the catalyst for this harassment specifically because that sexual harassment is operating here as a magnification of real-world prejudice. In this way, these girls are not the ones at fault, nor are they the ones who need to change.

3.4 Science Fiction Genre and Inhuman Ace

Science fiction deals in the not-yet possible, a genre of 'forward-looking fiction' (Parrinder 1980:xv, Mays 2019:317) which explores the 'alternate possibilities and anticipations' (Parrinder 1980:xiii) of an imagined future or

alternate present. Often these works explore oncoming innovations, positing what discoveries and new technologies leading-edge science may lead to. A staple of science fiction is its plausibility (Russ 1975), even if we have not yet reached that plausibility in the real world. Darko Suvin terms this ‘the literature of cognitive estrangement’ (1972:372; emphasis omitted), describing a suspension of disbelief centred on the fictionalised scientific consistency of an immersive science fiction setting. Science fiction stories may be set in the future or in the present – on Earth or in outer space – and tend to feature speculative concepts such as space exploration, extraterrestrial life, and time travel, gesturing ‘towards wonder, awe, and a religious or quasi-religious attitude towards the universe’ (Russ 1975:116).

In a grim inversion of the contemporary genre, the six instances of science fiction asexual representations in this corpus unanimously contain exile storylines (see Table 2 and Figure 5). One is a genre-defying endorsement of the Loner Ace trope (17 per cent), with the remaining five being genre-typical instances of the Inhuman Ace trope (83 per cent), only one of whom reclaims this trope in an Exile Refutation. The Inhuman Ace trope – the same trend which sees asexuals ‘discriminated against and dehumanized through rhetorical tropes of alien, robot, and monster’ (Brandley and Dehnert 2024:1575) – occasionally encompasses altered humans such as the genetically engineered or ‘geneered’ (2017:9) Cassandra Gupta from Heather Kaczynski’s *Dare Mighty Things*. But more commonly, the Inhuman Ace trope manifests as one of two things: the robot ace, or the alien ace.

This inhumanity makes some amount of sense when encountered in the science fiction genre, where Othering of this type is common. Joseph Campbell

Table 2 Exile in science fiction genre corpus

	Inhuman Ace	Other exile	Non-exile	Total
Endorsed	4	1	N/A	5
Subverted	1	0	N/A	1
Non-exile	N/A	N/A	0	0
	5	1	0	6

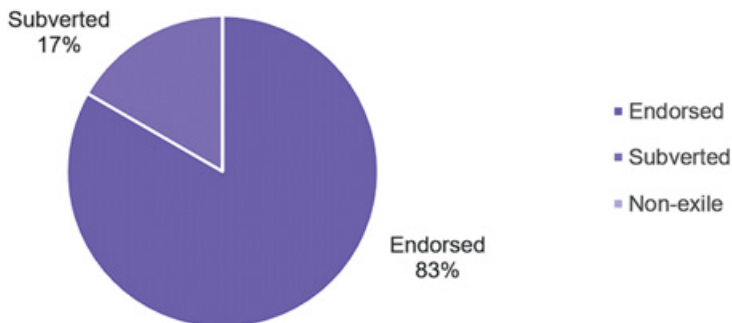


Figure 5 Exile in science fiction genre corpus

distinguishes between science fiction and dystopian genres, suggesting that science fiction is fundamentally underpinned by the concept of this Othering, while dystopian fiction is instead tied more strongly to ideas of ideology and repression (2019:4–5): ‘contemporary [science fiction] is engaged with the other and exploring the nature of the act of othering itself’ (2019:49). The figure of the robot as an inhuman Other is a common one, with Campbell going on to note its form and function when it acts as a metaphor:

By discussing the robot and its status as devalued other in the culture of the narrative, the science fiction author can show ideologies at work in a way that will perhaps make an impact on readers who might not have listened, or had access to critical texts, before. Through coding the other, science fiction author can function as social critic. (2019:59)

With this functionality in mind, *Hullmetal Girls* (Skrutskie 2018), a science fiction novel starring aromantic asexual main character Aisha, is a key demonstration of the robot as Inhuman Ace. Aisha became ‘Scela’, a government-controlled cyborg–human hybrid, so that the financial compensation to her family would help her sister’s high-risk living situation: ‘I don’t care if my destination is inefficient. My sister is in the dyeworks, and I won’t

rest until she's safely tucked inside a breach shelter' (2018:255). The surgical procedure to become Scela is a painful fusion of human and machine:

I can feel its components rushing toward my brain . . . My mind reels as a new consciousness runs headlong into it, one that's robotic and cold and unfeeling. The spine rears up, trying to lift me . . . I fight against it, but the strength of the exo is relentless. . . . The integration wraps around my brain, and in that moment my mind skews machine, flooded with the understanding of the exorig as part of my body, as the new spine, the better one. (2018:10)

'The alien is distinguished from the allonormative human by its lack of understanding', Brandlely and Dehnert describe, '[while] the robot [differs] due to their perceived lack of emotions' (2024:1573). We can see this principle in action here. Aisha's transformation scene contributes to the cold, unfeeling asexual stereotype – indeed, these are the exact adjectives used to describe Aisha's oncoming inhumanity. The Inhuman Ace trope is framed here as an improvement on her mere biology, but one that comes at the drastic cost of her humanity. She has been made Other, even monstrous, and as a result her place among normal society can never be redeemed.

Like Aisha, we can see this exclusion at work in *Ultraviolet* (2011) and *Quicksilver* (2013) by RJ Anderson, a duology featuring alien asexual character Victoria (Tori). In *Ultraviolet*, Tori's origins are aggressively dehumanised: 'an unlicensed conception, sold as a foetus for experimental purposes' (2011:257). Throughout her focused sequel, *Quicksilver*, she goes on to struggle with her resulting negative self-concept, an intense alienation from her peers leading her to feel profoundly counterfeit. She is easily able to invent a new identity (2013:7), boasting a 'talent for mimicry' (2013:11) which occasionally strays into blatant manipulation (2013:169), overcompensating for her lack of social instincts:

When it became clear that I had a natural affinity for machines but no instincts whatsoever when it came to people, [my parents] poured all their energy into teaching me how to

relate, how to connect, how to care. My dad had coached me through girls' hockey until I understood what it meant to be part of a team, and my mom had shown me how to read people's facial expressions and turn their frowns into smiles. (2013:16)

Tori's lack of platonic instinct is interwoven with her lack of sexual attraction, mediated by the narration as one and the same. A slew of internalised acephobia along these lines blends seamlessly with Tori's internalised xenophobia: 'I'm not normal, and I never was' (2013:216); 'I was a freak from another planet, a genetic mistake, and when I died that would be the end of it' (2013:265); 'I'm just a mongrel alien freak who was never meant to live on this planet in the first place' (2013:279). Further equating asexuality and alien nature, her confession to her parents reads much like a coming out: 'I don't belong on this world . . . I was never meant to be a part of it. I know you wanted me to get married and have a family of my own someday' (2013:258). This rumination on her unbelonging ultimately leads Tori to the same final destination as her narration throughout, emblematic of the genre trend. Her alien nature is fundamentally entrenched in asexual difference, cementing her exile as someone who does not make sense.

3.5 Historical Fiction and Exile Refutation

Where science fiction imagines the future and futuristic alternate realities, historical fiction instead reimagines the past, set in a time previous to the author's birth. These stories explore significant historical periods and events, offering authors the opportunity through fiction to write minority identities back into a history which neglected them. In 'Historical fiction: towards a definition' (2017), Bryony Stocker settles on a definition of a historical fiction novel as one 'when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past' (2017:78). She suggests that alternative histories should instead be categorised as 'historically-set speculative fiction' (2017:78). This truth-driven definition is something Stocker has upheld elsewhere, insisting that 'alternations [should] not affect historical

outcomes' (2019:333) in historical fiction, and that authors should 'make sure [their] inventions are feasible and in line with what is known of the past' (2019:333).

That being said, even Stocker is unable to entirely sidestep the tension in historical fiction studies regarding whether we can consider as historical fiction those works which are produced historically 'by accident' – that is, where contemporary fiction has become historical fiction purely as a result of the passage of time. She notes other points of contention in the field alongside this, such as whether or not historical fiction must be grounded in a measurable past by making characters from historical figures and to what extent this truth-telling is impacted by questions of historiography. Factors such as victor bias have greatly influenced the recording of historical primary sources, thereby obfuscating their account of the past. Laura Saxton distinguishes between accuracy and *authenticity* as a means of addressing this 'problematised' (2020:129) unease between historical truth and historical record, differentiating authenticity as 'the impression that a text is accurate, even if it is not' (2020:128) and its 'believability' (2020:133) as a result of expected historical cues:

The characters milieu, dress, customs, and speech all converge to create a plausible image of the period in question . . . the highly stylised language that attempts to create the speech of the past . . . provides a convention for writing dialogue that feels real in the absence of recorded voices from pre-modern eras against which we can measure the accuracy of the spoken word. (2020:132)

With this in mind, the emergence of a more recent sub-genre in historical fiction – historical fantasy – seems to be a natural evolution of these frictions. Even staunch advocate of historical accuracy Hilary Mantel grew to become more accepting of historical fictions 'close to fantasy' (2017). Ramón Saldívar writes on the power these works hold when reimagining historical slavery and the American south, requiring 'writers to invent a new "imaginary" for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction' (2011:574), adding an element of

historical realism to a fantasy genre he terms otherwise occupied with ‘daydream, delusion, and denial’ (2011:594).

While fantasy fiction has the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, contemporary fiction has the Loner Ace trope, and science fiction has the Inhuman Ace trope, historical fiction is the sole genre under study which has no correspondent genre-typical exile trope to match. I make the disclaimer here that this is the smallest subset of my corpus by far, with just four instances – two of which comprise a duology – containing three asexual characters between them. As a result, the commonalities here are far less substantiated than the other genres in the corpus, though still worth examining from a more theoretical stance. These works are set in the past, often with a fictionalised divergent event or element of fantasy preventing the world setting from becoming a one-to-one corollary to our own. This opens the gate for asexual representations, with several writers answering the call to write characters back into the historical narrative through their fiction. As a result, all four historical fictions under examination in my corpus are Exile Refutation narratives, wherein characters confront and overcome their exile storylines (see Table 3).

Historical fiction is unique when it comes to Asexual Exile. The absence of a genre-typical exile trope in the historical space, particularly when dealing in the historical fantasy sub-genre of historical fiction, leads to these historical exiles existing in a more ambiguous phase. My research suggests that exile stereotypes have not yet solidified in this genre into any one typical form, most likely because historical fiction is a more ambiguous genre, prone to fluctuating from case to case based on which secondary genres play a role of influence. In *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (Lee 2018) and *The Spy with the Red Balloon* (Locke 2018), the refutations

Table 3 Exile in historical genre corpus

	Non-specific exile	Non-exile	Total
Endorsed	0	N/A	0
Subverted	4	N/A	4
Non-exile	N/A	0	0
	4	0	4

depicted read most like an Exile Refutation of the Loner Ace trope, with some elements re-skinned to match the anachronistic time period.

The reclamation narrative in Ireland's *Dread Nation* duology, a setting where zombies are commonplace, bears closer resemblance to reclamation of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope given its narrative features a fundamentally fantasy-adjacent supernatural incursion. Ireland's series is set in an alternate timeline of the American post-Civil War period, one where after the Battle of Gettysburg, the dead rose again as zombies. In the aftermath of this development, Black children have been separated from their families and given mandatory combat training in order to execute the dead, with the rationale by white leadership that Black girls in particular are the most expendable. Katherine, an asexual main character in *Dread Nation* and deuteragonist in its sequel, *Deathless Divide*, is one of these girls. *Dread Nation* lays the foundations for Katherine's eventual Exile Refutation, establishing her asexuality and her commitment to living life on her own terms: 'I'm not ready to die' (2018:433). In *Deathless Divide*, Katherine goes on to have a close brush with undeath, a climactic infection threatening her life: 'I am dying. I can feel it. This is no usual sickness. A fever already burns through my body, and my fingertips are going numb' (2020:525). However, rather than forge ahead with the exile, Katherine's storyline takes a sharp turn away from it, with the primary protagonist Jane intervening to save her best friend (2020:533). Katherine's interrupted exile follows the pattern typical of the fantasy-aligned Death-Adjacent Ace trope before it is cut short by a clear refutation, her near-death experience evocative of resurrection in its own right: 'Despite feeling like the handmaiden to death I do not die' (2020:539). The unanimous Exile Refutation in the historical genre contributes to a set of healthier trends in this corpus, ones which present positive outcomes opposing the negative drift toward Asexual Exile tropes. In my fourth chapter, I examine these in greater depth, theorising two different antidotes to exile representations more generally.

3.6 Fantasy Genre and Death-Adjacent Ace

Fantasy fiction deals in the imaginary. Typically, it features mystical elements 'impossible in the world as we perceive it' (Clute and Grant 1997:viii), or is set in alternate worlds where these elements are 'possible

in the otherworld's terms' (Clute and Grant 1997:viii; emphasis omitted). These stories usually feature remarkable settings and characters, as well as magical and supernatural forces (Mays 2019). In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn describes four essential categories within the fantasy genre:

... the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. These categories are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world. In the portal-quest we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fiction, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape. (2008:xiv)

The fantasy literature in my corpus consists almost entirely of intrusive and immersive fantasies, with one outlier in the post-portal quest fantasy *Every Heart a Doorway* (McGuire 2016). To expand on these two key rhetorics, an immersive fantasy is contained entirely in another world setting – one where our world as we recognise it does not exist. By contrast, an intrusive fantasy is one where elements of fantasy trespass into our world from elsewhere, rupturing contemporary life with magical or supernatural themes. Between these two modes, anything is possible. Far-off feudal kingdoms and detailed magic systems allow readers to escape into imagination; sweeping storylines of adventure and colourful fantasy races pull ordinary characters along for the ride in the reader's stead. The allure of fantasy is that it *is* a fantasy, the most impossible of daydreams brought to life on the page (Clute and Grant 1997), allowing 'a more literal escapism and world-making' to the online escapism and peer support of the waking world (Henderson 2022:20). In fantasy, anything can happen. Why, then, is this the genre where we find the most severe Asexual Exile trope? This is the genre where the Death-Adjacent Ace trope incubated into being. It is precisely here where this trope primarily takes root. The answer is – of course – the asexual death association, particularly noteworthy here given that in fantasy fiction, we could be anything. We could be knights or elves or sorcerers. We could be wizards living in the shadows, secretly protecting

Table 4 Exile in fantasy genre corpus

	Death-Adjacent Ace	Other exile	Non-exile	Total
Endorsed	3	3	N/A	6
Subverted	3	1	N/A	4
Non-exile	N/A	N/A	9	9
	6	4	9	19

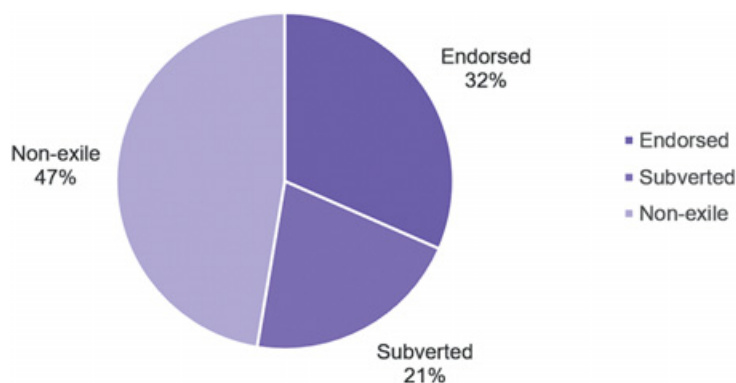


Figure 6 Exile in fantasy genre corpus

the world from evil. We could even be dragons. Instead, we are soulless, undead, and outcast. In a genre known for limitlessness, even here, the death association has us hemmed in.

With the Death-Adjacent Ace trope being the most severe Asexual Exile trope, it is initially encouraging that works in the fantasy genre veer toward neutrality, with nine of the nineteen containing no exile tropes at all (47 per cent) (see Table 4 and Figure 6). The remaining ten, like in my historical pool, are novels containing either the Death-Adjacent Ace or Loner Ace tropes. The six instances of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope (32 per cent) are split evenly, with three being Exiled Alone narratives and three being Exile Refutations. The four portrayals of the Loner Ace

trope (21 per cent) are more skewed by contrast, with one Exile Refutation and three endorsements of the Exiled Together permutation opposing it.

Sidelining the neutral depictions, we can see that instances of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope are almost equal between endorsement and subversion, with this tipping damningly once we factor in endorsements of the Loner Ace trope in this genre, too. With the fantasy genre evidencing such narrow statistics, not to mention that the Death-Adjacent Ace trope is the most severe Asexual Exile trope, I have gone into greater depth in my analysis here of this genre subset. In particular, I utilise this examination to explain and demonstrate the three exile permutations I identified previously. A close reading of relevant texts within my corpus function as case studies here.

3.6.1 Exiled Alone

Three (16 per cent) of the fantasy novels in this corpus showcase the Exiled Alone permutation (see [Table 5](#)). However, it is worth preceding this discussion with the disclaimer that, for what I should think are obvious reasons, singledom and self-sufficiency are already innately interwoven in asexual representations. That being the case, there remains a sharp distinction between characters who are merely aromantic and thereby uncoupled as a marker of their self-identity, and characters who are exiled from their community for these same reasons, coded as not belonging and not truly alive. This distinction is often lost in translation in this corpus, with considerable overlap between aromanticism and Asexual Exile tropes.

Table 5 Permutation rates
in fantasy Exile Refutations

	Frequency
Exiled Alone	3
Exiled Together	3
Exile Refutation	4
Non-exile	9
	19

Nineteen of the asexual characters in my corpus are aromantic, and four of the seventeen titles containing these characters perpetuate the Death-Adjacent Ace trope – but then, many of those aromantic characters exist outside of the fantasy genre where the Death-Adjacent Ace trope is primarily located, hardly making this a fair assessment of its prevalence.

We can see a much more revealing angle on this phenomenon once we reverse the examination, analysing the commonalities in the Death-Adjacent Ace trope rather than their frequency. Four out of six, or 67 per cent, of death-adjacent asexual characters in this corpus happen to be aromantic. *We Were Restless Things* (Nagamatsu 2020) and *Every Heart a Doorway* (McGuire 2016) are the sole exceptions, with Noemi and Nancy both being hetero-romantic asexual women.

Every Heart a Doorway is a clear illustration of the Exiled Alone permutation. To help reiterate its typical qualities, another key depiction is *Clariel* by Garth Nix (2014), a mainstay example in asexual representational discourse as it is among the very first portrayals of asexuality in YA (Arseneault 2017; Simelane 2018; O’Connacht 2019). While *Every Heart a Doorway* popularised the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, I would go so far as to suggest that *Clariel* was its original instance, albeit one that went unnoticed at the time of publication. The eponymous protagonist Clariel is a young woman who rallies against her parents’ plans for her to marry, instead longing to live by herself in the woods. Two major factors complicate this desire. The first is her asexuality in a compulsorily sexual world setting; the second is her natural talent for detecting death, known in-world as the Abhorsen death sense: ‘Clariel felt him die. It was a sensation she knew well . . . With animals it was like a fleeting, frozen touch in her mind. Here it was an icy gale that blew through a door that slammed shut again, all in one terrible instant’ (2014:205). Clariel’s inclination toward necromancy is portrayed as a latent force, the ‘instinct in [her] blood’ (2014:205), and the call of this embryonic necromantic power seduces her. The temptation of holding sway over life and death is ultimately irresistible to Clariel, leading her to develop into the key antagonist of the book series, ‘a corruption her asexuality and aromanticism made far more likely and are thus directly tied to’ (Arseneault 2017:para.6). Her innate power over death is too uncontrollable for her to risk human contact. Ultimately, it proves too dangerous for

her to even keep a grip on her sense of self. Clariel's resultant exile is doubly cruel, with her narration having opined throughout the work for a self-partnered aromantic solitude, only to be dealt that solitude in the form of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope.

3.6.2 Exiled Together

Equal to the previous, three (16 per cent) of the fantasy novels in my corpus showcase Exiled Together narratives. This trend functions much the same way as the Exiled Alone permutation, with the distinction that here the asexual character brings someone else along with them as a 'plus-one' into their exile, usually a paramour. The Exiled Together permutation usually treats the acceptance of a character's asexuality by their romantic partner as a climactic moment. That acceptance often becomes a consolation prize, with acceptance of asexuality by larger society being outright denied by the text. One example of this occurs in Amanda Foody's *Daughter of the Burning City* (2017), through demisexual character and romantic interest Luca. Luca is an awakened illusion – a projection of the main character's mind that has gained life and sentience – who invites strangers to kill him onstage as a means to make a living:

Before Luca can ready himself, Garrett swings his sword straight through Luca's neck. His head thumps to the stage and rolls off and onto the grass at my feet . . . Red blood stains the dirt. Luca's bedroom brown eyes look very dead . . . He walks to the opposite side of the stage, toward me, and reaches down. I hand him his head . . . He screws it back on as if he's a doll, flesh reattaching to flesh. (2017:139–140)

Luca is, for all intents and purposes, unkillable, and characterises himself repeatedly as a 'freak' for this unnatural ability (2017:153, 272). This peculiarity becomes a point of commonality with Sorina, the point-of-view character, and their kinship leads to the beginning of a romantic relationship. Together, they find refuge from a world which has always treated them as outliers: 'I'm kissing Luca, the boy who loves me, who sees me as more than a freak. The boy who'd call himself a freak, too' (2017:403). Luca's

ostracisation from society is a result of two things. On one hand, it is a result of his resurrection parlour trick, but on another it is repeatedly expressed to be due to his absence of interest in sex. This is primarily shown through his ambivalence toward ‘pretty men’ and ‘pretty women’, the fantasy terminology in this world setting to describe sex workers:

He went from being an outcast in his city for his jynx-work to becoming a sort of outcast here because he’s not as lustful for Gomorrah’s sexual pleasures as others. *Freak* may be the only word to describe a misfit in an entire city’s worth of misfits. (2017:272; emphasis in original)

In Exiled Together permutation narratives such as this, an asexual character is still separated away from community. The only difference is that a second character is exiled alongside them. While it might be argued that this still serves as a perforation of traditional exclusion narratives, it remains an exile. Finding love is not the same as finding broader social acceptance, and I would argue that ‘the best we can hope for is for one person’s love’ is not a message worth repeating to young readers.

3.6.3 Exile Refutation

Exile Refutation, the third and final exile permutation I identify, accounts for four depictions in the fantasy novels of my corpus (21 per cent). These are depictions in which an exile storyline is directly subverted – for instance, where exile is a character’s starting position and, therefore, a narrative obstacle to overcome, or when exile is circumvented before it can become a permanent state. Darcie Little Badger’s *Elatsoe* (2020), for instance, includes the Death-Adjacent Ace trope in order to refute it in the third act. In some ways, it is useful to think of *Elatsoe* as a parallel to *Clariel*. Like *Clariel*, *Elatsoe* is an eponymous young female protagonist with an innate connection to the world of the dead. However, *Elatsoe* is set in an analogue of our world rather than an immersive fantasy setting, with the key intrusive fantasy element (Mendlesohn 2008) here being that *Elatsoe* – often shortened to Ellie – is able to raise animal spirits as her Lipan Apache ancestors once did before her (2020:25). This skill is one

that carries immense risk, with Ellie's family pleading with her to exercise caution with her powers:

'Ellie, there are stories . . . about people – *living* people – who can walk between our world and the land Below, where ghosts and monsters dwell.'

'Do any of these stories have happy endings?'

'Rarely,' she said. 'It's easy to get lost in the underworld, and ghosts will try to trick you. Stay too long, and you'll die, Ellie.' (2020:177; emphasis in original)

In the Exiled Alone permutation, this premonition would come true. Ellie would be condemned to the underworld, 'causing conventional outcomes of isolation and death-like exclusion for the asexual character' (Kennon 2021:17). In an Exiled Together storyline, she would meet the same fate. The only difference would be that she would likely bring a close friend or relative along for company. Instead, Ellie's inevitable encounter with the underworld is framed as a close call, with her taking a stand against these sinister forces attempting to keep her rather than being swayed by their influence and becoming trapped: 'Home. Think of *home*. Think of her mother, her father . . . The toxic river behind her house. The high school she almost missed' (2020:333). Ultimately, her urge to return to her family and to her life wins out against the call of exile, Little Badger thereby reclaiming the Death-Adjacent Ace trope in a portrayal 'crucial for defeating this parasitic regime of White supremacy, colonisation, and exploitation' (Kennon 2021:17).

The storylines of this corpus are left to rest on an optimistic note, brimming with potential – as we all are brimming with potential – to see asexuality outshine the connotation that we are dead inside. Because we *can* outshine it. As Exile Refutation narratives demonstrate, we can eclipse the death association entirely with the sheer power of our determination to live.

3.7 Cumulative Findings

Assessing Asexual Exile tropes across genre, the sixteen subverted representations at 38 per cent clearly outnumber the twelve endorsed

Table 6 Asexual Exile in corpus cross-genre

	Death- Adjacent Ace	Loner Ace	Inhuman Ace	Non- exile	Total
Endorsed	3	5	4	N/A	12
Subverted	5	10	1	N/A	16
Non-exile	N/A	N/A	N/A	14	14
	8	15	5	14	42

representations at 29 per cent (see Table 6 and Figure 7). The remaining fourteen instances, or 33 per cent, are ones where exile is not present at all. It is the largely teenaged protagonists of the slice-of-life contemporary genre narratives who most reliably demonstrate Exile Refutation, with 62.5 per cent of refutation narratives being subversions of the Loner Ace trope. This encouragingly high rate of contemporary genre Exile Refutation portrayals indicates that the most identifiable asexual characters are the ones most likely to reject exile and embrace community. By contrast, the science fiction genre – admittedly with a smaller range of titles with asexual main characters, and thereby holding less of a presence in this study – trends toward exile endorsement. There are almost no attempts made to reclaim the Inhuman Ace trope, with the singular instance of science fiction Exile Refutation accounting for a measly 6.3 per cent of refutation narratives overall. Finally, turning toward fantasy, 25 per cent of the endorsements in this corpus are unquestioned portrayals of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, with 31.2 per cent of subversions being Exile Refutations of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope instead. These close figures render the fantasy sphere as something of a ‘battleground’ genre in this study, thus worthy of further investigation.

Intriguingly, 33 per cent of instances in this corpus abstain from the endorsement-versus-subversion question altogether by not engaging with an Asexual Exile trope to begin with. These neutral portrayals are only found in the contemporary and fantasy genre subsets, with the science fiction and historical genres being more polarised by contrast. Given the

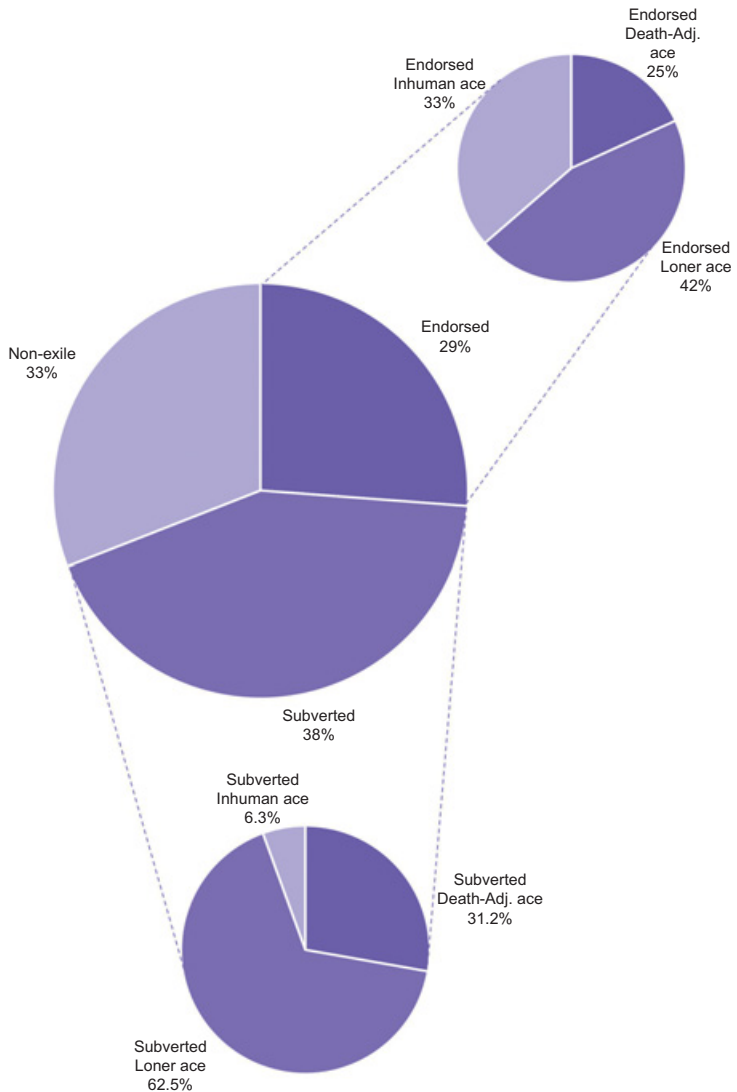


Figure 7 Asexual Exile in corpus cross-genre

drastic difference in the Asexual Exile tropes associated with each genre, neutrality bears different connotations depending on whether it is in the contemporary or the fantasy sphere. In the Loner Ace trope, where Asexual Exile manifests as friendlessness, an Exile Refutation tracks a recovery from social isolation. The difference between this and a contemporary depiction of non-exile is that in the latter, the asexual is never friendless to begin with. I would argue that this particular neutrality equates to a net positive outcome. Non-exiled contemporary asexual characters are already members of a community, with these platonic bonds being a refutation in and of themselves. Yes, there is no Exile Refutation present, but there does not need to be, as the problem has already been resolved. But to an asexual character caught up in the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, neutrality represents something entirely different, and it does not automatically carry the same subversive power. A contemporary asexual character being neutral to the Loner Ace trope guarantees them at least some form of community bond. But being neutral to the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, by comparison, guarantees nothing. This is precisely what constitutes a good portion of this trope's severity and stakes. In the fantasy genre, exile neutrality is a *true* neutrality. It does not promise friendship or family – it does not even promise *life*, with the death association insisting we do not live if we do not lust, given sex is believed to be fundamental to 'human nature' (MacInnis and Hodson 2012:739). In this way, these non-exiled asexual characters in the fantasy genre may not be written to belong with the dead. But this does not automatically mean they instead belong among the living.

Rarely are we afforded that right.

4 Asexual Necropolitics and Exile Alternatives

Slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself. – ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, Lauren Berlant.

This chapter reviews the key literature on necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), particularly queer and trans necropolitics (Puar 2012; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013), to precede my argument that we can identify in the Death-Adjacent Ace trope an emerging equivalent asexual necropolitics. To achieve this, I employ a reading of Edelman’s death drive (2004) to theorise that the key reason behind this dread of asexuals is tied to our aversion to sex. I argue that because of our refusal to go along quietly with compulsory sexuality – and with it, compulsory reproduction (Franke 2001) – asexuality has inspired a similar political contempt as the homosexual community received during the AIDS crisis (Butler 2004; Edelman 2004), albeit a contempt which is harder to recognise for what it truly is. This contempt stalking us through public opinion (MacInnis and Hodson 2012) and into our literary representation is most visible in Asexual Exile tropes, the most severe among these being the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. The asexual death association suggests something darkly fascinating about our long cultural shadow. Much like Edelman suggests of homosexual men (2004), asexuality is seen to harbour a future-negating power in our refusal to reproduce, and so we must be nudged toward negation ourselves, lest we ever be given the chance to succeed. I close by demonstrating the more promising trends found in this corpus, outlining how positive common qualities counter-balance the toxic ones previously discussed. By illuminating these potential futures, I posit that there is an antidote to exile in these stories – one where we can find life in community and in each other just as these characters do, following their example to affirm that we *do* belong, and that we cannot be outcast.

4.1 *An Introduction to Necropolitics*

Necropolitics, broadly, is the political theory that those who hold ideological power are able to decide, communicate, and enforce ‘who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe 2003:11). Originally, Mbembe developed this critique in reaction to slavery, genocide, and warfare, dissecting a eugenically driven contempt by a political sovereignty ‘whose central project is . . . *the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*’ (Mbembe 2003:14; emphasis in original). This analysis of military slaughter and refugee diaspora is orders of magnitude away from the glacial encouragement to die we see when we apply this theory to queer studies. Given that this is such a different context, the field dedicated to this study – queer necropolitics (Haritaworn et al. 2014) – leans more upon Berlant’s concept of slow death (2007) to make its case. This describes the ‘physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence’ (Berlant 2007:754), which is something Puar summarises in turn as ‘the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering’ (Puar 2012:149). Put another way, slow death could be framed as necropolitics when it takes its time – when there is no need to rush. It is a broad-spread political neglect and denial of prosperous conditions, ultimately corroding a communal will to live.

Berlant suggests survivors of domestic violence as one instance of these ‘subordinated populations’ potentially encountering slow deaths (2007:779), calling for other researchers to identify slow deaths where and when they encounter them. More recent adaptations of this theory utilise it to reanalyse political contempt toward the queer community, most obvious in the malicious refusal to mobilise resources and research during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s (Bersani 1987; Butler 2004; Puar 2012). In this way, Puar takes Berlant’s slow death and applies it to queer theory, specifically interrogating the gradual degradation of queer communities in order to answer Berlant’s call by asking ‘what kinds of “slow deaths” . . . a suicide might represent an escape from’ (2012:152): ‘How do queer girls commit suicide? What of the slow deaths of teenage girls through anorexia, bulimia, and numerous sexual assaults they endure as punishment for the

transgressing of proper femininity and alas, even for conforming to it?' (2012:157). The crux of this chapter is to turn these questions toward asexual slow death. We are long past the point of these being theoretical questions. One research paper surveying recent suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and asexual people in Australia suggests that 38.6 per cent of asexual respondents had experienced suicidal ideation in the preceding twelve months, with 4.9 per cent of asexual respondents having actively attempted suicide in the same time-frame (Lyons et al. 2022:527–528).

Death is not just in our present; it is in our future, too. Edelman's theory of the death drive is largely a response to the AIDS crisis and the resultant perception of homosexuality as a death sentence, arguing that 'what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively – to insist that the future stop here' (2004:31): 'Choose life, for life and the baby and meaning hang together in the balance, confronting the lethal counterweight of narcissism, AIDS, and death, all of which spring from commitment to . . . meaningless eruptions of *jouissance*' (2004:75). There is an obvious distinction we can make here for asexuals, who do not navigate all of this for 'eruptions of *jouissance*' but for the right to *abstain* from the eruptions – the right to not desire the eruptions at all. But to circumvent those eruptions is to circumvent the babies which come with them,⁵ thus lumping us in with the perceived narcissism of voluntary childlessness which Edelman refuses here to ignore. Reading sideways, we can see Bersani tracing this same path from orgasm to association with death, albeit without asexuality in mind. He achieves this through a disagreement with Foucault's reconfiguring of the human body as a site of sexually liberated pleasure, instead looking past this to the more radical

⁵ Admittedly, this is quite a functional view of sex, and of course I understand that reproduction is not the be-all and end-all of sexual intercourse. However, I would argue that the enduring preoccupation with procreation inherent in compulsory reproduction cannot be denied (Santos 2018:199), and gesture toward the ever-increasing body of research into compulsory reproduction – that is, 'the many and varied ways in which states regulate and shape the reproduction of their citizens' (Roseneil et al. 2016:2) – to substantiate this claim.

‘revulsion [homosexual behaviour] inspires’ (1987:26). There is a second Foucauldian argument to take up in this sphere, one wrapped in the biopolitical ‘right to take life or let live’ (Bersani 1987:756). Biopolitics, the effort to understand how characteristics of a population can pose particular problems to governmental practice (Foucault 1978:217), often provides a roadmap to identifying the justifications behind slow death (Berlant 2007). In this case, that justification is our refusal to churn out children and keep up the replacement rate.

There are, of course, asexuals who still reproduce. We are not all childless. However, sociological research suggests an asexual disinclination to procreate. One recent study indicates that just 57 per cent of asexual respondents want children, significantly less than heterosexual respondents at 91.5 per cent, bisexual respondents at 80.4 per cent, and homosexual respondents at 78.3 per cent (Hall and Knox 2022:2281). It is perhaps these asexuals who hegemonically come to represent us all, their reluctance to procreate understood as a refusal to propagate the future. Biopolitically, we are breeding stock. Asexuality is as undesirable a characteristic as one could hope for in the face of a social system vested in the regulation and deployment of our sexual desire and activity. This undesirability gives way to our negation, with attention often only paid to queer minorities when they are actively destroyed. ‘Trans necropolitics’ by C Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013), for example, condemns the ways in which transgender lives and voices – particularly those belonging to transgender people of colour – are only given priority and amplification in death rather than in life. They go on to allege that ‘spectacularly violated [transgender] bodies are continually reinscribed as degenerate and killable’ (2013:67): ‘We as scholars, critics, and activists might apprehend a biopolitics of everyday life, where the transgender body of color is the unruly body, which only in death can be transformed or translated into the service of state power’ (2013:68).

When we refuse to breed, we are rendered killable, too. Indeed, it is kill or *be* killed; extinguish or extinction. Asexual continuance constitutes a threat to the systems of power keeping us all under the thumb of compulsory sexuality and compulsory reproduction alike. Asexuality, too difficult apparently for these systems to adapt to, must instead be contained – how better to contain it

than to cast it out? To reconfigure asexuality as an aberrant outlier to ‘normal’ society, to insist over and over that to be asexual is to be asocial, inhuman, and not truly alive?

4.2 *Slow Death in Asexual YA*

In *Let’s Talk about Love* by Claire Kann (2018), Alice’s schoolyard bullies had a worse nickname for her than Valley Girl or Reese the Piece. They called her ‘The Corpse’ (2018:4). Her narration explains why: ‘Because she had just laid there while Sam had sex with her, and he had told everyone’ (2018:32). Her recollection of the encounter is marked by sexual passivity: kissing Sam had been ‘an ordeal to overcome’, and she expressed no desire to masturbate him when asked (2018:32). This sexual disinterest is apparently so laughable an anecdote that Alice’s peers gleefully associate it with necrophilia to deride her. She did not perform adequately, she did not feel the sexual attraction required in order for her humanity to count, and as a result she is reduced to a cadaver by schoolyard taunts. This prejudice has its share of racist implications as well. While the ridicule wrought on Alice is mediated as a punishment for her not being enthusiastic in the bedroom, it is clear elsewhere in the text that, as a young Black woman, Alice is expected to meet a sex-crazed racial stereotype. This stereotype is known in research as the ‘Jezebel’, describing an aggressive Black female promiscuity (Stephens and Phillips 2005) which is ‘at worst, insatiable’ (Collins 2000:83). A contemporary wave of objectification in mainstream media has deepened this stereotype to new extremes (Conrad et al. 2009; Ward et al. 2013), with these same inferences clear in Margot’s dismissal of Alice’s low libido:

‘I don’t see the point,’ Alice said. ‘I don’t need it. I don’t think about it.’

‘Sex?’ Margot laughed – a tiny giggle, as if Alice had told a mildly funny joke. ‘But you’re Black.’ (2018:4)

To Margot, Alice being uninterested in sex is literally laughable, given the hypersexual Black woman stereotype. This denial of Alice’s epistemic authority, while inarguably prejudicial in that her right to self-identify is under siege,

is nonetheless a non-physical assault. But elsewhere, the discrimination Alice faces becomes invasively physical, with her intersectional identity markers – Black, female, asexual – leaving her particularly vulnerable to ongoing threat. The sexual harassment she experiences as an adult is more confronting, with Alice being cornered by a partygoer who feels entitled to her body:

‘Don’t be like that. Come on,’ he said . . . placing his palm flat by the side of her head in that way boys seem to do when they want to corner their prey. ‘You know exactly how you look . . . Sexy as fuck. I’ve never been with a Black girl before . . . You should give me a chance.’ His free hand traced a line across her thigh, right below the hem of her skirt. (2018:117)

His actions are coercive, his intimate physical contact uninvited and unwanted, and his dialogue further exoticises and sexualises Alice by reducing her to her race and clothing. The automatic assumption he makes that she will reciprocate these advancements is discriminatory on multiple grounds: sexist, racist, and acephobic all in one. This direct comparison connects Alice’s bullies at school with her adult pursuers, in turn drawing a clear throughline between schoolyard bullying and the sexual harassment of the adult world, one represented here as inextricable from intersectional prejudice.

Let’s Talk about Love is not an instance of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. As a contemporary genre novel, it is not even an instance of the Loner Ace trope either, since Alice has a network of friends and family throughout the narrative. This makes *Let’s Talk about Love* an instance of exile neutrality. Yet the death association is right there. Her bullies openly call her The Corpse to break her spirit, all because she is not performing adequately to their sexual expectations. This is because Alice is acting here as a window into asexual lived experience. She is a representation and testimony rolled into one: the death association presses in on her precisely because it presses in on all of us, and it can only do so because we are believed to be adjacent to death.

This brings me to the question I have been contemplating now for quite some time: *are Asexual Exiles slow deaths?* On the surface, they do not seem

to be. If anything, they seem like a reversal of slow death, with not a single asexual character in this corpus dying by a novel's close. And yet, the uncomfortable nature of these exile representations appears undeniable all the same. These conflicting feelings at first refused to align themselves into recognition, as if something in me did not want to see or know the truth: I was attempting to reconcile Asexual Exile with a metaphor when in fact I was witnessing something far more interactive. All of these mounting endorsements of Asexual Exile do not *depict* our slow death. They actively *contribute to* our slow death. They encourage our isolation, at their worst insisting that our lives do not count as 'grievable' (Butler 2004) or worth protecting: 'An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all' (Butler 2009:38). The Death-Adjacent Ace trope is not a handcrafted indoctrination gimmick devised by those who hold political power, designed to pick us off one by one. Rather, it is the consequence of what those political powers *have* given us, and they have given us the death association now sewn to our nape. In a slow death, we do not need to be murdered. We merely need to be encouraged to die. All supports are taken away, all lifelines are withheld, and this eats at our resolve until we feel so alone, invisible, and unwanted that we are willing to take matters into our own hands.

When we ask what kinds of slow deaths asexual suicides represent an escape from, I should think by this stage that the answer is clear. They represent an escape from the myriad ways compulsory sexuality grinds us into dust. We are made to feel broken. We are *understood* to be broken, believed by our peers to be cold, emotionless, and not truly alive (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). Our sexual attraction to no one and epistemic authority to self-identify is undermined by our peers and pathologised by our professionals. Our visibility is severely lacking in the media, our representation inadequate, the resultant scarcity of asexual characters isolating us even further. What characters we *do* have are rife with Asexual Exile tropes, most dramatically the Death-Adjacent Ace trope, which dehumanises us even further through connotations of undeath. I have found in this research that while 67 per cent of asexual characters in this corpus are exiled in some way, 29 per cent go without any attempt to overcome this state. I can only imagine how much more dire these statistics would become in a multimodal

study poised to overview representation across media forms. In the face of this evidence, it seems undeniable. An asexual slow death is well underway.

This leaves us with two choices: to resist, or to renounce. The work of renouncing is already underway, as demonstrated by the 38 per cent of asexual characters in this corpus whose Asexual Exile tropes are directly refuted, and the further 33 per cent who are never engaged with this trope to begin with. It is a positive portent that Exile Refutation narratives in YA have experienced such a groundswell. This proves that asexual and allied authors *can* intervene. We are already doing so, working to lift ourselves out of obscurity, encouraging the representation we wish to see more of and condemning the representations which misconfigure us as inherently Other. It falls to asexual characters to refute their exile. But in the broader narrative of Asexual Exile, the more important narrative, the one that asexuals are made to participate in every moment of our lives – it falls to us. This is work not just for asexual authors, but for the allies who stand by our side. We can overcome this cultural exile through other representations besides Exile Refutations, with alternate narrative pathways available to help us speak over the top of these exile endorsements. I posit that if we can speak over Asexual Exile, then we can speak over the death association at the same time.

4.3 *The Antidote to Exile*

It is seemingly in order for me to report that subverted representations of exile outweigh those which go unchallenged. However, while this may be the case, there will always be readers who simply take a loner, inhuman, or death-adjacent asexual character as nothing more than what they appear to be on the surface. Even if the author has worked to subvert that exile storyline in an Exile Refutation narrative, there is a representational quandary here which feeds into anxieties around ethical representation and the authority to engage with harmful tropes. *What if the reader misunderstands the subversion, we are left to wonder; what if the audience misses the point?*

What, then, is the antidote to Asexual Exile? If we sideline Exile Refutation narratives for the time being, looking for an answer entirely from the outside, what can we do to counter Asexual Exile tropes if we do not engage them in the first place?

Here is my answer: we continue outweighing Asexual Exile with its polar opposite. Asexual and allied authors stay the course of breathing life into a *new* trope, a better one – not an Asexual Exile but an Asexual Belonging – one where we wield our representations like a crowbar, prying our way back into society as many times as it takes. I have found in this corpus that there are fourteen instances (33 per cent) which have already begun this work, split between two key identifiable trends. I refer to these as the Mismatched Attraction and Non-Romantic Love Story tropes. I will now overview each, laying out their typical features and functions to demonstrate how these stories can champion Asexual Belonging as a direct response to Asexual Exile. By encouraging these representations which foster Asexual Belonging, we can drive a wedge into the dominant narrative that asexuals do not belong. We can begin the work of halting our slow death in its tracks.

4.3.1 Mismatched Attraction

Of the fourteen instances of Asexual Belonging, seven (50 per cent) feature the Mismatched Attraction trope, taking up 17 per cent of this corpus as a whole (see Table 7). It is common for asexual-spectrum YA to explore relationship dynamics wherein an asexual character and a non-asexual character make mutual compromises in a fledgling romance. These characters go on to renegotiate their relationship, keeping their different orientations and comfort levels in mind. Typically, this mismatch in their sexual attractions and attitudes leads to inner-relationship conflict, with this usually at least temporarily overcome by the novel's close. It is this trend I have named the Mismatched Attraction trope.

Table 7 Asexual Belonging in corpus cross-genre

	Mismatched Attraction	Non-Romantic Love Story	N/A	Total
Endorsed	7	3	0	10
N/A	0	0	4	4
Total	7	3	4	14

Table 8 Frequency of sex attitude

Sex attitude	Frequency
Sex-neutral	36
Sex-negative	4
Sex-positive	5
Total	45

Attitudinally, there are two major metrics for assessing an asexual person's feelings toward sex. First is their sex attitude, or how they feel about sex conceptually; second is their sex aversion, or how they feel about being involved in sexual intercourse personally. In terms of sex attitude, the asexual characters under consideration within this corpus veer toward neutrality, with 80 per cent represented as sex-neutral (see Table 8). These characters are largely unbothered by the topic of sex, with it not being something they tend to think about. They often fail to notice the sexuality of other characters or even the sexuality of the society around them more broadly. By contrast, sex-negative asexuals – those who express discomfort or even revulsion at the topic – account for 8.9 per cent of the characters under study. These characters tend to recoil from sexual conversations and may feel uncomfortable about public displays of affection surrounding them. This smaller frequency of sex-negative asexual characters is in similar measure to sex-positive asexuals at 11 per cent, who tend to be quite comfortable with sex as a conversation topic and may even advocate for safe sex awareness in their social and community groups.

As for their sex aversion metrics, sex-favourable asexuals are by far the least represented, accounting for just 20 per cent of asexual characters under study – a significant figure, though still a clear minority in this literature (see Table 9). These asexuals are comfortable with intercourse and even express willingness to engage in it themselves within their relationships.⁶ This statistic echoes my previous findings that just 11.8 per cent of asexual characters in YA fantasy

⁶ It is especially disappointing to see such a dearth of representation here, not least because one particularly exciting aspect of sex-favourable asexual representation is its potential to disrupt hegemonic underpinnings of desire in romance fiction.

Table 9 Frequency of sex aversion

Sex aversion	Frequency
Sex-indifferent	17
Sex-repulsed	19
Sex-favourable	9
Total	45

fiction are represented as identifying along sex-favourable lines (O'Connor 2019). Sexual attraction is commonly depicted and understood as a necessary component of sexual arousal, when in reality, attraction to no one can be exactly that: sexual arousal without a target or object of desire. Comparative to sex-favourable asexuals, 38 per cent of asexual characters in this corpus are sex-indifferent, with no intense feelings one way or the other about whether they have sexual intercourse. They may still have sex for one reason or another, such as to please a partner or out of curiosity, but sex is not something they are particularly bothered by or seek out. Put simply, these characters do not care about sex. Finally, sex-repulsed asexuals are the primary group represented in this corpus at 42 per cent, or just under half. These asexuals find sexual intercourse off-putting, often expressing disgust at the prospect of engaging it for themselves, and are usually happily celibate.

With these different attitudinal metrics in mind, the representational value to the Mismatched Attraction trope becomes all the more stark. For example, Claire Legrand's *Sawkill Girls* (2018) centres Zoey, an asexual protagonist who recently broke up with her boyfriend Grayson after an unenjoyable first time in bed together. Both Zoey and Grayson still harbour romantic feelings for each other, and the re-negotiation of their romantic relationship to de-emphasise sex constitutes much of Zoey's character arc across the narrative. Ultimately, Grayson offers to go celibate for Zoey, and Zoey accepts that she cannot know for sure at the age of seventeen whether she wants to rule out sex forever (2018:530):

'Maybe,' she said slowly, 'I'll find out that I want to have sex with you. On occasion.'

‘Maybe,’ he agreed. ‘Or maybe you won’t. And that’s okay.’

‘Maybe I’ll transform overnight into a sex fiend.’

‘Maybe I’ll decide to take a vow of abstinence.’ (2018:530)

Non-compromise between potential romantic partners tends to be rarer by comparison. In Mackenzi Lee’s *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (2018), asexual protagonist Felicity does not reciprocate non-asexual deuteragonist Sim’s sapphic attraction, though she expresses a clear fascination with her at times: ‘this dangerous, gorgeous, wildfire of a woman’ (2018:340). The adjective choice ‘gorgeous’ here hints at Felicity’s appreciation of Sim being physically attractive. This appraisal remains independent from any sexual attraction on Felicity’s side, even when she appreciates Sim through traditionally romantic metaphor, the ‘wildfire’ metaphor connoting a burning passion. This non-normative queerplatonic friendship is disruptive to romance-dominated literature, not to mention compulsory romance more broadly. Similar to this fascination, sometimes the Mismatched Attraction trope leads to a more sensual place of non-sexual intimacy, such as by exploratory kissing or intimate space-sharing with no end goal. This occurs in Linsey Miller’s *What We Devour* (2021): ‘Wes had turned in our sleep. His head was nestled against my calf . . . Not once in the night had he expected more’ (2021:256). This physical intimacy is an undeniably sensual tactile connection, but one without any expectations of sexual outcome.⁷

In this, we can see an Asexual Belonging coming to life on the page. These characters overcome their differences – in a personal sense through their differing preferences and desires; in a broader sense, overcoming the divide between asexuality and compulsory sexuality, too. The Mismatched Attraction trope reverses the worst qualities of the Exiled Together

⁷ These depictions are especially encouraging for romantic asexuals seeking representation, though they are notably sometimes criticised for contributing to aromantic erasure. I would argue that the issue is not with the representations themselves, but with the inability of monolithic representations to represent all aspects of asexuality at once, a point I return to in my discussion of multiple asexual characters later in this chapter.

permutation I analysed previously. Where an Exiled Together couple is cordoned *off*, in the Mismatched Attraction trope, that couple is instead welcomed *in*. One represents surrender, while the other represents integration.

4.3.2 Non-Romantic Love Story

Comparatively, four of the fourteen Asexual Belonging instances – 29 per cent, or 9.5 per cent of this corpus as a whole – feature the Non-Romantic Love Story trope. While compulsory sexuality is one beast, compulsory romance is entirely another. One key difference between them is that romance does not hold a taboo status in Western society. Family friendly parables, as one obvious example, quietly gear children to accept that romantic love is the ultimate goal. This phenomenon is critiqued by recent research into the ‘couple-norm’ (Roseneil et al. 2020), a term describing the primacy and privileging of romantic relationships in contemporary Western societies (2020:3): ‘... the good citizen is the coupled citizen, and the socially integrated, psychologically developed and well-functioning person is coupled ... To be outside the couple-form is, in many ways, to be outside, or at least on the margins of, society’ (2020:4).

With coupledness taken as the ‘normal, natural and superior way of being an adult’ (2020:3), romance becomes the happily ever after in our stories, the castle under the clouds. With this being the case, the possibility for aromantic representation is well-set by the Non-Romantic Love Story trope, where stories revise romance-centrism by instead prioritising familial love or love between friends. This is in line with societal understanding of aromantic relationships in real life: ‘Aromantics may choose to build their life around friendships and may not be interested in a long-term, cohabitating, monogamous romantic partnership’ (Tessler 2023:5). True love in these depictions is not an instant romance between pre-destined soulmates. Instead, it is the unconditional bond between family, either born or found. While none of the aromantic characters in this corpus enter into romantic or sexual partnerships, a great number of them form a close platonic bond. Of the forty-two novels in this corpus, the primary relationships represented are romantic bonds, numbering twenty-two (52 per cent). Comparatively, eighteen (43 per cent) uphold primary platonic bonds, with a final two

Table 10 Gender in platonic relationship dynamics

Relationship	Frequency
F&F	10
F&M	7
F&F&M	1
Total	18

(4.8 per cent) representing asocial aromantic characters without any discernible bonds either way. I find this particular subset of representation especially encouraging, as a growing number of real-world asexual and/or aromantic people identify with the emerging label ‘aplatic’ (AUREA 2020), a neologism describing an absence of desire to form friendships or a marked difficulty in doing so.

The majority of the platonic bond dynamics in this corpus are homo-social and between two females, accounting for 56 per cent of aromantic relationships depicted (see Table 10). This is closely followed by hetero-social bonds at 39 per cent. Polysocial bonds, wherein a bond is forged between more than two characters, account for the final 5.6 per cent, or just one instance. In all of these dynamics, authors emphasise how important platonic relationships are to asexual people – especially aromantic asexual people – often out-valuing romance. To recall my literature review in the second chapter, this mirrors real-life sociological findings. Gupta, for instance, identifies how asexual respondents described reclaiming their agency from compulsory sexuality by forming asexual communities and prioritising non-sexual relationships in their personal lives (2017:1000). The vitality of asexual community has been upheld in research since, such as Esther Rothblum, Kyra Heimann, and Kylie Carpenter’s interview-based study where 48 per cent of asexual respondents described personal support networks inclusive of their asexual identity (2019). Angela Delli Paoli and Giuseppe Masullo (2022) underscore their ethnography on the online asexual community with similar research: ‘Asexuality finds a recognition

and a legitimization within online spaces . . . new forms of fantasies are legitimized, new languages are negotiated' (2022:169).

This evidence clarifies why platonic and familial dynamics outvalue traditional romance narratives when it comes to these representations. The Non-Romantic Love Story trope constitutes an incendiary interruption to Asexual Exile, embodying an Asexual Belonging by having an asexual character not only find community but have their place cemented within that community. Aromantic ties clearly elucidate that a community is far more than romance and far more than the couple-norm. Friendship and family are a stronger cross-section of society than a couple in isolation, as we see in the Exiled Together permutation, or even an integrated couple, as in the Mismatched Attraction trope. To put this another way, the Non-Romantic Love Story trope communicates a message of *you belong* rather than *you belong with me* – an ace of clubs, some might say, in place of an ace of hearts.

Akemi Dawn Bowman's *Summer Bird Blue* (2018) shares this sentiment, prioritising the love between sisters over any romantic love. *Summer Bird Blue* is a coming-of-age story, tracking the introspective journey protagonist Rumi goes through after the sudden traumatic death of her sister Lea. Set against a backdrop of serene Hawai'i, the tranquillity of these shores is a sharp contrast to the raw wound of Rumi's grief: 'I'm going to grow old without a sister – I'm going to live an entire lifetime without my best friend' (2018:84–85). Lea's sudden absence prompts Rumi to look deeper at another absence, one harder to stomach without her platonic partner: the absence of romantic desire. Initially, she describes herself as 'indifferent' to it (2018:104), later self-identifying more specifically in narration as asexual and on the aromantic spectrum (2018:332). Her attitude toward her sexuality is reasonably positive, with no traces of internalised acephobia. Instead, she expresses a resigned frustration with the compulsorily sexual society unwilling to accommodate her difference: 'I don't feel like I have fewer pieces than anyone else, or that I'm somehow less whole because I don't want to date. But I feel like I'm *supposed* to feel that way' (2018:104–105; emphasis in original). Overcoming this alienation, amplified tenfold by her grief, forms the narrative arc of the novel. It culminates with Rumi finally accepting

with the help of her friends that she will survive this and that she is not broken: 'You're a whole person. Your family might not look the same as it used to, but *you're* whole' (2018:305; emphasis in original). This platonic support and self-acceptance allow her the space and permission to properly feel the magnitude of losing Lea, her sister and soulmate:

I love her. I loved her in life and I love her in death and that kind of love only comes around once in a lifetime. Fuck romance – Lea was the love of my life. It was beautiful and horrible and messy and angry, but it was also the purest, most innocent kind of love I'll ever feel. (2018:348)

This passionate declaration of non-romantic love perforates compulsory romance and the couple-norm by insisting that the pinnacle of human passion can be found elsewhere than romance or sex. It can be found in bonds, connections which are untethered completely from sex or romance, just as in the real world: 'Relationships do not have to be romantic in order to be significant, nor do they have to be romantic in order to fulfill the roles that romantic relationships traditionally include' (Tessler 2023:16). In this spirit, these stories 'uncouple' the couple-norm, allowing asexuality to exist comfortably by its side prioritising community and centring the importance of adolescent friendship as a support structure. This is especially important given how fraught these representations have been in YA to date. As one instance, Ann Childs examines the formulaic treatment of female friendships in YA dystopian fiction, friendships which are often cast aside in favour of a heterosexual love interest, 'implicitly accepting rather than challenging society's preconceptions of female friendships as intrinsically shallow' (2014:200). The Non-Romantic Love Story trope combats this societal disregard by presenting platonic love as life-changing and full of passion, intrinsically deep as opposed to intrinsically shallow.

In Oseman's *Loveless* (2020), aromantic asexual protagonist Georgia learns that she has already found true love in her friendships and does not need it from romance – 'I used to dream of a spellbinding, endless, forever romance . . . But now, I realised, friendship could be that too' (2020:335) –

and when bisexual main character Rooney tells Georgia that she loves her, it is fundamentally queerplatonic, replacing the story beat where a romantic confession would typically appear:

Obviously I'm not romantically in love with you. But I realised that whatever these feelings are for you . . . I feel like I *am* in love. Me and you – *this* is a fucking love story! . . . And maybe most people would look at us and think that we're *just friends*, or whatever, but I know that it's . . . so much MORE than that. (2020:413; emphasis in original)

In this way, these positive potentials of the Non-Romantic Love Story and Mismatched Attraction tropes make the darkest potential readings of Asexual Exile tropes – the necropolitical reading of these tropes – all the more dire. At their best, asexual representations can give voice and visibility to a representation-starved audience seeking to see their experiences reflected in media which has, until recently, treated their experiences as unacceptable for not meeting a compulsorily sexual standard. But at their worst, these representations can swing in the opposite direction altogether. They can instead solidify pre-existing biases and isolate us not just from society but from our own will to live. What this necropolitical assessment of Asexual Exile reveals is that these stories of Asexual Belonging are more important than ever. In many ways, they are our way back to life.

Make no mistake, the deck is stacked against us. But that deck can be shuffled, dealing us a better hand. All the right cards are there already – clear trends of Asexual Belonging evidenced by what I identify in the Mismatched Attraction and Non-Romantic Love Story tropes – they only need to be rearranged. In that rearrangement, asexuals can be revived. Our slow death can be reversed. Our story can be rewritten.

4.3.3 Multiple Asexual Characters

'The LGBT community is most often othered through the act of staring and being stared at', claims Bittner (2016:204), describing cisgendered heterosexual assumptions of queer identity based on monolithic example. While a queer person never looks like just one thing, one person's representation is

still often taken as another's erasure. We can see this pattern across identity groups, such as in reactions to distinct representations of a racial identity or opposing attitudes to gendered presentations of femininity. Likewise, the asexual spectrum cannot be categorised as any one thing due to the expansive multitude of unique experiences and sub-identities contained therein (Kim 2010; Cerankowski and Milks 2014; Przybylo 2019). This fact troubles representations of asexual characters, since it is difficult to allude to these multitudes when portraying a singular character's individual experience. Asexual characters are, therefore, routinely criticised as some grander comment about what asexuality must look like, with asexual readers often alienated by sub-identities that do not match their own – aromantic readers feeling alienated by alloromantic characters, for example, and vice versa. I would not be the first to suggest that multiplicity is the best way of approaching this problem: 'Features of contemporary texts, such as multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, and multimodalities, invite readers to consider varied viewpoints on personal and social problems, including those normally under-represented' (Ivey and Johnston 2013:257). Alex Henderson embraces the term 'non-binary YA' to describe the subset of Young Adult fiction with non-binary main characters (2022:1), making a similar call about the vitality of multiple non-binary characters here:

Multiple characters also provide multiple versions of non-binary experience, gender articulation, presentation, and personality within a single text, helping to prevent the perception of a singular non-binary archetype – something particularly relevant given the multitudinous ways of being non-binary. (Henderson 2022:17)

With this pattern in mind, it is worth noting that the majority of asexual characters represented in my literary survey are cisgender women at 75.6 per cent, followed by cisgender men who are the next most common at 20 per cent, with non-binary characters amounting for the final 4.4 per cent. This much is to be expected, given that YA is well-known for the female skew to its readership, authorship, and character base (Lewit 2012). This also reflects the existing understanding of the real-life gender

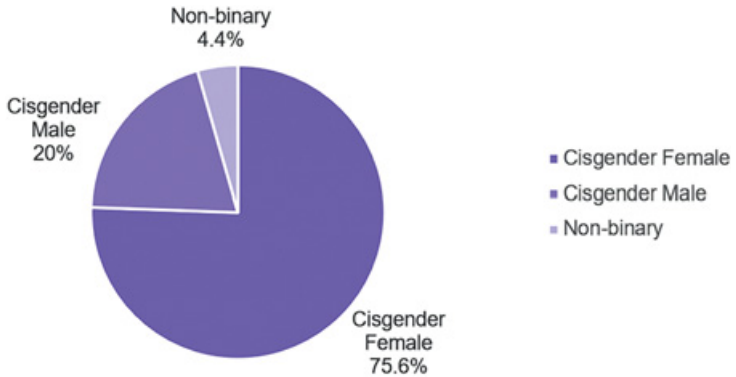


Figure 8 Gender breakdown of corpus cross-genre

breakdown of asexual people, with sociological research indicating that between 60 per cent and 73.5 per cent of surveyed asexuals identify as women (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014:180).⁸

Interestingly, and worryingly, there are no examples of transgender asexual characters who still identify with a binary gender in any of my corpus examples. Some novels feature female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF) transgender characters in a supporting role to the asexual protagonist, such as in *Beyond the Black Door* (Strickland 2019) and *Hullmetal Girls* (Skrutskie 2018). Some FTM and MTF characters even reached main-character status alongside the asexual lead, such as in *On a Summer Night* (Vidrine 2018) and even in *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016). But none of these transgender characters were both FTM or MTF *and* asexual.

What gender-diverse asexuals do exist within this corpus identify outside of the gender binary entirely, with some adopting the non-gendered

⁸ This makes no mention of the massive community of gender diverse asexuals self-identifying with labels including, but by no means limited to, genderqueer, agender, nonbinary, and trans. While this contingent of asexuality may be less recognised in academia, community-led research underscores their presence time and again – see Hermann et al. (2022) for more on this.

pronouns they/ them/ theirs. Others retain their gendered pronouns prior to transition but express a lack of identification with their birth gender in other ways, usually by self-identifying with the term 'non-binary' explicitly on-page. As one example, in *The Lost Coast* by Amy Rose Capetta (2019), Lelia has her friend explicitly come out as non-binary on her behalf: 'I kind of hate having to tell people . . . but I do want them to know, so June is helping me out' (2019:60). This non-binary representation is promising for the transgender community overall and by no means should be seen as a consolation prize for the lack of FTM or MTF characters in their stead. But 4.4 per cent is still a clear minority, not to mention one that suggests a massive representational gap for young transgender asexual readers seeking role models in their YA fiction. This gap yawns wider than ever for transgender asexuals who still identify with a binary gender, albeit a different one from the one assigned to them at birth. And the asexual-transgender representational gap is not the only absence worth interrogating, either.

Non-asexual aromanticism is a kind of asexual-spectrum identity with character representation much further behind the curve compared to that of aromantic asexuals and romantic asexuals, respectively. This makes sense, in a way, given the comparative lack of attention to aromanticism in general, with Hannah Tessler crediting the invisibility of aromanticism in part to it being assumed and overshadowed as an asexual sub-identity: 'In the existing studies, aromantic individuals are taken as a subsample of a larger asexual sample, therefore, there is no data on allosexual aromantic individuals' (2023:19). Likewise, non-asexual aromantic characters were entirely absent from my corpus, going entirely unexplored in the extensive sample of asexual-spectrum YA I studied. In their stead, the #OwnVoices stories and experiences shared in sociological literature were particularly inspirational, such as this instance spotlighted in *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* by Angela Chen (2020): '[David] experiences sexual attraction but doesn't know what it's like to want a specifically romantic relationship . . . [David felt a] worry that deep down, he was a sick, selfish person who wanted to use people for their bodies' (2020:124). The balancing act demanded of us is a fascinating one. I have already outlined how, without sex in the picture, romance is regarded as immature at best, lacking the 'human' passion one can apparently only

experience through their loins. But there is a mirror image of this truth which holds just as much sway only in reverse: without romance to pave the path for sex, legitimising it as good and loving rather than immoral and objectifying, we are made to feel monstrous.

The representational impact of non-asexual aromantic characters should be readily apparent by now, but perhaps their most compelling value is what they represent regarding the work yet to come. There are many conversations still to be had and studies still to be conducted into areas such as the absence of sex-favourable aromantic characters. I would reiterate the point that everyone deserves to have representation in which they see themselves. Even beyond this basic truth, it is unjust to pigeonhole asexual representations any further than they already are. The more diverse our characters, the more multifacetedly asexuality can be understood. It is in pursuit of this very mission statement much of this research has been conducted.

5 Looking Ahead

In the third chapter, I briefly described the climax of Little Badger's *Elatsoe* (2020) and protagonist Ellie's refusal to go quietly into her Asexual Exile. We can see similar notes of this refrain in Katherine's storyline in *Deathless Divide* (Ireland 2020), a novel I discussed as an example of how Exile Refutation manifests in historical fiction. But Katherine and Elatsoe are not the only asexual characters in this corpus to defy the Death-Adjacent Ace trope in such a manner. A third among them is the character of Noemi in *We Were Restless Things* (Nagamatsu 2020). *We Were Restless Things* is a fantasy novel straddling the line between magical realism and murder mystery, demonstrating an Exile Refutation of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. The catalyst to the novel is the strange death of local teenager Link, who drowned in the middle of dry land nowhere near a water source. Asexual protagonist Noemi struggles in the aftermath, especially since Link confessed romantic feelings for her in the hours before his death. Ultimately, Link's killer is revealed in the climax to be a fae-like entity acting as an avatar of death itself. This liminal being dwells in the forest and has taken a particular interest in Noemi, going so far as to drown Link because his romantic interest upset her. Taking on and corrupting Link's appearance, the creature's characterisation is notably thanatoid and clinical:

He watched her chest . . . like she was a cross section of a girl . . . [I]t was easy to see her chest moving in and out, lungs pumping hard somewhere beneath that thin wall of muscle. She panted like a rabbit pinned beneath paws, and it seemed to dawn on 'Link' that he should be taking air in as well, as though he'd forgotten to breathe this whole time. He exhaled, over and over so he would look alive in the way that she was alive, though everything about the way he did it suggested he found living to be a dreary repetition of irksome tasks. (2020:385)

Noemi's life force is coded here as fragile and under threat, similes working in tandem to associate her with a caged rabbit about to be vivisected. She is

not still or lifeless – in fact, she is the opposite – she heaves for breath, wary and trapped. The death-adjacent qualities of the entity serve as a foil to Noemi’s endangered liveliness, creating a grim allusion toward what she will become should she remain here. It is an ugly vision, and one anathema to her by her own admission:

‘Do you think you could be happy living here?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she said. Firm. She didn’t even have to think about it. ‘I already have a place to live. I couldn’t be happy never seeing my family again.’ . . .

‘What will convince you to stay?’

‘Nothing,’ she said. She couldn’t phrase it any more clearly. ‘Nothing will.’

‘You have no choice but to stay . . . What will make it easier?’

‘Nothing. I have no time for things I don’t want to do.’
(2020:384)

In these reclamation narratives, the asexual character refuses to be exiled. The story waits right until the critical moment, that fateful moment where every reader aware of the Death-Adjacent Ace trope would be bracing themselves to see another asexual exiled to a death world. That precise moment is where the asexual heroine digs her heels in, determined to stay, determined to live. But necropolitically, there is a second refusal happening here, one where these girls act as a stand-in for an asexuality under siege by the slow death marking us as killable and without a right to life.

Our representation is rife with the message that we do not belong, so we internalise the belief that we do not belong, and have that belief drummed into us by the acephobic discrimination this message fosters and promotes. This alienation and its resultant necropolitical asexual suicides are proof that our slow death is well at work. But it is within our power to change this. Our portrayals in YA can be rife with a different message instead – one where we *do* belong – one where asexual readers are not prompted to die, but instead encouraged to live. Just as the characters in these Refutation narratives stand together in my corpus, asexual and allied authors can stand

together, too. Together, we can demonstrate that, by subverting Asexual Exile and prioritising Asexual Belonging in its place, we can write ourselves back from the dead.

My goal in this research has been to examine how compulsory sexuality has fostered a complex and genre-spanning ostracisation of asexual characters in YA fiction. I have found that this Othering has dire implications toward the ongoing asexual slow death convincing us that we do not count as human and that our deaths do not count at all. Creative refutations are an everyday intervention into that slow death, with asexual-spectrum YA containing a representational impasse between endorsements and subversions of Asexual Exile – and indeed, between Asexual Exile tropes and the Asexual Belonging narratives battling to drown them out. It is crucial to keep up the pressure in this fight. It is damning indeed that the sole existing literature on asexual narrative theory (Hanson 2014) seems unable to fathom any other reading of asexual existence than as ‘nothing of consequence’ (2014:357); a ‘non-event’ (2014:367). I have spent a good portion of this research denouncing this view, proving that asexual narratives are full of life and love. We are anything but still, and anything but lifeless. But, to borrow a well-known creative writing maxim: telling that is one thing, and showing it is entirely another. It is my earnest belief that Asexual Exile cannot be counteracted by armchair critique. The asexual slow death before us is a present-tense problem, one which calls for an active intervention demonstrated in real time.

This study began with a demonstration of a failed attempt to subvert the Asexual Exile trope, via a reading of McGuire’s *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016). In the spirit of circularity, it is only fitting I return to it now as I make my final observations. One of the tensest moments in *Every Heart a Doorway* comes in the second act, when Nancy has no other option but to become so still that her heart stops beating entirely. She does this in order to avoid detection by the book’s antagonist, as it is her only hope of survival. This chapter is aptly titled ‘Be still as stone, and you may live’:

She could feel her heart slowing, five beats becoming four, becoming three, until there was no more than one beat per minute, until she barely had to breathe . . . It didn’t

feel like anything special. It just felt *correct*, as if this was what she should have been all the time, always. (2016:155–156; emphasis in original)

Nancy's character is edged in by stillness – it is her peace, her ambition, and her survival instinct. Stillness to her is 'absolute' and 'profound' (2016:74), and her lack of enthusiasm for the 'quick, or hot, or restless' acts as a metaphor for her disengagement from compulsory sexuality (2016:27). But this does not automatically render it a successful metaphor. In all respects, Nancy reads as a character who feels no need to be alive – or at least, one who feels no need to be a part of the world of the living. Several years before Kennon would go on to make a claim with uncomfortably similar wording (2021:16), Arseneault (2017) outlines the harmful impact of Nancy's characterisation given the pre-existent assumptions often made about asexual people: 'Her ability to remain perfectly unmoving is frequently tied to a lack of emotion and to invisibility – two other elements often associated with asexuality' (2017:para.16). The world of the living is connoted as an oppressive force to Nancy – she is written as a character whose body resists something as important as *breathing* – and it is specifically because she is asexual that her horizon of lifelessness is so concerning, because real-life asexuals have no choice but to struggle against the perception that we are not truly alive and not truly human (MacInnis and Hodson 2012).

It would be unjust to claim *Every Heart a Doorway* makes no attempt to separate or 'distance' (Arseneault 2017:para.6) Nancy's asexuality from her trajectory as a deathwards-bound character. Nancy clarifies in narration that her asexuality played no part in her wonderland. If anything, it meant she was at odds with the occupants of that world:

She would have thought her lack of sexual desire had been what had drawn her to the Underworld – so many people had called her a 'cold fish' and said she was dead inside back when she'd been attending an ordinary high school, among ordinary teenagers, after all – except that none of the people

she'd met in those gloriously haunted halls had shared her orientation. They lusted as hotly as the living did. (2016:42)

This attempts to justify Nancy's characterisation, positing that she is not death-adjacent because of her asexuality but simply death-adjacent *and* asexual at the same time. But one throwaway paragraph attempting to extricate two forces which are at all other times in the novella inextricably linked is clumsy at best and patronising at worst. The death association is not so easily handwaved away, given that this association is the bedrock of Asexual Exile, and – necropolitically – the foundation of our anguish, our suicides, and our slow death.

There are two ways of understanding the Death-Adjacent Ace trope. In one, it is a tasteless trend of poor representation further entwining asexuality with associations of unbelonging and exile. It sets us apart from our peers, insisting that if we do not, lust then we do not live, and our place among the majority is thereby withheld. But in the other way of understanding – at its worst, at the most extreme necropolitical reading of this phenomenon – I would end that sentence another way. The Death-Adjacent Ace trope insists that if we do not lust, then we do not live, and if we do not live, then it is morally neutral for us to be killed. And when the stakes are this high, we cannot afford not to assume the worst.

In the previous chapter, I questioned whether we should resist or renounce. My personal belief is that there is no choice here at all. We must resist. We must refuse the death association not merely threatening our characters but threatening us in the real world, too. Obviously, we are not mechanical cyborgs or otherworldly extraterrestrials outcast from our home planet. We are not zombies or necromancers or destined to return to the Halls of the Dead. *But we are told that we are*, and we are told it across the board; we are told it over and over and over again, until we code this lesson into the fabric of our self-concept and go on to ingrain it into our literary reflections. Asexuals in the real world are continually bombarded with a barrage of stories insisting that we do not belong – that we are not human – that we are not even truly alive, and thus it will not matter when we peter out of existence.

It falls to us to prove the death association wrong. I wish I could claim otherwise – I wish we could spend our time in other ways than justifying our lives as meaningful to a necropolitical power system which reduces us to our reluctance to procreate. It is a blessing, then, that our resistance comes not just in the stories we create and encourage but in the ones we live out ourselves in the real world. Our best defence against the death association is to live – to live bright and to live beautiful, to live our lives so fully and completely that we burn away the belief that we are death-like. In this refutation narrative, we are the main characters. We are writing our own exile subversion narrative every time we speak up. We are replacing Asexual Exile tropes with tropes of our own, tropes which centre Asexual Belonging, ones which will proliferate into the future whether we procreate or not. Every time we take a stand against the compulsorily sexual system set to exile us – against the necropolitical system vested in breeding us out – every time we demand the visibility and the voice so long denied to us, we are proving in real time that asexuality is interminable, and so are we along with it. This is how we come back from the dead. We cannot die slowly if we cannot die at all.

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Leah Tether is Professor of Medieval Literature and Publishing at the University of Bristol. With an academic background in medieval French and English literature and a professional background in trade publishing, Leah has combined her expertise and developed an international research profile in book and publishing history from manuscript to digital.

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