THE SPACE BETWEEN CATEGORIES: A CREATIVE SEARCH FOR ASEXUAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

CATEGORY Y

(Exegesis)

By

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ABSTRACT

The Space Between Categories: A Creative Search for Asexual Narrative Structure is a practice-led creative interrogation of the issues surrounding the nature and depiction of sex, sexual identity, and heteronarrativity in fiction. It constitutes two distinct but interrelated pieces of work:

Category X is a full-length creative novel about a teenage girl named Jess. At the beginning of the novel, Jess has suffered through the death of her father, who leaves her a small inheritance. Because Jess is not yet an adult, the inheritance is placed in a trust fund controlled by her estranged mother. After moving across the country to live with her mother, Jess decides to use the money to fund the last two years of her high schooling at a prestigious private college that was also her father's *alma mater*. As a piece of fiction, *Category X* is designed to explore sociocultural assumptions about heterosexual desire and its role in narrative structure. The first half of the novel resembles a young-adult *Bildungsroman* centred around Jess's platonic relationships and her first sexual relationship. However, Jess discovers that she may be asexual (she experiences little sexual attraction), which begins to shed light on some of the social dissonance she has experienced since hitting puberty. The novel attempts to highlight and redress some common literary tropes that rely on asexuality acting as an "antagonistic" force (for example, asexuality's association with death and disability, its conflation with social ineptitude or infantilism, and its "sex-negative" status). It deploys asexuality as a potentially informing counternarrative to conventional narrative structure (contextualised here as "heteronarrativity"), which I argue relies on heteronormative assumptions and constructs to function as a communicative exchange. Importantly, the second half of the novel is designed to subvert its own heteronarrative arc, which I particularise into the following narrative stages: stasis, disruption, tension, climax, and synthesis.

Category Y is *Category X*'s accompanying exegesis. Primarily, it expounds the academic case for *Category X*'s use of asexuality as both subject matter and narratological framework. *Category Y* is broken into chapters mimicking the flow of conventional narrative structure (again: stasis, disruption, tension, climax, and synthesis). It begins by discussing the "status quo" and exploring current mechanical theories surrounding the use of narrative and narrative structure. It then introduces heteronarrativity and the idea that how the human mind rationalises and ascribes meaning to narrative relies on the same sense-making instruments that govern sex and sexuality. It then introduces asexuality and asexual sense-making as a potential alternative to heteronarrativity and details some of the literary tropes redressed in *Category X*. This includes breakdowns of my

intentions and creative choices (subtext, metaphor, analogy, stereotyping, etc.), many of which were implemented to try and subvert heteronarrativity. Finally, *Category Y* explores some of the ways in which heteronarrativity re-encapsulates deviations from its usual structure, including "coming out" empowerment narratives common in LGBTQI works. I argue in *Category Y* that *Category X* effectively fails to subvert the heteronarrative, and that, despite redressing a significant number of problematic tropes and avoiding some common structural traps, it ultimately reinforces the phenomenological paradigm of the heteronarrative and the heteronormative assumptions that feed it.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. Does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and
2. the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: Thomas Stark

Date: 22/06/2023

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I'm sorry there's still so much hatred in the world.

FOREWORD

This thesis is concerned with the nature of narrative. Specifically, it argues that the way in which the human mind rationalises and ascribes meaning to narrative is a metaphorically heterosexual process, one that renders all narratives definitionally *hetero*narratives. Scholars have previously claimed that narrative is a product of the human mind's penchant for modelling the world in an abstract way, a neurological framework akin to a language (Oatley, 2011). This thesis asserts that such a language is overwhelmingly erotic and driven by a version of sexual desire that is almost always abstractly heterosexualised. Importantly, it does not seek to build precise taxonomies or study strategies regarding heteronarrativity, but to creatively interrogate the relationship between heterosexuality and its narrative "shape", a phenomenon noted by gender and literary theorists alike (see Farmasi, 2022; Hanson, 2013, 2014; Roof, 1996). As a model of human comprehension, heteronarrativity is consistent with the idea that narrative is often informed by sensorimotor experiences familiar to most human beings, an argument common in modern iterations of cognitive narratology and neuro-narratology (Caracciolo et al., 2017; Farmasi, 2022; Schneider, 2017). As a model of narratology, heteronarrativity taps into an intuitively recognisable heterosexual metaphor: it reimagines narrative "shape" as a philosophical seed, one that catalyses ideological reproduction in much the same way heterosexual intercourse catalyses biological reproduction (Roof, 1996). Simply put, heteronarrativity implies that the way the human mind makes sense of narrative and reality is predicated on the sexualising instincts that compel it to want to reproduce "itself", both biologically and socioculturally. This thesis explores that implication by deploying and subsequently attempting to subvert heteronarrativity in a creative novel and accompanying exegesis.

Thus, the narrative "shape" of interest in this thesis is one that mimics the act of heterosexual intercourse and appears frequently in literary theory throughout the world (see Campbell, 2004; Fields, 2005; Freytag, 2015; Gardner, 1984; Tsuchiya, 2022 for examples). Colloquially, this shape is easy to describe. There's usually a "hero": some*one* or some*thing* – be it a character, an object, or a concept – in which a narrative's audience can invest their emotional energy. The hero likely appears at the beginning of the narrative, or at a junction where the audience can comfortably contemplate the nature of its existence and ponder the promise of what it might (or might have) become throughout its journey. The hero will likely be challenged at some point; perhaps it is empowered in a way that draws the interest of a "villain": some*one* or some*thing* that embodies the hero's antithesis, that questions the hero's values or aptitude, or represents the hero's potential failure. The story will often include tension in the form of scenarios in which the hero and villain "battle" or

otherwise interact. The length and pacing of these confrontations will typically adhere to a set of rules: in a story too long, for example, the hero's journey becomes tedious; in a story too short, the hero's journey becomes trivial. The order in which the components of these interactions are presented to the audience will therefore follow a particular pattern of progression, one that culminates in a penultimate confrontation and climactic conclusion that together imbue the narrative with a sense of communicative purpose: the final stroke of its shape; its *raison d'être*.

This thesis treats the "shape" in question as a procession of narrative stages based on the metaphor of heterosexual intercourse: **stasis**, the beginning, the threat of non-change, of non-sex, a world perpetually *in absentia* of both and thus, without meaning; **disruption**, the seductive overture of courtship and the promise of change, of sex, of the hero's journey; **tension**, the escalation of the promise vitiated by the risk of its potential failure in the villain, "to be or not to be" as primary conflict; **climax**, the moment of rapture, of realisation, the sexual discharge and the catalyst of change, the moment in which the narrative's meaning is facilitated; and **synthesis**, the narrative's *raison d'être* and often dénouement; its "point", told as a reproductive consequence of the climax expressed as transformative kinesis: the acquisition of knowledge, perception, skill, or mastery. Contextually, the metaphor manifests here as a consequence of heteronormative assumptions about human perception and, if accurate, threatens to render all narrative abstractly heterosexual in form and function. This "heteronarrativity" – as I will call it in this thesis – is not an original concept: in fact, its variations have been subjected to dissection by gender and literary theorists before (see Hanson, 2013, 2014; Roof, 1996 for examples). However, attempts to structurally formalise and subsequently deploy (and interrogate) the heterosexual metaphor itself are comparatively rare, despite its problematic ubiquity.

The dominance of heteronarrativity in literary theory reflects what some scholars call "compulsory sexuality" (Przybylo, 2011, 2016): the assumption that every adult wants to (or *should* want to) engage in partnered sex and the privileging thereof (Carrigan, 2012). Sexologists like Sigmund Freud, for example, discuss the human drive to acquire and master new knowledge as a function of the life-instinct and death-instinct coalescing as heterosexuality (1922, 1977), while philosophers like Roland Barthes argue that communication itself is part of an erotic model of comprehension: an act of ideological seduction regardless of its form or medium (1975a, 1975b). In a practical sense, the shape is clear: one stage feeds an erotic desire for the next (Hanson, 2014), with each forming part of the narrative's heterological story: being alone (stasis), being courted (disruption), being seduced (tension), and having sex (climax). The erotic portion of the metaphor is complete with the story's

climax, after which heterosexual conception can take place (synthesis). Perhaps the writer's skills have been effectively demonstrated, the audience's perception of a social issue has changed, or everyone simply found a new way to enjoy passing time. Whatever the case, ideological reproduction replaces the physical, and the writer's tryst with the audience ends – in a manner of speaking – with the heterosexual metaphor fulfilled.

Of course, a narrative's shape can include innumerable permutations. In some, the hero does not win (at least, not overtly). Perhaps the villain is too powerful or too seductive, the story takes an unexpected turn and the hero's journey morphs into something else entirely, or the promise of what the hero will become was false; propaganda presented in bad faith, or a clever deception designed to belie the hero's true role. Perhaps the story is *about* the villain, and the hero is relegated to disruptive influence. Some narratives reject labels and linearity *all together*, becoming nebulous collections of unrelated assertions or utter subversions of their own apparent forms. Still, an atypical narrative is only atypical insofar as it presents its audience with novel characters and events or a novel structure (such as having *no* characters or events at all), all of which I argue remain contained within the heterosexual metaphor. Consider, for example, a piece of experimental fiction like Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1990), in which three seemingly disparate stories combine to form a postmodern reimagining of the classic detective novel. At first, a heteronarrative structure appears elusive (particularly when one of the characters interacts with Paul Auster himself), but when taken as a creative deconstruction of identity through a detective fiction lens, *The New York Trilogy* assumes an unmistakably heterological purpose.

This is because a narrative is ultimately part of a communicative exchange, one that requires those who engage with it to emerge on the other side having witnessed (or been part of) a collaborative act of transformative comprehension or kinesis (Messerli, 2017) and one this thesis argues is a product of the heterosexual metaphor. Indeed, a narrative that does *not* offer synthesis risks invalidating the contract of collaboration that its existence implies (Davies, 2000; Grice, 1975; Neale, 1992), and audiences often become critical of narratives they believe have failed to uphold their end of the bargain. In fact, if an audience feels they are denied synthesis, they may search for new ways to rationalise and ascribe meaning to a narrative beyond its apparent malfunction: a reconstruction of its communicative intent that makes use of subjective regions like the subtext, metatext, or context, often filtered through the lens of their own knowledge and experience (see Booth, 1961, 1974; Herman, 2013; Iser, 1972; Jahn, 1997; Walsh, 2017 for examples). Whatever the subject matter, be it the antics of a cartoon bunny, the loquacious speeches of a political figurehead, or one

hundred thousand words of gibberish, audiences are seemingly hardwired to both anticipate and reiterate the heterosexual metaphor; a semiotic template so pervasive that even narratives designed specifically to subvert it are frequently subsumed by its influence. *This* is the paradox this thesis focuses on deconstructing.

Somewhat ironically, then, its own narrative is rather disjointed and – quite frankly – prone to failure. It comprises a practise-led attempt at heteronarrative subversion in the creative fiction novel *Category X*, with a corresponding exegesis in *Category Y*. *Category X* is a coming-of-age, young adult *Bildungsroman* that focuses on Jessica Roe, an asexual teenage girl who, after the death of her father, is forced to move across Australia to live with her estranged mother. The writer chose to engage asexuality (the general non-experience of sexual attraction) as both structure and subject matter, attempting to deploy it as the novel's foundational counterpoint to heteronarrativity. *Category X* therefore initially resembles a typical young adult *Bildungsroman*, with stasis, disruption, and tension segments replete with structures and tropes (including some stereotypes) common to the genre. However, it subsequently avoids the narrative stages of climax and synthesis, instead luring its audience into perpetual tension and destabilising many of those structures and tropes. Despite its intended purpose, however, *Category X* is a story set to a form and style that *Category Y* suggests epitomises the *hetero* in *hetero*narrative. In fact, *Category Y* can be described as a heterological deconstruction of *Category X* that largely undermines everything the novel sets out to achieve by doing precisely what audiences tend to do when denied narrative synthesis. It is a personal essay, one that reiterates a heteronarrative structure and, in so doing, illustrates that structure's subsummation of both *Category X* and *Category Y*. First, it establishes certain facts about the nature and function of narrative (stasis), then argues that heteronormativity and narrative combine as heteronarrativity (disruption). Next, it presents asexuality as a potential counterpoint to heteronarrativity (tension) before discussing *Category X*'s subversive intentions (climax). Finally, it attempts to provide a compelling conclusion to the thesis as a whole (synthesis). *Category X* and *Category Y* are therefore at odds.

Because of this schism, the writer seems to have adopted two distinct voices. The first is the fanciful creative, the one whose interest lies in the art of narrative generation, and whose philosophical meanderings tend to be casually inclined. He is the one responsible for *Category X* as a work of fiction, and he is the one present in *Category Y*'s more discussive moments. The second is the consummate analyst; the student whose *alma mater* revolves around behavioural science and its various disciplines. His knowledge informed *Category X*'s depiction of asexuality (and may, on

occasion, have manifested in Jess's characterisation) and his tone plays the role of dry, scientific disruption here in *Category Y* (whether to the role of hero or villain remains up for debate). To make matters worse, the writer is also – in many ways – a fraud. He is not, as *Category X* might suggest, part of a marginalised group or possessive of a sexual identity outside the "mainstream". He is, in fact, an adult, white, heterosexual man. This thesis consequently does not tap into his lived experience and, though he extended every effort to depict asexuality sincerely and sensitively, he remains troubled by the fact that its creation necessarily infringes on a space that would likely see greater benefit from Own Voice material. Nevertheless, there is an academic purpose here that he hopes may help increase the visibility of liminal sexualities in the context of literary theory: that being the practise-led extrapolation of asexuality as an informative presence in the realm of narratology.

To wit, *Category Y* does not focus on analysing case studies. While the writer certainly engaged with fiction depicting asexuality and drew inspiration from it during his construction of *Category X*, doing so did not form the basis for his method of interrogating heteronarrativity. Rather, he became fixated on the psychosomatic foundations of narrative and specifically on the narratological interplay between asexuality and heteronarrativity. Though this strategy may ultimately prove problematic, it is perhaps a product of his scientifically inclined way of perceiving the world. It is also worth remembering that augmenting asexual representation in today's social zeitgeist was never this thesis's primary goal. It is true that asexuality – like many marginalised identities – *does* suffer from cultural erasure (Decker, 2014), but it is not difficult in 2023 to find fiction *supportive* of the asexual experience. Indeed, a quick Google search will return hundreds of results listing media designed to venerate asexuality or, at the very least, depict it as a valid sexual identity (and often to criticise Western society's obsession with eroticism and heterosexuality), and there is a growing body of literature examining the informative influence of asexuality in sociocultural spaces (including literary studies) (see Gupta, 2017b, 2017a; McDowell, 2022 for examples). The issue, however, is that many such works arguably still rely on heteronarrative shapes to communicate their meaning, even if that meaning is to denounce heteronarrative shapes. Once again, this thesis is concerned with the *nature* of narrative: its dispute is with the systemic deployment of compulsory sexuality and its manifestation as heteronarrativity. While this may involve countering certain problematic tropes often found in depictions of asexuality, it goes beyond merely interrogating content or structure: it challenges the way narrative *is* and *can be* understood by trying to break the morphology of heteronarrativity from the human mind to its textual manifestation *entirely*.

ON NARRATIVE (STASIS)

Jess, relax. Everyone's nervous the first time.
That's why they call it popping your cherry.
Don't fight it.
It's natural.
(p. 95)

I've recently taken to watching Eric Kripke's television adaptation of Garth Ennis's comic book series *The Boys* (2022). For those unfamiliar with the series, *The Boys* takes place in a world where superheroes are real, but most are the corrupt, narcissistic products of their unrelenting celebrity. At the zenith of the superhero ladder are the Seven, a collection of powerful individuals led by Homelander, the All-American Hero (and primary antagonist of the series), and assembled by Vought, a pharmaceutical company whose sole concern is profit. Despite the series being generally well-received, one of its recent subplots has proven extraordinarily divisive among the show's fans (see Fogarty, 2022; Russell, 2022 for examples of the discussion in popular media). The subplot in question concerns Black Noir, an almost indestructible man who wears a black suit, never speaks, and was a member of the Seven's previous iteration under the superhero Soldier Boy. In the series' universe, Soldier Boy has been missing for decades, but in season three, the show's anti-hero cadre (the eponymous "Boys") inadvertently finds and frees him from captivity. Soon after, the audience learns that the reason Black Noir is incapable of speech is because Soldier Boy brutally beat him during a power struggle. The show effectively sets up a multiple episode arc that begins when Black Noir finds out that Soldier Boy is alive: he flees from the Seven in quietly dramatic fashion, retreats to a childhood haven where he tries to overcome his fear of his former bully, then returns to the fold to seek a showdown with their collective nemesis (for better or worse). When the season finale arrives, however, Black Noir never gets to face his villain. Instead, he's executed by a paranoid Homelander, who accuses him of keeping secrets and summarily ends the mysterious superhero's story with a single (bloody) punch.

The scene met with a mixed reception: some fans labelled the death "poetic" while others argued that it constituted an objectively "bad" style of writing, one they called "lazy" and "cheap" (searching for "Black Noir" on the show's subreddit will reveal examples of these criticisms ["The Boys" Subreddit, n.d.]). Interestingly, the reasoning of those who condemned Black Noir's demise almost always followed the same pattern: after developing Black Noir's character arc in season three

and teasing a confrontation between him and his former abuser, critics claimed that the writers stole the character's chance for a meaningful resolution (whether in victory or death) and unfairly misled the audience into thinking there would be one in the first place. I was struck by the poignancy of these assumptions, particularly because they seemed to motivate so many among the show's audience to approach this turn of events with such a profound sense of entitlement over the outcome.

In the same way Amy T. Matthews suggests audiences expect a certain level of authenticity and experience from an author (2013), audiences here seemed to expect a certain level of narrative cooperation. When Black Noir *failed* to transform, *failed* to elicit a sense of synthesis in the audience, the narrative "violated" the contract the audience assumed was in place the moment they began engaging with the antihero's past. What, they asked, was the "point" of his story? Obviously, no contract to facilitate a "point" exists, so why do writers and audiences often behave as though one does? Even more interestingly, the suggestion that Black Noir's apparent demise was faked (or at least inconclusive) also appears to be divisive for the same reasons (again, "The Boys" subreddit is a good place to find examples of this debate). The depiction of a violent death – even in a fictional world of virtually indestructible superheroes, magic, and advanced genetic science – seems to carry a contractual obligation to reflect the nature of death in reality: it is final; it is absolute. But why is this the case? Or, better yet, why does narrative seem to function in a way that makes assumptions like this particularly common? One possibility posited by literary theorists is that, unlike the externally derived authority to perform heart surgery (for example), the authority to narrate is derived internally from the author's ability to elicit "interest" in a tale (Chambers & Godzich, 1984). If true, then Black Noir's death simply disregards the interest generated by his backstory by occurring outside its purview, thus undermining the authors' authority to continue the tale. Of course, "interest" and "authority" are two very difficult concepts to define, and strongly imply – in my opinion – a far richer and more nuanced story.

In its most reductive form, narrative is little more than communication (either akin to language or part of it), its primary purpose to convey information from one party to another by "signing" according to a set of syntactic rules (J. H. Miller, 2002). The sentence, "the sky is blue", for example, is an ostensibly short narrative about the nature of the sky based on an assertion about its colour. Both *Category X* and *Y* are also narratives, as is any essay, article, report, or transmission of data possessive of a communicative purpose. Linguists argue that any act of communication endeavouring to be "successful" must involve at least two levels of operational activity: a process of

utterance, and a process of interpretation (Pinker, 2007). Paul Grice attempted to formalise this hypothesis in the twentieth century as part of his pragmatic theory of language with a system of logical maxims that, when deployed in unison, *should* lead to a situation in which utterance and interpretation coalesce appropriately into mutual understanding (Neale, 1992). First, any utterance must be necessarily but not overly *informative* (the maxim of quantity); second, any utterance must be *truthful* (the maxim of quality); third, any utterance must be *relevant* to the nature of the exchange itself (the maxim of relation); and fourth, any utterance must be *clear* in its expression (the maxim of manner) (Davies, 2000). Collectively, these became known as Grice's Cooperative Principle, which is, I think, the basest description of how the human mind typically expects narrative to function in a mechanical sense. The idea that most communicative exchanges are also functionally narratives is one consistent with modern dissections of narrative participation (see Messerli, 2017), but it also has explanatory issues when it comes to intentionally dishonest exchanges (with the most technically appropriate example being fictional narrative itself).

John R. Searle (1975) describes this as a classificatory problem. According to Searle, in *nonfictional* discourse, the inscriber (equivalent to Grice's utterer) performs illocutionary acts in the form of assertions, all of which are typically filtered through a set of four rules similar to Grice's maxims: first, the maker of an assertion is assumed to be speaking the truth (the essential rule); second, the maker of an assertion must be able to provide evidence of this truth (the preparatory rule); third, the truth is not obviously apparent to both speaker and audience (or else the assertion is irrelevant); and fourth, the maker of an assertion commits to the belief that the assertion is true (the sincerity rule). In his article on the subject, Searle quotes a sentence from a newspaper to demonstrate that the writer of the sentence is making assertions about reality, and that the quality of the assertions relies on these four rules. Searle goes on to note, however, that none of these rules seem to apply to *fictional* discourse. He claims that the semantic standards of what Grice would call a communicative exchange must be suspended in the case of fiction because it is unlikely that the writer is writing literally (or even figuratively), even though fiction itself is often composed of literal and figurative statements. The writer of fiction, Searle argues, is *pretending* to perform illocutionary acts, effectively nullifying the applicability of Grice's Cooperative Principle by definition (since pretending is necessarily duplicitous). Searle renders the function of fictional narratives implicit, emphasising its interpretive component and shifting the focus from what the writer or speaker *explicitly conveys* to what they might, in the minds of the audience, *implicitly convey*.

To compare: as a case of communicative exchange under the dictums of the Cooperative Principle, there are several reasons why Black Noir's "premature" death in *The Boys* might seem like myopic writing. For instance, dedicating a significant portion of season three to Black Noir's previously unknown backstory only to have the character die suddenly in a subsequent scene disconnects those elements from the series' overarching plot. This renders them both overly informative (in retrospect) and largely irrelevant to the ongoing exchange, violating two of Grice's maxims. Compensating by shifting the supposed direction of the plot (reimagining Black Noir as a vessel for illustrating how unstable Homelander is becoming) continues to render similar violations: Homelander and Black Noir's relationship was *already* established as a positive one prior to the moment Black Noir's "betrayal" is revealed, so the inclusion of backstory elements to explain this remains overly informative. They're also unclear, since the secrets Homelander accuses Black Noir of keeping (specifically regarding Homelander's status as Soldier Boy's son) are explicitly corroborated through dialogue delivered outside of the backstory, anyway.

Under Searle's conceptualistion of fictional discourse, however, the presentation of Black Noir's backstory might serve as a self-contained nihilistic metaphor that augments many of the show's themes rather than its plot. Soldier Boy literally destroyed Black Noir's ability to speak earlier in the show's timeline, redefining Black Noir's voice as a metaphor for stolen agency. The audience's exposure to Black Noir's backstory is within the context of him deciding to reclaim that agency, as indicated by his trajectory (his initial retreat from the Seven, some heavily stylised flashback scenes, and his eventual battle-ready return). Because of this, the audience anticipates a confrontation between Black Noir and Soldier Boy. Of course, Homelander executes Black Noir before a confrontation can eventuate, permanently stripping him of the opportunity to regain his agency. This turn of events violates Grice's Cooperative Principle: it certainly isn't clear, nor overtly relevant to the narrative, but it doesn't violate Searle's proposition. In fact, many fans might draw meaning from Black Noir's "premature" departure, more so perhaps because it subverts the expectation of upcoming conflict. One might even interpret the scene as a snapshot from a second narrative, one embedded within or concurrent to the primary narrative. Perhaps Black Noir's death is a signifier of social commentary, an example of a focalisation window placed squarely above the narrative itself, provoking from its audience an extradiegetic analysis of its proceedings (see Jahn, 1996)? Perhaps Black Noir's story is, in fact, about the often-destructive outcomes of disproportionate privilege and wealth and the sometimes-hopeless struggles of those crushed beneath asymmetrical power structures, rather than standing up for oneself?

So, it seems that narrative can be more than just a communicative exchange, then. It can also help to organise and clarify ideas and to engage with ideas in a variety of ways (particularly in the context of fiction). As Jans Eder succinctly remarks: “Narration implies communication, communication implies reception, and reception implies cognition” (2003, p. 282). Indeed, literary theorists have been contemplating the rhetorical aspects of narrative for some time, with many seeking to explain how it manages to serve as a multifaceted tool for both the communication and explication of abstract concepts. At a basic level, an interpreter can easily make determinations of persuasive rhetoric from narrative: consider, for example, nearly any form of corporate, governmental, or religious propaganda. The sentence, “repent your sins or burn in hell”, tells a grim story, one designed to maximise sensationalist rhetoric and convince someone that this will be their fate unless they adhere to the tenets certain to follow. But rhetoric is generally more complicated than this. In fiction, what transpires is effectively imaginary (or hypothetical) and may be difficult to map onto any communicative technique or style of rhetoric. Nevertheless, structuralists like Seymour Chatman and Franz Karl Stanzel attempt to do exactly this by expanding on the work of Grice and Searle, reimagining the communicative exchange as a series of formal conceits.

Chatman, for instance, argues that substance, form, and expression combine to produce narrative statements (a discourse) that relate to signified features (a story), which in turn constitutes the persuasive elements of a narrative’s rhetorical function (1978). According to Chatman, meaning is not explicit, nor is it limited to the overt application of semantics. Rather, it is a product of the semiotic relationship between the signifying and the signified. In literary terms, imagine a protagonist described as wearing colourful clothes when they’re happy versus muted clothes when they’re sad: in this case, the writer can describe the clothes (with narrative statements) to indicate the protagonist’s mood (the signified feature) without explicitly relying on words like “sad”, “angry”, or “morose”. Music is an example of this in visual mediums like film and television. The raucous drums of Jack Sparrow’s swashbuckling theme in Jerry Bruckheimer’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies usually accompanies scenes of action and adventure, constituting a consistent leitmotif. Similarly, Gérard Genette separates narrative into its story (a series of events), discourse (the way those events are conveyed), and narrator (the voice conveying the story and discourse), claiming that the relative position and properties of all three components create what the human mind commonly perceives to be a unified narrative (1980). Importantly, neither Chatman nor Genette discount the possibility that narrative may be composed of multiple conceptual threads, removing the need to rely on clumsy concepts like “primary” and “secondary” narratives. Rather, they suggest

constructs like subtext and metatext, in which semiotic relationships can be composed of seemingly irrelevant or implicit components and yet coalesce into meaningful discourse.

Other early deconstructions of narrative also imply an intrinsic connection between the explicit and the implicit. Wayne C. Booth, for example, claims that audiences tend to subconsciously idealise who they believe a narrative's progenitor is according to signifiers left intentionally or unintentionally within the narrative itself, a kind of "implied author" that may or may not be representative of the *actual* author (1961, 1974). According to Booth, subtextual communication occurs when the audience and this implicit progenitor engage in a communicative exchange outside of the narrator's comprehension, resulting in a sense of rhetorical irony. As a literary example, consider the protagonist and narrator Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (2015). Humbert spends most of the story justifying his sexual obsession with an underage girl. Thus, if the reader evaluates Humbert's story according to Grice, they might be inclined to think *Lolita* represents Nabokov's attempt at exonerating child abuse. However, Nabokov (or what passes for the implied authorial version of him) gives the reader plenty of reasons to question Humbert's motives, given that the character commits and confesses to multiple crimes and even questions the veracity of his own mental faculties on more than one occasion. Though the nature of the narrative is ultimately ambiguous, Booth might declare it a case of rhetorical irony in which the reader is given cause to draw meaning from a subtextual derision of Humbert's excuses. This would transform *Lolita* into a text that condemns child abuse, even if Nabokov himself remained equivocal about his intentions.

Another rhetorical technique is focalisation, one detailed extensively by both Genette (1980) and Stanzel (1984). Though focalisation is often discussed in terms of properties "embedded" within a narrative such as the narrator's "position" or the "level" at which certain elements of the narrative are taking place relative to others (Bal & Tavor, 1981; Jahn, 1996; Pier, 2011, 2014), it also constitutes a kind of rhetorical tool that both Genette and Stanzel argue can alter the way audiences rationalise or ascribe meaning to the narrative as a whole. Encoded violations of human experience (a narrator who knows too much, for instance) allow readers to question the authenticity of a narrative's components without reducing the narrative itself to a collection of holistically nonsensical statements. Consider the infamous reveal (and effective climax) in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (2002): Hercule Poirot, in his characteristically dry manner, outs Dr James Sheppard, the book's autodiegetic narrator, as Roger Ackroyd's murderer. This certainly comes as a surprise to most readers, many of whom no doubt return to the scene in which Dr Sheppard last interacts with a living Mr Ackroyd, only to find his blithe recitation of, "I hesitated with my hand on

the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing", suddenly imbued with additional meaning. The deception itself becomes the encoded, subversive climax of the text; in essence, a clever practical joke on the reader that swaps the generic conventions of a detective novel for some unconventional antics. Consequently, the narrative's shape is changed by something *not actually present* in the text, but nevertheless essential to the audience's sense of synthesis.

Category X is similarly littered with encoded storytelling. Jessica Roe (or Jess), for example, is an autodiegetic narrator whose opinions, beliefs, and knowledge regularly colour her perception of the world and events she relays to the audience. The novel's first chapter opens with Jess alone in one of Sydney's inner-southern suburbs, waiting for her mother – Audrey – to arrive. Jess clearly doesn't want to be there, and her description of the neighbourhood as being in a state of "decay" (along with the moment she compares Audrey's house to a mouth with crooked teeth) are specifically designed to establish her as verbosely cynical, a quality later revealed to be one she inherited from her late father's penchant for prose and vindictive poetry. Of course, this is just the beginning. Jess is consistently trying to replicate her father's path in life, from attending the same school to seeking a career in the written word: pursuits meant to impress upon the reader (without explicitly informing them) how emotionally isolated Jess has become since his death. Jess's asexuality is also hinted at frequently before becoming more established later in the story: she experiences unsourced social anxiety, she is uncomfortable around sexualised conversation, and her first sexual experience with her boyfriend – Jace – is entirely absent from the text, despite it being a recurring topic for her and her friends in the leadup to – and lingering aftermath of – its occurrence.

The idea that encoded messaging can communicate information not explicitly contained within a text continues to inform literary theory in the twenty-first century. William Nelles (1987), for example, advanced a model for analysing narrative structure based on a refined version of the inscription techniques first articulated by scholars like Booth and Genette, work that has since been republished in both 1997 and 2020. Even modern conceptualisations of narrative structure that prioritise audience interpretation over inscriber intention still base many of their typologies on inscribed signifiers and semiotic cues simply out of necessity. In his definition of "mind-relevant", transmedial narratological theory, David Herman remarks on determining the significance of encoded "scaffolding" in the process of creating narrative "experiences" (2013), and more granular discussions of cognitive narrative structure often begin with a review of codified signifiers, as in the case of Burkhard Niederhoff's exploration of paralepsis (the inclusion of information a reader might

not expect given a certain focalisation) and paralipsis (the exclusion of information a reader might expect given a certain focalisation) (2013). Even Manfred Jahn, who coined the term "cognitive narratology" in 1997 to encourage more psychological explorations of the subject, has continued to publish compendiums on narrative that blend more progressive investigations of audience accountability with semiotic "grammars" sourced from inscription techniques (2017). Nevertheless, the concession that the audience *is* involved in the construction of a narrative is an interesting point, one consistent with the notion that narrative is inextricably tied to the way the human mind both makes sense of reality and communicates it to others. The question, then, is how deeply does that involvement extend?

In 1958, Monroe Beardsley argued that audiences shouldn't conflate the aesthetic qualities of art with the intentions of its creator (Dickie, 1965). Of the literary utterance, Beardsley posed two questions to illustrate his point: what does the *speaker* mean, and what does the *sentence* mean? Though the answers often coincide, the fact that a speaker may say one thing and mean another is undeniable (particularly in the case of illocutionary acts), and it is therefore not always possible and almost always undesirable to equivocate the two (Wreen, 2014). Though Beardsley is not without his critics, his contention remains philosophically sound. If an utterer or inscriber's intentions can't be deduced, how or why might one judge a narrative to be "cheap" or "lazy"? Beardsley suggests that audiences typically appeal to social convention in such situations, abandoning any reliance on naturalistic logic or a strict awareness of anyone's intentions. Rather, an audience's sense of a narrative's aesthetic might reflect their own sociocultural circumstances or those that surrounded the narrative's production, an anthropological phenomenon commonly referred to as "zeitgeist" (Simonton, 2011). Accordingly, sentences become more than simple constructs based on communicative norms: they are also referential entities denoting a relationship with the sociocultural climate in which they are born (Wreen, 2014). Beardsley is therefore arguing that narrative forms like fiction have a use beyond the comparatively trivial conveyance of an imaginary plot. They may, for example, constitute a sociological barometer capable of gauging sociocultural porosity. This effectively implies that a narrative's subtext, metatext, and context are just as important as the text itself, rendering the rationalisation of the text a truly collaborative effort.

Roland Barthes furthered this line of thinking with his essays *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) and *The Death of the Author* (1977). In the former, Barthes explicitly explores the act of constructing a narrative as a collaborative one (though with considerable artistic licence); specifically, he reframes it as a sexual encounter, an ideological tryst between author and audience in which meaning is

concordant with the elicitation of pleasure. In the latter, he takes this way of describing narrative construction to its extreme conclusion, arguing that an author has little (if nothing whatsoever) to do with the meaning of their narrative work. Indeed, Barthes seems to take dramatic exception to the idea that an author's intentions should dictate any measure of criticism whatsoever. He laments Western society's lingering obsession with authorship and likens it to malignant narcissism triggered by a fear of narrative without human agency to give it shape in the minds of others. The text, he declares, is not a message from an Author-God, but a "… multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash … a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977, p. 146). Certainly, an inscriber (utterer, author, performer, progenitor, etc.) *creates* a narrative (in the sense that they observe and reorganise ideas from the tangled mass of influences surrounding them) and presents it to others, but if Barthes is to be believed, then their role is almost curatorial, and narrative itself is necessarily derivative. Though this appears to contradict *The Pleasure of the Text* in some ways, it ultimately doesn't challenge its inferences. After all, narrative continues to provoke novel thought in those who engage with it, leaving many less sexualised questions in the wake of the suggestion that the inscriber has little to do with originality.

Narratologists like Wolfgang Iser argue that all literary works are, in equal measure, the textual product themselves *and* the constituent actions they elicit in response to their own existence (1972, p. 279). This implies that a narrative is the holistic product of both an inscriber *and* an audience, making both, in a sense, the narrative's progenitor. Iser adopts this dichotomy unreservedly, claiming that each sentence creates an aroused anticipation of the next in which the narrative itself stops and a kind of blockage necessarily forms that the audience must resolve. As a simplistic example, consider this original sentence: "I turned to look through the veiled grotto, and gasped at the horror I saw before me". A thrilling line, to be sure, but from a technical perspective, it's woefully incomplete. What exactly *is* this veiled grotto? Is it a grotto filled with trees? Why is it veiled? Is it foggy? Is it a consequence of the narrator's circumstances? What is the "horror" the narrator saw, and why was it apparently so unsettling? Is the narrator being literal? Or is this just a vision? A hallucination? A dream of some kind? Can the narrator even be trusted? The sentence is missing so much information, and yet, many will likely imagine a scene answering most (or all) of these questions rather than dismiss the sentence as nonsense. Minimal information is thus presented to elicit this very effect; an expectation of clarity, one that – even if it is never indulged by the author – audiences typically set about adapting to as a matter of course. Iser argues that no

story can be told in its entirety: there will *always* be gaps in the narrative – regardless of how small – and so the interplay between inscriber and audience is a necessary part of how a narrative is shaped.

Iser's phenomenological dissection of narrative is an early entry into a diverse body of works constituting cognitive narratology. The field itself, which foregrounds the processes by which audiences interpret narrative as its subject matter, would become widely popular in the 2010s, but is nevertheless the product of a slow transition from strictly structural systems of narrative analyses to interdisciplinary ones in the late twentieth century. This transition is exemplified by the work of narratologists like Tamar Yacobi, Dorrit Cohn, Manfred Jahn, Richard Gerrig, and Catherine Emmott. Yacobi (1981) and Cohn (2000) are, perhaps, the two on this list that hold most closely to formal structuralism. Building on Grice, Genette, and Iser's work, they both examine how narrative gaps and incongruities may result in the presence or perception of unreliable or "discordant" narration, a phenomenon that fundamentally relies on an audience's inferences. In its most basic form, discordant or unreliable narration occurs when a narrator fails to "correctly" relay the events of a story.

What constitutes correct is, of course, a qualitative judgement on behalf of the audience, even though inscribers can deploy a multitude of tactics to compel their audience one way or another. In the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the deception is revealed as straightforward, but Cohn suggests that there are innumerable signifiers with which inscribers can codify suggestions of unreliability. Accordingly, discordant narration falls into one of two broad categories: factual unreliability, in which the narrator is deemed to be explicitly unaware or misinformed about the truth of a matter; and ideological unreliability, in which the narrator's understanding of the narrative seems to differ from what's implied by the inscriber (or, analogously, Booth's implied progenitor) (2000, p. 307). Both require the audience to make qualitative judgements based on their own experiences of reality.

Yacobi, on the other hand, proposes a model of five generalised methods by which audiences attend to narrative discordance. An audience might, for example, appeal to what Yacobi calls the "genetic principle" to determine an inscriber's motives by examining the biographical facts surrounding them. They might also appeal to the "generic principle", broadly generalising conventions from whatever genre (or genres) the narrative borrows from to determine if it is, in a sense, "following the rules". The generic principle is relevant to the dearly departed Black Noir, who flouted the conventions of the superhero genre when he unceremoniously died while preparing for his final fight. While his

passing does not constitute unreliable narration (unless he re-emerges unscathed in season four), it certainly constitutes discordant narration according to Yacobi's principle. At the other end of the spectrum, an audience might appeal to the "existential principle" and apply their general knowledge of reality to posit the existence of anomalies in a narrative. They might also appeal to the "functional principle" to incorporate a narrative's supposed thematic purpose and structure into their evaluation of discordance. Arguably, the functional principle helps facilitate a decidedly more favourable interpretation of Black Noir's death. For example, *The Boys*' use of superhero conventions might be a play on more grounded concepts like late-stage capitalism, vanity, and demagoguery. According to this interpretation, the superheroes themselves are products (in fact, they are explicitly referred to as such by several characters throughout the series). The series is not actually *about* superheroes, then: it is about corporate-induced class warfare, and the synthesis of Black Noir's execution functions as an effective extension of that analogy.

While both Yacobi and Cohn focused on the analytical nuances of codification – in many ways relegating narrative to a puzzle that requires solving to work and reinforcing the notion that narrative is a collaborative process - other scholars began toying with the idea that narrative structure might be a construct of human experience rather than a derivative of language. Emmott, for example, argues that human experience constitutes a story and not a linear sequence of events (1998). Accordingly, narrative becomes a collection of semiotic prompts, little more than encouragement towards certain qualia ignited by memory (or reality itself, circumstances permitting) that can be *reinscribed* by the audience as a gap-filling technique to overcome something like Iser's "blockages". These are the contextual frames or "schemata" that result in the audience both imposing meaning *on* and extracting information *from* a narrative, what Emmott claims permits narrative to exist without plot, since its defining element becomes experiential immersion on behalf of the audience rather than codification on behalf of the inscriber. In what amounts to an earlier rendition of Brian Richardson's mimetic deconstructions, Emmott goes on to argue that the mental deployment of perceptually coherent realisms is an essential component of making sense of narrative and, by extension, the world (Emmott, 2008, 2012).

Importantly, Emmott's theory offered a potential pathway towards explaining why certain narratives can alter an individual's worldview or result in a degree of schemata "affirming" pleasure. In the case of the former, Emmott supposes that audiences necessarily engage in an evaluative process when a narrative deviates from their schemata (a faculty-based case of critical reasoning) to entertain the idea that their own contextual frame may be incorrect or otherwise incomplete (2012). They may do

this to avoid discomfort with the story or discourse or when they identify conscious or subconscious biases in their schemata revealed by the narrative. In the case of the latter, the emotional responses tied to the "thrill of recognition" is as adequate an explanation as any; it just so happens that the friend who shares one's worldview in this case tends to be fictional. The mechanical aspects of Emmott's schemata need not remain nebulous, either. Jahn, for instance, supposes that the audience typically adheres to a set of organisational rules whenever they engage with a narrative (or indeed, reality), operationalising these rules as "cognitive frames": the somewhat self-imposed mental expectations of how things *should* appear or proceed (1997). In terms of narrative, this manifests not only through appeals to memory, but appeals to perceptual assumptions as well. Such assumptions, Jahn argues, are based on cues embedded within the narrative in *combination* with the audience's expectation of how discourse should behave, meaning that cognitive frames and textual cues become reciprocally linked. Jahn calls this phenomenon the "Proteus Principle". As a simple example, consider the dietic marker "I". When used in a narrative, "I" generally implies the presence of a first-person narrator. In response, the audience will usually adopt a cognitive frame that draws on their understanding of how first-person narration functions and use that to evaluate the cogency of the narrative.

For the ease of argument, I'll make a few general assumptions about the characteristics of this frame while presenting the following as the opening line of a hypothetical book: "I'm walking through the park admiring the summer flowers when I suddenly come across the friendliest dog in the universe". Due to the presence of the marker "I", most audiences will automatically assume that the rest of the story will be delivered in first-person, probably by a homodiegetic narrator (a character who participates in the story and conveys it to the audience) whose narration will likely be coloured by a rather sunny disposition. Present-tense markers like "walk**ing**" and "admir**ing**" also provoke the adoption of a temporal cognitive frame, one that orients the events as taking place in "real-time" and forbidding the characters and narrator from reasonably possessing foreknowledge of events. But a writer can play with these assumptions. Perhaps the next line is something like: "At least, that's how Simon would recall the event in years to come". Due to the presence of new data (specifically, a reference to the previous "narrator" as "Simon" and the temporal shifting of the narration itself to *after* the event), the audience is forced to adopt new cognitive frames to properly evaluate the narrative. To begin with, the narration is no longer first-person but third-person, suggesting a heterodiegetic narrator (a character who does not participate in the story but who conveys it to the audience) or one that is extradiegetic (a character that only exists *outside* the narrated world). In concert with the fact the new line indicates that narration is also taking place

years after the event, the audience's previous assumption about the availability of information must also change if the text is to remain sensical.

Of course, since Jahn's initial work on cognitive frames, other scholars have broadened their philosophical purview and borrowed heavily from social science to articulate the role of audiences in narrative construction. Gerrig, for example, engages with psychologically grounded interpretations of how readers experience narrative "gaps" by exploring the question of automaticity: "Which types of inferences will readers in all likelihood encode without expending strategic effort?" (2010, p. 21). He begins with explanation-based processing, a theory that suggests readers fill narrative gaps by attempting to explain *why* a text may mention certain things but not others. This line of reasoning tends to result in the conclusion that a reader's inferences are largely predictive and goal-oriented, which, Gerrig remarks, is not backed by experiential evidence (and is once again a surreptitious appeal to the organisational allure of formal structuralism). Instead, Gerrig argues that readers usually engage in memory-based processing to draw meaning from what a narrative explicitly does and does not declare. This is a multi-layered procedure that Gerrig calls "resonance", in which readers process narrative gaps by accessing information previously conveyed by the text *and* from within their own applicable general knowledge store. Thus, the line, "he had the worst fungal infection *ever*", need not require further descriptors within the narrative but can still imbue other elements of the story and discourse with additional meaning.

Gerrig's application of resonance processing leans into psychological conceptualisations of metaphor in a way that helps explain why events like Black Noir's death might feed into an analogy for corporate-induced class warfare. Audience members who work in a corporate or bureaucratic space, or who consider themselves experientially immersed in some of the struggles faced by *The Boys'* characters (superpowers notwithstanding), may find Black Noir's "firing" tragically relatable (evisceration notwithstanding), and thus imprint meaning on the event by way of resonance processing. In fact, Gerrig strives to eschew formal structuralism altogether when it comes to esoteric interpretations of narrative, instead positioning audiences as a "side participant" to what he effectively labels a communicative exchange in the same vein as Grice. In Gerrig's version, however, the audience is not the party engaging *in* conversation, but simply one privy *to* the conversation. Gerrig uses unreliable narration to cement his point, arguing that an audience's decision to trust a narrator or not is often a function of their expectations of the narrator role (the details of the "contract", as it were, between writer and reader), supplied primarily by their subsequent comprehension of normative behaviour. While Gerrig explicitly references structuralist concepts like

paralipsis, he places the emphasis unequivocally on the audience's *perception* of it, rather than the inscriber's *codification* of it.

Narrative, then, isn't just about telling stories. Narrative is communicative: it can express thoughts, feelings, events, and concepts and articulate the relationships between them. Grice and Searle may have focused on the supposed "rules" of conversation, but Searle's interpretation of fictional discourse speaks to a complex system of interpersonal interaction between audience and inscriber, one that elevates narrative from simple conveyance to generative framework. Narrative is rhetorical: formal structuralism, championed by Genette and Chatman, provides scholars with countless categorical examples of writers using narrative to embed, encode, or otherwise expound instances of persuasion using techniques from direct diatribe to metaleptic metaphor. Narrative is perceptual: the shape narratives take is often composed of tools derived from human psychology specifically *for* the purposes of ideological interplay. Theorists like Iser, Gerrig, and Jahn effectively argue that narrative is as much a product of the audience's mental faculties as it is the inscriber's, regardless of what is encoded into a narrative in the first place. A narrative's meaning is therefore somewhat subjective, a result of sociocultural projection that provides the frames necessary to infer definitional commonalities.

In short, narrative is *all* these things; a kind of universal semiotic logic composed of acts of both encoding and interpretation, one that relies on the pragmatic necessity of communicative exchange and the esoteric machinations of human psychology to properly function. It is integral to the human experience, allowing for meaningful discourse to exist somewhere between the overbearingly explicit and the furtively implicit. Indeed, it seems the human mind can only decipher reality by ordering it *according* to narrative – cause and effect, today and tomorrow – rendering it a sense-making instrument beholden to mimetic assumptions. This suggests, for example, that Black Noir's arc is unsatisfactory because the narrative violated certain cognitive frames about how communication works: his execution is shocking because superhero narratives typically don't eliminate important characters without a fight, and his hypothetical return in season four would be cheap because people who lose possession of their major internal organs tend to stay dead in real life. It stands to reason, then, that narrative's typical constructions are grounded in things common to the human experience, things most people are likely exposed to in one way or another (be they psychological, biological, or phenomenological). If this is indeed the case, then could this unspoken "contract" between writer and reader be so systemic and ubiquitous because its foundation is, in

fact, an experience so systemic and ubiquitous to the human condition that it may – in some ways – transcend formal language? Enter the heterosexual metaphor.

ON HETEROIDEOLOGY (DISRUPTION)

Having friends is complicated.

(p. 53)

What exactly *is* the heterosexual metaphor? And if narratives can be described perfectly well as communicative exchanges – albeit collaborative ones that rely on both inscriber and audience to make sense – then why discuss a sexualising metaphor *at all*? The issue, I think, lies in the general immutability of narrative's primary function. Schemata, language, and communication are all subject to change: their fundamental construction and purpose shift according to the experiential, cultural, and societal norms of the individuals engaging with them. The way in which the human mind rationalises and ascribes meaning to narrative, however, rarely does, a fact evidenced by numerous psychological studies examining the homogeneity of narrative structure and its synchronic role in autobiographical memory formation across cultures (see Fivush et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2017 for examples). So, while a narrative may mean different things to different individuals, the method by which meaning is functionally derived doesn't (generally) change between them. This is unsurprising, though, as literary theorist Paul B. Armstrong points out: "Given the commonalities in the basic experiences members of our species typically undergo in their journeys from birth to death, it would be surprising if the cognitive configurations established through … connectivity between our brains, bodies, and worlds did not demonstrate various regularities that would show up in our narratives." (2020, p. 25). The heterosexual metaphor – as I'm deploying the term here in this thesis – potentially explains narrative's functional homogeneity: heterosexual intercourse, it suggests, is the cipher by which the human mind structures narrative design and purpose.

This premise is not without its predicates. In Western society alone, sexuality is associated with a plethora of seemingly disparate terminology (sex, gender, orientation, etc.) and features in a range of sociocultural phenomena, including identity formation (Savic et al., 2010), communication (Kilbourne, 1999), religion (Viefhues-Bailey, 2010), political science (Smith, 2011), and education (Shannon, 2016). It has been the subject of intense academic inquiry for more than a century (Seidman, 2003), generating considerable volumes of biological and sociological research (Freud, 1977; Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Millett, 1970; Storms, 1980). Sexuality even influences linguistics, with sex-specific pronouns and gendered adjectives coded into the basic semantic structure of languages throughout the world (Kiesling, 2019). Importantly, Western society and much of the media it consumes is generally *allosexual*, which is to say that when it *does* depict sexuality, it

depicts it as the motivator for pursuing sexual partners, and usually (but not always) for the purpose of reproduction (Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012). Sociologists remark that this is indicative of a broader sociocultural assumption: that all humans are compulsorily sexual; that is, they *should* and *do* experience a desire for partnered sex (Fedtke, 2012; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018; Przybylo, 2011). In short, sex and its related subjects are everywhere – a daily occurrence in the lives of many – and heterosexuality and heterosexual intercourse are among the most common sexual experiences in human existence. Sex is something most people engage in regularly, and when they're not *doing* it, they're *talking* about it, *thinking* about it, or otherwise navigating its peripheral effects on their lives.

Furthermore, evidence strongly suggests that sexuality as it presents in narrative both informs and is informed by popular conceptualisations of sexual identity. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the emerging schools of behaviourism and second-wave feminism dominated psychology and sociology, catalysing renewed academic interest in identity formation theory. Many scholars moved away from essentialist conceptualisations of human development to explore the roles of evolutionary science, interdependent learning, and social scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1974b; Millett, 1970). As a result, narratology gained significant interdisciplinary attention for two reasons. First, because narratives (particularly those concerned with fictional representation) often succinctly encapsulate the broad composition and relational nature of the real-world social identities relevant to their zeitgeist. Paul R. Abramson and Mindy B. Mechanic (1983), for example, examined the prevalence of narrative techniques pertinent to the representation of sex and sexual identity in best-selling romance books and films across the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. While their study's goal was to track changes in narrative techniques over time, it also revealed that the most common themes of commercially successful romance fiction revolved almost exclusively around societally dominant heteronormative conceptualisations of romance and sexuality.

Second, scholars began to argue that the consumption of fiction not only improved a reader's ability to empathise and interact with others, but also contributed to their development of a cohesive *social* identity (see Cherland, 1994 for a later example of such studies). For narratologists interested in sexual identity, this claim triggered a wave of literary criticism focused predominantly on the embedded tropes of romance and young adult fiction (Christian-Smith, 1988). Linda Kathryn Christian-Smith, among others, investigated correlates between romance fiction and the sociological profiles of teenage girls, concluding that the worldviews and social identities of readers often parallel those held by characters in their favourite books (and vice versa) (1993). Subsequent feminist theory-driven deconstructions of the romance and young adult genres systematically

expanded on this work, arguing that a detrimental cycle of reinforcement was encouraging young women to adopt introspectively passive worldviews and submissive social roles (Butler, 1999; Kamble, 2008; Kinard, 1998). Later studies would expand these scopes to examine fiction's role in the way young boys and men conceptualise masculinity and fatherhood (see Ochsner, 2012 for a twenty-first century example), leading scholars to posit that readers (particularly adolescents) acquire a significant portion of their learned knowledge regarding social and sexual identity through the consumption of fiction, and are therefore likely to develop perceptual conformity with whatever sociocultural idiosyncrasies saturate the fiction they consume (Younger, 2003).

Christina Mariani-Petroze (2006) suggests that this relationship can often be extreme, with readers sometimes "living vicariously" through fictional characters, a trend also observed in earlier studies (Christian-Smith, 1984) and largely supported by social script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1974c). In a later effort to explore this claim, Jessica Kokesh and Miglena Sternadori (2015) interviewed fourteen teenage girls and women, asking each to discuss their reading habits and compare their worldviews with those of their favourite characters. Kokesh and Sternadori described the participants' connections with their fictional companions as "parasocial", noting that readers who invested heavily in a one-sided relationship with a character often assumed the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of the piece were also those of reality without further thought. Consequently, their constructions of femininity varied in a manner consistent with the ambiguous nature of the fiction itself. For example, some participants described Bella from Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* as strong and independent because she pursued her desire to be submissive to Edward, while others considered her interdependent *because* of this (2015, p. 154). Again, though, none of this is terribly surprising: Paul du Gay (1997) had already formalised the relationship between reader and text, connoisseur and art, individual and society, in a framework he called the "circuit of culture" in the 1990s. In the case of fiction, du Gay argued that a narrative not only represented the zeitgeist in which it is created, but also tended to *reinforce* the zeitgeist to its constituent members, a paradigm summarised axiomatically thus: art imitates life, life imitates art (substitute "fiction" for "art", and the model is reproduceable in the narratological context). It's fair to say, then, that sexual identity on the page is both a simulacrum and a guiding influence of sexual identity in real life.

So, sex is almost ubiquitous, and the presentation of sex and sexual identity in fiction undeniably matters since they form a prominent part of a zeitgeist's sociocultural construction. This alone is enough to argue that, if narratives are indeed communicative exchanges, they are influenced by sexualised logics and experiential cues. Furthermore, evidence suggests that narratives would likely

(and problematically) naturalise dominant sociocultural conceptualisations of sex and sexual identity in their content. Indeed, there's no shortage of studies examining the privileging of heteronormative tropes in fiction: think the straight, white male protagonist, the female object of sexual desire, the queer as villainous or ancillary, and so on (see Ménard & Cabrera, 2011 for examples of this in romance novels). The heterosexual metaphor leans on this notion but takes it to its logical extreme. It implies – and I'm arguing that – the way in which the human mind rationalises and ascribes meaning to narrative uses the same experiential and conceptual "hooks" that drive human sexuality and reproduction. I'm arguing that the heterosexual metaphor transforms narrative into a wholly heterological construct; something that invariably mimics heterosexual intercourse – one of the most common human experiences in existence – to catalyse *ideological* reproduction; the seeding of an *idea*. There are two major assumptions I need to justify here: first, that the process of inscribing and interpreting narrative – particularly fiction – is inherently heterological (and thus, heterosexual); and second, that there is exists a commonality of human experience (regarding sex and sexual identity) powerful enough to explain the apparent omnipresence of heterosexual thought in narrative structure. Since both require a fair amount of dissection, I'll attempt to address them in turn over the course of this chapter.

In her seminal book, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*, Judith Roof invokes the words of Hayden White and Roland Barthes to argue that humans systematise their understanding of the world using prescribed narrative structures that explicitly reiterate heteroideological conceptualisations of sexuality and sexual intercourse, both literally and metaphorically (1996). To make her point, Roof contends that Sigmund Freud's articulation of sexual development is seductive because it both informs and is subsequently informed by the basic rules of narrative structure, which is itself heteroideologically reiterative. Ironically, I'll need to revisit Freud several times over the coming paragraphs, but for now, it's sufficient to say that Roof is referring to a theory of human sexual development eerily like the narrative progression of many a fictitious plot: the (presumptively pre-sexual) individual (hero) must overcome the (presumptively homosexual) "perversions" of "abnormal" sexual development in childhood (villain) to become a (presumptively heterosexual) self-actualised "adult" (Freud, 1922, 1977). From a narratological perspective, the struggle against homologic "perversion" (in Freud's zeitgeist: any sexual characteristic that threatens the potential for biological reproduction) inevitably creates tension both within and without the individual, but eventually a kind of climax of realisation is reached, and the individual achieves self-actualisation in the form of sexual mastery (in Freud's zeitgeist: the adoption of sexual characteristics that facilitate biological reproduction). While it's true that sexual identity is no longer considered the exclusive

purview of heterosexuality and its endpoint in biological reproduction (even if they are still the dominant modes of sexual thought), Roof's point is that human conceptualisations of sexuality and narrative structure both function as parts of the same ideological whole, something she calls the "heteronarrative".

Scholars have used the idea of heteronarrativity as a lens to examine and critique the very real textual privileging of heteronormative sexuality in fiction. Robin Silbergleid (2003), for instance, uses heteronarrativity to critique Chris Carter's popular 1990s science-fiction thriller television series *The X-Files*. *The X-Files* follows the adventures of FBI agents Fox Muldur and Dana Scully. Each episode generally sees them investigating a seemingly inexplicable crime, one that's layered in supernatural or extraterrestrial happenings. The agents also undermine expansive conspiracies perpetrated by both intra- and extra-governmental entities over the course of the series. Importantly, Muldur and Scully's relationship is – for a while, at least – strictly platonic, and Silbergleid notes that Carter himself stated in interviews at the time that the pair would never join sexually or romantically. This changed as the series progressed, however, with clearly romantic subplots bringing the two characters closer together. The season eight finale concludes, in fact, with the pair sharing a passionate kiss and committing to the familial obligations raised by Scully giving birth to a mysterious son. Silbergleid argues that even though Scully's baby was *not* biologically Muldur's, their eventual union as a heteronormative unit is a distinct consequence of heteronarrative structure and sensibilities: not only does the content implicitly privilege the heteronormative family paradigm (mother, father, child), it also places a positive emphasis on the protagonists maintaining their affront to the oppressive forces of conspiracy by passing on their passion and knowledge to a child of their own.

Roof's heteronarrative is more than just a passing criticism of Western society's tendency to inject heteronormative content into its fiction, however: it's also a critical repositioning of how *we* understand the *human mind* understands a narrative's meaning and function. Jodi Kaufmann succinctly describes the idea with a series of discrete assertions, which she then uses to demonstrate how narratives rely on "heterological suturing" to overcome "homological tension" (2006). While I won't repeat her experiment here, I will nevertheless summarise her process. She begins with a discussion of the "self" in a linguistic context, ultimately agreeing with Judith Butler's argument that the self is only recognisable as a "discursive fantasy" that refers to the body as a subject. The body and subject are consequently inseparable, since the body can only be affirmed using lingual signifiers that code what it *is* and *is not* as a subject. According to Butler, the discursive law that makes this

possible is the heterosexual matrix, a presupposed gendering and sexualisation of the body as it pertains to others based on a kind of performative rendering of what constitutes a "normal" identity (essentially: individuals replicate the sociocultural "performances" of those around them, albeit with minor variation each time, eventually shifting the definition of "normal") (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 1142). Kaufmann then compares this heterosexual matrix to Roof's heteronarrative, suggesting that the structure of narrative is streamlined in favour of affirming various forms of the "self" and implying that narrative exists to help humans delineate the "self" along the developing lines of the body as subject. Finally, she claims that Western narratives therefore work by asserting the heteronormative, presenting a threat to the heteronormative (hence: "homological tension"), then resolving that threat by reasserting the heteronormative, perhaps with some form of change (hence: "heterological suturing").

There is a massive corpus of work behind these ideas that I simply don't have the time to reanalyse here. Rather, I'll focus on what Butler, Roof, and Kaufmann's conceptualisation of heteronarrativity (and performative normativity) might mean for the creative art of narrative construction. It seems there is a hypothetical narrative "shape" here, one that taps directly into the heterosexual metaphor, mimics heterosexual intercourse, and attaches a heterological dimension to narrative's function. It is no doubt a familiar shape to many: a story begins in an explicit or implicit state of equilibrium for the protagonist (often the hero, villain, or primary subject of the story) or object to which the inscriber hopes audiences will attach their emotional energy; the equilibrium is then disturbed by external or internal dissonance caused by the arrival of an antithesis in one form or another; the protagonist then engages with this dissonance in some way (usually repeatedly) until a final, climactic confrontation determines whether the protagonist will return to a state of equilibrium transformed or not; the story then ends having made its "point" (or points) in the form of ideological discourse. Reductively segmented, this shape might look like this: introduction, rising tension, confrontation, falling tension, conclusion; or, in Kaufmann's terms, heterological introduction, homological middle, heterological conclusion.

I'm not trying to argue that this is how every narrative necessarily appears in text (and neither does Roof or Kaufmann). Indeed, inscribers and performers have been searching for ways to subvert narrative conventions for millennia. What I *am* trying to argue is that the human mind uses this shape to help rationalise and ascribe meaning to narrative itself, an assertion supported by the fact that variations of it are repeated *ad nauseum* throughout popular formulations of narrative structure all over the world. In Japanese kishōtenketsu, for example, the shape is segmented into

introduction, development, twist, and conclusion (Tsuchiya, 2022). In Gustav Freytag's Pyramid, adapted from his book, *Die Technik des Dramas* (2015, originally published in 1863), the shape is expanded to include an opening exposition and inciting incident as well as a dénouement in addition to the resolution. Joseph Campbell conceptualises the shape as a circle he calls the monomyth, a version of the hero's journey he explores in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004, originally published in 1949). Though Campbell applies a cyclical logic to the shape, it still follows the same gradated narrative progression as Freytag's Pyramid, with the climax repositioned and reimagined as the hero's personal revelation rather than an explicit confrontation with a villain. Conversely, John Gardner's Fichtean Curve (1984) leans into the idea of a tension-driven story, drawing the shape as a series of increasingly intense crises until the climax catalyses the narrative's resolution. Even Syd Field's Three-act Structure (2005) – which he specifically formulated for screenwriting – adheres to the same narrative shape, though he does adapt it into broader structural blocks ("acts") to produce bespoke pacing guidelines for the medium.

The heterosexual metaphor applies because there's a common human experience that also possesses this shape. The act of sex – its erotic tangents and bodily practicalities in flirting, foreplay, climax, and calm – can easily be mapped onto any of the popular formulations of narrative I've listed here, even if sex itself is a diverse activity with innumerable sociological rituals and physical permutations. Under such terms, the beginning of a narrative might be called the heteronormative (or heterological) promise of impending change through metaphorical sex, a foreshadowing of adherence to the idea that things will somehow be different for someone after the act. The middle is the arrival of the homological threat: a bad date, perhaps, as the thing that might prevent the act of sex from occurring. The audience takes pleasure in the homological "perversions" of the middle because they assume heteronormativity will eventually win out, an assumption that guides them through the rest of the tension. The promise of change is fulfilled as a climactic orgasm, after which the narrative dips into a kind of post-coital malaise where things are properly resolved. If its job is done, the characters *and* the audience will have been impregnated with ideological change; transformative kinesis in the acquisition of knowledge, perception, skill, or mastery that satisfies heterological reasoning in the absence of biological reproduction.

Homological tension also functions as a catch-all category for variations of this shape that may seem counter-intuitive to the goal of transformative kinesis. A denied orgasm (as a false victory for the hero, for example), is just another way of getting lost in homological tension, a threat to the anticipated – and promised – climax of the act (and dare I say just as frustrating on an intellectual

level, even if it *is* physically thrilling). The heterosexual metaphor is thus able to explain *why* both audiences and inscribers typically behave as if there is a contract between them: as if the transformative kinesis "promised" by a narrative's beginning is an obligation set within the narrative's *raison d'être*. Indeed, I've already referred to narratives that seemingly subvert this shape (what promise of change did Black Noir's premature death necessarily fulfil in *The Boys*?), but Roof argues that it's impossible to disentangle sexuality and narrative because they are ultimately expressions of the same phenomenological paradigm, one enraptured by systems of pleasure, mastery, transformation, (re)production, and synthesis.

I'm arguing here, of course, that in most circumstances, the "child" of such a union is an idea becoming existent where it previously was not, rather than the creation of a physical vessel for genetic material: an impregnation of thought, as it were, imparted by the inscriber, conceived during the "tryst" of the narrative, and carried to term by the audience to be birthed as an ideological version of transformative kinesis. The metaphor thus borrows from Barthes's aesthetic: the narrative *is* partnered sex, and the contract between inscriber and audience *is* one of reproduction (1975b, 1977). To reproduce in this way becomes definitionally transformative according to both Barthes and Butler: a kinetic event that prevents an individual's sociocultural stagnation and an analogue for the very real and broad-reaching assumption that every adult wants to (or *should* want to) engage in partnered sex (Carrigan, 2012). For queer theorists like Ben Nichols, the figure of the child and its enabling connection to heteroideology, heterologic, and heterosexuality (the child is, after all, the personification of "the future") is problematic here: a misleading inheritance that scholars sometimes struggle to decouple from the idea of reproduction (2020).

In fact, and perhaps *because* of the human mind's tendency to literalise the heterosexual metaphor, homologic is often conceptualised as a state of sameness – either a desire for sameness or for its temporal persistence – a notion that cannot facilitate reproduction without violating its own logic. In a narrative sense, homologic functions as an allegorical drive towards "death" (represented textually by the end of the story) at the expense of the potential "child" (in whatever that may be). There are solutions, of course, but they tend to stray into abstract expansions of the metaphor itself. Nichols, for example, proffers an alternate interpretation of reproduction as the replication of a dominant sexual formation or social identity (2020, p. 77). Whether that formation is homological or heterological is no longer relevant: reproduction occurs either way. In effect, Nichols compartmentalises the issue by attempting to redefine its parameters, a solution that clearly borrows from Butler, Roof, and Kaufmann's forays into performative normativity. Still, Butler, Roof,

and Kaufmann might be inclined to argue that nothing can ever be perfectly the same as something else and attempting to declare such an act possible would necessarily appeal to a heterological method of transformation (in the acquisition of knowledge and mastery of novel thought) to make sense *anyway*.

Fortunately, the heterosexual metaphor represents more than an analogue for biological reproduction: it also represents a pattern of naturalised capitalism that only reinforces this paradigm (Roof, 1996). Consider how often an audience's "payoff" for engaging with a piece of fiction is linked to the presence of an epiphanic realisation, one that results in a sense of mastery over the story's sources of tension (for a character), or a sense of mastery over its "message" (for the audience). As I've already argued, audiences tend to construct new solutions in the absence of straightforward or satisfying conclusions, delving deep into a narrative's subtext, metatext, and context to subjectively reconfigure its heterological promises and homological tension (see Wolf, 2004 for a broad overview of conceptual examples). Audiences may also transfer the act of transformation from the narrative onto themselves to heterosexualise a narrative and facilitate meaningful ideological change: a "well written" piece of fiction, for instance, might compel an audience to see the world from a new perspective or captivate them with a depiction of an experience they find familiar. The naturalised capitalism of narrative is thus heterologically reproductive: labour (the act of receiving a narrative) and capital (the narrative) combine to make a product (an ideological change).

My application of the metaphor may be somewhat blithe compared to the depth of the discourse surrounding the analogue between sexuality and capitalism, but I raise it here nonetheless as an example of how easily heteronarrativity maps onto systems of human interaction beyond a simple text. Apart from being integral to many sociocultural phenomena, the *commodification* of sex is also an ubiquitous component of modern capitalism (see Zeno-Zencovich, 2011, for an example exploration of the legal and economic implications of sex markets in a capitalistic system). From the outright sale of pornographic material to the subtly sensualised advertisement of goods and services: it may be axiomatically trite to declare that "sex sells" but it has undeniably been adapted throughout human history to facilitate the conversion of labour and capital into product and vice versa. Indeed, little has changed about the commodification of sex in the twenty-first century, despite the broadening in complexity and range of acknowledged sexual identities. In fact, the same notion is reflected in queer dissections of the issue, where scholars often argue that depictions of non-heteronormative allosexuality tend to result in the commercialisation of sex *and* contribute to

its re-encapsulation within a heteronormative system of commodification (see Vargas, 2010, for an example involving reality television).

Still, there's a deeper epistemological component to the metaphor that *has* certainly matured, one which suggests – once again – that conceptualisations of sex and sexual identity and sociocultural institutions (such as systems of economic management and political governance) are functionally consumed by one another, and sexuality and capitalism have been the subjects of direct comparison for decades at this point. Frida Beckman, for example, traces the development of the Oedipal territorialisation of capital from Freud's original formalisation of the idea to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's reimagining of its parameters and Jean-François Lyotard's subsequent development of the "libidinal" economy (among other theories). In chapter six of *Between Desire and Pleasure: A Deleuzian Theory of Sexuality* (2013), Beckman uses the so-called "money shot" – a common phrase in pornography typically denoting a visual moment of male ejaculation (contextually, a very literal implementation of the heteronarrative "climax") – to examine the flow of capital through the medium of commodified sex. She notes a particular focus on "desire" as capital's driving force, where sexual effort is labour and ejaculation the spent excess of that labour expressed as pleasure. Freud layers this transformation with Oedipal clauses, creating familial subjects of desire that render ejaculation a kind of "break-flow" or "apparatus of capture", one designed to recode sexuality and desire as capital and channel its energy towards production (or reproduction) in a conceptually equivalent manner to the transformative kinesis implied by narrative communication.

This gives ejaculation a sequence of linear causality codifiable according to a libidinal economy of desire *except* for its "wasted" element (the money shot often involves ejaculation on the body or face, precluding the possibility of insemination and reproduction). Beckman, however, posits the idea that the money shot's visualisation doubles as a fundamentally political gesture of subjugation, one in which the body (or face) is rendered in service to the *idea* that the phallus is the socioculturally dominant instrument of the exchange. She uses the physical diversity of the female orgasm as an analogue to explore alternatives to the money shot template but concludes that even when pornography involves – for example – a woman masturbating alone to the point of orgasm, it's still effectively depicting a form of economised labour that politicises its "waste" in the pursuit of further capital. Coupled with other ideas like Lyotard's *coitus reservatus* (the postponement of orgasm for the elicitation of greater pleasure), Beckman's sojourns into political and identity theory begin to parallel conceptualisations of heteronarrative shape retold as a capitalistic form of sexualisation (to wit: disruption in capital as sexual identity, tension in the exchange-value

commencement of the sex act, climax in the capture apparatus of ejaculation, and the subsequent product in mastery of knowledge – whether that "knowledge" is a truthful rendering or not – to generate new capital). Thus, sexual desire – and not *just* sexual reproduction – is repurposed in service of a capitalist order.

Although I'm clearly working with metaphors, the symbolism remains intuitively seductive. Admittedly, "mastery of knowledge" seems a vague surrogate for sexual reproduction, but when interpreted as a method of furthering capital – whether in the form of birthing a child or as expanding one's own perspicacity – it becomes conceptually congruent with heteronarrativity's implied sense of post-climactic synthesis. Even "politicising" the orgasm's "wasted" element by positioning it as a kind of psychosocial reinforcement (for example, with the production of phallic-centric pornography) is nothing more than an abstraction of this ordering process, filtered, perhaps, through some common circuits of sociocultural communication. Indeed, if the "child" of the union between labour and capital is nothing more than a product of sexual desire's recoding, then it follows that the way in which humans understand desire is itself necessarily heteronarrative in nature.

Heteronarrativity, then, is not a new concept, and it certainly isn't unique to this thesis. In fact, I'm convinced there's enough material present on the subject to suggest there is a demonstrable ideological overlap between heterological thought and how the human mind rationalises and ascribes meaning to narrative. To formalise the relationship between the two, I will represent Roof's "heteronarrative" as a five-stage narrative structure: a "shape" that metaphorically links the familiar formulations of narrative with their counterparts in hetero-sex. My goal in *Category X* and here in *Category Y* is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this shape within a work of fiction, but also to subvert it; to expand knowledge incrementally by searching for a way to resist heterological thought in the creative construction of narrative. To be clear, my intention is to call this shape out as problematic and to search for alternative possibilities through the grounded application of literary, queer, and feminist theories. My conclusion that such a thing might not be possible is in no way an endorsement of heteroideology, but an unfortunate reminder that perception is a difficult thing to change, even at the best of times. Thus, within the context of this thesis, heteronarrative structure consists of the following stages:

Stasis represents the expositional introduction of the narrative in which its opening equilibrium is conveyed to the audience. In popular terms, it is the moment the audience is invited to ruminate on

what might be incomplete (or what might *soon* be incomplete) with the narrative's hero. If the narrative's fabula (structural presentation) does not follow its syuzhet (the chronological order of its story), then stasis may not be the first thing the audience engages with. In heterological terms, though, this is where the inscriber lays down the promise of change, either within the characters and concepts presented within the narrative or within the intellectual purview of the audience. Remember that reproduction is not strictly biological: the impregnation of ideas can be as much a heterological performance as the impregnation of genetic material (Butler, 1990, 2017; Nichols, 2020). Thus, stasis itself need not be a place of negativity, and might, in fact, be a uniformly pleasant place: it doesn't matter because it's the *return* to stasis that threatens transformative kinesis and ideological reproduction (even if that reproduction is no more than a reaffirmation of the original equilibrium, heterosexualised by the acquisition of the knowledge that it is now *definitively* better than the alternative). If nothing changes – or the narrative ends before anything can – then no sense of reproductive mastery will occur, and the contract between inscriber and audience will be violated. As part of the hetero-sex act, stasis is the portion that is *not*. It is fundamentally pre-sexual, or perhaps (but not necessarily) sexually inept. Here, the incomplete factor that can be many things in narrative is always the absence of heterosexual sex, its potential, and its reproductive "value"; it is the return to or entrapment in this state that homological thought implies (Hanson, 2013, 2014).

Disruption represents the first stage of the inscriber's contractual obligations and the surfacing of the homological "threat". Typically, it's when the inciting incident occurs, and a challenge is placed before the narrative's protagonist that exemplifies the necessity of their impending transformation. Like stasis, disruption doesn't need to be chronologically organised between stasis and its following stage in tension, but it remains the point in the narrative when change becomes necessary. Disruption's analogue in the hetero-sex act is the destabilisation of stasis: it is the arrival of the potential partner, the catalyst for a state of arousal and of impending sexual connection, but also the potential *failure* of that arousal. If the individual is aroused, if their capacity for sexual congress is evoked in some way, then forward motion towards heterosexual reproduction can begin, but sex itself may not eventuate. Of course, narrative disruption isn't necessarily problematic. Arousal itself is arguably ambiguous: it can be negative if it suggests the onset of "perversion", positive if its implications are reciprocated. Narrative disruption can be clear (like when a villain burns down the hero's home, or a natural disaster forces the hero to dislocate to survive), or it may be equivocal. Empowerment, for example, can fulfil the role of disruption. A hero who finds out they're the "Chosen One" might spend the rest of the narrative deciding what to do with their newfound fame

and power. Disruption marks the beginning of the narrative tryst and the arrival of the antagonistic force (in whatever form it may take).

Tension represents the conflict between the heterological promises of the narrative and the homological obstructions that threaten their realisation. In heterological terms, tension mimics foreplay and heterosexual penetration in its construction and pacing: a delay designed to conjure pleasure in its own procession and eventual defeat in inevitable climax. Tension works if it never wantonly violates the original contract: when the climax *does* arrive, whether it be in the form of revelation or orgasm, then its preceding tension becomes an enticement, both in the moment and the future. Some theorists argue that the belated pleasure gained from a revelation beset by doubt is intrinsically more powerful than that gained from one proffered without hesitation (Barthes, 1975b; Freud, 1922), rendering the audience a patient lover-to-be, seduced by the inscriber's narratological seduction. Most popular formulations of narrative structure suppose tension naturally inclines towards a climax, while others posit an oscillating model that varies between "crisis" or "pinch" points (see Campbell, 2004; Fields, 2005; Freytag, 2015; Gardner, 1984; Tsuchiya, 2022 for examples). Either way, tension succumbs to one or more confrontations between the heterological promise and the homological threat, in which the character, narrative, or audience are afforded the opportunity to resolve the tension or escalate it further. In the hetero-sex act, confrontations without resolution are akin to *extended* foreplay: perverted orgasms that don't facilitate reproduction but otherwise scintillate and excite. A successful resolution is typically the penultimate climax of the conflict when resolution *does* occur.

Climax represents the fulfilment of the heterological promise. It's *the* orgasm: the one in which sexual desire and spent labour are captured and recoded; in which reproduction metaphorically occurs, and the moment all energy and attention is focused on the creation of a heteroideological purpose. In the climax, the hero defeats the villain, the villain defeats the hero, or the expectation that either will "win" is subverted, and the audience shifts the heterological promise of the narrative into its subtext, metatext, or context. Whatever the explicit outcome, the climax is thus the "apex" of foreplay (tension), the "supreme" facilitation of naturalised capitalism in ejaculation and its heterosexual reception. In a narrative sense, the climax is the manifestation of transformative kinesis and the desire to procreate *ideologically*. Even if the narratological analogue of biological reproduction is not achieved (in an implied sequel, perhaps, or the continuation of the story in fanfiction), mastery is concomitant: mastery over sex, sexuality, identity, desire, and the hero; to possess what the narrative suggests as an alternative way of being by way of a change in perception

or knowledge. In essence, the audience seeks to inherit a portion of the inscriber, and the climax facilitates this like the merging of genetic material or a generative grammar. It is the pairing of two distinct progenitors and the commencement of a linear sequence of pregnancy, birth, and dynastic mimesis, re-enacted within a narrative as pleasure, an ideological shift, and the propagation of a concept or worldview, after which the audience is invited – now in a state of post-coital malaise – to reflect on the nature of the narrative and determine the efficacy of its supposed purpose.

Synthesis represents the reflective portion of the climax. In synthesis, the audience seeks to recognise the fulfilment of the narrative's heterological promise by finding the counterpoint to its beginning (stasis). From "before" to "after": the narrative's characters, concepts, or ideologies must have changed, must have demonstrated transformative kinesis either in themselves or on behalf of the audience. The narrative's purpose, its *raison d'être*, is made clear by the difference between stasis and synthesis, framed by the story nestled between the two. This allows the audience to apply meaning to the whole, and subsequently evaluate its effectiveness. In the hetero-sex act, this is akin to insemination, something somewhat beyond *immediate* experience and grounded instead in the act's long-term outcomes: pregnancy, birth, child-rearing, family. The hope, then, is that whatever pleasure inscriber or audience draw from their coupling germinates, and the revelation, now enduring (perhaps as ideology or aesthetic sensibility) is reproduced. Of course, and even though the whole point of the narrative shape I'm studying is to liken it to sex, *biological* reproduction is once again not the only way *heterological* reproduction is expressed. In narrative, it is often conveyed as the mastery of skill or knowledge, the exertion of power and control, or a shift in ideological perspective. A narrative's sources of tension – the homological threats to the heterological conclusion – are usually the target of the protagonist's mastery just as the body's sources of arousal are usually the target of the individual's mastery during sex, but the end goal is to reproduce certain conceptualisations in the audience (thus completing the metaphor in the birth of a new viewpoint). The reproductive prerogative that might follow is an extension thereof: the pleasure of reconciling one's desire for narrative conclusion with the desire to create something new. The narrative is thus rationalised, and meaning can be ascribed.

Stasis, disruption, tension, climax, and synthesis: the shape of sex; the shape of narrative. From both narratological and psychological standpoints, the metaphor assumes an intuitively familiar pattern, one that feeds directly into human experience and brings me straight back to my second assumption. Does there exist a commonality of human experience (regarding sex and sexual identity) powerful enough to explain the apparent omnipresence of heterosexual thought in

narrative structure (at least, as I've attempted to formalise it here)? To begin dissecting this assumption, I feel I must begin over – once again – with Freud. Freud opens *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by arguing that all higher-level (human) mental processes are governed by the eponymous principle (which is to say that all such processes begin in a state of tension that an individual will try to resolve to elicit pleasure) (1922). According to Freud, the antithesis of pleasure (pain) is the product of operational caveats playing out at the ego and superego level. The ego's impulse towards self-preservation, for example, can cause pain when it postpones the need for satisfaction until after the intrusion of necessity (the need to eat, for instance, or *coitus reservatus* in strictly biological terms). Similarly, the repression of inappropriate behaviour for the benefit of broader social cohesion, what Freud calls the "… development of the ego towards a more highly co-ordinated organisation" (1922, p. 5), induces a sense of pain, both in the form of repressed instincts and belated pleasure.

Consider, for example, the number of people who endure stressful situations to maintain a job, or the angst associated with studying before an exam. Very few people obtain pleasure from being under stress or the apprehension of potential failure, yet many tolerate both to induce a greater (however delayed) sense of satisfaction from having a steady income or mastering a particular subject. As a function of the heterosexual metaphor in the narrative milieu, this translates to whatever is threatening a story's heterological conclusion. There is a power fantasy here, one that cannot be achieved without repressing the urge to quit, go out with friends, watch television, or do anything other than work, study, or engage with a narrative: in fact, things that would normally please the individual may, Freud argues, become devastating sources of pain for the superego if indulged, since they threaten the supposedly forthcoming sense of satisfaction. Of course, Freud also acknowledges the existence of a multitude of perceptual sources of pain (psychological trauma), but his point is nonetheless made. Humans will generally seek the production of pleasure, often despite (but sometimes by way of) expeditions into pain, and narrative is no different.

Freud's analogies go further, however. He argues that instincts compel an organism to turn inward, towards the id and an earlier state of existence (1922, p. 44). This logically culminates in a desire for death ("Thanatos"), since the first instinct born of the first consciousnesses must have been to return to a state of non-consciousness (an ostensibly homological phenomenon if one accepts the premise that homologic is – at its core – a philosophy of sameness). If true, Freud sees no other option than to accept the nihilistic proposition that the goal of all life is to end (1922, p. 48). However, even Freud admits that this assertion defies reduction to a systematic series of pleasure-

seeking goals and hardly reflects reality, thus complicating the pleasure principle. For an answer, he turns to his previous work on sexual development, and (perhaps inevitably) entangles the two concepts in one broad stroke; the conflict, he argues, is *all* biological. A fixation on or mental repetition of traumatic and pain-inducing stimuli is almost *always* a matter of incongruence between Thanatos and its counterpart in the life-propagating portion of the individual, the sexual instincts ("Eros"). The repression of trauma to the subconscious then becomes inherently sexual (even if its focus is ostensibly transferred) and stems from a stage of sexual development that ultimately "stalled" in the individual's past, causing conflict between Eros and Thanatos. Concurrently, self-actualisation is almost always related to an individual's libidinous impulse to propagate, often regarded as an instinct itself but placed distinctly by Freud alongside the ego or, at least, within its narcissistic liminalities. He suggests that a healthy mental state is one that can accommodate the interplay between the conscious and subconscious – the id, ego, and superego – by resolving this conflict, usually (but not always) by fulfilling their "natural" role as a reproducing adult (1922, p. 21). Freud argues his case literally, transforming heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and heterologic into the innate order of life and claiming that their denial will always lead to a kind of pained perversion in the individual, regardless of how they manifest.

Freud effectively argues that self-actualisation of this nature is one of the major motivating factors that allows humans to tolerate (and even laud) tension-riddled narrative. It affords individuals the opportunity to renounce their baser instincts by demonstrating mastery over them. Freud argues this is typically achieved through open confrontation and resolution; in other words, humans initialise a conscious override to appropriately repress the id, thus rendering mental neuroses a consequence of failing to negotiate the spaces between one's various "selves" rather than anything explicitly external. The failure foments, germinates, and eventually becomes a fixation on (or mental repetition of) trauma or unwelcome behaviour in the form of compulsions or dreams. Roof reconceptualises Freud's version of existence in terms of fluids (concerned, as she is, with the nature of sex): specifically, as a river flowing inexorably towards the ocean (1996). Perversions to the "natural order" of the river come in the form of blockages and distractions (a fallen tree or rivulet, perhaps) that molest the expected discharge of essential fluid into the collective from whence it came. The natural order always prevails according to Roof, however, and the river inevitably returns to its oceanic progenitor one way or another. There, it meets both beginning and end, the climax of Eros and Thanatos, in which the child (the river) supplants its parent (the ocean) and becomes one with all. Perhaps anachronistically, I found myself wondering what the river would think, if it at all could, about its apparent desire to return to a state of simultaneous being and non-being. Still,

Roof's analogy works just as well if one trades meteorology and geology with biology and sociology. If this is indeed an accurate conceptualisation of heterologic, then narrative tension is an internal affair before it is an external one.

Abstractions of social and sexual identity aside, cognitive narratology has also found a place in fields like neuroscience. In her recent piece, *Narrative, Perception, and the Embodied Mind: Towards a Neuro-narratology*, Lilla Farmasi suggests it would take "many books" to determine why narrative is so universally serviceable (2022, p. 4), but nevertheless envisions a theory dedicated to combining the biological sciences with narratological philosophy. She points towards an emerging trend in second-generation cognitive narratology as a potential baseline: something she calls "embodied" narratology. According to Marco Caracciolo, Cécile Guédon, Karin Kukkonen and Sabine Müller, embodied narratology is literally the study of the physical human form as it pertains to the conveyance and interpretation of narrative and its structure (2017). In Western culture, being a reader (or an audience to a narrative) is often reduced to a purely mental exercise in which words are mapped onto an imaginary simulacrum of reality (2017, p. 1), but this, asserts Caracciolo et al, is only part of the way humans *experience* narrative.

Building on the idea that experience subsumes the way narrative activates and exploits cognitive frames and schemata, Caracciolo et al pose a scenario in which *bodily* experience acts as a kind of "meeting place" where perceptions and reflections converge with sensations to cumulatively inform one another; a "feedback loop" that humans use to conceptualise their own physical realities and that of others (2017, p. 4). Narrative thus leverages the body in cognitive, representational, and interpretive ways, filtering its organisational qualities through human awareness, movement, expression, and behaviour. This is compatible with – and even augments – Butler, Roof and Kaufmann's search for the "self" through discursive law and the heterosexual matrix, providing a kind of bridge between their somewhat metaphorical constructs and actual human experience. It even goes some way to explaining why narrative is so effective at creating identity. Consider, for example, the personification of freedom in a human hero or violence in a human villain, the importance of a subtle smile and a wink to establish irony in a stage play, or the implications of a character's victory over an oppressive institution in a psychological thriller: all rely on "embodied" experiences to elicit meaning that can then be relayed holistically to the audience. According to an embodied narratology, a narrative about sexuality and sex is powerful because it taps into its audience's bodily qualia *of* sexuality and sex; their sensorimotor experiences of sex stored as memory (Caracciolo et al., 2017; Farmasi, 2022).

Furthermore, an embodied narratology offers potential answers to some of cognitive narratology's explicatory shortfalls. An ongoing debate in cognitive narratology surrounds the impetus for when and how an audience might apply or alter certain frames of reference to interpret narrative shapes. Jahn's cognitive frames, for example, come with variables he calls "normal-case assumptions" and "exception conditions", conditions that allow for both additive and subtractive modular flexibility in an individual's mind when they engage with a narrative (1997). Rather than simply abandoning frames as a narrative's content renders them obsolete, individuals tend to mentally amend them, provisionally adopting frames with certain exceptions capable of explaining why the narrative can proceed despite it violating previous expectations (recall Simon's adventure with the happiest dog in the world).

Jahn acknowledges that this raises two questions about his theory: first, if frames are inherently modular, do they add anything meaningful to the discourse around narrative shape; and second, is it even possible to determine what factors influence the subjective application of a frame? Scholars like Farmasi (2022) and Armstrong (2020) argue that an embodied narratology – specifically one that focuses on the neurological manifestations of narrative engagement – would embed how humans understand narrative shape and function in the bioevolutionary make-up of the body, potentially providing answers in the form of neural event patterns predicated on perception and its footprint in memory. Farmasi points out that perception itself is a foundationally biological process, with input from the senses parsed in concert within an "egocentric" brain (one that must often deal with the threat of death or desire to reproduce) to produce a holistic spatial and temporal experience for the individual (2022, pp. 46–60). Under an embodied narratology, narrative becomes little more than an abstraction of this process. Importantly though – as with heteronarrative "shape" – I'm *not* trying to claim that heteronarrativity is the only explanation for narrative's functional homogeneity, nor do I wish to suggest that neural activity alone could possibly render a complete picture of the interlude between physical phenomenon and conscious thought. In fact, both Farmasi and Armstrong admit that embodied narratology and neuro-narratology fail – on their own – to wholly supplant cognitive narratology and the structural taxonomies of classical narratology. I *am* trying to claim, however, that the sense-making instrument humans use to comprehend and order reality is, in fact, the same one they use to tell stories, and that it is almost always a metaphorically erotic device thanks to the instincts associated with Freud's whimsically labelled "Eros" and "Thanatos".

There are objections to this, of course. Scholars who've noted the potency of the bodily experience also decry the limitations of mimetic modes of thinking in which narrative is necessarily a reflection or subversion of reality. Richardson, for example, claims that the difficulty in producing and interpreting what he calls "unnatural" narratives stems from the persistent assumption that semiotic cues rely exclusively on experiential frames of reference to tell a story (for example, that a fictionalised narrator is analogous to a human being, or that a plot represents a consistently logical reflection of time moving forward) (2017). He goes on to propose a series of antimimetic narrative techniques, lamenting that mimetic scaffolding – while it does much for streamlining the logic behind human perception – insufficiently addresses all the possible functions of fiction. After all, a narrative that circles back on itself (like James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*) or addresses the audience as protagonist (like Jay MacInerny's *Bright Lights, Big City*) would surely escape personal experience, as would Black Noir's hypothetical reappearance in season four of *The Boys*.

Ultimately, I'm inclined to agree with Farmasi's appraisal of the situation: it would indeed take many, *many* books to adequately discuss the minutiae of narrative's functional homogeneity. Within the context of *Category Y*, however, I'm satisfied there's a compelling enough argument to suggest that sex and narrative share the same paradigmatic structure, one based on the tendency of human beings to perceive and organise reality according to the sympathetic sensorimotor experiences they commit neurologically to memory. This is why narrative is such an effective tool: it translates shared sensations into a series of semiotic prompts (essentially, a language) that uses primal bioevolutionary frames to endow seemingly benign instances of communication with lavish meaning. This also helps explain why the homological and homosexual are often problematically labelled as antagonistic. Indeed, its role in heteronarrative structure suggests that it's essential; that whatever form the homological tension of a narrative happens to take – be it the "villain", the "antithesis", or even the "counternarrative" – its ultimate role is to serve as the proverbial mirror by which the heteronarrative's *actual* point is reflected at the audience (and it need not be explicitly sexual, either). The villain that destroys the hero's village and kidnaps their family is a vehicle for the conceptualisation of Eros and Thanatos *within* the hero, whether it be towards a state we should "aspire" in apoplectic victory and the reclamation of family or one we should "avoid" in nihilistic defeat and the loss of family. As for the hero who disregards their family and demurs from rescuing anyone in favour of a happy life alone? The lack of homological tension renders the narrative dissatisfying, or it is reinterpreted by the audience, perhaps as an ironic take on the sociopolitical roles of family. Without that tension, narrative would cease to be an effective communicative tool.

Problematically, though, homological tension only forms *part* of a process, one which will inevitably manifest as the heteronarrative. Heteronarrativity's most insidious quality, then, is that it never *appears* as antithesis because it has already co-opted what defines human conflict and inserted it into the way humans communicate and make sense of the world. Eros *is* heterological, Thanatos *is* homological, and pleasure comes from Thanatos only when the promise of Eros is fulfilled. The heteronarrative is both a symptom and cause of this dichotomy, a sociocultural rendition of the heterosexual metaphor that reiterates its position as the natural order of life. Consequently, and regardless of where the disruption, tension, or climax takes place in a narrative, it's *always* going to be reducible to Eros and Thanatos (the only difference being, perhaps, whether we conform blindly to that truth or do so with open eyes). The search for new ways of understanding human perception, then, is intimately tied to the search for new ways of understanding both sex and narrative, and changing the landscape of one will inevitably lead to changing the landscape of the others.

ON ASEXUALITY (TENSION)

'It's not necessarily *physical,' she says. 'Some people consider it a sexuality in and of itself, but, in my opinion, a healthy sex life is something most people want, and something I think everyone* should *have. Pleasure is, after all, essential to a happy life. Trust me, I've been working here a long time, and every single person I've met who didn't want or couldn't have sex were suffering from some kind of trouble, or they were too young to know what sex is in the first place.'*

(p. 154)

How does one even begin to combat something as pervasive as the heteronarrative? Is something like subversion even possible? Homosexuality was my first thought – in fact, *Category X*'s protagonist was originally going to be a lesbian who "comes out" – but the problem is that homosexuality deployed as homological tension inside a heterological structure still privileges heteronarrative conceptualisations of sex and narrative that facilitate ideological reproduction. Deconstructing heteronarrative didn't initially monopolise my plans for *Category X*, but I quickly came to realise that a homosexual coming out or coming-of-age story is necessarily heterological (even if it is an overwhelmingly positive depiction of homosexuality) because it relies on the stasis-disruption-tension-climax-synthesis shape of heteronarrativity to elicit transformative kinesis in its penultimate moment. If Jess achieved self-actualisation by overcoming heterosexual pressure, for example, then she is still encapsulated within a categorically heterological binary designed to produce knowledge (this "thing" is not that "thing" because…). If Jess failed to achieve self-actualisation by succumbing to heterosexual pressure, then she becomes a vehicle for the subordination of non-heterosexual categories (even if heterosexual pressure is encoded as the villain). Either way, the homological options remain antagonistically "othered", and they are resolved only by appealing to heterological suturing.

I began to see what some scholars call "compulsory sexuality" – the assumption that every adult wants to (or *should* want to) engage in partnered sex and the privileging thereof – everywhere (Carrigan, 2012; Przybylo, 2019), and I honestly wondered if I would ever find a way to build a narrative that didn't conform to its dimensions. I needed a tool – something I could deploy as both content *and* structure – that would inform my construction of *Category X* and encourage my audience to appeal to subtext, metatext, and context in a way that didn't simply default to the heterological; something that could potentially counter heteronarrativity on all fronts. I discovered an intriguing possibility in asexuality, defined by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN)

as the non-experience of sexual attraction (AVEN, 2020): a sexual identity so antithetical to the idea of compulsory sexuality that I set out to determine what informing qualities it may have in the literary space. Asexuality thus informed both *Category X*'s subject matter *and* its final structure. Before I get into more detail in that regard, however, some explication is in order.

While asexuality has not, perhaps, been as violently maligned as homosexuality has in the past, it remains prone to greater erasure and misunderstanding. In fact, until the establishment of AVEN in 2001 (AVEN, 2020) and Anthony Bogaert's subsequent study of sexual identity in 2004 (Bogaert, 2004), asexuality was mostly ignored or otherwise problematised by Western medicine. As an example, the world's leading catalogue of abnormal psychology (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) effectively considered asexuality a symptom of hypoactive sexual desire disorder until the release of its fifth edition in 2013 (van Houdenhove et al., 2014; Wrhel, 2017). The name *Category X* is itself a reference to asexuality's first non-pathologised (albeit still "othered") appearance in formal literature, where Alfred Kinsey classified a subset of research participants who described themselves as not being sexually attracted to anyone as "category X" (as opposed to heterosexual or homosexual) (Kinsey et al., 1948). Today, of course, things are more complex. The variety inherent to human sexual identity and experience is a topic of considerable discussion, and asexuality is no exception, even if it remains subject to marginalisation. While an asexual individual is often defined according to AVEN's characterisation of them, many within the asexual community argue that asexuality is multifaceted, with a spectrum of variance at least as wide as any LGBTQI inclusive measure of sexual orientation (Cowan & LeBlanc, 2018). AVEN's definition is itself not without detractors, with some pointing out that it's both *reactionary* – because it's based on the absence of a certain characteristic – and *simplistic* – because it doesn't account for many of asexuality's permutations (Przybylo, 2011; Schilling, 2014).

Nevertheless, AVEN's definition supplants behavioural indicators of sexuality with experiential ones, and thus represents a significant improvement over any pathological definition. It does not, for example, preclude asexual individuals from both identifying as asexual and engaging in sexual acts, experiencing a desire for sex (as distinct from sexual attraction), or experiencing romantic love (AVEN, 2020, sec. FAQ). Importantly, AVEN's definition represents the most common refrain in both mainstream and academic discourse (AVEN, 2020; Bogaert, 2004, 2006, 2012; Carrigan, 2012; Scherrer, 2008), an achievement considering Western society still largely understands sexuality through the lens of an individual's dyadic sexual configuration (Wilchins, 2002). This typically manifests as a function of biological relativism (such as genital configuration versus sexual object

preferences) (van Anders, 2015), or the "socially produced differences between being feminine [female] and being masculine [male]" (Holmes, 2007, p. 2); heterological narrativisations of sexuality that would deny asexuality classificatory congruence (despite the increasingly popular work of constructionist scholars who encourage the decoupling of concepts like sex, gender, and desire).

Asexuality's presence already illuminates some of the assumptions inherent in Butler's heterosexual matrix (femininity and masculinity are, after all, categorical labels that designate types of "self" by appealing to human sensorimotor experience), but it also raises several important epistemological questions about sociosexual identity: who, for instance, has the authority to rationalise sexuality's origin and nature, how does asexuality interact with other concepts like gender and binarism (being a "mother" or a "father", for instance), and are categorical labels inherently empowering or dispossessing (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014)? Pathologisation has, until recently, served as the proverbial buffer to these problems (if asexuality is "abnormal", then it cannot possibly threaten heteroideology), but that school of thought is finally waning. Indeed, since the establishment of AVEN in 2001, numerous "grey-a", "grey-ace", or "grey-asexual" sexualities have achieved recognition (Steelman & Hertlein, 2016), many of which fall outside the descriptive capacity of dyadic sexuality or even queer sexuality (Bogaert, 2012). Furthermore, psychologists like Sari M. van Anders have recommended moving away from dyadic conceptualisations of sexuality and towards more complex and gradated "models" in part due to the de-pathologisation of asexuality (2015).

Sexual configurations theory, for instance, incorporates factors beyond the simple genital configuration versus sexual object preference setup that Western society typically relies on to determine sexual identity (van Anders, 2015). Biological sex, sexual orientation, romantic orientation, erotic orientation, partner presence and number, sociosexuality, gender, and fetishism all play equally valid roles in sexual identity formation according to sexual configurations theory. Some scholars might be inclined to argue that van Anders' is seeking to formulate ideas that inherently defy formulation and, indeed, I feel as though I am beginning to stray too far into the realm of taxonomical classification here, but her argument is clear: there is *nothing* about sexuality that is easily categorisable, let alone innately binary or dyadic, and asexuality is as legitimate a contributing factor as any other aspect of sexual identity. It may even constitute an informing presence in the sociocultural space *in addition to* the literary space, given its previous exclusion. This is the position I took when I wrote *Category X*: if asexuality *does* constitute an informing presence in the sociocultural space, then what can it teach us about the heterosexual metaphor? Can it,

perhaps, be the concept that finally, successfully, and comprehensively subverts the heteronarrative?

My initial research focused on the current state of asexual representation in Western society and literature. In *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, Julie Sondra Decker meticulously details the discrimination asexual individuals have and continue to experience at the behest of what Przybylo dubs the "sexusociety" (2011), a concept analogous to compulsory sexuality (2016, p. 182). While asexuality rarely induces the kind of organised prejudice homosexuality has endured for centuries, asexual individuals nevertheless report being subjected to things like epistemic denial, institutional bigotry, and "corrective" rape (Decker, 2014, pp. 17–88). It is also often conflated with sex-aversion, homosexuality, celibacy, and even assumptions of disability. Eunjung Kim argues that allosexualism is typically synonymous with "functional" or "able" social identities in the West, while asexuality is not (2011). Similarly, Maureen S. Milligan and Aldred H. Neufeldt (2001) discuss the prevalence of sexual disenfranchisement among people with disability, claiming that members of their support networks (friends, family, institutions) tend to treat them as asexual by default.

Carrie Sandahl (2003), too, asserts that, despite the increasing mainstream acceptance of gender and sexual minority groups, non-heteronormative and non-able identities often intersect in socially subversive ways that can result in the expurgation of one or both. Some queer theorists question the conceptual efficacy of applying labels altogether; Kristian Kahn suggests that "… the [identifier] is forced to use language to identify him- or herself as an object in language rather than a subject possessing individuality and subjectivity…" (Kahn, 2014, p. 62). Others argue that queer "labels" necessarily reflect the androcentric-style power structures inherent to binary conceptualisations of sexuality (Wilchins, 2002), and sociologists agree. Explicit sexual identities, they claim, often position people within a sexual taxonomy that "invokes sex rather than gender" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1180), crystallising possessional relationships (i.e., masculinity "belonging" to men and femininity "belonging" to women) and delegitimising variation even while trying to exemplify it (Butler, 2017; Wilchins, 2002).

In the literary space, asexuality seems to reside in an equivocal liminality, somewhere on the edges of Roof's heteronarrative and Freud's conceptualisation of the psyche. There is no shortage of problematic tropes to redress, perhaps even more than I could reasonably indulge in a single novel. Portraying asexuality as a legitimate identity seems to be difficult for many writers, and not least of

all because of the complexity of representation. In mediums like film and television, for example, sexually ambiguous characters (that *may* be asexual) are sometimes retroactively canonised as allosexual as they become popular with viewers, or their story arcs become prominent. In the rebooted versions of *Star Trek* (Orci et al., 2009) and *Riverdale* (Aguirre-Sacasa & Talalay, 2018), for instance, the previously asexual characters of Spock and Jughead Jones are rendered definitively allosexual, consistently expressing a sexual attraction to, or experiencing physical and emotional pleasure while engaging in sexual acts with, other characters (Wrhel, 2017). Even when asexuality *does* form part of a character's identity, writers often explore it in terms of comorbidity: for characters like Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al., 2008), asexuality is an identity combined with abnormal intelligence, eidetic memory, heightened social anxiety (bordering on autism spectrum disorder), obsessive-compulsive disorder, and synaesthesia. In fact, compulsory sexuality in fiction means that the conflation of asexuality with illness, trauma, disability, or perversion are common, resulting in an abundance of characters negatively "afflicted" by asexuality. For example, the narrator heavily implies that Florence, an asexual character in Ian McEwan's novel *On Chesil Beach* (2007), is only repulsed by sex because her father abused her when she was a child (Fedtke, 2012), and Seligman prefaces his attempted rape of Joe with a declaration of asexual innocence in *Nymphomaniac* (Trier, 2013).

Conversely, asexuality is sometimes exoticised as a reverential (though no less antagonistic) trait. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has Sherlock Holmes openly declare that emotional pursuits (such as love and sex) compromise his perspicacity (Doyle, 2003, p. 235), implying that Holmes's incredible intellect and his disinterest in sex are comorbid. In its most extreme literary form, this exoticisation results in a sense of communicable inhumanity. In Lackey's 1988 fantasy novel, *The Oathbound*, protagonist Tamra becomes spiritually linked to a warrior goddess after her tribe is decimated by bandits, rendering her physically strong but irrevocably asexual. Arguably, Lackey deploys this plot device as a method for empowering women, a fact made evident by the alarming prevalence of physical and sexual violence in Tamra's world. Nevertheless, not only is Tamra's asexuality inescapably pathological in nature (even if its source is magic rather than disease or disability), it also becomes associated with infertility: Tamra can no longer conceive, forcing her allosexual friend Kethry to seek sexual partners to repopulate their tribe.

Similarly, Fedtke (2012) examines asexuality as a utopian and dystopian societal extreme in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* (2009), arguing that both depict complex, compelling, and ultimately flawed versions of asexuality. In *The Left Hand of*

Darkness, the asexual Gethenians, an alien race from another planet, are fluidly androgynous: they shift between male and female "archetypes" for the purposes of procreation through a process called kemmer. However, Gethenians who elect to remain in kemmer (that is, to permanently adopt either male or female, masculine or feminine, traits) become sterile and are considered perverse, effectively fusing the idea of asexuality with androgyny. In *Corpus Delicti*, asexuality is the result of politically motivated eugenics; the novel's fictionalised authoritarian government has effectively removed its citizens' right to personal identity and reduced sexuality to a specialised, utilitarian process. In every case – whether negative or positive – the narratives in question depict asexuality as the cause of an inability to function "correctly" in the face of eroticism or sexual desire. Asexuality is therefore treated as something inhuman, or, at the very least, detached from the "natural" experience of sex. Once again, it is pathologised: linked to undesirable traits (intellectual elitism, violence, drug use, delusions, inhumanity) so that the characters are, in a sense, its victims.

Asexuality is also regularly paired with death. Recently, science fiction writer O'Connacht (2018) published an essay discussing the asexual character of Nancy Whitmore in Seanan McGuire's *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016). In the book, Nancy escapes from reality by visiting a fantasy realm called the Halls of the Dead. After returning to Earth, she consistently expresses a desire to return to the Halls, which O'Connacht interprets as a metaphor for darkness, death, and stillness. O'Connacht goes on to note how often asexuality and death coinhabit the same text, using Garth Nix's *Clariel: The Lost Abhorsen*, Alyssa Wong's *You'll Surely Drown Here If You Stay* (2016), and RoAnna Sylver's *Chameleon Moon* (2016) as examples. She labels the phenomenon the "death-adjacent ace trope" and criticises it primarily on the humanitarian grounds that perpetuating such an association is dehumanising in a manner consistent with some of the intergroup biases against asexual individuals noted by sociologists (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012). The death-adjacent ace, O'Connacht argues, is an extension of the idea that asexual people are "plants, frigid, cold fish or any other variant" (2018); in a sense, it is used to imply that the character is partially "dead" and incapable of experiencing something that is essentially human (sex). According to O'Connacht, the Halls of the Dead are also linked with the idea of suicide (physically or emotionally) which plays out in *Every Heart a Doorway* as a variant of the *Bury Your Gays* trope (https://tvtropes.org/, n.d.).

A more liberal interpretation of asexuality as something not *quite* death but otherwise inhuman is also common in speculative, science, and fantasy fiction, and is rarely directed in an asexual character's favour (as in, portrayed as a fallacious sociocultural assumption). Apart from the examples already mentioned, the asexual possibility in protagonists like *Doctor Who's* Doctor

(Newman, 2005), *Angel's* Lorne (Greenwalt & Whedon, 1999), or *Shadowhunters'* Raphael Santiago (Decter, 2016) tend to signify a characters' inhumanity rather than their humanity. In the case of the Doctor, asexuality is a component of a decidedly alien origin: while modern iterations of the Doctor sometimes develop romantic connections with their companions, they nevertheless express discomfort when confronted with potentially sexualising acts (Osterwald, 2017). The same is true for Lorne (despite his penchant for panromantic flirting), a humanoid demon from another dimension, and Raphael Santiago, a vampire. Asexuality takes the form of "un-life", an operational term borrowed to represent a sociological schism summarised concisely by Decker, who argues that "people who look at asexual people as though they must be zombies or robots are probably looking at them as a concept rather than as people." (2014, p. 122). Within the context of fictionalised asexuality, un-life describes the state of characters depicted as deficiently human, whose existence is absent the qualities necessary for a "complete" and erotic life. In the cases of the Doctor, Lorne, and Raphael Santiago, it is something that they lack (in combination with other alien attributes like a superhuman intellect, tendency to intermittently regenerate, or desire to drink blood) that marks them as not *quite* human.

As part of *Category X*'s subversion of the heteronarrative, I intentionally positioned Jess alongside these problematic tropes: in fact, some of the encoded storytelling I mentioned in the previous chapters is specifically formulated to encourage heterological interpretations of the text (at least, initially). Presenting Jess as a socially anxious, verbosely cynical, and analytically inclined teenager, for example (albeit one who occasionally engages in mock conversation with her cat), was designed to subtly suggest that she may be neurodivergent. This evolves into sexual "dysfunction" once Jess begins to realise that she doesn't experience sexual attraction (and little pleasure from intercourse). Similarly, the passing of Jess's father is an obvious example of entangling her journey with death, and her damaged relationship with her mother – quickly revealed to be a lesbian whose affair with another woman was instrumental to the "collapse" of Jess's family unit – exacerbates her exorcism from heteronormative life. Jess's obsession with academic excellence, too, is a nod to the "inhuman" function of asexuality in fantasy and science fiction. Asexuality doesn't become explicitly part of the narrative until much later in the novel, at which point Jess's association with such tropes begins to erode (a conscious choice that I will discuss in the following chapter). Nevertheless, *Category X* is deliberately designed to mimic the heterosexual metaphor in its early content and structure.

Of course, not every character who appears asexual necessarily is, and declarations of asexual subject matter in fiction (particularly in work predating contemporary sexology or when the author

is unable or unwilling to clarify a character's sexual identity) sometimes rely on speculation (Hanson, 2013). To avoid this issue, theorists like Elizabeth Hanna Hanson argue that narratological explorations of asexuality should focus on the asexual *possibility* that sexual paucity suggests rather than potentially fallacious determinations of identity (2014). She bases this argument on the fact that writers often use sexual paucity as a disruptive plot device that prevents a protagonist (or ancillary characters) from achieving self-actualisation. The communal pop-culture wiki TV Tropes lists hundreds of works that exemplify this, many of which feature fictional characters whose development is hamstrung by the mere potential of asexuality (listed under tropes such as *You Need to Get Laid*, *Must Not Die a Virgin*, and *Nature Abhors a Virgin*), along with plots that glorify allosexual desire (listed under tropes such as *Sex is Good*, *Sex-Face Turn*, and *Good People Have Good Sex*) (https://tvtropes.org/, n.d.). As a concept, asexuality represents a counterpoint to sexual desire, and often becomes a source of conflict for the asexual character or those around them. This is already problematic from a sociocultural perspective, especially when asexual people often report experiencing a sense of discomfort with hypersexualised situations (Decker, 2014; Robbins et al., 2016), but when a narrative positions sexual desire as "the original, the true, the authentic [experience]" (Butler, 2017, p. 1) or the preferred manner of "being", it necessarily reiterates the same paradigmatic assumptions as compulsory sexuality. In the case of fiction, the erotic potential of the narrative becomes linked to its resolution: acquiring allosexualism becomes the goal of the asexual character's journey and often the "point" of the story, rendering the character's asexuality "impossible … a fabrication, [or] … a problem to be resolved" (Przybylo, 2016, p. 182).

Even removed from deeper assertions of identity, however, the asexual possibility is still strongly associated with "corrective" behaviour in fiction, once again positioning it as an antagonistic or disruptive force. In the 2005 film, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow & Carell, 2005), for example, Andy Stiltzer's friends goad him into confessing that he is a virgin, compelling them to devise a series of scenarios designed to trigger his "latent" allosexuality. While the film never canonically establishes that Stiltzer *is* asexual, he repeatedly reveals a distaste for partnered sexual activity, something his friends unerringly attribute to social anxiety and his borderline obsessive-compulsive behaviour rather than accepting him as potentially asexual. In the film's penultimate scene, Stiltzer finally engages in heterosexual intercourse, "curing" him of both his sexual paucity and the supposed anxiety that prevented him from achieving self-actualisation. In 2012, an episode of the television series *House* called "Better Half" (Shore et al., 2012) depicted the husband of a self-identified asexual couple as medically compromised when the series' eponymous protagonist determined that a tumour was suppressing the man's sex drive. Though he and his partner initially appeared reticent

to have the tumour removed, the man's wife eventually reveals that she is not actually asexual, but simply lying to accommodate her husband's by-then-invalidated sexual identity. The asexual possibility is consequently explained away: in the case of the man, it is literally pathologised, and in the case of his wife, it is relegated to the realm of a polite falsehood. The episode restores the heteronarrative status quo before its dénouement.

It is worth noting that depicting asexuality as an antagonistic or disruptive force is not *always* problematic in this way, particularly when writers portray sexuality as multifaceted and malleable. The ancillary character of Valentina "Voodoo" Dunacci in Fox's television series *Sirens* (Sloan & Ensler, 2014), for instance, openly declares herself asexual to audiences in the show's first season without any suggestion that it may be pathological. Voodoo's asexuality still creates tension in the plot, however, when one of the show's central characters – Brian – develops a crush on her. Surprisingly, the writers depict Brian as a bumbling antagonist struggling to comprehend Voodoo's lifestyle, encouraging viewers to perceive asexuality as a valid identity either part of, or logically equivalent to, partnered sexuality (and perhaps something that allosexual people may have trouble understanding). In a similar (though narratologically converse) manner, the asexual protagonist of Ormsbee's novel, *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* (2017), Natasha Zelenka, is rejected by her allosexual crush after she reveals to him that she is asexual. Ormsbee urges the reader to feel sympathy for Natasha; it's *her* story they've been following, *her* emotional state that must recover from rejection. The "point" of the story is not to find an erotic resolution, but for Tash to acquire emotional stability without one. Nevertheless, asexuality still tends to serve as an ironic foil in these cases, even if problematic depictions of it are neutralised. For example: although Brian's romantic advances are played for comedic effect in *Sirens*, it's Voodoo's asexuality that nevertheless provides the homological tension for one of the series' narrative arcs and Voodoo herself has a noted interest in the nature of death. Further still, the fact that Voodoo's asexuality is eventually validated in full is simply an opportunity for the narrative to convey (or reproduce) knowledge in the arc's climax, reinforcing a heteronarratively structured discourse and provoking transformative kinesis among the show's characters and audience.

With this in mind, asexuality's conflict with the spectre of heteronarrativity may, in fact, be fruitless. Indeed, if it *is* to succeed as a tool of subversion, then it will have to overcome its own form of semiotic scaffolding: it will need to inhabit a narrative in such a way that it attacks not only the narrative's content, but also its symbology and structure (the aforementioned "shape" of heteronarrativity); a kind of generative grammar grounded in homologic rather than heterologic. As I

argued in the previous chapter, Roof implies that a satisfactory narrative conclusion is one that simultaneously fulfils the life-instinct (the facilitation of ideological reproduction) *and* death-instinct (the ending of the narrative, but also the transformation of stasis into something else, signifying the death of stasis). Even if death does not literally occur in the narrative, transformation of any kind requires knowledge, either prescient or learned, of the "origin" and summarily supplanting it or *becoming* it (synthesis is synthesis because it either isn't the same as stasis or it's stasis after the defeat of homological tension). To borrow an idea from Jacques Derrida (1998), this might be a kind of "trace": the desire to understand (and perhaps master) the liminal cases of difference between oneself and what one aspires to be or where one "comes" from. In Freud's language, this is an inherently Oedipal clause that rests on the psychosexual impulse to replace the same-sex parent, the source of an individual's life and – by whatever applicable biological and sociocultural metrics – their "original". In narrative, this corresponds to the beginning and the end of the story: the state of being *before* the protagonist's transformation is the metaphorical parent to be spurned or supplanted by the protagonist (in the case of Eros) or subsumed should the protagonist elect to regress – as Freud would argue – towards the precedent: towards infantilism (in the case of Thanatos). How, then, can asexuality or even the asexual *possibility* hope to redefine relationships so fundamentally engrained in the human psyche?

Interestingly, the answer might be found by returning to Barthes's provocatively titled *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), where the philosopher compares the act of writing to an act of seduction. Barthes does indeed begin with the heterosexual metaphor: to read a text, he claims, is to engage in a metaphorically sexual tryst with its writer, an act from which one may draw pleasure to rationalise the text's existence and ascribe it meaning. I have already discussed this side of his argument, but in Barthes's exploration of the subject, he also notes the difference between *pleasure* and *bliss*, both of which may manifest in heteronarrative structure. He supposes a communion shaped holistically by what does and does not appear within the text: a narrative's unwritten propositions, its secret, tantalising moments of ambiguity that he claims connects writer and reader by means other than mere words of conveyance (recall Booth's irony or Iser's aroused anticipations). This is what Barthes calls a narrative's "edges", akin, in his view, to the flashing of skin beneath a parted garment, something deployed surreptitiously to entice the affectations of another through intermittence.

The text of pleasure is one *consistent* with culture. Its edges are *not* subversive: they promise and deliver what the reader expects; a shared sense of one; a comfortable analogue; a consistent identity. Conversely, the text of bliss is one *inconsistent* with culture. Its edges *are* subversive: they

call into question the persistence of selfhood, the worldview of the reader, and suggest loss. They shatter a reader's expectations, but often replace them with new ideas. Barthes imbues pleasure with Eros-like qualities and bliss with Thanatos-like qualities, but I would argue the opposite is the case: the text that challenges is the text that plays upon the desire to reproduce and master (pleasure both literally and metaphorically drawn from the life-instincts, or belated sex-instincts) while the text that comforts is the one that plays upon the desire to regress towards an original (bliss in the return to the precedent, drawn from the death-instincts that logically culminate in non-existence). I'm tempted to remark that Barthes's textual sensibilities lean cynically towards Lyotard's libidinal economy (particularly if we accept the analogue of reading as sex), but even without capitalism, asexuality – as the subject matter that challenges the elicitation of sexual pleasure while encouraging sexual bliss – can theoretically function as heteronarrative's counternarrative: an "apparatus of capture" that recodes and redirects the heterological flow itself.

The natural target of asexuality's counternarrative is the apex of the heteronarrative shape: the climax. The climax represents the metaphorical discharge of philosophical or creative fluids (as both Roof and Freud may describe them) into the parental ocean of all and none; the salient *point* of a narrative expressed through the victory of Eros or Thanatos and the annihilation of both in the narrative's end. If the climax is denied, then the arousal of disruption and the foreplay of tension remain functionally unresolved and the communicative purpose of the heteronarrative is unfulfilled. How skilfully an inscriber can disturb the onset of the heterological "orgasm" with those pesky homological "perversions" while still delivering a proportional climax is therefore integral to an audience's ability to draw pleasure (or bliss) from the text. Consider the dramatic admission of paralepsis in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, or the red herring of Black Noir's past in *The Boys*: the notion that narrative is like sex relies on the notion that disruption *is* arousal and that conflict *is* foreplay because both feed into a *desire* for climax. The heterosexual metaphor suggests that if the climax is denied, then so is pleasure (and, consequently, the hook for synthesis), but if we follow through on Barthes's analogy, then the text that challenges, that outwardly denies climax, can still deliver meaning to its audience in bliss.

Synthesis is another possible target. Many pieces of fiction accommodate a kind of post-coital malaise in the form of the dénouement, a structural appendage in which the inscriber typically assures the audience that self-actualisation through transformative kinesis can occur or has occurred. While the climax clears the way for ideological reproduction, only the explicit or implicit consequences of the text induce synthesis. The reiteration of norms or their upheaval (resulting in

epistemic authority and affective change); the mastery of something previously beyond control; the birth of a child as the text itself (and perhaps even a sequel); all are effectively variations on this portion of the heteronarrative shape. While literary theorists like Iser (I1972), Genette (1980), Jahn (1997), and Gerrig (2010) have attempted to formalise the techniques associated with this process over the years (something Barthes himself did alongside *The Pleasure of the Text* (Barthes, 1975a)), their attempts are tangential to the argument, because the metaphor and its extrapolation remains intact. Whatever the medium, audiences are generally bound by their expectation of satisfaction, addicted, as it were, to "the skin beneath the parted garment" and its climactic exposure (or, at least, the promise thereof). Consider Iser's "gaps", Gerrig's "resonances", or even Jahn's "frames": *all* speak to the concept of intermittence, a refrain to the imagination to interpret the nature of what lies beneath an overt narrative; a process identical in typical cause-and-effect to the seductively parted garment. The moment the flesh is made permanently visible, all pretence of seduction is abandoned, and the nature of the climax is revealed as confluence of Eros and Thanatos.

Asexuality's goal, then, is to elicit bliss without such confluence, by revelling instead in perpetual and homological seduction: in the promise of a climax, but also its persistent denial. Of course, there are already narrative forms that attempt this. According to Shira Chess, for example, video games belong to a medium that revels in this "queer" homological narrative structure: to the player of the video game, she argues, the more important aspect of the narrative is often delivered in the smaller activities, subplots, and subsequent rewards experienced before the game's conclusion, rather than within the conclusion itself (2016). A narrative structure built on asexuality rather than heteronarrativity must similarly refuse to flow towards its own end and the consequences thereof. Ostensibly, this seems simple: scholars like Richardson (2017) have suggested technical methods for achieving something similar in the form of antimimetic narratives. Richardson points towards narratives that defy reality and reason (think pages of words composed of letters that don't mean anything) or ones that end where they begin (like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). After all, such narratives are either nonsensical or circular and thus never reach a climax, right?

I don't think the problem is so easily addressed. Remember that explicit rejections of heteronarrativity invite audiences to explore a narrative's liminalities – those subtextual, metatextual, and contextual portions implied rather than literal – and audiences often recreate a heteronarrative shape in their compulsion to do so. If *Category X* was just a string of nonsense phrases, it would still find synthesis as a categorical rejection of heteronarrative structure: its non-meaning would essentially *become* its meaning, or at least one of the ways in which an audience

may rationalise or ascribe meaning *to* it. Similarly, a narrative with purpose definitionally conforms to a heteronarrative shape – as would *Category X*, being part of this thesis, because purpose – as humans understand it – still entails stasis, disruption, tension, climax, and synthesis. A narrative of nonsense just transfers this shape into the ideological ether: a place not on the page, but still one that exists in the minds of its audience.

In retrospect, it seems inevitable to me that I would eventually have to learn to work within the heterosexual metaphor itself, searching for a kind of homological narrative that both is and is *not* heteronarrative: a built-in "deviation" to the heterosexual metaphor, as it were; one that can be qualitatively measured against the shape of heteronarrativity. I even found an explicatory angle in the work of Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, whose preliminary attempts at establishing an asexual narrative structure searched precisely in this direction. Where Roof focuses on the privileging of the sex act, Hanson suggests that the problem lies in desire itself rather than the desire *for* something. She argues that heteronarrativity doesn't go *far enough* in describing the nature of narrative structure and instead argues in favour of the broader term "erotonormativity" (or, contextually, "eroto*narrativity*") (Hanson, 2014). Where heteronarrativity demarcates the privileging of *heterosexual* attraction, desire, and sex in both the form and function of narrative generally, erotonarrativity demarcates the privileging of *sexual* attraction and sex in general as a function of desire, a concept still supremely compatible with libidinal economies and seductive texts. Hanson posits that, in the literary sphere, the "asexual possibility" (the "absence" of sexual attraction or desire, whatever its cause or motivation) is almost always deployed as an antagonistic force, either within the story or as a component of its structure (Hanson, 2014), because the human mind requires desire to rationalise reality (effectively rendering the object of desire interchangeable). Hanson suggests that the privileging of desire is a teleological issue, one bound to the concept of desire as movement, momentum, and motive rather than the confluence of reproduction and death. According to Hanson's terms, desire would be akin to pure Eros, driving humanity forward unrelentingly from one way of being to another.

This is not only analogous to the bioevolutionary components of human experience, but something Hanson implicitly uses to ascribe agency in the same way Freud uses the subconscious mind. Consider, for example, the sexual incompatibility of Florence and Edward, the two protagonists in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, or the asexual villain Clariel (otherwise known as Chlorr of the Mask) and her quest for eternal life throughout Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series. In the first case, the asexual possibility manifests as virginal inexperience for Edward and as sexual trauma for Florence,

both of which ultimately prevent the protagonists from consummating their marriage (and thus, their relationship). In the second case, the asexual possibility manifests as an agent of undeath, a force incapable of reproduction seeking revenge upon its heteronormative counterparts. In heteronarrative, asexuality clearly threatens the resolution of the text, but in erotonarrative, asexuality goes further: it threatens the *desire* for resolution *a priori*, calling into question the very nature of human experience. A successful asexually structured narrative would make this threat even more tangible by demonstrating that bliss can be detached from climax *and* synthesis, existing instead within perpetual tension.

Admittedly, Hanson's implications are more behavioural than Freudian. Indeed, she effectively reduces Freud's metaphysical dispute between id and ego to a perceptual quirk of a basic bioevolutionary device, and it makes sense: time itself seems to iterate desire, as causality cannot be understood without such a force that compels an object from one state of being into another, nor can agency be ascribed without a linearly definable motive *based* on causality. The asexual possibility, then, might be one that simply threatens forward momentum in *any* context, be it explicitly sexual or not, be it an "apparatus of capture" or the endpoint of spent capital. Superficially, though, Hanson's argument resembles a reductive version of Roof's: why should one talk about Eros and Thanatos when Eros on its own – reconceptualised as a unidirectional desire to transition from one state to another – provides an adequate phenomenological structure for how narrative functions? After all, both still begin with stasis and the fear of remaining in stasis (or the current state). But Hanson's "desire" is neutral towards ideological reproduction: its semiotics are necessarily contained within the logic of transition itself, reducing ideological reproduction to a kind of mimicry in which the audience attempts to imitate the state endorsed by the narrative. Mimicry may still *technically* be an act of synthesis in the context of ideological reproduction – once again, Butler's discussion on gender and whether any performative state can be truly adapted (Butler, 1990, 2004, 2017) suggests that this is a broad and ongoing debate – but at least the asexual possibility offers a different perspective on the matter.

For *Category X*, this meant that I couldn't just have Jess definitively announce that she was asexual and proud of it. Even if I didn't adopt Hanson's erotonarrativity wholesale, I'm convinced a coming out story doesn't necessarily subvert heteronarrativity. Rather, it elevates a non-heteronormative identity into a position of definitionally acclaimed non-heterosexuality, a binary establishment that comes with what Karli June Cerankowski calls the spectacular challenges of visibility (2014). Similarly, I'm convinced swapping out heterosexual characters and concepts for homosexual ones

does little to undermine the heterological structure that gives them the semiotic templates (like "hero" and "villain") the human mind relies on to rationalise and ascribe meaning to narrative. What *Category X* would've announced as an empowering coming out story is that asexuality is *here*, it's *valid*, and it's *not* heterosexuality: all good things, but ones the human mind can only understand as a function of the categorical distinctions implied by doing so. In other words, even if a narrative's *content* is non-heteronormative, the *structure* that gives it that quality still *is*, and the audience is *still* encouraged to process and master a new world view in a manner identical to synthesis in the heterosexual metaphor. As I've already noted, any story that relies on the stasis-disruption-tension-climax-synthesis shape of heteronarrativity to elicit transformative kinesis in its penultimate moment is essentially heterological, regardless of its content. Thus, the conventional coming out story is little more than a variation of the heteronarrative.

It seems implementing performatively heterological binaries is an inescapable habit of human nature, even within discourses aimed at tearing them apart (Jagose, 1996; Sinwell, 2014). Indeed, although queer theory constitutes a perpetually shifting exploration of the liminal possibilities *between* categorical absolutes, queer interpretations of sexuality often implicitly uplift partnered sexualities by representing asexuality as a kind of sex-negative "oppositional" state of being (Decker, 2014; Hanson, 2014; Owens, 2010), once again reiterating a heterological binary. Megan Milks argues that this phenomenon is historically apparent by virtue of asexuality's absence from most sex-positive renditions of queer sexuality (2014). My hope for *Category X*, then, is that an empowered asexuality is one capable of thriving in the homological permanence of tension that never arrives at a binary distinction: a Trojan Horse masquerading as heteronarrative until that penultimate moment when desire is denied. An implied climax that never comes may constitute a reorganising element in the communicative exchange that resists binarisms where an explicit refusal to engage in the heteronarrative shape at all would simply reinforce them and may – if Barthes's take on the heterosexual metaphor remains true – still elicit pleasure in the audience. Then again, I might just be proving how all-consuming heteronarrative really is. That, of course, is the exploratory problem *Category X* was designed to test.

ON SUBVERSION (CLIMAX)

It feels like it takes forever, but when it finally begins to happen, I almost fall forward. The spasm rocks me one way and then the other until the knot feels so tight it almost hurts. Then, all at once, the muscles in my abdomen clench and release, and melt away into nothing, or at least, that's what it feels like. For a split second, I think I understand. Then I pull the vibrator free, and just as suddenly as it began, the sensation is over, reduced to a lingering heaviness between my thighs and a shortness of breath. After all that time and effort, a dying flame, a fleeting spark, gone, replaced by… Is that relief?

(p. 128)

In *On Narrative*, I argued that narrative is a complex form of communicative exchange, a semiotic construct that relies on human perception and experience to function. In *On Heteroideology*, I argued that the way in which the human mind understands and ascribes meaning to narrative is quintessentially (and problematically) heterosexual, a process that relies on using the same "shape" to make sense of both narrative and sex (stasis, disruption, tension, climax, synthesis) to compel a reproductive outcome from both (transformative kinesis). I called this the "heteronarrative" after Roof's coining of the term in *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. In *On Asexuality*, I discussed the recent appreciation of asexuality as a valid sexual identity, some of the problematic tropes surrounding its depiction in fiction, and the potentially informing influence it might have on our understanding of communicative exchange in the form of heteronarrativity. Ultimately, I argued that narrative structure is effectively hardwired to the interplay between heterologic and homologic, analogues in the human psyche for iterative life and absolute death.

Typically, I would now turn to a detailed analysis of a particular corpus of work – "asexual characters in contemporary young adult fiction" seems appropriate, given *Category X*'s setting – to investigate how the asexual possibility might already be disrupting heteronarrativity, and subsequently explain how I incorporated this analysis into the construction of *Category X*. This isn't what I intend to do. To an extent, I *have* touched on asexual representation in fiction generally, but the goal of this thesis isn't to taxonomically study depictions of sex and asexuality, nor is it to necessarily generate a catalogue of subversive writing techniques designed to undercut heteronormative tropes. This thesis is concerned with the nature of narrative, and its goal is – and always has been – to engage in a practise-led experiment focused on tracing the morphology of heteronarrativity – from its origin in the human mind to its textual manifestation – and meaningfully disrupting that process during the

act of creation. For this reason, I'm going to avoid delving too deeply into line-to-line comparisons between Jess and her fictional contemporaries, though I do want to make it clear that I *did* engage with asexually themed fiction during my time writing her (in fact, *Category X* contains material and narrative structuring inspired by dozens of depictions of the asexual possibility – both positive and negative – across a plethora of media). However, close-read comparisons simply didn't form part of the analytical process behind *Category X*.

The novelty of my approach to *Category X* fairly invites criticism. In retrospect, I consider the lack of detailed case studies a shortcoming that – while it doesn't nullify the potential contribution to knowledge *Category X* represents – certainly would've helped clarify the full problematic spectrum of heteronarrativity. Nevertheless, what I *do* intend to do now is indulge the less technical aspects of the work that fed into *Category X*, and discuss – in a more conversational style – the approach I took and the decisions I made while writing creatively. I'll also try to explicate my positioning of the novel as a young adult *Bildungsroman*, though there's a lot that goes into a work of fiction that isn't strictly academic. I'll start by saying that the version of *Category X* I initially planned is nowhere near the version that appears in this thesis, and I think briefly recounting the thought processes that led me to the final version gives my motivation some important context (if no more than as an amusing sojourn in what might've been). I originally conceived *Category X* as an experiment with abstraction first and foremost (it is the heterosexual *metaphor*, after all), so I designed the original story as a low-key urban fantasy coupled with an unreliable narrator in Jess. Indeed, she would've begun as an independent twenty-something living alone in a Melbourne apartment and working at her local supermarket, with a sequence of disturbing events introducing the reader to the idea that she can make things happen with her mind (or, at least, that she believes she can).

Because it's so very, very wise to depict marginalised individuals as inherently manipulative, I had Jess use her powers to trick a man into dating her (in response to a friend's mockery of her "single-by-choice" lifestyle), a course that sees her end up at *The Unspoken Word*, a club where amateur writers with unusual abilities come to deliver their poetry on stage. The story's foundation was in the lives of the people and personalities she met at the club, all of whom would systematically question her disinclination towards intimacy and sex and position her alongside some of the problematic tropes I discussed in the previous chapter. Ultimately, the narrative involved Jess coming to terms with the realisation that she can't, in fact, change the world with her mind, and that if she wanted to be happy, she would need to change for *it*. The climax was to be packaged in the form of Jess's epiphany that she is powerless (a grand metaphor for asexuality, to be sure), catalysed

by the insinuation that Jess's mother died of a heart attack while she and her daughter were arguing (something for which Jess previously blamed herself). *The Unspoken Word* would then be exposed as little more than a place in Jess's mind, its residents her own anticipatory rejection of love personified. Trauma, mental instability, ambiguous sexual identity: the shock of these realisms would've compelled Jess to attempt suicide. She would either be successful, throwing herself from Bolte Bridge to an abrupt end, or she would fail, and subsequently reconcile with her friends to find peace in platonic comradery.

Category X 1.0 was *not* a good story, and not least of all because it broke the cardinal rule of representation: namely, it conflated asexuality with antagonism and trauma, even though I didn't plan to explicitly introduce asexuality at any point (which would have been an odd plot hole, given that it's easy enough for someone to Google asexuality these days even *if* it is a relatively obscure concept in mainstream discourse). Having Jess shift her conceptualisation of her own identity to fit snugly into the heteronormative world around her also effectively stripped her of epistemic authority, leaving her ripe for re-encapsulation by the heteronarrative. Yes, version 1.0 was bad: it was unrelentingly bleak, it redressed too few of heteronarrativity's bad habits, and it even reinforced the broader narrative that asexuality was essentially something pathological and undesirable. Fortunately, I had enough sense to promptly scrap it and move on to the more promising iteration of 2.0, where I planned to correct these issues by adopting multiple frames of reference. I replaced its fantasy and discordant elements with a more distinct and literary three-act structure, and rather than focus on one brief period of Jess's life, I expanded the story's scope to simulate a more Dickensian style *Bildungsroman*: one that would allow the reader to join Jess for more than just a single formative event.

The first act would follow Jess through the final years of her high schooling, during which she would be subjected to a case of "corrective" rape that resulted in her contracting a sexually transmitted disease. The second act would follow Jess through her university education, during which she would be introduced to the concept of asexuality after being spurned by the on-campus LGBTQI support group. The final act would follow Jess through the first few years of her career, during which she and an asexual man would seek to conceive a child together. This goal would be denied, however, once Jess discovered the sexually transmitted disease she contracted when she was younger prevents her from giving birth without serious risks to both her and the hypothetical baby. In the climax, her relationship would collapse because of this (another unfortunate victim of heteroideological conceptualisations of partnership) and Jess would have ended the story seeking to write a book

about her experiences, leading into a cyclical dénouement that implies the book in the hands of the reader is, in fact, authored by her. Sexual trauma notwithstanding, this was a *better* story, but it still had its issues.

The first was the inclusion of rape. My intention was to turn the heterosexual metaphor itself into an explicit and visceral antagonist that casts a shadow over the entirety of Jess's journey with lasting and unpleasant consequences. If I had followed through on my designs, however, I would have deployed this topic as a device, a tool that, even though I had every intention of depicting the devastating effect it can have on someone's life, would have nevertheless formed an ancillary vehicle for plot purposes. This is a hypocritical objection, perhaps, given the apparent utilitarian deployment of asexuality throughout this thesis, but I'd argue that dedicating an entire novel and subsequent exegesis to the subject affords me the opportunity to explore it with greater nuance and authenticity than a "subplot" would allow. While I firmly believe that the realm of fiction is *laissez-faire* – that any topic is open to any writer and the adage suggesting one should stick to what one knows is unnecessary (and wholly unrealistic) gatekeeping – I also believe that tackling topics one is not experientially familiar with necessarily entails a heightened level of responsibility, one tied to the world's need for compassionate speech. It should go without saying (though it often must *not*) that misrepresenting the experiences of others to further a personal or political agenda is reprehensibly callous, and in a story literally *about* sexual identity, something as potentially defining as the trauma of rape should not, in my opinion, be deployed as an adjunct event.

The second was the unintentional reinforcement of heteronormative assumptions about sexuality, which was particularly visible in Jess's desire to have a child. While asexual people are in no way precluded from the desire to have children, or even to engage in sexual activity specifically to *make* children, Jess's struggle with the fact that she couldn't *have* children reiterates the heterological idea of mastery, the denial of which would've been integral to Jess's distress. Interestingly, Jess's vocation in both the first and second versions of *Category X* exacerbate this discourse. In both, she was originally going to be a healthcare worker (or, as the case may have been, a prospective healthcare worker stuck in the service industry), a career that not only dipped into the familial manifestations of heteronarrative mastery, but also pinned her to some very conventional gender roles. From a structural perspective, making her a writer is no real improvement since it functions as the perfect analogy for parenthood. Jess's desire to write an autobiographical book, in particular, fits neatly into the metaphor of surrogate child, especially in the wake of devastation I had her

experience at the news she would never be able to safely conceive (at least, I rationalised, it was better than having her pine after the idea of literal progeny).

I liked some things from *Category X* 2.0, but, after a brief and turgid reimagining involving Jess's experimentation with lesbianism fell flat, I decided to shelve it, and instead turned the remnants directly into *Category X* 3.0, the version of the novel that appears in this thesis. While this version admittedly carries over some of 2.0's lingering idiosyncrasies, the story's style is certainly not the Dickensian epic envisioned in its predecessor. Indeed, its timeframe is closer to 1.0's, following Jess's last two years of high school over the course of a plot closer to a young adult coming-of-age adventure than a protracted literary psychosocial positioning of asexuality. Nevertheless, I'm inclined to argue that turning *Category X* into a young adult novel wasn't as dramatic a change as its sounds. Consider that a *Bildungsroman* ("transformation novel") focuses on the formative events of a protagonist's life – whenever they may occur – during which the protagonist usually negotiates a series of existential challenges to transition *from* a state of dissonance (or "incompleteness") *to* a state of actualisation (or "completeness") (Kerschen, 2009; Swales, 1978). Typically, this takes the form of a coming-of-age story, but not always. Holistically speaking, all *three* versions of the story are – or would've been – *Bildungsromane* ("transformation novels") of one kind or another, and as a description of what occurs in *Category X* 3.0, this maps onto Jess's journey of asexual discovery *regardless* of whether that journey takes several months, several years, or several decades. The question, then, is less, "why did I choose to make it a young adult novel?", and more, "could I have pursued the same goals while leaving *Category X* an adult-oriented *Bildungsroman*, or – more generally – an experimental piece of adult fiction that abandons the *Bildungsroman* altogether?"

I think the answer is "yes", but with some powerful caveats. A plot that doesn't fixate on issues of adolescence would've provided a wider canvas with which to explore asexuality as a narrative tool, but representation of this nature was not my primary strategy (or, at least, it wasn't the flashpoint on which I focused). In fact, there's a quality to such an endeavour that unavoidably reiterates heteronarrative structure in at least two ways. First, asexuality presented explicitly as the homological counternarrative to heterological thought is already subsumed by heteronarrative structure. It is "othered" as the disruptive "part" of the story, the source of tension presented in service to the heterological "whole" that is the narrative. A book written backwards, for example, may *textually* challenge the heterosexual metaphor, but it must invariably conform to the heterosexual metaphor in its subtext, metatext, or context if it is to make any kind of sense. Second, any attempt to reconceptualise this relationship is an exercise in the ideological development and

communication (and thus, reproduction) of new knowledge. It's not enough for a text to simply be unconventional: in fact, it may even be counterproductive. When the human mind's desire to seek heterological resolutions is so pervasive, so integrally tied to the way it perceives and orders the world around it, the only way to subvert the system may be to *use* the system.

Because of this, my primary strategy became to use asexuality as an *implicitly* subversive tool rather than an *explicitly* subversive one: to suggest – *in absentia* – that there may be *other ways* to narratively organise human perception by properly *understanding* the status quo rather than replacing it. Asexuality's informing presence may not be the shock that changes the system, but it could certainly be the spark that illuminates it (and preferably in the least heterological way possible). Therein lies the reason *Category X* became a young adult novel: I wanted to make the reader complicit in the construction of the heterosexual metaphor; to lure them into a safe and familiar literary space grounded in a common human experience and the exploration of liminal spaces. I would then undercut the anticipated climax, leaving the text in a state of bliss-inducing tension predicated on appeals to the psychosomatic phenomena (see Caracciolo et al., 2017; Farmasi, 2022). This strategy could – in theory – act as a "communicative exchange" (see Davies, 2000; Neale, 1992; Searle, 1975), "seduction" (Barthes, 1975b), and "authorial discourse" (see Chambers & Godzich, 1984; Messerli, 2017) while simultaneously undermining the transformative kinesis of heterological thought (see Butler, 2017; Hanson, 2013, 2014; Przybylo, 2010; Roof, 1996).

What better canvas was there to do this than the young adult novel, a style dedicated to the most commonly tumultuous period the human mind and body experiences (puberty)? Not only is adolescence a stage that so many individuals have themselves had to perform upon, but the genre itself is increasingly renowned for its subversion of heteronormative assumptions and exploration of liminal identities. Finally, young adult fiction is relatively free of narrative dictums, despite being generally simple and easy to read. I'm not trying to imply that young adult literature is narratively simplistic – indeed, scholars like Crag Hill argue that young adult fiction is becoming an increasingly sophisticated format defined by cross-generic experimentation and polyphonic voices (2014) – but it's worth remembering that the genre *is* an extension of children's literature, or, at least, of literature aimed predominantly at pre-adult (or newly adult) audiences, which does afford it a set of common forms and themes that tend to favour economical (or "on-the-nose") cadences. In this case, I became interested in an asymmetrical and heteroideological-adjacent power structure common in young adult literature that Maria Nikolajeva calls "aetonormativity" (2009, p. 16): the privileging of adult-determined conceptualisations of age and the role of childhood therein. Essentially, Nikolajeva

claims that aetonormativity manifests in children's literature and young adult fiction as a coding of the assumption that adults are physically and intellectually superior to children, and that this inherently results in the empowered author-adult using the text to lead the disempowered reader-child towards an "appropriate" place in adult society. She brands the genre as one traditionally designed to reiterate and reinforce aetonormative – and heteronormative – sociocultural structures, an assertion consistent with theories like du Gay's "circuit of culture" (1997) and Butler's "heterosexual matrix" (Kaufmann, 2006).

Nikolajeva's argument is particularly salient when it pertains to how integral sex and sexually are to – and how they're often depicted in – young adult fiction. Psychologists have long noted that sex and sexual identity comprise a set of experiences often perceived to occupy a transitional space between childhood and adulthood (see Gagnon & Simon, 1974a as an example). Consequently, adolescence – demarcated by the onset and subsequent conclusion of puberty – is regarded as a tumultuous period of sexual discovery and awakening, a theme central to the young adult fiction coming-of-age story. Its roots as a generic trope are undoubtedly aetonormative: Lydia Kokkola, for example, examines the literary construction of the "child" in recent history, remarking on the rise of the belief that children are inherently "innocent" and in need of guidance from adults when it comes to adulthood-defining experiences like sex (2013). Kokkola argues throughout her book, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*, that sexuality and the act of sex are typically deployed in children's literature and young adult fiction as *the* liminal experience that effectively defines the boundary between childhood and adulthood. She also explores how such beliefs tend to manifest as a desire in adults to moderate childhood identities (*especially* sexual identity). To be clear, and although there is a vast psychosocial debate at play here well beyond the scope of this thesis, Kokkola doesn't deny that children often *do* need guidance, but she notes that the same narrative systems of rhetoric composed to help children make sense of sex can also be disempowering and even punishing.

This is not a controversial opinion, either: scholars like Paul Venzo and Kristine Moruzi note that a preponderance of literary scholarship surrounding sexuality in young adult fiction relegates sexual actualisation to this type of "gatekeeping" function (2021, pp. 13–42). Venzo and Moruzi go further, arguing that this places children (as both characters *in* narratives and as readers *of* narratives) in the difficult position of having to maintain their assumed innocence while simultaneously developing towards a (presumptively heteronormative) sexualised future. Kokkola describes this as a necessary component of the differentiation process: that children are categorised as separate from adults by

virtue of the knowledge they do not possess that adults do, including carnal knowledge (2013, p. 28). Sex and sexual actualisation thus become one of the most prominent heterological rite of passages in young adult fiction in a way not necessarily replicated in adult-oriented fiction. The acquisition of something both edifying and taboo that can either be rewarding (perhaps with a fulfilling monogamous relationship) or punishing (perhaps with a sexually transmitted disease or an unwanted pregnancy) is not something unique to young adult fiction (Kokkola, 2013; Venzo & Moruzi, 2021), but it is the only genre where sex and sexual actualisation are uniquely treated as an indication of aetonormative authority by default.

This gives the young adult *Bildungsroman* an interesting sociocultural position compared to its adult-oriented counterpart. Yes, this thesis might've pursued (and even achieved) many of its goals if *Category X* was a more experimental piece of adult-oriented literature, but if heteroideology is indeed as pervasive a system of perception and comprehension as I believe it to be, then any textual erosion of the heteronarrative shape is superficial at best. To be successful in its subversion, *Category X* needs to rely on already established subtextual cues, ones tied to narrative structures already scaffolded around liminal sexualities and identities and the potential for transformative kinesis outside mainstream discourse. It needs a genre prone to the deployment and subversion of heteronormative tropes so that its homological tension might seed suggestion in the minds of those most capable of affecting future sociocultural change. To wit, I've already discussed – in general terms – the role of fiction on social identity formation, but the poignant influence of young adult fiction as a source of information for developing individuals cannot – and *should not* – be understated (see Pattee, 2006). As a piece of young adult fiction, *Category X* can aim its messaging squarely at an adolescent audience, one not yet in possession of aetonormatively based authority. It can present them with a heteronarrative shape that they – by the time they are transitioning towards adulthood – would presumably be familiar with but not yet be able to claim ownership over. *Category X*'s less conventional take on sex and sexual identity might then find a path forward into reality in a way that disrupts heteroideological assumptions about childhood, adulthood, and sexual identity and the heterological inevitability of future narrative.

This might sound like a nebulous and idealistic goal, but I've already argued in previous chapters that narrative, perception, and identity formation all essentially on the same sense-making instruments: changing one will necessarily impact the others. It's also worth noting that weaponising young adult literature in such a way isn't just idle speculation. Scholars note that subversion is an increasingly common aspect of young adult literature, with Nikolajeva herself remarking that contemporary

children's literature (and young adult fiction) has "… cautiously begun subverting its own oppressive function…" (2009, p. 16). In both content and form, asexuality is like any other sociocultural queering of the heteroideological: its recent addition to the young adult literary canon suggests an alternative method for categorising and making sense of adolescent sexual development, one in which the experience of sexual desire is not – as CJ DeLuzio Chasin laments – an indicator of "normalcy" and the definitional quality of "intimacy" (2013). Patricia Kennon likewise remarks that "while YA [young adult] literature has not fully recognised the diverse spectrum of asexuality and it has, to date, had mixed success in confronting and dismantling allosexual assumptions, YA literature nevertheless affords a powerful opportunity and radical potential for challenging and disrupting the "same old story" of allonormativity [compulsory sexuality]" (2021, p. 6). The young adult *Bildungsroman*, then, is perhaps the most apt marriage between heteronarrative form and heteronormative content in writing there is, and it is *because* of this marriage – rather than despite it – that young adult fiction is one of the most fertile platforms for the propagation of queer and otherwise subversive interpretations of those very structures.

With a more centred milieu, Jess became an amalgamation of her two previous constructs (except younger): blithely put, she became driven and motivated, but confined to a particular sociocultural snapshot where heteronormative expectations are often at their zenith (once again, puberty: the transition from "pre-sexual" childhood to "post-sexual" adulthood). This design gave me the tools I thought I would need to address the problematic literary tropes associated with asexuality, as well as to structurally subvert heteronarrativity's shape in a way that plays into and ultimately uses the audience's expectations against them. With this in mind, I felt it necessary to reimagine some of *Category X*'s other plotlines, too, even if elements of them remained intact. Jess's desire to become a writer, for instance, now forms the basis for her obsession with the school magazine in 3.0, representing a potential career pathway (and thus, heterological closure to the homological tension that is her fragmented schooling). Indeed, Jess's interpersonal relationships had to become much more integral to her negotiation of sexual identity, as layering the novel with episodic encounters and discrete pinch points would've likely encouraged audiences to search for a heteronarrative shape in its subtext earlier than anticipated and dramatically softened the penultimate subversion of the climax. So, Jess's first sexual encounter is now a result of and continues to influence the dynamics in her friendship group, her experience of the LGBTQI community is filtered through her combative relationship with her mother, and her positioning alongside Western conceptualisations of death and sociocultural stagnancy tie into the loss of her father and how she deals with that loss over the course of the story.

In essence, I was able to *personalise* the story: to ground it more thoroughly in characters and events that would likely be more common in the memories of my potential audience. Jess's internal struggles become far more incitive and directly form the basis for many of her actions and their consequences throughout the story, which allowed me to reinforce the novel's young adult sensibilities far longer than I would've been able to otherwise. It also helped keep the asexual structure of the narrative clandestine until closer to the "climax": instead of going through the rejection some asexual people experience at the hands of LGBTQI support groups; the disconnect between asexual and sexual identities became one of the core sources of friction between Jess and Audrey (though this remains unclear until near the novel's end).

Of course, this strategy had its own immediate issues. First, I realised that the reader might become annoyed and disconnect from the narrative. *Category X* as a literary *Bildungsroman* with multiple pinch points might've lacked a singular moment of climax, but the reader may have found enough ongoing resolution in the smaller climaxes along the way to remain engaged, much like in Chess's video game analogy (2016). Second, and perhaps more emphatically, I realised that the reader may feel compelled to find a heterological way to rationalise and ascribe meaning to *Category X* anyway, despite any effort on my behalf to replicate the heteronarrative shape as closely as possible (save for the climax and synthesis). Worse still, I came to realise that the necessary existence of an exegesis (in *Category Y*) would constitute a self-evident – if formalised – demonstration of *precisely* that: a heterological rationalisation of *Category X* that provides its reader with a dissection of the story's subtext and a powerful context for its anticlimactic finale.

This is also true on a smaller scale within the construction of chapters both here and in *Category X*: the fact I felt compelled to share some insights into *Category X*'s evolution at the beginning of *this* chapter – an appeal to its "before" state to induce a sense of stasis that I could heterologically disassemble by way of an "origin story" – is arguably evidence of the heteronarrative's reiterative seduction. I came away from this realisation musing that – despite the wild telepathic power of narrative – defeating the heterosexual metaphor might be as likely as reversing time. The hope for a successful asexual narrative structure lies, I think, not in a definitive counterpoint to heteronarrativity, but in the space between categories, *between* a reader's completion of a text and their attempts to rationalise it: in the case of this thesis, between the last word of *Category X* and the first word of *Category Y*. Only there, in what might be called the story's queerest turn – the moment before the river is entirely drained into its progenitive ocean – might the disturbing extent

of heteronarrative's influence become properly visible. Regardless of my misgivings, however, I had to begin constructing *Category X* 3.0 somewhere, and that somewhere was inevitably in the narrative's framing.

When the story begins, Jess has just travelled across Australia to move in with her estranged mother, Audrey, who lives in an inner-Sydney suburb and works at an all-night pharmacy. Jess's father, with whom she was close, has recently passed away, and the money he left her has been placed in Audrey's care. This is a problem for Jess, who – it's later revealed – condemns her mother for splitting up with her father. Furthermore, Jess isn't exactly a social butterfly: she doesn't make friends easily, can't seem to relate to people her own age, and would rather spend her time alone working on something creative (a trait she shared with her dad) than with others. Of course, moving across the country at sixteen also means Jess must finish her schooling somewhere new and, perhaps out of a reactive sense of loss, she decides to use her inheritance to pay for a place at Stanmore High, an expensive private college and her father's own *alma mater*.

Arguably, then, the story opens with disruption already underway, but its positioning of stasis is retroactively deductible: Jess is a relatively stable, if somewhat lonely, child; a girl who hasn't yet decided where she wants her life to go, but who pursues intellectual hobbies and interests happily, probably supported at one time by a few friends and a father with whom she had a good relationship. She has taken the loss of her father with difficulty and may be trying to compensate for his absence by following in what she understands to be his footsteps. The reader is invited to assume the heterological dimensions of the contract the text is proposing: will Jess reconcile with her estranged mother? Will she overcome the trauma of her father's death? Will she find friendship or even love? Will she find her place in the world? Homological tension is sourced in the antagonists that initially rise to "threaten" the resolution of these potential threads: Jess's estranged mother, Audrey; her social and academic rival, Milly; her on-then-off again boyfriend, Jace; and her own embattled subconscious mind. A sensible heteronarrative would answer all such questions, and, indeed, I wrote the first half of *Category X* as if it was my intention to do so.

Consider that (for a while, at least) Jess seems to be moving towards a heteronormative state of being in *Category X*. Though her anxiety results in a few tense moments, she falls in with a group of boarding students – Sam, Hannah, Jace, and Mikey – who slowly push her into becoming a more socially engaged individual. After an initially unpleasant confrontation with Milly – a controlling overachiever obsessed with keeping people away from her accolades – Jess's outstanding grades

and penchant for studying compel her to start planning her pathway into higher education and her future career. She even plucks up the courage to begin a relationship with Jace, a boy with whom she surprisingly finds common intellectual ground. Not everything is perfect, however (homological tension must be sourced from somewhere, or else the journey is unsatisfying for the reader): Milly's menacing presence looms in the background, Jess's relationship with her mum only seems to deteriorate (while her reluctance to let go of her dad intensifies), and her friends have a habit of pressuring her into uncomfortable situations (like when they convince her to smoke marijuana or to send Jace a photo of her exposed body as a "flirt"). My intention was to continue building homological tension in outwardly conventional ways, lampshading the potential avenues by which the reader might arrive at heterological resolution in the text's climax and synthesis (the same climax and synthesis I intended not to deliver).

Additionally, I positioned Jess alongside many of the problematic tropes that plague asexual representation in fiction. For example, in the first half of the novel, I paired Jess's anxiety and tendency towards introversion with her disinclination for sex. Similarly, her initial interests might be described as "creative" or "cerebral" rather than "reactive" or "practical", a deliberate choice to play up the "inhumanity" sexusociety suggests is concomitant with the inability to enjoy sex (Przybylo, 2011). Once again, while there's nothing inherently negative about any of these personality traits, writers typically use them to signify sexual "immaturity" (think the "maladjusted" virgin, or the "damaged" asexual) that exaggerate the liminal qualities of an asexual character, effectively pairing their identity with illness, disability, or inhumanity (Kim, 2010, 2011). Attaching death to the novel's inciting incident and entangling it with the plot's proceedings (as opposed to saving it for a later reveal or abstracting it as the hypothetical inability to give birth) also places Jess much closer to the concept than in the novel's previous iterations, and allowed me to revisit the trope as sexusociety exerting control over the less sexualised aspects of Jess's epistemic authority (her access to education and money, for example). The idea was to purposely conflate asexuality with resistance to transformative kinesis and misplaced stasis (in death's case, Jess's inability to let go of her father). Heterologically, this makes sense: asexuality could be directly interpreted as a metaphor for death, since it seems to defy the reproductive Eros or the desire for transition. Finally, Jess's mother is a lesbian, which is eventually revealed as one of the reasons she and Jess's father split up. This distances Jess from the sex-positive LGBTQI community Audrey allegorically represents *and* acts as a catalyst for sexual discord: a wedge between Jess and what would have otherwise been her place within a typical heteronormative family "unit" (something she still subconsciously mourns the loss of when *Category X* opens).

Thus, *Category X* is framed as a fairly conventional young adult novel, one that comes with a number of ostensibly heterological threads. Stasis is retroactively conceptualised through Jess's explications of her life before the story begins. Disruption – the death of Jess's father – has therefore already occurred at this stage, and homological tension builds as Jess tries to acclimate to her new surroundings. Things change, however, immediately following Jess's first sexual experience with Jace (around halfway through the novel). Though she still finds Jace romantically attractive at this point, Jess comes away from her encounter having found it thoroughly mediocre and somewhat uncomfortable, which leads her to doubt she wants to engage in sex again. This is the first *explicit* suggestion of the asexual possibility in the text (beyond a passing comment or two by Jess herself), and my goal with its introduction was to undermine the assumption that sex would somehow herald Jess's heteronormative "awakening" as a potential heterological solution to the story's themes and plotlines. By heteronarrative standards, this *should* have been the story's climax: either Jess finally becomes a "sexual" being, or she discovers she doesn't like sex and comes out as asexual (or at least somehow non-heteronormative), at which point the reader would've been compelled to engage in heterological suturing to resolve the narrative's homological tension. In this case, the acquisition of compulsory sexuality would've completed – or at least "oriented" Jess – towards the heteronormative resolution and transformative kinesis of her coming-of-age journey, while its rejection would've encouraged the reader to search for heterological meaning in the novel's subtext, mastering new knowledge about asexuality in the process.

This isn't what happens, though. In fact, nothing dramatically changes for Jess, except that she remains at a loss to explain why she's still attracted to Jace emotionally but not physically. Jess's relationship with Jace forms a throughline *defined* by homological tension in the spectre of stasis: she can't seem to move forward into what she thinks she *should* be, nor can she move backward into what she *was*. This has a flow on effect to Jess's other relationships and thus further events in the novel. Her relationship with Audrey continues to fluctuate, for example, resulting in another tense period of strained reconciliation after Jess returns from an extended sojourn with her friends. As the story enters Jess's final year of high school, she and Hannah finally manage to dethrone Milly from the school magazine (*New Wave*), but this has the unfortunate side effect of turning the school – previously a symbol for Jess's connection to her father – into a somewhat unwelcoming environment. Jess's relationship with Jace begins to gradually disintegrate as well, not because of intentional sabotage or incompatibility, but because Jess struggles – in her own mind – to solidify her social and sexual identities. She comes to regard herself as "broken", unable to experience

"true" sexual pleasure or even attraction, playing further into the idea of homological tension. Jess's first sexual experience, then, is not – and cannot be – the story's climax: too many things are unresolved. It does, however, commence the process of "flipping the script".

What I mean by this is that, after her first sexual encounter, Jess's sense of epistemic authority (or sense to self-determinate) only ever strengthens, even though the process of doing so proves exceedingly difficult. Indeed, Jess becomes dangerously self-loathing at one point, and she struggles to maintain her friendships once her relationship with Jace finally devolves into an abusive rivalry. I wrote the masturbation scene – which represents the culmination of Jess's attempts to convince herself that her disinterest in sex is simply the result of lacklustre experiences – as a kind of "secondary" climax, the peak of the conflict between asexuality and the heteronarrative. Jess takes the vibrator given to her as a gift – something she would never have imagined using herself – and locks herself in the bathroom until she can achieve an elusive orgasm. Jess *does* achieve orgasm, and she *does* enjoy it, but unlike the climaxes of legend, Jess's is only mildly engaging, and leaves her with a greater sense of relief than anything else. It's confusing; vague. Rather than an epiphanic moment of revelation, Jess is instead forced to face what she imagines to be a broken body. But her experiences are shaped by a desire for transition from a state of non-comprehension to one of comprehension, and this gives Jess the strength to pursue her search for self-determination even though the world itself seems to be working against her.

Perhaps I'm cruel, but Jess never does get to define her sexuality. After her breakdown in the bathroom, she ponders and pontificates, but doesn't make any declarations. Instead, she simply takes charge of her life. She seeks company where it's offered and cuts it out where it's denied. She begins to heal her relationship with her mother (somewhat). She tries to repair her friendship with Jace, and when that doesn't work, she turns away from his vitriol to focus on herself. She even experiments with what kind of intimate contact she *does* enjoy experiencing. The asexual possibility's appearance allows Jess to reclaim her epistemic authority in a way that abandons Eros and the heteronarrative entirely. She isn't primed to become a sexual being, nor is she primed to come out as non-heteronormative, and consequently, her epistemic authority isn't projected through the page in a directly reproductive manner. Instead, Jess's flirtation with asexuality is empowering because it causes her to question the heterological forces that have, until then, been shaping her identity in the mind of the reader *for* her. Jess's assumption that she's interested in boys and sex; her desire to use her inheritance to attend her father's *alma mater*; her naturalised distrust of Audrey; her tendency to push herself beyond her comfort zone to make friends: all are the result

of society's penchant for compulsory sexuality and the pressure it places on her in *Category X*. Jess might never unequivocally state what her sexual identity is, but she does ask herself if sex is something she perhaps just *doesn't* want, and whether maybe, just *maybe*, that's perfectly okay.

If the asexual possibility is empowering for Jess, then it's also the counternarrative that proves the heterosexual metaphor to be the source of the narrative's homological tension, despite appearances to the contrary. For example, Jess's discomfort with the idea of a sexual relationship – despite professing an attraction to Jace – and her general anxiety collectively suggest she needs to find herself sexually, which invites heterological interrogation: does Jess *want* to be with Jace, or is she just being pressured into a relationship? Is she just nervous because she's never been in a sexual relationship before? But once the asexual possibility becomes the empowering alternative to heteronormativity – the possibility that frees Jess and helps her towards self-determination – it becomes the nature of this interrogation itself that proves to be the tensive element, a problematic assumption birthed in the mind of the reader by seeds codified and imparted by the writer.

In essence, the heterosexual metaphor in play in the first half of *Category X* strips Jess of the same epistemic authority the asexual possibility later grants her: it tells the reader that something's wrong with *Jess* and not with the *narrative* around her. Once the script is flipped, however, the heterosexual metaphor becomes the villain, and the asexual possibility tells the reader that something's wrong with the narrative, not Jess. Importantly, none of the problematic tropes I positioned Jess alongside are allowed to persist as sources of obvious tension once she begins to embrace the asexual possibility. Jess and Audrey's relationship becomes far more stable as Audrey helps Jess establish her independence, even if they still have a long way to go; she eventually spurns what she imagines were her father's expectations of her, even if she decides to stick with writing as a career path; and she willingly concedes her conflicts with both Jace and Milly, even if they leave her with some significant emotional baggage. Most importantly, Jess becomes comfortable with her own social and sexual identity, even if she admits she's not sure how to label either of them.

It was never my intention to indulge such tropes beyond the first half of the narrative (at least, not unironically). Rather, I planned them to work in tandem with the narrative's syuzhet to encourage the reader to appeal to a heterological subtext after Jess's first sexual encounter, one that most would no doubt be familiar with and that might constitute a method of literary "seduction" (the orgasm is *coming*, trust me). Since half the story belongs to the audience, though, my goal was once again to make the reader complicit in the formation of the heteronarrative shape from the

beginning, and to maintain that shape for as long as possible into the narrative's tensive regions. In short, I set the story up as a coming-of-age *Bildungsroman* with every intention of reneging on the resolutory pattern such a set up implies, even though Jess *tries* to fulfil it. She masturbates; she has sex; she researches; she speaks to authority figures, but in the end, she relies on her own interpretation of her experience and doesn't explicitly embrace any category of sexual identity. The asexual possibility is the catalyst for this, but it isn't the answer. Jess's healthy acquisition of epistemic authority and subsequent dismissal of heteronormative solutions disavows – to an extent – a heterological subtext: Jess was always the hero, but my hope was to transfer the role of villain from asexuality to the heteronormative assumptions the reader makes at the beginning of the narrative.

Of course, when it comes to things like subtext, metatext, and context, I can only make suggestions: the power to complete the narrative – whether it be with heterologic or homologic – solely belongs to the audience, and, as I've already argued, the presence of asexuality alone does little to dissuade the reader from seeking heterological solutions to the narrative. They might conclude, for example – as the doctor Jess visits does – that Jess was abused by her father and is consequently sex-repulsed. Facing down such a trauma would very much constitute the acquisition of mastery for the character and knowledge for the reader. I therefore needed to maintain what I started by denying the narrative its climax: I needed to excise its synthesis, as well. The astute reader may well have noticed that almost none of the narrative threads I've thus far mentioned are effectively resolved during the story, and I'd be forced to agree. In fact, Jess herself is pensive about the directions her choices might take her, and a lot of the outcomes that *do* occur are somewhat ambiguous.

Jess's rejection of all categorical sexual identities, for example, hopefully leaves the reader wondering if she really *is* asexual, or if the label even matters. Likewise, Jess unequivocally doesn't experience sexual attraction, but she *does* experience and enjoy sexual arousal in certain circumstances, as well as romantic attraction. The confluence of these factors was intentional: my attempt at resisting categorising Jess while simultaneously depicting sexuality's liminal spaces in a positively subversive way. In terms of the heteronarrative, however, this furthers homological tension: it conforms to a heterological narrative only to the point of tension, at which point it refuses to proceed and remains perpetually unresolved. The ambiguity is the asexual possibility reiterated atop the narrative's structure and enhanced by its dualistic presence, and I repeat this pattern throughout Jess's journey. Jess enters Stanmore's Literary Excellence Program to ensure she scores enough credit for entry into one of Sydney University's arts program scholarships, but her rivalry

with Milly over the school magazine ultimately concludes in Milly's favour, leading her to abandon this path. The story concludes with Jess gearing herself up to apply at far less prestigious arts college: a choice, or a concession she rationalises as a positive move, even though the evidence might suggest otherwise? Similarly, Jess's break up with Jace becomes malicious when he encounters her kissing a man in a club and summarily accuses her of fabricating her asexuality. After this interaction, Jace effectively distributes revenge porn of Jess in the form of the semi-nude photo she sent him earlier in the story. This unsurprisingly ends up destroying Jess's coterie, so was Jess's parsing of her friendships *really* a self-motivated decision based on her improving confidence?

At the core of these refusals to provide resolution is, of course, my attempt to find an asexual narrative structure that *works*, because while asexuality may represent the foundation of the asexual possibility in *Category X*'s content, it must also dictate the dimensions of the narrative's shape. This is why Jess never "officially" comes out as asexual. She certainly equates some of her experiences to it, and she tries to explain how this is the case to both Jace and Sam, but asexuality never *defines* Jess, and the story ends with Jess unwilling to discuss her sexuality with Audrey (though the suggestion that she soon might reinforces homological tension). This is because categories imply binaries, and binaries imply a division based on a heteronarrative structure of comprehension (once more, transformative kinesis). I, on the other hand, needed to find a way to elicit bliss purely in tension and perpetual seduction. But even if I managed to encode *Category X* without a single identifiable binary, one still exists between inscriber and audience, writer and reader. A narrative that adheres to heterological shapes encourages audiences to interpret a narrative *as* heterological, which means that Jess was always at risk of being labelled the narrative's villain (even if she is the protagonist and, in many ways, the hero). If her asexuality was expounded at the beginning of the narrative, I risked encouraging readers to view it as the problematic aspect of stasis that needed to change to catalyse synthesis; if it was omitted altogether, I risked giving readers too much interpretive freedom and allowing them to strip Jess of her epistemic authority. Admittedly, Jess *is* the victim of many unfortunate and malicious acts during the story (she even commits a few herself), but asexuality always had to be vindicated, and I was always going to have to engage in binary reasoning to vindicate it.

The second half of *Category X*, then, is designed to block the momentum of desire. It is the apparatus of capture that does *not* recode or redirect the flow of capital. It resists the temptation to enable synthesis; to acquiesce to the reader's anticipation of a narrative structure that conveys something from one state of being to another. Jess *does* change, but in distinctly inconclusive ways

that avoid categorical designations. *Is* she asexual? *Will* she reconnect with her mother? *Will* she find love? *What* will become of her career? While Roof and Barthes trade in experiential meta-terminologies and sociocultural metaphor, *Category X* is an experimental rejection of the technical manifestations of heteronarrativity in literary spaces. Creating this was not easy: indeed, if Barthes's articulation of "edges" – those symbolic flashes of "skin" otherwise called the "subtext" – is a case of categorical heuristics, then structural narratology may be one of the better ways to measure it. Consider, for example, both Gerrig and Iser's teleological interpretations of narrative gaps (the "missing" parts of a text, or its subtext), in which they argue that sentences are designed to create an "aroused" anticipation of the next (Gerrig, 2010; Iser, 1972), a tool that entices the reader into their own imagination and perhaps towards Barthes's "pleasure" (and the potential reproduction of the self). For Gerrig, this is pragmatically explained as a cue for readers to devise their own contiguous experience of the story, for Iser, the result is an expression of emotional avoidance, but the ubiquity of the device remains the same: the reader is compelled to draw on their own knowledge of bodily experience and its cultural appendages to avoid blockages and subsequent instances of profound disappointment.

Even Booth's unreliable narrator can effectively fulfil the role of "seducer", nothing more now than just another apparatus of capture whose inability or unwillingness to share the facts as the reader assumes they should tantalises through the promise of a "second story" or, at the very least, some impending epiphany. Here, Roof's heteronarrative transcends the strictly sexual: the component of interest within her phenomenological paradigm shifts from notions of pleasure and bliss to one of knowledge acquisition and, once again, mastery. Personal change, as an act of reproduction catalysed by the idea that discordance within a narrative *must* mean there's *something* for the reader to discover, is as much a (hetero)sexual performance as "straight" sex. Writer and reader *are* complicit in this act, but instead of the literal birth of a child, the reproduction takes the form of imparted ideology. For literary theorists like Cohn, Emmott, and Jahn, this would be consistent with ideas like rhetorical irony (Cohn, 2000), schemata (Emmott, 2012), and cognitive framing (Jahn, 1997). In every case, the act is both secret and collaborative: the unreliable narrator, a creation of the writer, is communicating something perceptible *only* to the reader, something *beyond* what is conveyed on the page and hidden, perhaps, from more than just a story's characters. In *Category X*, unreliable narration plays out in the switch that occurs at the denied climax: the heteronarrative shape itself becomes the antagonistic force behind the narrative's tension rather than Jess's asexuality. A subtext communicated as surreptitious suggestion, and a taboo by any other name.

The even more astute reader may now be looking at some of my decisions and coming to the same conclusion I did even as I endeavoured to leave *Category X* in a state of continuous tension: the purpose of a persistent homologic is *still* a purpose. Even if *Category X* ends in unresolved tension, having it do so implies the presence of a heteronarrative shape outside the text that will inevitably conclude with synthesis anyway. The proof is in the existence of this very explication: for every subversive technique in *Category X*, there's also an intent that is (or could be) conveyed heterologically here in *Category Y*. Asexuality itself is a good example (despite its conceptual resistance to binary modes of thinking) because it can only function as a communicative term if the heterological dyad between sexuality and asexuality is understood. This manifests as a literary problem, too. For characters who embrace "the label", like Alice in Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love* (2018), Gerald Tippett in *Shortland Street* (1992), or Todd Chavez in Raphael Bob-Waksberg's *BoJack Horseman* (2014), the problem is not so much etymological as it is definitional: what does it *mean* to be an asexual, and is it unproblematic to identify as one? Whom does an explicitly labelled asexual character represent, and whom, by virtue of that representation, do they not? Jess, of course, refuses to adopt a strict label before the end of *Category X*, but in so doing, opens another avenue of interpretation (and thus, synthesis) through the rejection of categorisation itself (a distinctly categorical action).

The action can be analogically summarised in Bradway's (2018) deconstruction of the Boston obscenity trial that accompanied the release of Burrough's controversial work, *Naked Lunch*, in 1957. The book constitutes a kind of fever dream in which the drug-addicted narrator relates a series of increasingly bizarre and graphically brutal vignettes about his life to the reader. Importantly, non-heteronormative sexuality features heavily in the narrator's tale, which detractors cited as one of the primary reasons for banning it. Ultimately, the Court decided not to censure *Naked Lunch*, but it did so (in Bradway's opinion) because it chose to read the book as a work of Burrough's *hallucination* rather than *imagination*. Here, hallucination implies the removal of agency and the dispossession of identity; the homoerotic fantasies of the text are "forced into the mind by the horrors of drugs" (2018, p. 2). Conversely, imagination implies the acquisition of agency and the possession of identity; the text becomes a "political critique … that conjures a broader community of queer desiring subjects" and "[implicates] the readers in its … fantasies" (2018, p. 2). The purpose of the ruling was to remove any potential for synthesis from the text by denouncing the writer's capacity for intent: the book was nonsense, in the Court's opinion, but labelling it thus gave it heterological context whether the Court's opinion was shared or not.

I'm not trying to argue that all categories are binary and that all binaries are absolute and therefore heterological or prone to heteronarrative subsummation. There is considerable nuance even within categorical extremes. Western society's parsing of sexuality through the lens of an individual's dyadic sexual configuration would seem to contradict this, but there are degrees and variations to consider, and the binaries themselves are not exclusively oppositional (van Anders, 2015). A person may express both masculine and feminine characteristics; a narrative may be the product of both hallucination and imagination; *Category X* can be both success and failure. The problem is that categories inherently replicate heteronarrativity in their construction and combination: they provide a method for identifying stasis in something uncategorised, disrupt it by applying a label defined by properties *to* the uncategorised, create tension by contextualising the label alongside others so the uncategorised can *be* categorised, produce climax by "successfully" categorising the uncategorised, and induce synthesis in the power of description enabled by categorisation. Liminal spaces – if they even exist – are battlegrounds that inevitably result in transformative kinesis the moment they become visible (see Greteman, 2014; Nichols, 2020; Owens, 2010; Sandahl, 2003; Stockton, 2016 for examples). Categorisation, it seems, may be a human response to the fear of remaining in the stasis of the unknown.

Category X may revel in its homological tension more than a typical narrative, but its components – its fabula and syuzhet – are not unknown. As a protagonist, Jess goes on a standard young adult coming-of-age journey. She goes from having relatively little confidence in her own epistemic authority at the beginning of the story to having a great amount by the end: so much so, in fact, that although she never makes a definitional choice regarding her sexual identity, the mere fact that she empowers herself to make such decisions in the *future* fulfils – emphatically so, in my opinion – Freud's description of Eros or Hanson's conceptualisation of desire. The same can be said for Jess's contemporaries, many of whom are going through their own personal transitions. Jace and Hannah's rejection of the asexual possibility in Jess, for example, might be a problematic synthesis, but it nevertheless constitutes a transition from a state of not knowing what asexuality is to categorising it as delusion (the fact that I chose to depict Jace and Hannah's synthesis as problematic in the wake of Jess's empowerment offers a certain subtextual synthesis to the reader as well).

Jace's betrayal of Jess's trust, Sam's self-destructive cries for attention, Mikey's battle with expectations, even Milly's own ruthless competitiveness: all of *Category X*'s characters are on a journey over the course of the story, and because I was determined to keep it conventional in many ways, they all end up breaching the stasis that defines them upon their introduction. Some are more

straightforward and conclusive than others (Jace versus Sam), and some represent a journey told through subtextual cues (discovering *why* Milly is an antagonist), but all end up conveying a communicative exchange that uses a heteronarrative shape to function. I may have begun *Category X* confident that I could make it both easily readable and comprehensively subversive, but by the end, I realised I couldn't tell the story I wanted to tell without deploying heteronarrative structure unironically to some degree. I maintain that I successfully explored some methods of subversion, and that asexuality is an informing presence in the narratological space, but I think the momentum of desire is a powerful force that may ultimately subsume its own perversion.

Even if I had committed to a strictly cyclical narrative structure – one that directly fed back into the beginning of the story literally (through a time loop, for example) or figuratively (through a ubiquitous application of Hanson's asexual possibility) – the story simply could not be left devoid of meaning. Once again, and as I've already argued, humans perceive reality as a series of causal relationships, ones that inherently imprint those causes with categories and meaning. A time loop in which Jess is returned, without memory, to the beginning of the story would suggest that there is a second narrative being delivered in *Category X*. Perhaps the text would then be decrying Western society's tendency to hold on to antiquated notions of sexual identity, or perhaps it was a science fiction novel the entire time, and Jess is a character trapped in some sort of temporal paradox. Of course, this is an extreme hypothetical: what if I had simply left all the narrative threads *completely* unresolved? What if I had designed the text of *Category X* to be in perpetual tension from beginning to end without a single moment of closure? Rewriting certain scenes (including the ending) to accommodate this did occur to me. But when you subscribe to the idea that communication inherently involves both a speaker who encodes and a receiver who interprets, then this, too, results in a kind of synthesis. There *must* be a reason for the text being incomplete or nonsensical if it is so, otherwise it's no longer a communicative exchange; it's simply *nothing*. But wait: perhaps there's a story behind the creation of the text more compelling than the one on the page, or perhaps the writer is building towards a longer story composed of multiple entries? An explanation in the tangent body of ideas elicited by the text becomes the default refrain in times of unresolved homological tension, and nothing is a more apt analogy for the birth of a child than the promise of a sequel. The heteronarrative thus survives the conceptual death of both the text *and* the author.

Though Barthes's verbose stanzas and Roof's nihilistic ruminations threaten to render all fiction an allegory for sex, *Category X*'s failures lead me to conclude that the sociocultural implications of the heteronarrative are very real. Certainly, sex is a ubiquitously discussed topic, and although Freud's

more controversial opinions about sex have since fallen out of general favour, popular formulations of sexual identity remain largely unchanged. Humans use sex as a tool for developing intimate relationships, they have difficulty communicating with one another when sex is a mystery, and sex is how they ensure their genetic material carries on into the proceeding generation. Sex is so entangled in their daily experience that I struggled to represent even a third of the sexualised pressures Jess would likely endure during her adolescents *regardless* of her asexuality. Consider, for example, that Jess's unusual familial dynamics – which forms a subplot in *Category X* – is influenced by the implication that her father wanted a larger, more traditional family, and her mother's need to remove herself from him resulted in sex-positive actualisation, even if it caused interpersonal issues. Sex influences Jess's journey in both a very textual and subtextual sense. At times, it is idealised, exoticised, and occasionally ostracised, but desire is never the question: the only thing that matters is sex *happens*, and it touches *everybody*. And yet, Jess's conflict with sex belies a far deeper interaction with narrative itself. If narrative is indeed a semiotic code humans use for ordering reality, then Jess's perception of what *should* happen when one orgasms for the first time was esoterically shaped by this in a way not *literally* about sex, but nevertheless akin to its confluence of actions and ideas. This is true for the entire story, which, despite being denied a textual climax and subsequent synthesis, manages to somehow reiterate a heteronarrative structure in many other ways and, at the very least, defies interpretation without it.

ON PURPOSE (SYNTHESIS)

No.

I'm wrong.

There is *something there for me.*

(p. 231)

So, where does that leave this thesis? I can't deny that, in many ways, *Category Y* is the climax to the narrative presented in *Category X*: the capital to the reader's labour, set in place to inspire – once again – the process of transition, the acquisition and mastery of knowledge, and the reproduction of an ideology. *Category Y* is proof positive that, even if *Category X* lacks textual climax, it nevertheless elicits one in its metatext and context: just another component of another heteronarrative reiterating its own semiotic inevitability; stasis, disruption, and tension replete, with climax and synthesis simply outsourced rather than averted. I conceived *Category X* as a subversion of heteronarrativity, yet all I seem to have done here is retrace the heterosexual metaphor by explaining how I didn't quite retrace the heterosexual metaphor. Yes, I adopted asexuality as a counternarrative tool and constructed a story defined by an embrace of persistent homological tension (riddled with subtextual suggestion), but in the end, all is subsumed by the necessity of a heterological deconstruction.

I look back at *Category X* now convinced that it's what I'd *intended* it to be, yet nothing I *needed* it to be. I'm left wondering how else I can effectively communicate my process if my goal was to have a piece with no act of transformative kinesis, no reproductive synthesis. How can I explain something when explaining it necessarily places it within a heteronarrative, and what, then, do I even have *left* to explain? Like *Category X*, I'd originally envisioned *Category Y* as something quite different, something that continued the counternarrative into ambiguity. But a counternarrative is *still* a narrative: it still *has* a reproductive synthesis even if it doesn't overtly mimic the shape of heteronarrativity, even if the heteronarrative itself is repurposed to serve as the antagonist, and even if the climax of the counternarrative is removed. It's still making a point with a heteronarrative shape, it just delivers its synthesis telepathically by commandeering the interpretive powers of the reader. The *Category Y* that appears in this thesis is, consequently, an admission of miscalculation on my part. I *do* believe *Category X* is a successful experiment, but I also think it delivers an outcome contrary to its intended purpose. The *why*, it seems, is an invariably heterological proposition; an

extended synthesis; the heteronarrative resurgent. In short, I comprehensively failed to achieve my goal.

In fact, I'm now left with the belief that it may be quite impossible to completely disengage from heteronarrativity. Whether I like it or not, *Category X* represents an intellectual synthesis within my own mind, regardless of the nature of the text or the way a reader chooses to interpret it. It begins with the death of the author (Barthes, 1977). Consider this: I am an adult, white, heterosexual man attempting to depict the experiences of a marginalised, asexual, teenage girl. How do I do that sincerely? How do I do that sensitively? If *Category X* is ever published, in what way might it become part of the zeitgeist (under such conditions)? These are questions I asked myself, even though I never doubted I would eventually find enough information to compose something decently representative of certain asexual experiences. I never denied myself the right to tell Jess's story, nor did I anticipate creating a story that would please everybody. Indeed, I've never felt compunction at the thought of writing a fictional character I can hardly (if at all) relate to, nor did I once convince myself that *Category X* would ever be universally praised. Someone, somewhere, will disagree with my approach, and someone, somewhere, will accuse my writing of being problematic, and at least some will no doubt be correct with their criticism. Nevertheless, I don't think anyone should feel compelled in the world of fiction to adhere to experiential boundaries designed to forbid the exploration of things they don't or can't otherwise know. Therein, of course, lies an act of transformative kinesis, one not explicitly replicated on the page, but taking place within the inscriber himself: the labour of my research captured by the apparatus of narrative, recoded as the communication of an original perspective. The only way to answer my questions is to engage with the heterological: to seek out and to question others and to be questioned in turn. The naturalised capitalism of knowledge is all but heteronarrativity stripped of its corresponding artefact.

Simply, *Category X* can be described as an educational experience for me that – even if I've overlooked something or implied something insensitive – has left me with a far greater appreciation for the complexity of sexual identity (as well as the hideous experiences people have endured because of sexually motivated bigotry). I had, until *Category X*, only imagined the death of the author acting in one direction – the founding principle upon which subverting the heteronarrative was possible in terms of my own journey – because if I accepted the proposal that art and creator are entirely disjointed entities, then any synthesis the creator experiences is not necessarily bound to the text. Now, though, I find such an idea disingenuous. I may have just relied on it to justify writing an experience I can't have, but *Category X* has demonstrated to me that synthesis works

both ways. No narrative exists in a vacuum: not even personal fiction no one else ever sees. I still don't think that means the authority to write should be an exercise in experiential gatekeeping, but it does, however, make me think that creators have a responsibility to remain impartial. By impartial, I don't mean cold or heartless, but creators should approach topics with a general sense of good faith and seek to transcribe their interpretation of it sincerely, sensitively, and without prejudice. They should seek edification in what they do, not judgement. After all – as I've just spent an entire thesis arguing – narrative is, at its core, a communicative exchange, and it should be communicable to as many as possible.

Perhaps *Category X*'s failure is a good thing. Perhaps it speaks to an intention to depict asexuality, as I say, in good faith. All I know is that my mind consistently wandered back to the existential problems of heteronarrativity and subsummation as I wrote it. In retrospect, I suppose thinking of myself as a curator rather than a progenitor helped alleviate some of my concerns. As the progenitor of a narrative, is it reasonable to hold me at least partially responsible for how the audience interprets its meaning? Is it then not equally as reasonable for me to deny any responsibility whatsoever if I present myself as little more than the organising entity inside a nexus of ideas, all of which are wholly unoriginal (and unattributable to me)? If so, what exactly is my compulsion to inscribe sincerely or sensitively? Wouldn't it make sense for me to pursue whatever avenue most benefits me? Sensationalism? Misrepresentation? A conduit for capitalism, for personal achievement, for legacy? At the very least, why did I fall so readily into the pattern of heteronarrative shape when doing something *truly* daring may have produced a much more powerful counternarrative to the heterosexual metaphor? I have no answers. All I can say is that while I may not embrace the death of the author as wholly as Barthes did, I *do* take comfort in the idea of my own ideological death in the birth of something new (however reiterative) as the collection of concepts that is this thesis, its subtext, metatext, and context. In other words, I think more research is needed.

Still, it seems inevitable that I must holistically reflect on *Category X*, to draw conclusions about it, to reinforce the heteronarrative tale that began the second I conceptualised it. I suppose stating as much is technically a tautology, since that is what an exegesis definitionally does. Nearly every strategy I deployed was ultimately subsumed by the heteronarrative, and I am prepared to admit that expecting a *Bildungsroman* – specifically, a young adult coming-of-age story – to do anything else might have been folly from the start. Even my choice to make *Category X* a story "told" by Jess in the present-tense, which I did to remove the sense that she might be "reflecting" on the edifying

experience of her formative years, is arguably nullified by, or perhaps complicit with, Jess's ultimate resistance to categorisation. She *is* the narrator, the vehicle through which the story is told, and the reader is invited to view categorisation through her perception of it. How is that *not* an attempt to provoke a kind of intellectual transformation and mastery in the reader? Would it have been different if I'd followed through with my plan to have Jess begin writing a book at the end of the story in *Category X*'s second iteration (an alternative to the article she penned for *New Wave*), a book that would have seen the story end with the same few paragraphs it opened with, suggesting that the book in the reader's hands was Jess's all along? *Category X* could then have been called cyclical, its climax denied by turning the narrative back on itself and by quite literally returning it to what defined its stasis and subsequent disruption to begin with. But would this have nullified its synthesis? After everything, I'm tempted to argue that it wouldn't have made the slightest difference: it would simply have provided another avenue of metatextual interpretation. After all, that regression to the previous state, that denial of desire and momentum, tends to inspire in the audience a rejection of the same, an intellectual compulsion towards avoidance and thus, in the end, the production of a heteronarrative that ends with some subjectively contrived solution.

While the word "narrative" most frequently occurs in literary, creative, and academic contexts, it is almost universally applicable to how humans interact with and understand existence. Their perception of reality, it seems, is fixed, and so fundamentally integral to this process that a manner of interpreting the world *without* narrative is almost inconceivable. They can't even articulate *what* narrative is without appealing *to* narrative, let alone *why* narrative *is*, and the same is true for sex. The striking similarity between sex and narrative is the catalyst for Roof's argument that they are, in fact, one and the same: two sides of the immutable heteronarrative. I must admit, it is difficult for me to know what I should say about Roof's bugbear now, despite my belief that my attempts to subvert it proved futile. I think what Roof calls heteronarrative is the reason Jess's story exists in the first place, as well as its inexorable outcome: a postmodern *Bildungsroman* that isn't nearly as clever as it thinks it is. Perhaps its only saving grace lies in that uniquely queer and liminal experience immediately following the conclusion of a narrative in which its audience can spend a few furtive moments simply *enjoying* pleasure or bliss before the heteronormative urge to rationalise such sensations kick in. In those moments, I hope *Category X* can make the asexual possibility a comfortable and informative proposition, even if it's immediately subsumed by the heteronarrative once the conscious mind begins to order it.

Either way, I probably need to draw some conclusions about heteronarrativity and its modern manifestations. I'm just not sure how to do it. Every time I arrived at this point in the past, I was reminded that Roof spent nearly two hundred pages analysing the topic philosophically, a feat that necessarily renders whatever I write here a woefully truncated facsimile. Still, there are so many potential threads of argument. I'm thinking of the work of gender and literary theorists who study the intersection between sex and narrative structure (Barthes, Przybylo, Hanson, Farmasi) and queer theorists who repeatedly deconstruct mainstream spaces in favour of liminal ones (Sedgwick, Butler, Scherrer, Jagose). All have contributed to the argument that we understand narrative in the same way we understand sex and sexual identity, and all contribute to the case that they are both expressions of a single phenomenological paradigm: the same phenomenological paradigm that tends to determine how we interpret the world.

My intention with *Category X* was to ultimately make it a text without forward motion, a text without closure and that intentionally resists recoding capital. Jess's journey is meant to be a rebellion against the supposed union between narrative and heterosexuality, the articulation of an alternative to the joinder implied by either. Yet, the more I explicate my reasoning, my choice of construction, my application of theory, the more I come to agree with Roof's conclusion in *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. I find myself convinced that heteronarrative is ubiquitous. How can I possibly subvert heteronarrativity and simultaneously communicate my subversion to a reader *without* relying on heteronarrative to do so? If I chose to exemplify Booth's conceptualisation of rhetorical irony and, instead of analysing *Category X*, simply wrote my exegesis as a new story about a puppy named Flop (whose oversized ears are known throughout the land and whose nose can sniff out a stash of truffles from a mile away), might Flop's adventures represent an entertaining frustration of the "point"? I could even consider transforming this exegesis, or *Category X* itself, into a cavalcade of nonsense phrases, a collection of phonetics that quite literally prevents the clarification of *anything*. In its obtuseness, though, it would still serve a heteronarrative purpose as readers tried to disentangle meaning from its subtext, metatext, context, and everything else. Closure would still be discovered by the reader who understands the "commentary", the reader who "gets" why there is no meaning (and therefore ascribes it meaning), and for those who don't, would it not represent a successful demonstration of how *not* to subvert heteronarrativity? It might even become more profound, in fact: an intertextually postmodernist response to a modernist exploration of narrative asexuality? Either way, the existence of this exegesis, no matter what form it takes, simply serves the heteronarrative. It is the manifestation of *Category X*'s undoing, which, without it, could at least have remained ambiguous.

All of this confirms to me, at least, that the narrative structure I strove to challenge with *Category X*'s creation has subsumed it completely. I see this as early as *Category X*'s opening scene now, which effectively foreshadows Jess's entire journey. To recall: upon her inception, Jess is surrounded by darkness and the thoroughly unfamiliar, technically alone, though she can hear the muffled sounds of people in the houses around her. It's a moment she interprets as hostile, a world in a state of decay. By the close of the book, Jess's reality hasn't changed all that much, save for the lens of the metaphor through which she interprets it: darkness and decay become the threats of epistemic denial and social displacement, but their ongoing effects are notionally identical, even if she herself has switched on an allegorical flashlight. The fact that this parallel exists within the text immediately reveals a subconscious desire to craft the story according to conventional narrative structure, one in which the hero's transformation is implicitly promised by their beginning. Ultimately, Jess's destination remains one of disequilibrium and ambiguity: she does not experience justice or revenge, she foregoes any definitive shift in identity, she does not repair most of her relationships, and she can't even bring herself to discuss asexuality with her mother (at least, not within the text itself). The duplication of her end in her beginning, however, concedes the desire to imbue her story with the subtextual union of Eros and Thanatos, fulfilling Freud's prophecy of reasoning. It mollifies, to some degree, what many readers may deem the "unproduction" of Jess's overt journey (her inability, as the protagonist, to inflict meaningful change within herself or upon those around her) because they can safely argue from the symmetry placed before them that Jess herself is not (and perhaps never was) the "point" of the narrative.

These are the instruments of narrative as Western culture understands it: structural manifestations of what gender theorists call the heteronarrative. It is the compulsion for reproduction, paradigmatically reinscribed as the heterosexual metaphor. What a story *should* be; what a story *must* be. By narrative's most reductive metric, Jess and her rebellious journey are a success (and thus, a failure) because (as popular understanding dictates) a story *must* have a "point". It *should* render complete the ideological synergy between narrative and heterosexuality, not with the literal act of sex or the birth of a child, but with its capitalistic analogues: knowledge, mastery, victory, a sequel, a resolution that persists in the mind of the reader and makes the homological frustrations of the plot and the text itself worthy of endurance. If the subject of the analogue does not fall upon one within the text, then it must fall on one without. After all, a victory is nothing without hardship, and a reader *knows* when a story is dissonant, incomplete, or does not end "well" (to whatever satisfactory standards they deem appropriate). Thus, *Category X* seems to do what the

heteronarrative demands. It trades the lens of one metaphor for another, yes, but in so doing, it trades plot for commentary. The "point" was never *really* Jess's journey: it was the reiteration of liminality and its subsequent oppression. Since Jess and her asexuality were simply the writer's objects of choice, the reader's yearning for closure is therefore fulfilled even *before* the novel's opening paragraphs are done. Jess's "failure" is annulled because her success never really mattered in the first place. My problem, then, is not that I am reticent to explain my "process", or to draw conclusions about the heteronarrative, but that doing so only serves to undermine the subversion I set out to execute with *Category X*.

Nevertheless, the communicative exchange *must* be upheld. The acts of encoding and interpreting (and their associated outcomes) are dependent on, and perhaps incomprehensible without, the use of narrative scaffolding, and the narrative scaffolding of the current zeitgeist, it seems, can only function as an extension of heteroideology. So, despite everything I've written both here and in *Category X*, the only thing I can ostensibly guarantee is the experience of a satisfactory climax: of an end simultaneously presented as a beginning, the true confluence or Eros and Thanatos as the text itself is allowed to die having inevitably facilitated reproduction. It's funny that, as I contemplate where a good place to end might be, I wandered right back to the beginning of *Category X*'s story, something I avoided within the text itself. Freud's ideas may be archaic, but I suspect they remain persistent in popular culture because they are ultimately relatable to a great many people. The heteronarrative does indeed encapsulate *all*, and the only appropriate place to end, I suppose, is with a time-honoured gesture of rhetorical politeness: a question to you, the reader, since this conclusion is as much yours as it is mine.

Was it good for you, too?

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