

The Discourse: An Online Debate

by

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ABSTRACT

The Discourse is an online community coalesced around debate about LGBT+ identity and inclusion. In this thesis, I specifically focus on the vitriolic debate over asexual inclusion in the LGBT+ community. Using data gathered from an extensive monthslong ethnographic study of The Discourse, involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participants, I attempt to make sense of The Discourse. This thesis examines on the ways in which The Discourse parallels and inherits from older debates and schisms within the LGBT community. It also discusses different aspects of The Discourse germane to Internet studies topics, such as surveillance, free speech, and the ways in which identity intersects with Discourse interactions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to The Discourse

For the past several months I have been studying a loosely linked community of discussion on Tumblr, a social networking and microblogging website, known as The Discourse. Broadly speaking, The Discourse is a social space in which a number of arguments about membership and oppression in the LGBT+¹ community take place. Users are often quite active and well-informed in this community, posting continuously for hours and citing quite sophisticated theory in their arguments. However, there is also a great deal of vitriol and transgressive behavior within the community, ranging from insulting comments on controversial posts to anonymous death threats. The stakes, it would seem, are high for participants, and the issues they debate fraught with significant meaning. In this study, I focus on one frequently seen topic in The Discourse -- the question of whether asexual² people ought to be considered part of the LGBT+ community.

It seems like the Discourse participants are trying to suss out the answer to a question activists have been answering, directly or not, for decades: how are the boundaries of the LGBT+ community demarcated? Is queerness/membership in the LGBT+ community defined by pain and persecution, or instead by resistance to, and/or deviance from, prescribed mainstream norms? One camp of The Discourse, the “ace³ [asexual] inclusionist” side, argues that asexual people belong in the LGBT+ community because asexual people are also marginalized by society’s hegemonic heterosexual norms; queerness, they argue, is a function of one’s intrinsic

¹See glossary entry LGBT+ for clarification + definition.

² The most commonly used definition of asexuality encompasses anyone who does not experience sexual attraction. See the “asexual” glossary entry for more information.

³ “Ace” is a commonly used abbreviation for “asexual” in many asexual communities (not limited to Tumblr).

difference from societally expected norms of gender expression, sexuality, and relationship configurations. The opposing group, often referred to as “gatekeepers” or “hatekeepers⁴,” or “ace exclusionists,” believe that membership in the LGBT+ community is defined by *systematic persecution*, and they exclude groups they believe haven’t experienced oppression on a societal level. They view the word “queer” as a slur; its ongoing use as a slur in many places and contexts, they argue, makes it off-limits for reclamation on a universal level.

To exclusionists, the LGBT+ community is a place of safety with limited resources whose safety and sanctity would be threatened by interlopers with identities not strictly located underneath the LGBT umbrella. In this worldview, LGBT+ solidarity is a unity born of necessity -- a united front against persecution & oppression. What folks in the community share, according to this model, is a common experience of societal oppression and pain as a result of identities outside their control. “Ace inclusionists,” however, take the view that the LGBT+ community ought to be first and foremost a place of support & belonging. In the inclusionist worldview, all folks under the expanded LGBTTQQAAP⁵ acronym represent challenges to normativity; the purpose of the community is to provide a safe space for individuals to better understand themselves.

Why does it matter?

When we see The Discourse only as a collection of perhaps a few thousand people, many of them young and belonging to one or many marginalized identity groups, yelling at each other

⁴ All three of these terms are coined by the asexual inclusionist side of The Discourse and occasionally used ironically by the exclusionist side.

⁵ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, ally, asexual, pansexual, respectively.

over the Internet, it is easy to dismiss it as something trivial or nonserious -- certainly not worth the months of study I've put into this thesis. Yet I argue -- and not just because there's no other way to justify spending those countless hours of my life on Tumblr that I'll never get back -- that there is worth in understanding The Discourse and, more importantly, its participants. Discourse participants are deeply, passionately invested in The Discourse; no matter what side they belong to, their concerns run much deeper than simply "winning" the argument. For both sides, the stakes are no less than the safety and belonging of large swathes of vulnerable people and the concept of what the LGBT community ought to be.

Fights over the essential composition and purpose of the LGBT community are nothing new; the community has struggled to make a place for bisexual and transgender members and fought bitterly over radicalism versus assimilationism. Today, though, as queerness enters the mainstream and becomes an easier label to saddle oneself with, the question of who gets to claim queerness grows ever murkier. Part of what The Discourse does is suss out that very question, albeit implicitly. Part of what I aim to get at by studying The Discourse is the ways in which The Discourse attempts to make sense of it. Moreover, observing The Discourse allows us to ask and answer questions about surveillance, free speech, and concepts of safety in online participatory communities -- questions that can really only be answered by embedding oneself in such a community and deeply understanding it.

Chapter 2: Methods

A Warrant for Ethnographic Study of The Discourse

The occupation of sociological work is fundamentally about the “interplay of individuals and society.” According to sociologist C. Wright Mills, the fundamental task of the sociologist is to “make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference” through simultaneous understanding of the forces salient to the individual and to the society⁶. The struggles that concern an individual are “the personal *troubles* of milieu,” where individually held values are felt to be threatened, and those that concern a public, where publicly held values seem under threat, are *issues*⁷. Understanding what The Discourse is working toward requires grasping the *troubles* affecting individual participants or sets of participants. A researcher must also understand the *troubles*, or perhaps *issues*, at stake for either side of The Discourse, as well as the larger societal *issues* impinging on Discourse participants and their dialogues. A central question this research attempts to make clear is whether the values Discourse participants are defending have parallels to the values that are being debated in longer-standing societal conflicts.

Jack Katz, an ethnographer and sociologist, lays out several answers to the question of purpose and significance that is applicable to so many ethnographic inquiries in his essay “Ethnography’s Warrants.” Particularly pertinent to my study of The Discourse are warrants to study deviant or disreputable activities⁸; explain historically new phenomena⁹; and document how people in a particular situation are “confronting exceptionally vivid interactional challenges¹⁰.” Katz draws a distinction between “bohemian” portrayals -- studies that show informants’ actions deviate more from norms than was expected by conventional opinion -- and “normalizing” accounts,

⁶ Mills, C. W. *The Sociological Imagination*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ Jack Katz, Ethnography's Warrants. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 25(4), (2008): 394, doi:10.1177/0049124197025004002

⁹ *Ibid.*, 411

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 407

which demonstrate that supposedly deviant informants are much like anyone else, but are constrained by their circumstances¹¹. In researching and portraying The Discourse, I aim to avoid erring toward dismissive accounts of Tumblr and its denizens which cast them as virtue-signaling “social justice warriors¹²” overly concerned with their “special snowflake” identities. I do not think the people I study are necessarily so absorbed in, nor so exclusively informed by, Tumblr culture, that that would be a fair portrayal. Online life is seldom so absorbing as pundits make it out to be, and it is often the case that (offline) societal forces have far larger effects on informants’ lives and behavior, both online and offline, than any inherent characteristic or culture of online media (see for example danah boyd’s book *It’s Complicated*¹³). Since it is difficult to separate out these forces and their effects *in situ* -- that is, exclusively through participant observation, data from interviews is extremely important to this study, as it was for boyd.

The Discourse also exists also in a context that would have likely been unimaginable as recently as twenty years ago. Tumblr is home to many vibrant, generative communities, and its affordances are in constant flux as the site tries to monetize and maintain its user base. It is only one of several social networking sites (and indeed one of the smaller ones) that allow people to generate and share content, gather with others like them, and communicate (or argue) instantaneously. Many nascent “webs of significance¹⁴” have been spun on these sites, still others have been changed drastically from their pre-Internet shapes, and The Discourse finds

¹¹ Ibid., 395-396.

¹² See for example [reddit.com/r/TumblrInAction](https://www.reddit.com/r/TumblrInAction), a subreddit that exists to mock some of the more left-of-mainstream Tumblr content and “social justice warrior” - identified individuals.

¹³ danah boyd, (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 80.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

itself suspended in some subset of both pre-internet and Internet-based ways of meaning-making. Is The Discourse a historically new phenomenon? Certainly the argument over inclusion which is at the heart of The Discourse is nothing new, but it is novel for such debate to occur in a *networked public*¹⁵ (a term first used by Mizuko Ito to describe public places altered or created by digital technologies), with all the affordances and altered behavioral cues it brings with it. The vitriol with which Discourse participants disagree with each other is an extreme case of the ordinary arguments we so often hash out in everyday life, here complicated by the pseudonymous, mediated nature of interaction on Tumblr. This particular sort of argument, where the consequences of misbehavior are mild (of necessity in an online pseudonymous environment) yet the issue being debated is of heavy consequence for the participants, can help us think about other cases of disagreement in civic spaces.

Qualitative Validity

Some people, particularly those who are strong advocates of quantitative investigations, often question the validity of ethnographic work, or that of qualitative research in general. They might claim that qualitative research is anecdotal, subjective, less valid than work based on quantitative data, or does not meet the positivist standards of validity applied to quantitative studies¹⁶. Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, all ethnographers experienced in working in virtual worlds, confront these challenges to the validity of ethnographic work with thorough explanations debunking them as fallacious. While ethnographic texts may contain anecdotes from fieldwork, those anecdotes are representative of many incidents of that phenomenon over a prolonged period of fieldwork. All scientific research comes from a position of subjectivity, and

¹⁵ Mizuko Ito, *Networked publics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 1-14.

¹⁶ Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and virtual worlds: a handbook of method* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2012), ??.

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qualitative research is no different. Boellstoff et. al. argue that subjectivity is in fact vital to communicating and engaging with one's informants on a human level. Moreover, all data collected by humans is altered in some way by human intervention: even the most supposedly "pure" quantitative data has been touched by human influences. Qualitative data and human interpretation may offer valuable insights that quantitative methods simply cannot.

However, making sense of the validity of qualitative accounts, which may not have the appealing statistical power of quantitative data, can be a tricky business. My study is based on purely qualitative data consisting of months of participant observation and ten hourlong semistructured interviews. Understanding what conclusions I may pull from my data, and why, is an important step in the research process. Maxwell, an ethnographer, offers a review of various concepts of qualitative validity. According to him, Guba and Lincoln (1989) cast validity as a positivist idea. Wolcott (1990) suggests that *understanding* "is a more fundamental concept for qualitative research than validity"¹⁷ While Maxwell agrees, he goes on to present several different categories of *validity* that he explains as derived from "the kinds of understanding gained from qualitative inquiry"¹⁸ This concept of validity "employs a critical realism," and treats validity as a relationship between an account and the thing it seeks to describe¹⁹. If we take as granted that there is no objectively correct account of an event, our goal then becomes to assess whether the inferences drawn from data are valid -- precisely my goal in this thesis. Maxwell lays out five broad types of validity in his essay. Descriptive validity requires providing a factually accurate account in terms one's informants would agree with. An account that is interpretively valid

¹⁷ John E. Maxwell, "Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* 62, no. 3, 280, doi:10.4135/9781412986274.n2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

conveys the meaning of the narrative to those involved in it. Theoretically valid accounts correctly apply an applicable theoretical account. The generalizability of an account is a measure of how much it can be applied to situations outside the specific one being studied. Finally, an account that is evaluatively valid makes a valid judgement or evaluation of the events in an account. It is especially ethically difficult to impose an evaluative or moral framework on the participants of The Discourse because of their youth and drive to protect their communities. In this thesis, I especially focus on descriptive and interpretive validity because there is so much tacit in the text of the arguments that play out online.

For this study, achieving a defensible level of descriptive validity is rather straightforward to do simply because I have the ability to screenshot events, write down hyperlinks to users' blogs, and transcribe quotes exactly as they appear. Not all fieldworkers have this luxury, but because my field site is an asynchronous online space, my capabilities for collecting data are extended. Similarly, because I have spent a good amount of time on Tumblr as a user (and interned there last summer as a product analyst), I have a well-developed sense of the emic vocabulary and frameworks for sensemaking on mainstream Tumblr. Some of those may well differ in The Discourse, which is of course the task of extensive participant observation to uncover, as full interpretive validity is dependent upon it. Theoretical validity requires answering the question "what is this an example of?" and I cover several debates and studies whose subject matter is adjacent to The Discourse in the literature review. For example, The Discourse is certainly a participatory culture and a debate over inclusion in the LGBTQ+ community; I examine instances of both in greater detail in my literature review.

Moral and Ethical Considerations

One issue I often found myself wrestling with in this study was a certain degree of frustration with, and disappointment in, my informants. Kleinman reminds us that our emotions during fieldwork are “resources for understanding the phenomenon under study,” and indeed our emotions are indicative of our values²⁰. Thus can one’s emotions be valuable data to further understanding of a situation: the values we determine to be threatened when we examine our emotions are reflective of larger societal systems of valuation that impinge on our informants. In my case, my frustration with the way Discourse participants engaged with each other is reflective of my expectations about how arguments ought to be conducted: patiently, calmly, thoughtfully, and certainly at bare minimum without death threats. Yet we often place an unfair burden of respectable engagement on oppressed populations²¹ while failing to listen to their legitimate concerns. Moreover, because my work is in academia, I may very well be falling victim to an overly dry academic “ivory-tower” perspective on issues that are very salient and high-stakes to the people I am studying. The urgency with which Discourse participants debate asexual inclusion indicates that the stakes of the debate raging on Tumblr are very high and extremely personal. Who am I to say these issues should not be engaged with with the level of vitriol they are, when, as an academic, the sorts of debates I intend to take part in are scholarly in tone and dry in nature, and the stakes are abstract for me?

²⁰ Sheryl Kleinman, Field-workers' feelings: what we feel, who we are, how we analyze. In W. B. Shaffir & R. A. Stebbins (Eds.), *A SAGE Focus Edition: Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research* Vol. 124, (1991): 184.

²¹ Fredrika Thelandersson, “A Less Toxic Feminism: Can the Internet Solve the Age Old Question of How to Put Intersectional Theory into Practice?” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 3 (2014): 528.
doi:10.1080/14680777.2014.909169

The stakes can be very real for Discourse participants whose undesirable posts are unearthed by other Discourse participants. By writing a thesis that will likely be online in one form or another, I run the risk of exposing any participants whom I quote or whose posts I screenshot to harassment, should they be identified. In this age of search engines and constant archiving, a screenshotted Tumblr post is very often traceable to its original poster, even if the name is removed. While much of the content created and posted on the Internet is viewable by anyone with a browser, the original poster may not have necessarily intended their post to reach such a widespread audience. Given the typical audience for posts and implicit norms of disclosure, participants may (reasonably) assume a *contextual integrity* to their situation that generally applies²². Participants may resolve the tension between the desire to be in public and the desire to be free from interference or surveillance by assuming the extent to, and individuals by which, they are being surveilled is appropriate to the context in which they are interacting. boyd reads this not as a failure to protect oneself, but as a sophisticated navigation of the “complex interplay between privacy and publicity.”²³”

As a researcher, I am outside the contextual norms for interaction on Tumblr; the average user certainly does not expect that their interactions, debates, and everyday ramblings are being recorded, analyzed, or screenshotted by someone writing a thesis on their activities. When I first entered the community, I announced myself as a researcher studying social media, but did not explain exactly what I was studying (fearing, as Van Maanen encountered, overreport or overacting of one’s supposed role as a performance for a known researcher)²⁴. What consequences might revealing information about participants’ online behavior have besides

²² Helen Nissenbaum, “Privacy as Contextual Integrity” *Washington Law Review* 79, (2004): 102.

²³ boyd, *It’s Complicated*, 57.

²⁴ John Van Maanen, “The Moral Fix: On the Ethics of Fieldwork”. *Social Science Methods* 1, (1982): 371.

embarrassment? When all their actions online are indexed by Google already (modulo draconian privacy settings and deletions), what do my responsibilities to participants look like?

Over the course of this study, I made several commitments to do well by Discourse participants. For me, this involves, first and foremost, a commitment to anonymity whenever possible. If a post or a direct quote is likely to bring a user strife, I make sure their identity is hidden and context clues that might make the original poster Google-able are minimal or nonexistent. This also requires that I be transparent about my intentions and the risks of participation, in introducing myself to others, asking for interview participation, and getting consent for interview participation. And finally, as a general principle, I constantly reminded myself to meet participants where they were and learn from their situated expertise. I was constantly amazed by the depth of insight and thought and the amount of passion Discourse participants put into making sense of and participating in The Discourse. I hope to honor and convey that, and tell their story in terms that are true to them, in this thesis.

Tumblr places notable trust in the permanence of the hyperlink; for example, in several “callout posts” meant to alert others in the community to a certain individual’s problematic and/or dangerous behavior, the original poster will link to posts made by that individual, presumably with the assumption that they will not delete those posts. In contrast, /r/kotakuinaction, the subreddit where pro-Gamergate²⁵ activism has coalesced of late, has a bot that makes an Internet

²⁵ Gamergate was a controversy that spawned in August 2014, when Eron Gjoni made a very public, very lengthy blog post alleging that his ex-girlfriend Zoe Quinn had leveraged personal connections for positive reviews of her game *Depression Quest*. This blog post spiralled into a storm of complaints and allegations about ethics in gaming journalism that somehow became grounds for gendered harassment and threats directed at prominent women in gaming and journalists who covered the controversy. “Pro-Gamergate” participants are associated with the complaints about gaming journalism and long-lasting harassment and threats; the (still extant) subreddit /r/kotakuinaction is one networked public where they gathered and coordinated.

Archive copy of every link posted to the subreddit, illustrating the institutionalized distrust of news outlets that characterized (at least ostensibly) the Gamergate “movement.” Judging by typical behavior, The Discourse does not seem to suspect similar malfeasance on the part of individuals being called out. This suggests that they view posts as relatively stable artifacts -- at least stable enough to provide evidence in a callout post.

Boellstorff et. al. discuss the principle of care²⁶ -- the idea that the ethnographer has a responsibility, by dint of the asymmetrical power relation between researcher and informants, and the benefits the researcher gains, to “take good care” of informants and make sure the relationship with them is one of “trust and mutual respect.” I aim to do this by being transparent about my role as a researcher without revealing my specific purpose. Moreover, when writing up my thesis, I obscure the content of posts when possible, and obscure URLs (Tumblr usernames) whenever I feel the user could be harmed by association with a post. Because posts are construed as permanent within the Tumblr milieu, a “problematic” post, as evidence of a misdeed or problematic thinking, can follow an individual for years, or across multiple usernames. At bare minimum, I wish to ensure that this research practice will not contribute to Tumblr’s viral outrage mechanisms and do any user serious emotional harm as a result. In an ideal world, however, I hope that this study will give Discourse participants valuable insight into the larger context into which their debates fit, and lend the sort of participatory culture The Discourse exemplifies a measure of legitimacy as a place of civic debate.

²⁶ Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and virtual worlds: a handbook of method*, 129-130.

Doing Description & Writing About Culture

The task of the anthropologist is not to develop some quasi-mystical ability to get inside the minds of the people they are studying, but rather to “figure out what the devil they think they are up to²⁷.” In other words, the basic task of writing about cultures -- *ethnography* -- is to understand how people express what they are thinking and put it into terms that one’s audience can understand. At the heart of this task is the difference between *experience-near* and *experience-distant*. Geertz defines a term that is *experience-near* as one that an informant would use without much thought to describe what they think is happening. An *experience-distant* term, in contrast, would be used by experts (in this case social scientists of whatever stripe) to explain what is going on²⁸. An account skewed too much toward the *experience-near* is stuck within the scope of the particular culture being studied, while one written entirely in *experience-distant* vocabulary will contain none of the nuance or “distinctive tonalities” inherent to the informants’ lives²⁹. Geertz argues that understanding how to deploy *experience-near* and *experience-distant* terms to create a cohesive, comprehensible narrative is the main task facing the ethnographer.

Ethnography, then, according to Geertz, is “an elaborate venture...in ‘thick description’³⁰”. An ethnographer must become familiar with the “imaginative universe” in which their informants’ actions are signals and learn to navigate the “piled-up structures of inference and implication” which are rich in meaning but often difficult to interpret without context³¹. The social discourse -- *discourse* being, in Ricoeur’s analysis of the way *discourse* becomes *text*, an inherently

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, no. 1 (1974): 29. doi:10.2307/3822971

²⁸ Ibid., 29-30.

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," 2.

³¹ Ibid., 2.

present phenomenon, where one “had to have been there” in the presence of its subject in order to understand -- must be converted -- fixed -- into a legible form³². Writing about discourse, then, fixes into memory and narrative that which was not previously autonomous.

My initial task in this study -- recording and describing goings-on in The Discourse -- is rather different from the scenarios Geertz and Clifford likely envisioned when they wrote the texts cited above. I currently consider myself fairly literate in the experience-near terminology and frameworks employed in The Discourse, as a result of many hours spent on Tumblr in adjacent communities. The “imaginative universe” of The Discourse, and the structures that comprise it, are not wholly unfamiliar phenomena. I hope that this initial grounding in context will be an advantage and that bypassing the initial process of learning the culture from a starting point of complete illiteracy will not disadvantage this study.

Moreover, I believe the task of an ethnographer studying a social network is somewhat complicated by the nature of the subject matter. Fixing discourse into a legible form is complicated when screenshots and hyperlinks can be recorded alongside fieldnotes. In this situation, what constitutes “having been there” in the presence of the discoursing subject(s)? Is there some factor inherent to discourse that is missed when a researcher picks through traces of a minutes-old argument? Ethnography is, after all, fundamentally the act of writing about culture - - fixing social discourse into a legible, thickly described narrative. I hope this can be remedied with careful attention to the terms with which I describe events that transpire -- and perhaps discourse is already fixed somehow by the inherent semi-permeance of Internet-based dialogue, no matter what the ethnographer attempts to do.

³²James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority” *Representations* 2 (1983): 131. doi:10.2307/2928386

Participant Observation

Goffman describes participant observation as subjecting the researching self and one's social situation to the "set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals"³³. The researcher ought to be close to their informants as they react to what life is doing to them and be able to accept all the good and bad of their reality as if they were a member of the society they intend to study. One must force oneself to be tuned into the rhythms of the society in order to become an adequate witness to their lives. Goffman says that "the way to make a world is to be naked to the bone;" the researcher must learn to retain some sense their own identity but also assimilate adequately with the people they're studying³⁴. Ultimately, the place one purports to be studying ought to be familiar and the rhythms of participants' lives should make sense to the researcher on a visceral level.

Participant observation in a networked field site is somewhat different from what Goffman envisions; for one, it is impossible to physically live with one's informants in their community: the community is comprised of individuals conceivably from all over the world, and exists in physical space on Tumblr's servers in a Buffalo, NY data center. For another, I will be spending only part of my time in my networked field site, and the rest existing in my "normal" life as a student; due to practical concerns (i.e. graduation requirements) I cannot "strip my life to the bone" and plunge headlong into The Discourse full-time. This does, however, at least mirror the lifestyles of the people I am studying, many of whom are also young adults who are students or employed full-time.

³³ Erving Goffman, "On Fieldwork" *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18, no. 2 (1989): 125.
doi:10.1177/089124189018002001

³⁴ Goffman, "On Fieldwork," 127.

My subjective position as a student and a queer young adult allows me to understand the subject positions in which my informants stand and perhaps better access their worlds; many members of The Discourse are around my age and also identify as some flavor of queer, for whatever definition of “queer” makes the most sense to them. boyd manages approximately the same function by immersing herself in popular culture and teen Internet culture such that she has “a baseline knowledge of the cultural references” her informants use³⁵. In her project, she understands the networked field site as one of a few discrete field sites (among which she names different social media sites, schools, and public places teens, her informants, can be found hanging out) that are linked through a common phenomenon.

Accumulating a community of informants for participant observation is not entirely straightforward on a social networking site; communities are not clearly delineated, and finding a particular fuzzy community can also be nontrivial or biased by the machine learning algorithms employed in various search functions. For this study, I used snowball sampling, adapted to an online field site, to curate a population of users to study. Critics of snowball sampling suggest that it is biased, since the researcher is essentially studying a social network of some sort. However, a sample used in a qualitative study does not necessarily need to correspond to the standards of classical statistics. Instead of thinking about the study in terms of bias, either from a statistical or more qualitative point of view, it is important to think about the grounds by which we interpret it -- broadly speaking what this sample *means to the study*³⁶. To obtain my sample, I searched tags including “the discourse,” “ace inclusion,” “lgbtq,” and a few others that seemed to

³⁵ Boyd, *It's Complicated*, x.

³⁶ Mario Luis Small, “How many cases do I need?: On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography* 10 no. 1 (2009): 14. doi:10.1177/1466138108099586

appropriately relate based on my prior knowledge of Tumblr tag culture and The Discourse. Tags³⁷ are often used to indicate participation in a larger community or conversation (for example, fans of a particular television show will tag their posts with that show's name; participants in The Discourse may or may not tag their posts with "the discourse," depending on whether they would like to be known participants in The Discourse), so they are a reasonable way to find people taking part in the broader conversation of The Discourse -- *and want to be known as such*.

To embed myself within the Discourse community, I started following people from whom the people I was following often reblogged, or with whom they often conversed. Some individuals, whose posts I saw reblogged quite often with relatively many "notes" (reblogs, likes, or comments), I assumed to be central figures in The Discourse. When I looked closely at their blogs, they seemed to be receiving and publishing many anonymous messages (some positive, some vitriolically negative), which would indicate that their blogs have wide visibility among users interested in The Discourse. I also made a post tagged with "the discourse" and a few other relevant tags introducing myself as a researcher (though vaguely -- I claimed I was "interested in social media," as I did not want to contaminate my informants' actions by explaining what exactly I intended to study) and asking for people to follow. I was fortunate enough to get a few responses (this approach is, I believe, more in line with traditional snowball sampling), including one bot that seemed to respond when anyone made a post tagged "the discourse."

³⁷See glossary entry **Tags**.

This was not as successful as I had hoped, however; I only had a few followers throughout the course of my research on Tumblr, and getting respondents to posts was difficult. Achieving a large following on Tumblr requires a great deal of cleverness and investment of self and time that I simply did not have the capacity for. To get respondents for my interviews, I eventually had to employ another sort of snowball sampling and ask some of the “bigger” bloggers I was following for signal boosts or simply to participate in my interviews. I succeeded enough for my purposes with this approach, but it required many cold messages to get ten interviewees. However, for purposes of participant observation, being peripheral to the conversation yet embedded in it was perfectly fine for the most part.

Participation observation in this study entails a great deal of scrolling through the dash³⁸ I have curated on Tumblr for the account I established when I began research. I generally have a web browser open in half of my screen and a text document in another. As I scroll through, I will record events that unfold, or things people are talking about; I might write down a hyperlink to a particular post so I can refer to it later, or take a screenshot of a particularly visual or volatile conversation. If I notice a particularly interesting chain of reblogs (either because I do not entirely understand what is going on, or the argument taking place is a particularly involved Discourse argument), I will read the blogs belonging to the individuals involved in the conversation to understand who is engaging in the conversation, what else they have to say about the situation, and what feedback they are getting from their community as a result.

³⁸ The Tumblr “dash” is a dashboard of all the posts made by individuals a user follows, interspersed with native advertising, arranged vertically in chronological order.

Interviews

Becker and Geer, who are sociologists and ethnographers, offer a comparison between interviews and participant observation and find that interviews ought to be supplemented by participant observation³⁹. Interviews absent cultural context from participant observation are plagued a few issues, in their experience. These include not understanding the ordinary language used by informants in the very particular context they use them⁴⁰. Additionally, interviewers may not be able to understand or know about truths that are held tacitly within the community, or be able to broach difficult or uncomfortable topics without the grounding that participant observation provides⁴¹. Finally, knowing what events or individuals are seen through distorting lenses requires, again, contextual understanding that can come from prolonged observation in the field⁴². Interviewees may perceive or relate events differently from what most would consider objectively true; although this is in itself valuable data, a researcher who naively takes interview data as truth may be at a disadvantage. Interviews require a lot of inference, and Becker and Geer emphasize that a researcher must have the background from participant observation to back it up or, at very least, make very careful inferences⁴³.

According to the theory-driven model of the interview Pawson, an ethnographer, puts forth, a researcher's theory ought to be the subject matter of the interview, and the respondent ought to be given the necessary information and grounding in the theoretical model such that they can

³⁹ Howard Becker and Blanche Geer, "Participant Observation and Interviewing: A Comparison." *Human Organization* 16, no. 3 (1957): 29. doi:10.17730/humo.16.3.k687822132323013.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

⁴² Ibid., 31.

⁴³ Ibid., 32.

confirm, falsify, or refine that model⁴⁴. The task of the sociologist is to explain intriguing outcome patterns by positing some mechanism which is contingent on the context informants find themselves in -- Pawson calls this realist theory-making⁴⁵. In order to do this, an interviewer must get both knowledge domains -- the experience-distant theoretical & the participant's experience-near knowledge -- working in the same direction. The interview, then, is an exercise in division of expertise for theory-building. Going over the context and outcome aspects of the theory should be led with researcher's understanding - it is the researcher's job to make meanings clear in interview questions and teach the conceptual structure of the theory to interviewee, understanding that using experience-distant categories and terms may be hard for the respondent⁴⁶. The respondent then can provide insight into the mechanisms by which outcomes occur. Essentially Pawson is arguing for a bidirectional flow of information in interviewing, constantly informed and refined by the respondent's understanding as they relate it⁴⁷.

The nature of The Discourse raises questions about studying and discussing about sensitive topics, namely sexuality. How might I think about dealing with potentially very weighty conversations? Gorman-Murray et. al., ethnographers who conducted research interviews with many people in the LGBT community, suggest that just as queerness -- living one's life outside normative heterosexuality -- transcends binaries and boundaries, so too can one *queer* research relationships by communicating across and subverting the boundaries between researcher and

⁴⁴ Ray Pawson, "Theorizing the Interview." *The British Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 2 (1996): 298.
doi:10.2307/591728.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 301.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 305.

researched, insider and outsider⁴⁸. Indeed, one's concepts of *insider* and *outsider* may not map neatly when one is studying a community one is part of. Dahl, a queer feminist scholar and activist, mulls over the idea of one's community as home and dissects the idea of home; home, in traditional ethnographic work, is the academy, and the field site is away⁴⁹. Yet when the academy reproduces norms that the researcher lives outside of, and the field site is comparatively familiar territory, a researcher might well choose to call the field site *home*. It can be a dangerous move to assume that the researching self is entirely *at home* or an insider to the community simply on the basis of shared queerness; informants' understanding of queerness might not match one's own, and shared queerness does not immediately confer mutual understanding.

When one is actually conducting an interview, Dahl and Gorman-Murray et. al. both encourage us to think critically about distance and reflexivity. Should a researcher maintain a certain distance and neutrality, or take advantage of the inherent familiarity that comes with a shared marginalized identity? Dahl advocates for an environment that radically disrupts the unequal power relation between researcher and informant by allowing informants equal room to ask questions of the researcher and take part in theory-building⁵⁰. Gorman-Murray et. al. ask us to consider power positionality and the researcher's subjectivity in relation to informants⁵¹. In particular, as a consequence of well-established rapport, informants may tell the researcher

⁴⁸ Andrew Gorman-Murray, Lynda Johnston, & Gordon R. Waitt, "Queer(ing) communication in research relationships: A conversation about subjectivities, methodologies and ethics" In *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. K. Browne & C. J. Nash (England: Ashgate: 2010): 105.

⁴⁹ Ulrika Dahl, "Femme on Femme: Reflections on Collaborative Methods and Queer Femme-inist Ethnography." *Finnish Society of Queer Studies Journal* (2011): 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁵¹ Gorman-Murray et. al., "Queer(ing) communication in research relationships: A conversation about subjectivities, methodologies and ethics", 110.

intimate stories; it is the researcher's duty to understand for whom those narratives are intended - is it the interviewer-as-researcher or the interviewer-as-confidante? Moreover, what potentially controversial aspects of the stories ought to be told to open dialogue, and which ought not to be for fear of exacerbating tensions within the community? They offer no neat solutions, but urge the researcher to, as always, communicate with informants with respect and honesty.

In my interviews, I found it easy to establish rapport with participants. We had a common context, and I spoke their language (the language of "asks," "dash," and "callout posts") with reasonable fluency. As someone who shared many of their experiences, such as being an impressionable high schooler on Tumblr and living a queer identity, I was able to empathize and share bits of my own experience, building a shared foundation for our conversation to work with. Sometimes I tried too hard to relate to experiences or to make sense of something that a participant understood in a different way. Recovering from those missteps required acknowledging my mistake while still trying to maintain rapport and continuing to feel for where the participant was actually coming from. While my subjectivities and my interviewees' subjectivities tended to match up, the territory where it didn't (especially because the context I live in, a liberal Northeast city, is far different from what many of them experience) had to be navigated with care.

Data Analysis

According to Geertz, analysis of ethnographic data is “an interpretive science in search of meaning.⁵²” Such an analysis requires “sorting out the structures of signification” -- reading “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures,” which an ethnographer must have already successfully rendered legible for their audience⁵³. Theory is a set of ideas that can be used to explain what meaningful actions signify. When properly applied to ethnographic data, it is adopted from other related studies, refined, then applied to new interpretive problems. The ultimate goal of analysis, in Geertz’ mind, is to make available answers that other cultures have given to the hardest questions of existence and ensure that they are recorded in the record of human knowledge.

To begin analyzing data, I went through my notes (both field notes from participant observation and interview transcripts) and labeled events with pertinent actions and meanings. The codes I eventually came up, ought, according to Charmaz, a sociologist, to pertain to actions and meanings⁵⁴. Coding schemes in grounded theory should be created by defining what’s visible in the data. We (as researchers) choose the words that make up our codes; we are actively creating these codes from our subjective points of view, so the words we use are not the only objectively correct ways to express the ideas we are labelling, but one of many potentially correct terms⁵⁵. Once finished with preliminary coding, Charmaz advises the researcher to proceed to focused coding, which is concerned with larger categories, then axial coding, which relates categories to subcategories, and finally theoretical coding, the ways in which substantive codes may relate to

⁵² Geertz. “Thick Description,” 2.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. (London, England: Sage Publications, 2006): 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 54.

hypotheses for theory⁵⁶. Coding is first and foremost a way to get a preliminary set of ideas and then begin to analytically unify those ideas

Theory-making, which is what I intend to do over the course of this thesis, is the result of deep analysis of one's coded data. As I go over the data, I also draw upon the existing literature on social movements, LGBT activism, and participatory culture to understand how such debates and online cultures have operated in the past. I anticipate that my data on The Discourse will reveal new examples of the concepts and categories raised in these papers, and perhaps even complicate the theoretical models put forth in the current literature. I hope that this study will provide valuable refinement or complications to the existing theory and give me ample material to build new theory and contribute to the existing body of work.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

In this thesis, I am trying to understand what The Discourse means to the people who participate in it. I believe The Discourse and the questions it attempts to answer point to larger questions about drawing the boundaries of communities, the ways we have arguments, and how we produce knowledge online. The LGBTQ+ community has had arguments about the boundaries that define the community before; in that sense, The Discourse is nothing new. Neither is the activist mobilization of queer and feminist sensibilities in an online community of practice. However, the asexual community has only recently come into its own as a cohesive online

⁵⁶ Ibid., 63.

activist presence, with a proliferation of discussion about asexuality, coming-out narratives, and a proliferation of different asexual-spectrum identities.

The way argument occurs online has evolved considerably in recent years with the expanding ubiquity of online comment, increasing real-time engagement of social media, and social networks' increasing role in our civic awareness and participation. The problem of doing ethnography online is twofold: first we face the classic problem of doing an ethnography of an unfamiliar whose habitants may not necessarily be eager to welcome a researcher and second, we must figure out how to do so in a virtual context, absent gestures and facial expressions yet rich in cultural references, hidden meanings, and traces of activity that remain long after the participants have logged off.

LG/BT Conflict

Queerness -- who is queer, what queerness means, what queerness ought to do for people, what the boundaries of queerness ought to be -- is at the heart of The Discourse. Schisms in the LGBTQ+ movement are nothing new, and neither are the themes of (homo-)normativity, assimilation, and fluidity that crop up over and over again in The Discourse. To ground this study of a question of inclusion in the LGBTQ+ community, we discuss a few cases of identity politics and implicit/explicit exclusion in its history.

The LGBTQ+ community coalesced as an activist body and has been embroiled in identity-based political activism ever since. Bernstein discusses identity deployment as a strategic, collective action, aiming to use various actions by the lesbian and gay movement as a lens to understand when and why differences are either celebrated or oppressed. She explains that there are several

different types of identity deployment: identity for empowerment; identity as goal; identity for critique; and identity for education⁵⁷. The three significant dichotomies that determine the ways in which identity are deployed are, she says, organizational infrastructure and access to the polity; inclusivity of the movement (or lack thereof); and routine versus organized opposition⁵⁸. In this thesis, I examine the ways in which participants in The Discourse deploy their identities. While Bernstein's dichotomies do not translate neatly to a Tumblr-based activist collective, attempting to apply the dichotomies and assess what types of identity deployment are taking place does illuminate the types of goals users are working toward.

Identity deployment becomes a fraught process, moreover, when an activist collective attempts to navigate the labyrinthine American political system. Pragmatics may win out over idealism, and only a narrow, acceptable version of the interested group's identity may be deployed in activism. Vitulli, a gender studies scholar, tells a story of homonormativity's impact on the goals and actions of LGBT activism through attempts to pass ENDA (the Employment Nondiscrimination Act). Homonormativity, as defined by Vitulli, reinforces systems of normative sexuality, gender, and white supremacy; it presents (a very narrow slice of) lesbian and gay folks as non-destabilizing to mainstream normative society by virtue of their gender conformity, adoption of middle-class neoliberal American values, and profession of essentialized sexual preference, as opposed to a queer politics that seeks to disrupt mainstream heteropatriarchy⁵⁹. Much of the argument that happens in the Tumblr Discourse is essentially a

⁵⁷ Mary Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement" *American Journal of Sociology* 103 no. 3 (1997): 537. doi:10.1086/231250

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁵⁹ Elias Vitulli, "A Defining Moment in Civil Rights History? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Trans-Inclusion, and Homonormativity" in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 7 no. 3 (2015): 158. doi:10.1007/s13178-010-0015-0

fight over who ought to be included within the bounds of queerness or the LGBTQ+ community, and I think a similar tension between queerness-as-radical-resistance and respectability/political expediency may exist within The Discourse.

Expanding on the theme of tension between radicality and respectability, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia, communications and sexualities scholars, aim to understand the various sexual ideologies underpinning assimilationist and radical perspectives on same-sex marriage. The assimilationist perspective, they argue, comes from an understanding of marriage as a stabilizing force with potential to counteract promiscuity within the gay community alleged to be responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STIs⁶⁰. Assimilationists also argue for marriage as a way to extend the same expectations and commitment to society expected of straight people to same-sex couples. These perspectives, and the rhetoric they employ, find echoes in The Discourse -- Tumblr users on the asexual-inclusionist side of The Discourse will occasionally make posts alluding to non-asexuals' supposed vulnerability to STIs (to widespread outrage from the asexual-exclusionist side of The Discourse).

The radical perspective, however, frames marriage as a patriarchal and heterosexist institution with negative consequences for the queer community (which allows for many non-normative models of relationships and family) if extended to same-sex couples⁶¹. Similarly, asexual-exclusionist users in The Discourse frame the inclusion of cisgender, heteroromantic asexuals as an invasion of a community defined by opposition to, and oppression by, the norm. It is worth

⁶⁰ Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, & John P. Elia "A Critical Appraisal of Assimilationist and Radical Ideologies Underlying Same-Sex Marriage in LGBT Communities in the United States" in *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 no. 1 (2003): 56, DOI: 10.1300/J082v45n01_03

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

noting that this rhetoric does not support the usual parallels I make between The Discourse and LGBT+ intracommunity arguments. Here exclusionists' rhetoric is in opposition to that employed by assimilationists, and the devices assimilationists use to support their rhetoric directly parallel those used today by inclusionists. Clearly there is not a neat one-to-one correspondence between inclusionists/radical activists and exclusionists/assimilationists; each side of The Discourse inherits from multiple sides in multiple LGBT+ conflicts. However, the traces of older conflicts and older conversations still linger in The Discourse, and tracing their lineage is an important part of making sense of the conversations taking place right now.

The Discourse also complicates the concept of the LGBTQ+ community as a monolithic, unified entity - the dispute over asexual inclusion is so bitter, it is difficult to conceive of any sort of cooperation happening between the two sides at times. Weiss, another sexualities scholar, sets out to debunk the supposed monolithicity of the LGBT community in her article. She argues that the conglomeration of L, G, B, & T is largely a "marriage of convenience," marred by a great deal of intra-community prejudice⁶². According to Weiss, bisexual folks and transgender people experience prejudice within the LGBT community because they problematize concepts of gender-normativity, conventional relationship structures, and sexual identity as essentialized and static⁶³. Weiss' archaeology of what we now call LGBT identities (i.e. homosexual, bisexual, transgender) makes clear how nonlinear -- and how recent-- the construction of these identities truly is. On Tumblr, we see a fairly current proliferation of new non-heterosexual/cisgender identities; however, the boundaries of the LGBTQ+ community on the site are not always elastic enough, it would seem, to accommodate all those whose identities transgress one or more

⁶² Weiss, J. "GL vs. BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia Within the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Community" *Journal of Bisexuality* 3 (2004): 28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31.

socially constructed norms. What Weiss doesn't quite get at in her archaeology, and what I hope to better understand through this study, is how exactly the boundaries of the LGBTQ+ community are drawn, in terms of both explicit and implicit inclusion (because, as Weiss points out, inclusion in the acronym does not necessarily come with full acceptance in the community). Weiss doesn't really examine present act of boundary-drawing so much as delineates the causes and consequences. What I hope to do in this thesis is illuminate acts of boundary-drawing and observe them in action.

Realignments in allegiances based on the relevant question of inclusion of the time are far older than *The Discourse*. King discusses the feminist politics of sexual politics by examining the ironies and conflicts inherent in the "feminist Sex Wars," academic theory, and the ways in which feminist culture is produced. She chronicles different times and spaces where very different alignments of identity groups would group together under one aegis or another, based on the discourse that was salient at the time⁶⁴. Similar fluidity in alignment appears to occur in *The Discourse* on Tumblr, although of course the time scale is an order of magnitude smaller. Moreover, similar gatekeeping behaviors to those that King writes about in 1970s feminist academia, in which one group devalues literature that disagrees with the party line, is what asexual inclusionists claim is their main grievance with the asexual exclusionist camp. Understanding what characteristics of a political movement or coalition cause realignments of loyalties to happen, and what motivations might be salient for gatekeeping behavior, is thus very relevant to the work in this thesis.

⁶⁴ Katie King, "Producing Sex, Theory, and Culture: Gay/Straight Remappings in Contemporary Feminism." *Conflicts in Feminism*, (1990): 84.

Thinking About Asexuality

Asexuality (and, specifically, its queerness or lack thereof) is central to The Discourse; asexual people are simultaneously the subjects and the objects of The Discourse. Asexuality is defined as some degree of absence of sexual attraction. Like many sexual orientations, it can be fluid and exists on a spectrum. Asexual folks have fairly recently become a visible, increasingly political group⁶⁵, and that consciousness is reflected in the role they play in The Discourse -- arguing for their existence and their belonging in a community that at times does not appear to understand them. At the same time, both sides of The Discourse demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of theoretical constructs of asexuality I cover in this section, but they apply them to opposing ends. Many of the conversations currently happening in academia around asexuality also take place in The Discourse; I hope this discussion primes the reader to delve into the Discourse around asexuality with a better understanding of the territory they are getting into.

Scherrer discusses how people come to and make sense of an asexual identity; she seems to support a distinction between romantic orientation and sexual orientation very comparable to the “split attraction model” frequently employed in The Discourse on Tumblr by supporters of asexual inclusion. The article draws parallels between asexuality and other marginalized sexual identities and behaviors, focusing particularly on medicalization, persecution by legal institutions, identity-based community creation, and the process of coming into such an identity⁶⁶. Once again, it’s fascinating to see the same arguments made in academic publications crop up, at much the same level of sophistication, on the Tumblr Discourse. While academia is

⁶⁵ SE Smith, "Asexuality always existed, you just didn't notice it | SE Smith," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2012, , accessed May 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/21/asexuality-always-existed-asexual>.

⁶⁶ Scherrer, K. S. “What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 22, no. 1-2 (2010): 56-73. doi:10.1080/10538720903332255

an important place of knowledge generation/dissemination, it appears that some of those same processes are also occurring in specific Tumblr communities.

Chasin argues that the asexual community constructed itself in response to hostility, specifically anti-asexual discrimination, homophobia against those perceived as lesbian or gay by those who could not parse their non-heterosexual behavior and mannerisms, and the implicit pathologization of low sexual desire. The article outlines the ways in which asexual people experience prejudice, then goes on to discuss the “discursive resources” becoming available in ever-increasing quantity to asexual people, the ways in which asexual people negotiate their identities, and the social reality in which asexual people currently live⁶⁷.

Carrigan presents a sociological inquiry into the asexual identity, employing methods such as interviews, an online questionnaire, and analysis of various websites to “elucidate personal and communal aspects of asexual experience⁶⁸”. The study finds a great deal of diversity within the asexual “umbrella” identity, and discusses the ways in which study participants come to an asexual identity, emphasizing shared contexts and experiences. Carrigan concludes by positing the idea of the asexual community as a political entity, wondering how such a community might be able to problematize the idea of sexual desire as default. I would argue that on Tumblr, the asexual community is already very much a political entity inasmuch as such a thing can be said to exist on social media. The cultural work the asexual community on Tumblr does, certainly at

⁶⁷ CJ D. Chasin, “Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community: Navigating Relationships and Identities in a Context of Resistance,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 25, (2015): 167–180, DOI:10.1002/casp.2203

⁶⁸ M. Carrigan, “There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 465, doi:10.1177/1363460711406462.

least within The Discourse, is in part questioning sexuality as default, but also extends to pushing for greater inclusivity within the LGBTQ+ community and questioning gatekeeping behaviors.

Cerankowski and Milks are deeply concerned with the intersection of asexuality and queer and/or feminist politics, and what an asexual feminism or studying asexuality through a queer studies lens actually might mean in practice. The authors introduce the asexual identity and go through existing literature, narrating asexuality's "definition, community formation, and politics"⁶⁹. The article delves into the question of whether asexuality is a queer identity: is queerness simply defined by non-normativity, or is there more nuance involved? They recommend that a theory of asexual identity be brought to life "at the crossroads of feminist and queer studies," situating it in the same place they argue transgender studies came from⁷⁰ -- a rhetorical move that places asexuality, at least academically, in the territory of LGBT identity. The questions they bring up in this article are also questions The Discourse has yet to resolve. For example, they wonder to what extent asexuality can be defined by abstinence from sex⁷¹, which has been the topic of many heated debates within The Discourse. While they bring up common arguments used against asexual inclusion in the LGBT community, such as the idea that queerness is "an erotic desire for the same"⁷², Cerankowski and Mills come down firmly on the side of asexual queerness. However, it has been interesting to see The Discourse hash out some of the finer points the authors bring up, and certainly to see them bring to vivid, vitriolic life the discussion laid out in dry academic terms in this article.

⁶⁹ K. J. Cerankowski & M. Milks, "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice." *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010), 651.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 655.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 658.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 660.

Asexual identities and relationships, according to Scherrer, problematize assumptions of sex or sexuality in relationships and, indeed, the normative idea of marriage. Because the current normative structure of marriage does not neatly fit the range of relationships that asexual people may be involved in, just as it might fit some (but not all) folks in the LGBT community, same-sex marriage perpetuates a hierarchy of relationships that lifts up dyadic, monogamous, sexual relationships at the expense of other, less traditional/normative relationship structures⁷³. This argument, more or less, is also frequently deployed by the asexual-inclusionist side of The Discourse: asexual people belong in the LGBTQ+ community, they argue, because their relationships are also fundamentally different from “conventional” heterosexual relationships, and they face prejudice for their non-normative identity.

Studying/Theorizing Online Media

Many authors have devoted quite a bit of thought to understanding how technological infrastructure and artifacts affect people. Technology is frequently a political actor (in the small-p sense of political -- influencing how power relations are structured) with significant influence on human society. There’s a great deal of theoretical work discussing how exactly technology fits into human actor-networks; I review some of it here.

In his classic article “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” Winner discusses the inherent politicality of technological artifacts. Winner argues a position somewhere between hard technological determinism and hard social determinism -- social systems influence the way technology develops, but technology also has an effect on social systems. Some technologies are inherently

⁷³ K.S. Scherrer, “What Asexuality Contributes to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion.” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 22, no. 1-2, 56-73. doi:10.1080/10538720903332255

political (think nuclear weapons); others have embedded politics but are not constrained to one politics (Winner gives the example of automated tomato harvesters)⁷⁴. As someone who's worked at Tumblr and therefore has had, I suppose, a glance inside the proverbial sausage factory, I recognize that the site is built by human beings with values of their own that may, occasionally or often, consciously or not, bleed into the workings of the site. I hope to use Winner's soft technical determinism to analyze the ways in which the affordances of the site influence the ways discussion and network-building take place on Tumblr.

Technology may not only be inherently political, however; it can in fact act in the place of human actors or institutions. Bruno Latour presents a door-closer as a social actor endowed with very human qualities, indeed standing in for a human actor who enforces ideas about when a door ought to be open or closed. Objects, he argues, can speak for or stand in for human actors or institutions, and the distinction between objects (i.e. technologies) and subjects (i.e. people/institutions) is perhaps fuzzier than we generally tend to believe⁷⁵.

Understanding the values embedded in Tumblr requires that we take an ethnographic approach to infrastructure. Star advocates for the discipline of "studying boring things" like infrastructure; infrastructure, she says, can tell us about the values and narratives embedded in the systems we study⁷⁶. Star's approach is a relational and ecological one that asks the researcher to recognize that different individuals' understanding of a system of infrastructure may vary greatly, and that infrastructure itself is embedded in the way people act, the tools they have at hand to understand

⁷⁴ L. Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (2010): 121-136.

⁷⁵ B. Latour, "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer," *Social Problems* 35 no. 3 (1988): 298-310. doi:10.1525/sp.1988.35.3.03a00070

⁷⁶ Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 no. 3 (1999): 377. doi:10.1177/00027649921955326

and manipulate it, and the wider web of infrastructure and built environment⁷⁷. Here, I'm tasked with thinking about the infrastructure of a website -- what narrative is baked into the design of the site? Is it similar with the narrative founder David Karp (and Tumblr marketing) would like audiences to believe?

Beyond site design and infrastructure and media artifacts, there are of course the effects of those items. Since we are here concerned with the effect of media on a form of identity work, I discuss Mary Gray's paper discussing queer youth identity work and how media mediates the coming-out narrative (and narratives of living-as-queer) for queer rural youth. Her approach is unique in that it studies media *in situ* rather than simply thinking about its impact & "the moment of reception." For her study, this means thinking about how media fits into, and is shaped for/by its recipients in, the larger ecosystems of the influences and actors that make up people's lives⁷⁸. Studying media effects on Tumblr can be difficult because I can easily access the traces of users' activity, but I can only make conjectures about the context in which Discourse posters exist in "meatspace." However, I hope my interviews will allow me to better understand the ways in which narratives and arguments from Tumblr are filtered through users' particular milieux for individual meaning-making.

People Interacting Online

Moral panics about Internet use causing our ability to interact with other human beings to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 380.

⁷⁸ Mary L. Gray, "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 no. 4 (2009): 1162-1189. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01485.x

atrophy drastically crop up every now and then⁷⁹; the reality, though, is much more complicated. Researchers like Nancy Baym and danah boyd explain the nuances in the ways social media and mediated interaction have changed the way we interact, without making utopian or dystopian arguments, and with hope for the future. There are, however, dark sides to the Internet -- trolling and comment are two especially problematic phenomena that both have a place in The Discourse. Sternberg attempts to make sense of misbehavior online in a review of the existing research on misbehavior in online places. Even the design of such places is important -- the values creators choose to build into websites speak to their users and shape how the site will be used.

Design plays into the way communities feel for their users, and indeed values can be baked into design when the process is intentional. Archive of Our Own (AO3) is a popular fanfiction archive designed and implemented by the fanfiction writing community (primarily women); Fiesler, Morrison, and Bruckman use AO3's origin story as a way to illustrate how values can be embedded in design and successfully implemented in the final product. The site is very intentionally built with accessibility, inclusivity, diversity/fluidity of identity, and advocacy in mind, and the authors explain how these values were implemented and how they were received by users⁸⁰.

In her book *Personal Connection in the Digital Age*, Baym aims to understand how our “relational lives” have been affected by communication technologies (namely the Internet and

⁷⁹ See for example: Nicholas Carr, "Nicholas Carr: 'Are we becoming too reliant on computers?'" The Guardian, January 17, 2015, , accessed May 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/nicholas-carr-are-we-becoming-too-reliant-on-computers>.

⁸⁰ C. Fiesler, S. Morrison, & A.S. Bruckman, “An Archive of Their Own: A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design.” *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2574-2585.

the mobile phone) -- what aspects of personal connection are affected by these technologies? How have people adapted their ways of managing social connection? Is the future of personal connection in the digital age so grim as some pundits would have us believe⁸¹? While I am not sure I would characterize The Discourse as a shining example of positive personal connection or relationship-building, it is nonetheless important to examine the technical affordances involved in the relations and discourse that do happen within The Discourse. Baym asks whether human connection will remain the same in an increasingly online era; my research aims to know what human connection looks (and indeed if it is sustainable) in a hostile online environment.

One form of less direct human contact, albeit one that drives the bulk of Internet discourse and opinion-making, is the comments section on many websites. Reagle looks at the many flavors of Internet-based comment (e.g. review, flame war, constructive criticism/critique, or trolling) and discusses the legal, structural, social, and technological forces behind them. He goes on to discuss the ways people construct discourse and make sense of said discourse at “the bottom of the Internet.” The book provides an in-depth analysis of the motivation behind comment and the affordances that shape the form it takes on a particular platform⁸². This analysis is particularly applicable to The Discourse, as much of the argument takes place in endlessly nested comments on posts.

Arguments, flamewars, and generally hostile online environments are fueled by many sources, some of which Phillips explores in her book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. Phillips looks at online trolling, examining the cultural media narratives that trolls both fuel and are

⁸¹ Nancy K. Baym, *Personal connections in the digital age*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010).

⁸² Joseph M. Reagle, *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

fueled by; trolls' sense of right and wrong (and corresponding online activism); and the Western cultural tropes that are foundational to trollish behavior⁸³. The book is immensely helpful for understanding why bad actors online act the way they do -- and how the notion of a bad actor is itself quite often complicated. The more mainstream (for my purposes, asexual-exclusionist and -inclusionist) actors in *The Discourse* also occasionally use rhetorical tactics that might be labelled as trollish; moreover, an "anti-SJW" bloc of trolls makes up one significant subset of the actors in *The Discourse*; I hope to make sense of their behavior and motivations through Phillips' interpretive frameworks.

Sternberg sets out to synthesize literature about misbehavior in online communities in order to comprehensively understand how people regulate misbehavior in these communities. According to Sternberg, a great deal of literature already exists on misbehavior and rule-breaking/-making in virtual communities; however, nobody has really sat down with the literature and looked for patterns and unifying categories, as she does in this book⁸⁴. I use Sternberg's taxonomies of misbehavior and regulation to understand misbehavior and acting out in *The Discourse*, drawing parallels to older virtual communities that faced similar kinds of misbehavior. These parallels might illuminate, at least on a more global scale, reasons for or logics behind misbehavior, and help me pinpoint what sorts of disagreements of worldview are behind behavior that transgresses social norms in *The Discourse*.

⁸³ Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015): 124.

⁸⁴ Janet Sternberg, *Misbehavior in Cyber Places: The Regulation of Online Conduct in Virtual Communities on the Internet*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012).

Social Media as Participatory Culture

Much has been written about participatory cultures, particularly online ones, as of late; researchers seem to be very interested in the educational and civic possibilities such environments might offer. However, such promise doesn't come without complications; participatory cultures that offer opportunities to deeply embed oneself within the culture and participate fully like reddit or, indeed, The Discourse, are also home to pockets of toxicity and problematic cultural norms. Communities of social justice-focused critique also exist on the Internet, but they are still nascent and may have problems of their own. Tumblr is the site of many communities of progressive critique and education, of which The Discourse could be construed as one. Many interview participants highlighted their experience on Tumblr as incredibly educational and eye-opening, but it was overshadowed by the toxicity and abuse that are hallmarks of The Discourse.

Youth engagement in social media for civic activism is not exclusive to Tumblr, however, and researchers have generally studied less toxic civic publics. Vromen, Xenos, and Loader interviewed several young people about the ways they engage with social media for political ends. They surfaced quite a few differing citizenship norms, including a tension between “dutiful allegiance to formal politics” and “a more personalized, self-actualizing” online political organization⁸⁵. I posit that political organization on Tumblr leans more to the latter than the former; the political discourse folded into The Discourse is often urgently personal, with users sharing deeply personal stories or spreading call-out posts aimed at one individual deemed

⁸⁵ Ariadne Vromen, Michael A. Xenos, & Brian Loader, “Young people, social media and connective action: From organisational maintenance to everyday political talk” in *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 no. 1, (2014): 80. doi:10.1080/13676261.2014.933198

“problematic” in an attempt to further their own political goals or call out a particular aspect of a politics they disagree with.

Yet in some spaces, calling out problematic culture is a behavior that is urgently needed. Social media, Sills et. al. argue, is a space where rape culture proliferates -- but it also contains spaces where young feminists can call out rape culture and make a safe space of their own to participate in what the authors label a “feminist counterpublic”⁸⁶. I would argue that Tumblr facilitates many feminist counterpublic communities; many of the design affordances and conventions users themselves have constructed deploy and, indeed, spread feminist values in a space not explicitly designed for that purpose. For example, trigger warnings are common practices, androcentric patterns of argument (e.g. arguing to “win” rather than to educate, trying to victimize one’s adversary) tend to be shot down, and the reblog structure emphasizes collaborative knowledge-building rather than one person’s success in competition for social capital. However, what happens in inward-looking feminist counterpublics like The Discourse that are increasingly focused on intracommunity callouts and problems within the counterpublic itself? Can such spaces even be called a counterpublic properly anymore?

Connelly, a gender and sexualities scholar, discusses Tumblr in her undergraduate thesis as a place for the raising of a (not necessarily unproblematic) feminist collective consciousness.

Tumblr, she argues, can be understood as a “feminist community of practice” -- a space where a

⁸⁶ Sophie Sills, Chelsea Pickens, Karishma Beach, Lloyd Jones, Octavia Calder-Dawe, Paulette Benton-Grieg., & Nicola Gavey, “Rape culture and social media: Young critics and a feminist counterpublic” in *Feminist Media Studies* 16 no. 6 (2016): 943. doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.1137962

new sort of feminism appropriate for the digital age continues to take shape⁸⁷. It would seem, then, that the conflict and schisms that previous generations of feminists faced will not bypass this Internet-era feminism; while the affordances of the site allow for networking and consciousness-raising at an unprecedented scale and pace, they also make argument and attack possible on an equally grand, rapid scale. As feminist practice and activism reshape themselves to fit the shape of social media culture, understanding how intracommunity conflict also reshapes itself in concert with the movements it is endemic to is of considerable value. While *The Discourse* espouses feminist values, its core conflicts are about the nature of the LGBT+ community. However, I believe the patterns Connelly uncovers in evolution of feminist conflict to a Tumblr-based context are germane to *The Discourse* and the evolution of LGBT+ intracommunity conflict.

Sometimes intracommunity conflict shapes itself along lines of privilege. Nakamura seeks to surface and explain the emotional labor of people (here, Nakamura is talking specifically about the experiences of women of color) who moderate communities, focusing mostly on misogyny and sexism, and face pushback as a result of their volunteer labor⁸⁸. While there are no explicit moderator roles in *The Discourse*, there are multiple people who put considerable work into running discourse blogs or enforcing community norms/good behavior. This labor can be extremely draining, and the patterns of pushback Nakamura describes are rather familiar, but complicated by the fact that ideological differences between the people doing emotional labor in

⁸⁷ Sarah M. Connelly, “Welcome to the FEMINIST CULT”: Building a Feminist Community of Practice on Tumblr. *The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College*. (2015): 7.

⁸⁸ Lisa Nakamura, “The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call Out Culture As Venture Community Management” *New Formations* 86 (2015): 107-108. doi:10.3898/newf.86.06.2015

The Discourse and the people providing pushback are considerably slimmer than they are for Nakamura's informants.

Ceglarek and Ward, human-computer interaction scholars, study the ways in which LGB⁸⁹ youth make use of social networking sites, The cultural work they do on them is far different from the more civic-oriented publics discussed so far, such as Nakamura's Twitter participants, Connelly's feminist Tumblr communities, and Sills et. al.'s feminist counterpublics on various platforms including Tumblr. LGB youth, in this context, use social media to work on making sense of and constructing their identities; this online identity work is linked to better mental health. Online spaces, the authors posit, are extremely valuable as safe spaces for identity work and as resources for networking with other LGB youth⁹⁰. Tumblr is increasingly trying to brand itself as a platform for self-discovery (i.e. identity work), and I've seen quite a few narratives of LGBTQ+ self-discovery on Tumblr in my interviews and participant observation. However, I wonder what the net effect of The Discourse is on participants -- many people call out the toxic culture and will, on occasion, announce they are leaving the community and delete their blogs. Is The Discourse any sort of safe space for LGB youth, or is it another type of space entirely? Certainly youth use The Discourse as a way to reify narratives that underpin and affirm their identities, but The Discourse is also a vitriolic space that too often features aggressive invalidation of others' identities and where one's understanding of one's own identity is often on perilous ground.

⁸⁹ LGB here stands for lesbian, gay, and bisexual; the authors of the paper discuss sexual minority youth only, and do not purport to include gender minority and/or transgender youth. Thus the "T" in LGBT is not included here.

⁹⁰ Peter Ceglarek & L. Monique Ward, "A tool for help or harm? How associations between social networking use, social support, and mental health differ for sexual minority and heterosexual youth" in *Computers in Human Behavior* 65 (2016): 207. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2016.07.051

Chapter 4: Making Sense of LGBT Identity in The Discourse

Who's Who in The Discourse

Debate in The Discourse generally hinges on the vitriolic debate between two sides: the *inclusionists* and the *exclusionists*. The fundamental difference between the inclusionist side and the exclusionist side is their opinions on asexual inclusion in the LGBT community: inclusionists believe that asexual (and aromantic) people are inherently LGBT, even if they are cisgender and heteroromantic/sexual (“cishet”), while exclusionists believe that the LGBT community is comprised of people who are not both cisgender and heteroromantic/sexual -- i.e. “cishet” asexual and aromantic people do not belong. However, there are some other points on which the two sides generally disagree; I have attempted to enumerate the full range of their disagreements in this section in order to flesh out both sides’ rhetoric and points of view before we continue.

The main point of the exclusionist agenda is that asexual and aromantic people are not inherently LGBT; they have put forth a “slippery slope” argument alleging that if the LGBT community includes asexual and aromantic people, it will also eventually be required to include polyamorous people, people who engage in kink, and perhaps even pedophiles. According to the rhetoric I have seen from many exclusionist bloggers, the unifying characteristic of the LGBT community is systematic, state- and societally- based oppression for one’s orientation or gender identity. While asexual and aromantic people may face abuse, mockery, prejudice, and erasure quite frequently, exclusionists argue that these issues are fundamentally different from those faced by LGBT people because they do not come to the level of societally endorsed, historically salient oppression LGBT people are assumed to face. Inclusionists, by contrast, believe that asexual and aromantic people do face the same oppression LGBT people do, namely corrective

rape, erasure, medical pathologization, and conversion therapy. According to them, membership in the LGBT community is predicated on differences in attraction and gender rather than oppression; basically, anyone who is not a cisgender person attracted both romantically and sexually to the “other” binary gender ought to be included in the community, regardless if their oppression is deemed “good enough.”

The two sides also disagree about language put forth as umbrella terms for the community; inclusionists are often associated with a fairly new model to replace the LGBT umbrella called MOGAI (marginalized orientations, gender alignments, and intersex); exclusionists violently oppose it with the same “slippery slope” argument with which they oppose asexual inclusion and believe that it is actively harmful to young LGBT people trying to figure out how to articulate their identities. Exclusionists also disapprove of the use of the word “queer” as a unifying term for the same reasons; because it has been used as an oppressive slur in the past, they argue that only members of the LGBT community (as they define it) ought to be able to reclaim it, and then only on an individual basis, lest they upset others for whom “queer” still is harmful.

Inclusionists tend to use it as a unifying term for people who deviate from societally imposed norms of cisgender hetero-attraction. Some inclusionists will censor the word or tag posts containing it with content warnings lest it upset followers for whom the word is uncomfortable, while some will proudly assert that “my identity is not a slur” and refuse to make those accommodations.

Loudly articulated concern about the sexualization and exploitation of minors is another unifying characteristic of the exclusionist side; exclusionists express frustration with asexual advocates

informing youth that they can identify with asexuality because they believe it forces youth to contemplate sexuality at too young an age. Inclusionist posts about youth asexuality will frequently be reblogged with comments like “stop sexualizing minors;” exclusionists also believe that telling others about one’s asexuality is “tmi” -- “too much information” because asexuality as an identity deals exclusively with one’s desire to have sex.

Exclusionists and inclusionists disagree on the treatment of non-offending pedophiles.

Inclusionists cite new research showing that pedophilia is a disorder for which people can seek psychological help. This is a major underpinning of their argument that non-offending pedophiles ought to be treated with compassion. Exclusionists, however, believe that anyone attracted to minors deserves no compassion. There have recently been a spate of accusations by exclusionists about pedophile and rape apologism on the inclusionist side; many callout posts for alleged pedophiles or their apologists are currently circulating on the site and the discourse on the subject has increased proportionally. It seems that exclusionist paranoia about pedophile support or apologism on the inclusionist side is at a peak right now, and dire accusations are flying. In an environment where all people have to go on is hearsay, this can lead to dangerous consequences quite rapidly. One prominent inclusionist blogger, friendly-broccoli, was recently accused of being a pedophile by an exclusionist blogger simply, it seemed, because they were not vocally saying that all pedophiles were horrible people who should be killed. I follow friendly-broccoli, and did not see any content from them that could be reasonably labeled as pedophile apologism. After friendly-broccoli confronted their accuser (as did their many followers), the accuser retracted the accusation, but friendly-broccoli was greatly distressed by the incident.

Factions in LGBT Activist Communities

Vitulli, as well as Yep, Lovaas, and Elia, both queer social theorists, identify two factions in LGBT activist communities -- Vitulli, in communities discussing the marriage equality movement⁹¹, and Yep et. al. in communities' sexual ideology surrounding marriage equality and the HIV/AIDS crisis⁹². Vitulli outlines two factions within the marriage discourse, one characterized by assimilationism, and one characterized by radical rejection of the institution of marriage. Assimilationists sought to gain equal footing in straight/neoliberal society, in part through partaking in the institution of marriage. Marriage here represents a buy-in to the expectations and implied contract of a mainstream society governed by normative, neoliberal rules - and assimilationist folks were seen by radical activists as capitulating to those restrictive rules. The assimilationist faction was often accused of homonormativity, which is a broad term for the ways in which LGBT people can be complicit in promoting cisheterosexist, neoliberal, racist norms through their assimilation into mainstream society⁹³. While a homonormative politics may be of use in making LGBT identities more palatable to the mainstream, it fails to challenge the constructs and -isms that underpin much of the inequality in our modern capitalist world, such as (cis)sexism, racism, and increasing economic inequality, and, fundamentally, it is this fact that caused radical activists to take issue with the push for marriage equality.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Elias Vitulli, "A Defining Moment in Civil Rights History? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Trans-Inclusion, and Homonormativity," 155-167.

⁹² Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, & John P. Elia "A Critical Appraisal of Assimilationist and Radical Ideologies Underlying Same-Sex Marriage in LGBT Communities in the United States," 45-64.

⁹³ Vitulli, "A Defining Moment in Civil Rights History? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Trans-Inclusion, and Homonormativity" 159.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 160.

Radical activists argue against the presentation of LGBT identities and lives as non-threatening to established politics; they instead promote a queer politics that aims to disrupt the existing systems of heteropatriarchy -- including marriage, which they view as a construct that enforces said heteropatriarchal values. Homonormative activism, such as the marriage equality movement, promotes values that do not disrupt the state and the various inequities that underpin it; in doing so, it excludes LGBT people who do not fit homonormative norms. In Vitulli's words, "the homonormative subject's ability to (re)gain access to the state, citizenship, and white privilege is based on the reestablishment of racialized, sexualized, and gendered boundaries between "us" and "them" and the policing and reiterative performance of these boundaries"⁹⁵."

A participant in The Discourse would not be likely to explain to an outside observer that the conflict in The Discourse is about the tension between assimilationism and radicalism. Conflict in The Discourse is, on the surface, about the exclusion or inclusion of asexual people in the LGBT community by virtue of their asexuality. On a deeper level, though, Discourse factions fundamentally disagree on what LGBT identity means to them. LGBT identity, to exclusionists, is marked by oppression based on gender or attraction. Moreover, that oppression is societally imposed -- it is structural and pervasive, not something that exists merely on an individual level. As verbose-chainsaw told me, when explaining how cishet asexuals ought to approach the LGBT community, "you do have to understand that if some people are uncomfortable with you being there, a cishet ace, or you do have to understand that your experiences of oppression aren't the same."

⁹⁵ Ibid., 157.

For example, exclusionists argue, LGBT (writ narrowly) people lack legal protection against discrimination in many parts of the United States, allowing them to be denied jobs or housing because of their gender identity or sexual orientation; asexuality, however, has so recently come to the mainstream that exclusionists believe it is impossible for institutionalized anti-asexual discrimination to exist. As verbose-chainsaw explained it to me, “In general, you know, someone who identifies as ace isn't going to be attacked on the street compared to like someone who is maybe like, you know, either gay or bi or trans ... you're less likely to get kicked out of your homes; you're less likely to see that difference in oppression.” He believes that this difference in oppression exists, but he also understands that it may not always be visible to asexual people who do not have that perspective. To exclusionists, LGBT identity may be something to celebrate, in defiance of oppression, but it is not something to celebrate for its defiance of cisheterosexist norms -- the movement cohered around oppression, and the unifying characteristic of the community remains oppression.

Inclusionists, however, believe that LGBT identity is defined by resistance to cisheterosexist norms; they take joy in the ability intrinsic to queerness to upend and subvert such norms and believe in the transformative power queerness has to change society for the better. When explaining her queerness to me, silver-sniffle explained that her asexual lesbian identity didn't make her ”half gay.” “No, I'm all queer,” she told me, meaning that her asexuality didn't make her halfway part of the LGBT community, but rather a wholesale member of the queer community. LGBT identity, to inclusionists, ought to embrace anyone whose identity defies those norms. Depending on who you ask, this may include asexuals as well as people who participate in kink, and polyamorous folks.

SAM/MOGAI

While the discussion in Chasin's paper "Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community" is aimed at applied psychologists treating asexual clients, it is valuable because some of the arguments and models used in the paper turn up, at much the same level, on Tumblr as well. Examples of this include the "split attraction model," (SAM) where one's romantic and sexual attraction are understood as separate entities. Moreover, the scope and character of "discursive resources" on Tumblr differ quite a bit from those on AVEN (the Asexual Visibility and Education Network). Tumblr focuses a great deal on building an aesthetic and literal language of asexuality, while AVEN helps asexual people build narratives of coming to understand their asexuality and making sense of it in a sexualized world. Understanding the narratives people use around their asexuality on Tumblr, and the ways they try to fit it into the world, requires bringing to bear Chasin's understanding and applying it to a (mostly) new world.

SAM, the Split Attraction Model, is controversial within The Discourse. According to the SAM, one's romantic attraction is understood separately from one's sexual attraction. Some examples of identities under the SAM include panromantic heterosexual (romantic attraction to all genders, sexual attraction to different genders), heteroromantic asexual (romantic attraction to different genders, no sexual attraction), or homoromantic lithsexual, an identity usually seen only in the MOGAI community, (romantic attraction to similar or same gender, where sexual feelings for the object of attraction fade if reciprocated).

According to exclusionists, the SAM makes sexual attraction and romantic attraction distinct, thereby rendering the difference in same-gender-attracted people's sexual attraction, for which they are persecuted by straight society, more starkly visible. While romantic same-sex attraction can be construed as "pure" and "wholesome," exclusionists say, sexual same-sex attraction is often erased or demonized. Separating the two allows for emphasis on sexual same-sex attraction and therefore opens same-gender-attracted people to more persecution for their sexual desires.

Exclusionists also argue that the SAM allows people with internalized homophobia to avoid claiming or grappling with one part of a same-gender-attracted identity; one user gives the example of a girl who likes both women and men but identifies as heteroromantic bisexual because it allows her to identify as "not *really* liking women" (bi-privilege, 2015). Exclusionists maintain that the SAM is useful for asexual and aromantic people, who need separate descriptors to fully explain their identity, but it should not be used on non-asexual or aromantic people because it sexualizes same-gender attraction by emphasizing the sexual aspect of one's attractions and encourages internalized homophobia. Inclusionists disagree with this assessment of the SAM, claiming it is not itself harmful as a construct, and does not sexualize same-gender attraction so much as render sexual and romantic attraction distinct. As with any model, they argue, people can use it to enforce existing prejudices or write themselves back into the closet.

MOGAI, also a point of contention within The Discourse, stands for "marginalized orientations, gender alignments, and intersex." It arose organically around 2012 on Tumblr as a more inclusive alternative to the LGBT acronym, and was meant as a new umbrella term for gender

and sexual minorities that can be used as an alternative to, or perhaps a replacement for, the LGBT umbrella term. Some people (usually inclusionists) argue that MOGAI provides a more inclusive definition for a community of people whose experiences are coherent; others (usually exclusionists) believe that MOGAI opens up a slippery slope of including people in the community who definitely do not belong there (people who participate in kink, polyamorous people, and pedophiles are the most common examples). Exclusionists put a particular emphasis on the potential inclusion of pedophiles as an example of why MOGAI is too expansive a definition of the marginalizations it attempts to define. Because pedophilia is a universally detested “orientation,” exclusionists believe that pedophiles might make an argument for their marginalization and thereby gain entrance to the MOGAI community. Pedophilia is exclusionists’ most potent example brought up when arguing against MOGAI, despite the fact that inclusionists do not intend for MOGAI to include pedophiles.

Opponents of MOGAI also argue that it can make it difficult for people to understand their identity because it encourages hyper-specific identities that are often a consequence of internalized homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality, or trauma. One of the bloggers I interviewed, jubilant-umbrella⁹⁶, publishes messages from other users, which are usually anonymous, narrating how their path to discovering their identity has been derailed by the MOGAI model; last I checked, their count of these messages was almost at a thousand. Jubilant-umbrella has in fact made it one of the missions of their blog to combat MOGAI and archive evidence of the harm it has done.

⁹⁶ All urls are pseudonyms generated with the github random repository name generator.

Exclusionists' concerns with MOGAI are multifaceted. A blogger I spoke with expressed deep concerns about susceptible people being influenced by MOGAI and its associated rhetoric. MOGAI, they said, is "...pretty easy to fall into, especially for people who are easily influenced and/or don't have that much experience on their own - it creates a strong case of "us or them" mentality and convinces people of ideas that are simply not true, like allosexual/monosexual privilege and all that..." Another participant was deeply troubled by the fact that once someone adopts a MOGAI microidentity, those "billion overspecific labels" can hinder their progress in thinking critically about their identity - in fact, someone might "start to justify what [they're] feeling to fit the label." According to them, MOGAI labels can allow someone who is unsure of their heterosexuality to identify with labels that continue to enforce their heterosexuality. For example, MOGAI, they told me, can reinforce compulsory heterosexuality by making identities like "i only experience attraction to guys until they reciprocate it," which they brought up as an example of a "super specific condition," a common identity and way of understanding one's attraction.

All of the interview participants who mentioned MOGAI (which was the vast majority of exclusionists and no inclusionists), except one, all pointed to it being particularly harmful to lesbians, although none of them could point at an answer. jubilant-umbrella, however, has noted that many of the stories they see involve lesbians and trans men; they told me that "MOGAI is very lesbophobic and brings out the worst of the "gay men are misogynistic for not wanting to date women" + "binary privilege" rhetorics, which then ofc go to affect lesbians and trans guys the most." What they mean by this, as far as I understand, is that MOGAI inherently impacts lesbians and transgender men more than it impacts people of other orientations and/or gender

identities. Moreover, it is seated on rhetorics of accusing gay men of misogyny for not dating women and “binary privilege,” the idea that binary cis and trans people have privilege over nonbinary people. These rhetorics, they have concluded from the many stories people send them, tend to disproportionately prevent people from identifying as a gay transgender man or as a lesbian woman, and instead to identify with a MOGAI orientation or gender.

The inclusionists I interviewed were notably silent on MOGAI; the only interview participants who brought up MOGAI were exclusionists opposed to it. Inclusionists on the site will mention MOGAI in passing, perhaps in a tag to signal boost to a community they believe exists, or as a reblog from another blogger promoting pride flags for MOGAI identities or validating MOGAI identities in some other way, but I have not seen any active defense of MOGAI remotely proportional to the opposition to it coming from the exclusionist side. Discourse on certain topics tends to ebb and flow, although it is rare to see one-sided Discourse, as discussion on one side is inevitably picked up by someone on the other side and becomes full-fledged argument. Perhaps this is because MOGAI discourse is past its prime. Jubilant-umbrella believes that MOGAI started spreading around 2012; they told me that “2013 or so was the Prime age [for MOGAI], I think it’s slowly starting to decrease though.” This could be because there is such a vocal faction opposing the model, or simply because viewpoints on it are fairly fixed and there is little to no more arguing that needs to happen. Inclusionists don’t seem to engage with the discussion of the damage MOGAI and SAM do, and the ways in which these models are deemed problematic, in the same way they engage with the rest of exclusionists’ rhetoric.

Why is the conflict between concepts of the LGBT community important?

The conflict between the concepts of LGBT-community-for-survival and LGBT-community-for-transformation is part of an ongoing discourse between assimilationist and radical factions in the LGBT community that has been going on for a long time. These are forces that have existed for a while, and The Discourse is yet another part of this same conversation. It is easy to dismiss Internet-based debates as trivial or meaningless, yet the Internet is a major site of LGBT activism and consciousness-raising today; dismissing the discussion and networking that takes place there would be a substantial oversight. The Discourse may be a vitriolic online debate, but it also draws on a rich heritage of previous debates about the nature, purpose, and meaning of the LGBT community. Indeed, it may very well be the site of the next step in the community's evolution and understanding of itself.

Questions about LGBT-ness and queer identity are entering the mainstream; op-eds in [The New York Times](#)⁹⁷ and [Slate](#)⁹⁸ discuss queerness as something that is increasingly being co-opted by corporate or capitalist interests and defanged by straight people identifying publicly with it. As society begins to grapple with an increasingly visible and politically powerful LGBT community, questions of who experiences queerness and who gets to claim it become more and more salient. We live now in an era of transition: LGBT people are more visible than ever before, and both mainstream society and the LGBT community are still trying to make sense of it. We are at a point where questions of assimilation versus a radical activism that seeks to

⁹⁷Jenna Wortham, "When Everyone Can Be 'Queer,' Is Anyone?," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2016, , accessed May 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/magazine/when-everyone-can-be-queer-is-anyone.html?_r=0.

⁹⁸ June Thomas, "Lesbian Is the First Letter in LGBTQ. So Why Does the Identity Feel Like It's Fading Away?," *Slate Magazine*, December 20, 2016, , accessed May 13, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/12/20/is_lesbian_identity_fading_in_a_queer_world_outward_presents_the_lesbian.html.

dismantle oppressive societal structures are becoming increasingly salient, and there are many different sites where people seek to hash out the answer. The Discourse is one such site of sense-making, one that draws on questions that may well never entirely leave us.

These two strands of ideology --radical and assimilationist -- can still be seen today, I argue, in The Discourse. The Discourse centers on a basic level around the inclusion of asexual people in the LGBT community *by virtue of their asexuality*, but I argue that the fundamental difference between exclusionists (those who would exclude asexuals) and inclusionists (those who believe asexuals are inherently LGBT) goes deeper than that. While both factions stem from Tumblr LGBT social-justice activism and are therefore quite aware of homonormativity and the various prejudices underpinning society, the underlying ideologies of the assimilationist and radical factions still manifest in the exclusionists and inclusionists of The Discourse. From speaking to many exclusionists in my interviews, I learned that what was at stake for them was oppression and inequality; their concerns are more immediate than dismantling societal expectations. They worry about the availability of resources and safe spaces and the impact of institutionalized prejudice. LGBT-ness, for them, can't yet be about dismantling norms: there are more immediate battles to fight for the continued survival of the community. Much of the rhetoric in support of marriage equality within the LGBT community also focused on resources and survival; advocates for marriage equality often brought up issues of visitation rights, tax filings, and adoption -- rights conferred upon a couple if and only if the state recognized and sanctioned their partnership.

For many inclusionists I talked to, the LGBT community was the only place they felt they belonged and were accepted, and a place where they learned a great deal about activism; one asexual and aromantic interview participant, silver-sniffle, spoke passionately about the sense of finally belonging somewhere she felt when she encountered the LGBT community for the first time, and being “blown away by its inclusivity.” After a lifetime of feeling slightly out of place, she began to grow enormously as a person. She discussed with me the “universal human need for acceptance” and the joy she felt when realizing that the questions she was constantly asking herself: “What’s wrong with me? Am I broken? Why can’t I feel the way everyone else feels?” were shared in “this community built around being different.” The LGBT community was the first place she learned about social justice activism and allyship for marginalized identities. She’s had the opportunity to learn from trans and nonbinary women and women of color -- people she celebrates as “people sticking the hell up for their queer family.” Following those people, she told me, has exposed her to “a lot of other types of discourse on a lot of different things,” things she wouldn’t necessarily have known about because of different axes of privilege. For silver-sniffle, being part of the LGBT community was truly a transformative experience.

Concepts of Queerness and the LGBT* Community

Much of the Discourse on The Discourse can be traced back to one fundamental question: what does it mean to be LGBT? Inclusionists believe belonging in the LGBT community is predicated on *difference*; they cite experiences of feeling out of place growing up; differences between asexuality/aromanticism and societal expectations that are sometimes violently enforced; and erasure in a society that expects romantic and sexual attraction from everyone as reasons that they ought to be included in the LGBT community.

Exclusionists, however, believe membership in the LGBT community is conditional on *oppression*; they maintain that members of the LGBT community are parts of the community because they are in societally oppressed categories based on their attraction or gender identity. The LGBT community, they argue, is for *survival*.

Exclusionists frequently accuse inclusionists of attempting to gain membership in the LGBT “fun club” when to them it is a coalition based on mutual aid for survival. User cuddly-octo-carnival specifically mentions the aesthetics of the Tumblr LGBT community as a causal factor; she told me, “all these pride flags and pastel moodboards...and positivity and everything like them...I guess cishet aces and inclusionists who see that...they just want a part of it. They see the community as just sort of a fun club which you can barge in and be a member of.” Another interview participant, vigilant-telegram, says inclusionists have a “fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be part of the LGBT community” - “you can’t kick yourself out” of normality and become part of the LGBT community. Oppression is, to him, something that happens to a person, not something that they can necessarily claim on an individual basis.

When I asked exclusionists and inclusionists what was at stake for them in The Discourse, the responses were starkly different. Exclusionists told me that resources and safe spaces were in danger, while inclusionists said their acceptance, validity, and inclusion in the LGBT community were what they were fighting for. One user, jubilant-umbrella. said that “aces are actively robbing us of safe spaces and resources that are already spare enough and we can’t afford to give them out to people who aren’t LGBT when we don’t have enough for our own.” Another

interviewee, sturdy-bassoon, echoed their opinion, telling me that “there’s also the issue of taking up resources like homeless shelters and suicide hotlines...things that could actually save people’s lives.” To her frustration, sturdy-bassoon has “personally seen straight and cis asexual people kind of talking over gay people, trans people, and...just not letting them have a voice” in LGBT “societies and stuff.” Like sturdy-bassoon, Cuddly-octo-carnival was concerned with gay-straight alliances, also citing as problematic “cishet aces in positions of power in gay-straight alliances.” Another exclusionist, fuzzy-pancake, who comes from an city in a US region with comparatively few LGBT resources, was deeply concerned with resources, telling me that “when you’re saying LGBT centers have to have PDA [public display of affection] limits or can’t talk about gay sex - the only place we can talk about gay sex are *maybe* our homes depending on where we live...we are barely providing for LGBT people.” Here, they are referring to the discomfort some asexual and aromantic people have with public displays of affection and discussion of sexuality; blogs that deem themselves safe for asexual and aromantic people who are sex- or romance- repulsed usually tag this content so their followers can avoid it, and thus fuzzy-pancake imagines that this might occur in LGBT spaces that inherently include asexual and aromantic people.

Exclusionist participants consistently cited scarcity of resources and invasion of safe spaces as problematic and concerning. One exclusionist, fuzzy-pancake, suggested that already-established non-LGBT-specific resources and policy interventions, especially those advocated for by feminism, would better serve aromantic and asexual people.

Aromantic and asexual people want to be part of the LGBT community, though the inclusionists I spoke to didn't talk about resources or safe spaces when we discussed the stakes of The Discourse. Instead, they talked about having a space, whether physical or virtual, to feel that they belonged in. Silver-sniffle mentioned wanting space in "the movement" and told me that the LGBT community was "one of the first places where she felt accepted and understood;" when she "wandered into the ace community," she was "blown away by its inclusivity." The solidarity and ability to share relatable experiences - that feeling of "joy in figuring out who you are" and seeing threads where the posters are "people who do what you do" - are what is at stake for silver-sniffle in her fight for inclusion. Curly-parakeet, who lives in Europe, is concerned with The Discourse, but "at the end of the day [eir] local community accepts [eir] asexuality," so the stakes are different for em.

Making sense of LGBT Identity

Inclusionists and exclusionists make sense of queer/LGBT identity in distinctly different ways as well; specifically, they think about the meaning of membership in the LGBT community with sharply contrasting frameworks. Inclusionists tend to embrace the concept of queerness and the academic framework of queer theory as something that makes sense to them and affirms their worldview. Queerness, to them, represents a rejection of heterosexist norms and a defiance of mainstream society's constructs pertaining to partnership, gender, and sexuality. They therefore actively embrace the term "queer" as a label that accommodates everyone who falls under their definition of the LGBT umbrella. One inclusionist, silver-sniffle, told me that queer "makes me feel safe - it tells you just enough...to know that I'm not straight...I don't want to explain my identity to you..." At the same time, though, she recognizes that some people don't like the

word but, as she asked me, “what word in the acronym hasn’t been used against us?” At the same time, though, she “fully respects people’s desires to not have it used on them,” recognizing its fraught history even in the way it was used her own childhood (a common saying in the South, she told me, is “queer as a three dollar bill”).

Exclusionists, in contrast to inclusionists, are adamant that the word “queer” is a slur, even going so far as to add derisive commentary to screenshots of queer theory texts. Queer theory, to them, comes from an overly idealized “ivory tower” perspective that doesn’t relate to the everyday experiences of LGBT people. They draw a sharp contrast line between those who have the privilege or academic perspective to label themselves as “queer” comfortably and those for whom the word still stings and carries painful connotations. While the word may be reclaimable for some, it is used as a slur directed at others in some areas, and for some of those people, it is not yet something that they can defiantly take back from those who would use it to oppress them. They actively reject the concept of queerness and queer identity (exclusionist bloggers tend to regard queer theory with derision as well) as being based on a slur and an overly radical, expansive definition of the LGBT identity that encompasses ideas or practices that they think should not be allowed to “invade” LGBT spaces. Exclusionists often make fun of inclusionists by way of an imaginary individual known as the “radikweer” -- a more-progressive-than-thou individual who is radically inclusive and progressive to the point of absurdity.

The radical acceptance inclusionists practice mirrors the practices and discourse of radical anti-marriage-equality LGBT activists in the 1990s through the 2000s; inclusionist Discourse focuses

on the ability of queerness to *be queer* -- to subvert existing binaries, rules, and structures and liberate those constrained by them. The definition of queerness, to them, is fluid and pliable enough to accept identities that are newcomers to mainstream consciousness, like asexuality. However, that definition of queer identity is not always that which is presented to the general public. Radical acceptance, as marriage equality activists quickly found, does not win votes in the legislature.

LGBT activism in the marriage equality movement relied on strategic deployment of identity for education, as Bernstein discusses; identity, when employed for education, can be “used strategically to gain legitimacy by playing on uncontroversial themes” -- just as the Vermont LGBT activists Bernstein studied intentionally played to normative expectations when presenting themselves to legislators and policymakers⁹⁹. This necessarily tends to limit the scope of conflict because it becomes difficult to challenge or even call out mainstream, oppressive norms.

Because exclusionists do not have activist goals in the same way marriage equality activists did, they instead deploy identity for empowerment, in this case to affirm identities and consolidate solidarity. However, both of these practices of identity deployment focus on identity for the survival or betterment of the LGBT community, looking inward to shore up the community and make sure that members have the rights and support that they need.

Both inclusionists and radical anti-marriage-equality activists deploy identity as a goal and for purposes of critique; their activism and discourse is outward-looking in nature because it hones in on the transformative power LGBT/queer identity might have to disrupt restrictive mainstream

⁹⁹ Bernstein, “Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement,” 538.

norms of gender and sexuality. Bernstein explains this type of identity deployment as a way of seeking to “challenge stigmatized identities,” gain “recognition for new identities,” or “deconstruct restrictive social categories,” exactly the goals of radical queer activism and the principles that differentiate the inclusionist side of The Discourse from the exclusionists¹⁰⁰.

LGBT identity, for inclusionists and radical queer activists, is defined by its potential for transformation. Yep et. al. offer a good example of the radical queer activist viewpoint; they are skeptical of assimilationism as “the road to equality, sexual bliss, and social acceptability” and instead put forth that queer theory has better answers to “greater freedom, social equality, and the acceptance of sexual pluralism¹⁰¹.” They argue that abolishing the institution of marriage frees up resources to remove from the “sexual project” “confining expectations about linkages between sexual activities, relationships, and procreation.¹⁰²”

Chapter 5: Free Speech, Surveillance, and Debate

Navigating The Discourse is made more of a tangled proposition by the complexities of the site itself, the subject matter with which participants are working, and the politics of free speech, surveillance, and safety that participants work within and through. The site itself, and the ways users have made extensions for and modifications on top of it, affords for many different behaviors to surveil others and circumvent others’ surveillance. The way Discourse participants make use of affordances allows for cultivating safe spaces, perhaps sometimes at the cost of intellectual challenge, and gives them fairly precise control over their audiences. However, the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 536-537.

¹⁰¹ Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, & John P. Elia “A Critical Appraisal of Assimilationist and Radical Ideologies Underlying Same-Sex Marriage in LGBT Communities in the United States,” 57.

¹⁰² Ibid., 58.

way one's audience perceives one's actions can be unpredictable and tumultuous. The Discourse has rules about who can speak on what issue, and who ought to even be participating in The Discourse in the first place. Arguments about participation and positionality are frequent, as are accusations that quickly escalate and blow up for the accuser and the accused. Yet at the center of The Discourse and its myriad safe spaces and attacks, we can come to understand the ways in which its meaning-making is driven by intense care for others and their vulnerabilities.

Affordances

Anonymity can take many forms and has many different flavors on Tumblr. Users are pseudonymous in that each blog has a URL associated with it, rather than the user's "real name" as is the case on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter. Each user's account is associated with a unique user ID number (UID). This is linked to their main blog URL, which for most users is their semipermanent identity on the site, also called their "main" blog. Users may have multiple blogs associated with the same identity (UID). They may have any number of "sideblogs" dedicated to specific topics or specific facets of the user's identity. These will commonly be associated with the user's "main" URL, but not always. Some users will link the constellation of blogs they own in an "about" page (i.e. this is my Star Wars blog; this is my Discourse blog) but some users prefer to keep their side blogs very well separated from their main identity.

Fuzzy-pancake, for example, has a Discourse sideblog because they know "the people who follow me would not be terribly pleased with my exclusionist views." Users may also circumvent the idea of url-as-identity by changing their blog URL. Since Tumblr associates a user's account with a unique user ID that isn't tied to a username, users can change their URL at any time.

People have been known to delete their blog or username after having made a post that was particularly upsetting to the community, then make a new blog with a different theme and/or URL. Sometimes they will indicate on their old blog that they moved; other times another user will expose this new blog as belonging to the old identity, now deemed “problematic.” For example, after one inclusionist user, shiny-palm-tree, made a post saying, “gatekeepers claim that the aids crisis is the all powerful defining movement for the "lgbt"qia community, while also ignoring that if allosexuals in the lgbtqia community had listened more to ace people in the lgbtqia community... the disease might not have spread so fast. this is exactly why ace people need a powerful voice in queer groups," exclusionists were outraged and quickly began to call her out and send her messages telling her why what she did was wrong and telling her to kill herself. Shiny-palm-tree quickly deleted her blog and all of her posts, leaving only “now @new_url” at the top of now the default-themed blog. This was likely an attempt to distance herself from the identity that had made that post and start afresh; because she deleted her problematic post, it would take some degree of detective work to find the original poster again. However, she complicated this by leaving a trail to her new URL and reblogging criticisms of her own original post with commentary that clearly indicated she was the original poster. When I navigated to new_url.tumblr.com, it already had a clearly work-intensive pastel theme and several posts about asexual positivity; shiny-palm-tree had also been fielding anonymous messages castigating her, asking her to prove that she had learned from her mistakes, and sending her support, among other things.

True anonymity (inasmuch as such a thing can be said to exist) is available on Tumblr; the “anon” function allows a user to anonymously message another user who allows anonymous messages, at which point the recipient will either “publish” the “ask” to their blog with a response or simply read and ignore the message. Asks began as a way for followers of a blog to ask the blogger anonymous questions, but have since become a way for followers and others to send hate mail, confessions, compliments, and more. Most bloggers allow anonymous, but some, especially those who have received a great deal of hateful messages in the past, do not. When shiny-palm-tree received the anonymous messages, she responded to them in many different ways. She dealt with the particularly hateful messages by simply posting them with no commentary or, in one case, in which the message said, ““if I ever find you, and I will, you'll wish you could die of aids because it would be a blessing compared to what I'll put you through,” responded to it only with “uh.” Many anonymous messages, particularly in the midst of controversies, are categorized by users as “anon hate” -- hurtful anonymous messages that run the gamut from namecalling to suicide baiting. cuddly-octo-carnival told me it was “a form of cyberbullying itself” and hypothesized that perhaps the impact was different, because “you can't see the person who's sending you that hate, so it's like...depersonalized. and when it's depersonalized, it doesn't have the same impact as it would have if the person who was sending that, if they actually had an identity online.” Verbose-chainsaw was concerned about the amount of power and latitude for hateful speech that the anonymous feature gave some users: “I think the anonymous feature gives a lot of power to say hateful things or like, take things too far with how passionate they are, because then they feel that's safe, because they can't also be attacked, and you know, that then gives them the ability to cause an enormous amount of damage, because you can say things in an anonymous message that you can't say on your blog”

When shiny-palm-tree received messages questioning how much she had learned or whether she understood why her actions were wrong, she responded at length, attempting to explain what she had learned and why she was using the “self-flagellating language” the anonymous message accused her of using. At some point the messages she received and the research she was doing on her own caused her to change her viewpoint; she posted

“I’ve been doing some soul-searching and after reading through the links people have sent me, I’m no longer confident that I belong in the LGBT+ community. I haven’t ever experienced homophobia or transphobia. I never will. I’m now convinced that a person actually in the LGBT+ community would never have never thought let alone post the things that I did about the AIDS crisis, and I think that’s important, worth noting. Getting almost 4k notes on a random post was never my plan but that’s not an excuse. I’ve read all the messages. All the tags. All the comments. And I agree. What I said was inexcusable.”

At this point she began to receive more supportive messages, some praising her for her courage and others asking those sending her anonymous hate to stop; she responded to the latter with “I don’t want messages like this. In my post I essentially said that LGBT+ people deserved to die during the AIDS crisis. I sex-shamed an entire community of people based on nothing more than my own homophobic prejudices. I am an adult who deserves to be held accountable for bullshit that I post on publicly on the internet. So. I don’t support sending death threats but I’m not going to make this about myself any more than I already have.” Some messages she tended to still argue with, though; one, for example, said, “Acephobia isn't real, and you need to just leave the

discourse all together. Someone who spouts hateful homophobic rhetoric, no matter if you apologized, isn't adding anything positive to either side of the discussion. Cease.” to which she responded, “ I can't agree. Acephobia isn't like racism or homophobia but it does definitely exist. But you're right, I don't think I should be making opinion posts anymore about ace discourse. I don't think I will be taken seriously as a result of my awful behavior.”

The anonymous function also has more benign or at least community-oriented uses; it is often used to ask questions of bloggers, particularly for advice or clarification of a particular term or usage. Some users will also anonymously ask a blogger they follow to tag some content that is triggering for them so they can filter it out. The bigger bloggers (those who have more followers and therefore a wider audience) often field tens if not hundreds of asks per day; they often provide advice, answer questions, defend their opinions, and publish anonymous users' stories. For the users sending these asks, the anonymous function is protective; the situation, ignorance, opinion, or story can't be traced back to the person who sent it.

The anonymous mode can also be useful in the realm of callout posts. A callout post is a post made to be spread; it contains allegations about a particular user's bad behavior, sometimes @-mentioning them in it so they will be notified of the post (@-mentioning someone in a post about them is considered common courtesy, unless that person has blocked you, and failing to do so can greatly offend the person mentioned in the post). It is worth noting that @-mentioning is not always done in callouts; it can also be used to alert a friend of a post they might enjoy, or call on another user to provide knowledge one does not currently possess but that might help a follower. Callouts are intended to be spread among many users such that they blog and/or dogpile that

user, depending on the original poster's stated intent and the nature of the people who see the post.

I have seen some of the bigger bloggers deal with callout posts; in most cases they will ask for "receipts" -- that is, links to evidence of bad behavior, before making a formalized callout.

Because the original accuser is anonymous, anonymous callouts can be tenuous at best unless backed up by evidence. Callout culture can be dangerous; according to curly-parakeet, "these people tend to dig up anything they can to get dirt on the person, but if someone (especially a teenager) says something prejudiced that comes from a place of ignorance we should probably to educate first, these callouts can be scary, kids have been suicide baited and chased off social media for relatively minimal things."

Callout posts' lifeblood are "receipts," evidence of a blogger's wrongdoing, usually in the form of screenshots or hyperlinks to the post(s) in question. It is generally considered questionable to make a callout post without receipts. Depending on the severity of the user's offense, the intention of the callout post can be to get many people to block the user, or to get many people to report them to Tumblr staff. In The Discourse, the argument is generally so vitriolic that the intent of the callout post is not necessarily to get the subject to apologize or own up to their actions, but rather to no-platform them or isolate them from the community. If a user is at the point where they are making a callout post for another user, they tend to not believe that that user can be redeemed. I believe that the polarization of The Discourse means that incidents of learning, such as the one we examined featuring shiny-palm-tree, are incredibly rare. The majority of cases simply continue and escalate the vitriolic argument.

It seems that users hold Tumblr the website somehow responsible for The Discourse; references to Tumblr as “this hell site” or “tumblr dot hell” are common in The Discourse. Users generally seem to consider Tumblr staff to be a powerful arbiter on the site, capable of removing users they dislike with impunity and concerned with everyday wrongdoing. It seems that in reality, Tumblr’s Community and Trust team seems to operate with a light hand, as most of the block-and-report posts do not actually result in a user being blocked. This is in line with Tumblr’s pro-free-speech stance as articulated by David Karp, its CEO:

“With so many barriers to digital expression now lifted, and nearly all modes of media supported across all platforms, there is now an unprecedented opportunity to dedicate this space to freedom, truth, expanded perspective, and positive influence in the world. Tumblr’s focus over the next decade will shift accordingly. Expression has been and always will be a foundational part of Tumblr—and our roadmap this year will not disappoint—but it is now more urgent than ever to empower positive and productive connections across the communities that thrive here. To create an environment where people are truly safe to be themselves. To ensure positive discourse rises above toxicity. And to protect the free exchange of ideas, from which truth will emerge¹⁰³.”

Karp here is echoing cyberutopian ideals of the Internet -- the idea that Tumblr can be a place where free speech and positive connection between communities takes place. He believes that the site can have features and communities in place such that vitriolic debates like The

¹⁰³ David Karp, “Ten Years Ago With Modest Expectations” (2017, February 16). Retrieved May 05, 2017, from <http://www.davidslog.com/157326177955/10-years-ago-this-sunday-with-modest-expectations>

Discourse are subsumed or drowned out by “positive discourse” - which is decidedly not the case in this little corner of The Internet.

When arguments escalate, evidence often enters the mix. As I’ve mentioned above, receipts are often employed as concrete (more or less) evidence of an individual’s wrongdoing. However, receipts may be ephemeral; hyperlinks to the problematic individual’s blog will occasionally lead nowhere as they delete their blog or simply delete the post in question. Some users will insert screenshots into a callout post or provide them as evidence. Some more tech-savvy bloggers will use the Internet Archive or link to their own reblog of the post; reblogs of posts do not disappear when the original post is deleted, so this is a way to preserve posts that a user may want to reference later. Multiple interview participants mentioned using their blogs as archives; sturdy-bassoon explained to me that “I think most of the things I post are just the most homophobic things I see - I just reblog them and just to have like record of the really bad things that the other side say,” and fuzzy-pancake told me they would often reblog “really good posts” made by people to have a “backup” in case the original posters deleted the posts or their blog. The speed with which some bloggers can reference posts, whether problematic or useful, is uncanny: when I interviewed silver-sniffle and asked her about events in The Discourse, she almost immediately pulled up two posts on her phone that had particularly impacted her to show me, and described a few others from memory.

Users will often engage with a post by reblogging it and adding commentary; because of the way Tumblr structures its posts, each reblog of a post is its own individual post that traces its lineage back to the original post made. Sometimes reblog chains will be accumulations of useful

information (as members of a participatory culture, Tumblr users have an incredible wealth of collective knowledge that they enjoy contributing to) and sometimes they will be additions to a particularly humorous joke. Users can have conversations by reblogging each other's posts repeatedly. However, only that thread of conversation will be visible on the dash of anyone following the people having that conversation over reblog; only one thread of conversation can exist at a time on a reblogged post. In The Discourse, this often produces multithreaded arguments, so one user arguing with multiple people over a post may reblog several different versions of their original post to argue with several different people.

Participatory Surveillance in The Discourse

Albrechtslund discusses what he calls *participatory surveillance* -- a form of lateral surveillance in which users "watch over" (the literal translation of the French *surveiller*) each other, engaging in "social and playful" aspects of surveillance¹⁰⁴. While surveillance is usually understood as a vertical process, perhaps one powerful entity monitoring many less powerful (subordinate) entities, it can also be understood as a horizontal process ("lateral surveillance"), in which multiple individuals with the same level of power in the social hierarchy monitor each other.

Albrechtslund seeks to complicate the dystopian understanding of lateral surveillance by laying out the ways in which mutual surveillance on social media can empower users to act socially and build identity by surveilling one's friends, lovers, family, and acquaintances and acting with the internalized gaze of the surveilling social equal: in other words, "participatory surveillance"¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Anders Albrechtslund, "Online social networking as participatory surveillance," *First Monday* 13, no. 3 (2008): n.p., doi:10.5210/fm.v13i3.2142.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., n.p.

Tumblr users, especially in The Discourse, show many signs of having internalized the surveillant gaze. Many of the participants I interviewed mentioned feeling uncomfortable discussing certain topics or expressing certain opinions (mostly opinions that did not align with the views of the majority of users on their side of The Discourse); some had a Discourse blog separate from their “main” blog (their most permanent and most well-known Tumblr identity) so that their views on The Discourse could not be traced back to their semi-permanent identity on the site. According to one interview participant, verbose-chainsaw, many of his friends were familiar with The Discourse but refused to even “touch” the subject online or acknowledge its existence for fear of being dragged into the argument.

Tumblr, in contrast to the AO3 site Fiesler et. al. studied¹⁰⁶, was not built with feminist HCI in mind; however, users have created quite a few third-party tools and common best practices to foreground accessibility and inclusivity, with a focus on providing for neurodiverse users. These practices are particularly prevalent within social-justice-focused spaces (such as The Discourse) and I believe when studying The Discourse, it’s important to understand how users have adapted the space to fit their values inasmuch as they are able. Much of the adaptations users make can be understood as responses to the surveillant gaze of fellow participants; I outline a few of them in the following paragraphs.

Because the search function on Tumblr uses a proprietary algorithm to surface posts, it isn’t possible to predict whether or not one’s post will appear for a given search term if it is tagged with that term. Discourse participants have taken to censoring or purposely misspelling certain words, especially Discourse-related words that are likely to be used as search terms, to avoid

¹⁰⁶ Fiesler et. al., “An Archive of Their Own: A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design.” (2016)

showing up in search results and possibly being discovered by an irate individual from the other side of The Discourse. By the same token, if they are discussing a particular individual on the site, they will avoid spelling out that individual's URL explicitly by putting slashes or other symbols through it (e.g. ceta//cean/--/nee//ded rather than cetacean--needed) so that person will not know they are being discussed on the post in question.

In a similar vein, users will often make use of the *tags* on a particular post; when a post is reblogged and a user adds commentary to it, the person from whom they reblogged, as well as the people who see any reblog of that post with the commentary on it, all see that commentary. If a certain comment is particularly contentious or ends up on a popular post, it may be seen by many people, some of whom may “dogpile” the commenter. Users circumvent this issue by writing their opinions in the tags of the post, which are intended to act as an indexing system for posts (e.g. a post tagged “game of thrones” will show up when one searches the “game of thrones” tag on Tumblr, or in the “game of thrones” tag on the user's blog). Since tags aren't preserved when a post is reblogged, only one's followers or visitors to one's blogs can see the tags put on posts. It's therefore a safe way for users to share their opinions with followers in a controlled manner. However, some users will screenshot another Discourse participant's post, including the tags, in order to call them out. As a result, Discourers, particularly those with anxiety that makes them paranoid about being surveilled, might have a “no screenshots” warning on the “about this blog” section that comes up when one hovers over their blog's name.

Even though many Discourers act with considerable regard for the surveillant gaze, the community still may see their posts as inappropriate and call them to account. Most bloggers

will not create a callout post for such a user without “receipts,” or evidence of that user’s misdeeds. The concept of lateral surveillance is here complicated by the power differential commonly at work in such a situation: while an individual Tumblr user, no matter how popular, does not have the overwhelming power of the state behind them, they may nonetheless have the not inconsiderable power of a large, loyal following behind them. In Albrechtslund’s model of participatory surveillance, users are empowered by the ability to observe and monitor others -- but also by the freedom to share details about their innermost thoughts and private lives and be surveilled¹⁰⁷. Yet in The Discourse, users are disempowered from taking part in such an empowering act of disclosure by the very capacity others have to surveill. In the traditional dystopian model of lateral surveillance, users enact the gaze of the state or some other authority; here, Discourse participants instead surveill with the embedded authority of Discourse groupthink, which has authority precisely by the force with which it is enforced. Provoking the ire -- or even drawing the gaze -- of a Discourse participant with a great deal of social capital can be a dangerous proposition.

Age in The Discourse

Tumblr is a fairly young website; many of its users are teens or young adults. Although the official age minimum on the site is age thirteen, there are a surprising number of centenarians and an impressive spike of individuals born in 1969 on the site, suggesting that perhaps some users are not telling the truth about the year of their birth and might even be under thirteen. The Discourse involves people of all ages, from thirteen-year-olds to parents of teenagers, and complications inevitably ensue - each side accuses the other of naïveté and inexperience,

¹⁰⁷ Albrechtslund, “Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance” (2008)

claiming that they are being manipulated by “ill-intentioned adults.” There is also discussion about to what degree it is appropriate to engage with minors in The Discourse, and to what degree minors themselves ought to be involved in The Discourse (although users are not sure how to enforce this or discourage minors’ participation).

Interview participants generally highlighted the exclusionist side as comprised of younger people; depending on the participant’s side, this may be a pleasant surprise, as it was for fuzzy-pancake, an exclusionist, who remarked, “our youth ended up so nice and ethical!” or, as curly-parakeet, an inclusionist, experienced it, a source of frustration. Curly-parakeet explained that these youth “probably think they are doing a good deed and changing something but they don’t even know their community’s history.” The exclusionist side finds younger participants’ youth concerning because they tend not to be taken as seriously by older participants; multiple inclusionist participants mentioned that because youth have less experience in the world, they tend to be more dramatic and more difficult to reason with. Inclusionists believe that exclusionist youth are susceptible to the influence of “ill-intentioned adults who are bigots,” while exclusionists think youth Discourse activism originated on its own, with minimal adult influence. Both sides express concern about youth’s immersion in the toxic environment of The Discourse.

Discussion on adulthood in The Discourse is much more limited; adults in The Discourse are characterized either as leading susceptible exclusionist youth (by inclusionists) or ignoring the well-thought-out opinions of exclusionist youth (according to exclusionist participants). All the participants I spoke to were over 18; they mentioned that many Discourse participants were

young, and wondered how this might be influencing the environment of The Discourse.

Verbose-chainsaw, who does not affiliate himself with either side of The Discourse, said, “It’s very interesting how most of them seem to be ...like...young...if you read their descriptions, they’re like 15 or 16 years old...and you have to wonder like, there’s just a lot that people don’t know about the world at that age, that I feel influences opinion on both sides, so it’s just really interesting because someone that age, it’s like obviously you think you’re right, you know you’re right...” He was echoing a sentiment shared by many of the participants I spoke with echoed, namely that youth might be overdramatic or “not know any better” with respect to the models they use for attraction, the boundaries they set online, or even the experience they have in the world and how they frame it.

A common topic of discussion in The Discourse is the involvement of minors and the proper protocol for interacting with them when knee-deep in Discourse. Particularly incendiary posts sometimes spawn enormous reblog chains that rapidly descend into vitriolic Discourse, only to be halted by someone shaming one of the participants for Discoursing with a minor. The shamer will often admonish participants for not having known better - many users have a fairly detailed “about” page describing themselves or, at bare minimum, a brief description that appears when a web-based user hovers over their url or a mobile-based user clicks on their blog. These descriptions may or may not include age. In situations like these, it may be difficult to tell a user’s age; vigilant-telegram mentioned Discoursing with a user who he later found out was a minor and being admonished for it. With respect to allegations that he should’ve known better, he said “I’m not going to scroll through thirty pages of your blog trying to figure out how old you are.” In situations like these, the onus is on the adult(s) involved to do due diligence and

know which users are minors, then behave gracefully and appropriately toward known minors. What happens, though, when the minor is the one acting out in a way that is egregiously harmful?

Earlier in 2016, turbo-spoon made a particularly controversial post: “You know what, I hope the cishet aces, cishet aros, and cis aroaces get oppressed. I hope they leave you in concentration camps. I hope a disease breaks out and the government let yall die. I hope they experiment on you. I hope they fire you, make laws against your very existence, and yall get tortured. You want to call yourselves oppressed? Earn it.” Turbo-spoon is a minor; when people dogpiled them with death threats, suicide bait, and widespread harassment, users attempted to defend them on the grounds that they were a minor. A few users got knee-deep in the argument about age; one blogger responded,

“Are you seriously defending a person who wished torture and death upon people because of their age. That’s not an “opinion” that’s hate speech, and extremely fucked up. 13 is old enough to know right from wrong, and know that wishing death upon people is entirely fucked up and NOT okay. If you think it’s okay to defend that just because they’re 13, you need to get your priorities in order.”

The blogger who had been arguing with them added,

“THEY ARE LITERALLY THIRTEEN YEARS OLD. I OWN SOCKS OLDER THAN THEM MY DUDE THEY ARE A LITERAL CHILD AND YOURE GOING TO TELL ME THIS THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SHOULD KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THINGS MATURELY??? YES IT WAS SHITTY OF THEM. IM FUCKING AGREEING WITH YOU ON THAT. WHAT IM

DISAGREEING WITH IS THAT YOU THINK ITS OKAY TO GIVE THEM
NO CHANCE TO RIGHT THEIR WRONGS.....They aren't an adult capable of
thinking rationally and knowing the consequences of their actions. They're a
fucking THIRTEEN YEAR OLD ON THE INTERNET¹⁰⁸.”

There is some disagreement over minors' accountability here; should a minor who makes a post that some users label as hate speech be as accountable for their actions as an adult would be, or should they be educated and allowed to right their wrongs somehow? The rules of engagement in The Discourse are organic and ever-shifting, and it seems that nobody has been able to codify the way one ought to engage with a minor, much less one behaving inappropriately.

“Oppression Olympics”

In mid-January, The Discourse briefly exploded over one blogger's lies about their identity. Stunning-lamp, the blogger in question, claimed to be an intersex bisexual transfeminine person of Jewish Afro-Latinx descent. She used her claim to these identities to speak on issues that affected people in those identity groups and assert her ideas as more relevant; in some cases, she spoke over others who also experienced those identities. A callout blog, called stunning-lamp-lies, gave evidence, through screenshots of her blog, detailed analysis of images she posted, and records of inconsistencies and clear fallacies in her posts, that stunning-lamp was lying about all the identities she claimed. Discourse participants put an incredible amount of work into discrediting stunning-lamp. For example, there exists an incredibly in-depth analysis anonymously submitted to stunning-lamp-lies about the way in which she edited her images and then deleted any evidence of editing. The person running stunning-lamp-lies has screenshots of her blog from an impressively wide timespan and went through them to point out inconsistencies

¹⁰⁸ This passage was originally typed in all caps for emphasis.

in identity claims she makes and knowledge she disseminates. For example, she speaks about blood quantum and attempts to arbitrate who gets to speak on Native issues, but her claimed ancestry, unless very, very generously interpreted, meant she was not, by her standards, qualified to speak on those issues either. She claimed to be of Jewish ancestry, and said that her (paternal) grandmother died in a concentration camp, while simultaneously being a Catholic; according to Jewish bloggers who contributed to the callout blog, Judaism is inherited from one's mother, and one cannot be simultaneously Catholic and Jewish. Additionally, stunning-lamp's demonstrated knowledge about intersex issues was, according to other intersex bloggers, spotty at best; people calling her out claimed that some of the conditions she said she had were in fact biologically impossible.

Users didn't speak out on the stunning-lamp problem, however, until overwhelming evidence emerged, curated by an anonymous user. Many people spoke out after the fact, saying that they knew something was off about her posts and claimed identities, but in many cases they added that they were afraid to speak against stunning-lamp at the time. She had many extremely loyal followers who would, according to users I spoke with, "dogpile" bloggers who argued against her, and as a result many bloggers simply did not speak out about inconsistencies or problematic things stunning-lamp said. Fuzzy-pancake told me that even though they have "like five followers," they didn't say anything about her because they knew "saying something would get [them] dogpiled" and saying something wouldn't change anything. They understood why people didn't say something beforehand -- "anyone who speaks against her gets dogpiled" -- but at the same time, it was frustrating to see posts going around the exclusionist side saying "inclusionists don't call out people who are really homophobic or antisemitic the way we

exclusionists do” when “we’ve got people calling her out and all y’all are defending her!” The reaction among Discourers, which generally seemed to be restricted to the exclusionist side, was overwhelmingly one of anger, shock, and betrayal. In our interview, sturdy-bassoon said, “I’ve only seen people from the exclusionist side talking about it. And they’ve just...they seem very sad and they feel hurt, I think...People are feeling very betrayed. Because people defended her and she was being questioned and attacked on those things...everyone’s kind of realizing that you can’t trust who you’re talking to all the time.” Stunning-lamp was, according to sturdy-bassoon, “just basically lying about everything to kind of talk over other people and make it so that I guess her opinions couldn’t be argued with.”

On social-justice-focused Tumblr, it is commonly considered best practice to allow people who have a particular identity or experience to be heard over others when speaking about that identity or experience. Sometimes a user will be accused of occupying a position of privilege they do not occupy; for example, users speaking on trans issues are often accused of being cis by people who disagree with their opinions regardless of their actual identity. This silencing tactic works because of the way identity functions as a way to understand whose knowledge ought to be heard first: if someone claims a particular identity, their voice is prioritized when speaking about that identity. It was therefore very troubling to Discourers when someone who had claimed so many identities and intersections -- and used those identity claims to legitimate their opinions and speak over others -- was found to be lying about experiencing those identities. Because our embodied selves are not necessarily visible online unless we allow them to be, it is difficult to know what identities people experience unless we tell them; it is also near-impossible to know whether people experience the identities they claim

they do. Users will frequently enumerate their identities in an “about” page, commonly revealing their gender identity, pronouns, orientation(s), and occupation, and occasionally delving into neurodiverse status, race, location, weight privilege, and class privilege. In the Tumblr community, people generally trust that users are telling the truth about their identities; in fact, as fuzzy-pancake says, there is somewhat of a culture of oversharing in which “people will tell you their actual name, their age, and exactly where they live....they’ll just say out all kinds of really painful things about themselves...” When this environment of mutual trust and revelation is fractured, users’ understanding of what the community ought to be like becomes fraught.

Tactics and Subject Positionality

The stakes for making a mistake in The Discourse are high; users who make a post in bad faith -- or in good faith -- or behave badly are often subject to barrages of anonymous hate mail that can range from mild insults to exhortations to kill oneself. Users attacked in such a manner might delete their blog, attempt (and fail) to apologize, or proudly and defiantly continue Discouraging as before. Often these “dogpiles” are controversial in and of themselves, especially when the user being attacked occupies a more vulnerable position. For example, we can refer to turbo-spoon’s particularly controversial post suggesting that asexuals and aromantics should be placed in concentration camps (see the section on age in The Discourse). Turbo-spoon later apologized for their post, but the harassment continued. They received (and published) death threats, suicide bait, and other vitriolic harassment. Other users castigated their harassers, arguing that treating a minor with such anger and violence crossed a line. In situations like these, the unwritten rules of The Discourse become visible. One of the generally agreed-upon rules, though some believe

there are grey areas (as in turbo-spoon's situation, for particularly egregious cases), is that minors should not be attacked with the full barrage of vitriol that an adult might expect for making a "bad post."

More generally speaking, though, the subject positions one occupies determine the treatment one receives as a result of posts or actions. Cis users will be criticized for speaking on trans and/or nonbinary issues, for example, because they do not have the necessary perspective or knowledge to speak over those whose experiences actually matter. Accusations of being cis or straight are frequently employed by some to shut down users speaking on LGBT issues, whether or not they are valid. Some users react to others' posts with trepidation when they do not know a user's identities and subjectivities; vigilant-telegram told me that while he opposes engaging with minors in The Discourse, sometimes it's impossible to tell a user's age if they "don't put it in their hover-over about" (the "about this blog" blurb that pops up when one hovers over a blog's URL) and "then someone gets called out as a child abuser." Articulating one's identity in anticipation of the surveillant gaze is considered common courtesy in The Discourse; frequently "read my about" (i.e. "read my about page") is employed when a user feels another Discourse participant does not understand the position they occupy. For example, when one of the users I follow on my Discourse account was accused of being "enbyphobic" (that is, prejudiced against nonbinary ("NB" = "enby") people), they repeatedly replied with "read my about" after reiterating their nonbinary identity did not stop the accusations. Here, surveilling another user enough to become aware of their identities is considered compulsory. Articulating one's identity is not exactly an act of empowerment and assertion of identity here as Albrechtslund would make sense of it, but perhaps a preemptive defense in anticipation of erasure or invalidation.

Chilling Effects & Rhetorical Moves

About half of the users I interviewed mentioned feeling uncomfortable expressing certain views or opinions on Tumblr for fear of repercussions. Some interviewees mentioned maintaining a separate “sideblog” purely for Discourse-related posts so that their followers on their “main” blog wouldn’t be exposed to, and therefore have the chance to react, perhaps very angrily, to, their opinions on The Discourse. Fuzzy-pancake told me that their sideblog was an important anonymous space for them: they maintained their Discourse blog as a sideblog because they know the people who follow them “would not be terribly pleased” with their exclusionist views. To them, it was good to vent without a name or “main” identity attached to their words. However, there were still some chilling effects on their speech as a result of The Discourse’s polarization: as much as fuzzy-pancake agrees with the exclusionists on many things, they feel as if there are some things that they “just don’t quite agree with.” That isn’t something they can discuss even on their Discourse sideblog, though. Even though they only have “like five followers,” if they were to say something against the exclusionist party line, they “would immediately get some of callout post, and then people would block [them], and then [they] couldn’t reblog their shit.”

The Discourse is a space where rhetoric and arguments are extremely polarized, and thus so are people’s reactions to others’ speech. Vigilant-telegram tried to explain his current theory of why homosexuality might exist to me, but noted that he was using language that would “piss off the community” -- to him, there was no better way to word it, but the theory would be controversial simply by merit of its wording. The community reacts violently to posts made in bad faith (see, for example, turbo-spoon’s post about asexuals/aromantics and concentration camps and the

subsequent fallout, which included death threats), but it can also react vitriolically to posts made in good faith with poorly chosen words. Accusations of homophobia and transphobia often begin to fly when Discourse arguments become heated; whether the speech is in fact homophobic or transphobic is up to the person impacted by it, but sometimes it is hard to understand the rhetorical moves they have made. For example, asexual positivity posts that label all asexuals as “queer” and say things like “your queerness is valid” will often be reblogged by exclusionists objecting to the use of the word “queer” by people who, they argue, do not have the right to reclaim that slur. The exclusionist reblogging the post and arguing against it will frequently accuse the original poster of homophobia - while this is not a blatant instance of homophobia, the argument seems to be that claiming “queer,” a slur traditionally used against people under the (exclusionist-defined) LGBT umbrella, for people who do not fall under that umbrella, is an act of discursive violence against LGBT people.

Similar rhetorical moves are made in the creation of blocklists and in the labels bloggers use to describe each other. Discourse Tumblr’s two sides may disagree on a lot of subjects, but they do agree that neo-Nazis and TERFs are harmful and dangerous. TERF stands for “trans-exclusionary radical feminist;” a TERF is someone who believes that the only “real woman” is a cisgender woman (i.e. someone who was assigned female at birth and still identifies as female) and trans women are men trying to invade women-only spaces. Some users place these people on “blocklists” that they circulate and share; this means that the community’s collective knowledge of known TERFs and neo-Nazis is greater than any individual’s. While Tumblr does not have blocklists to the level of technical sophistication that exists on Twitter, some users do post lists of users they find objectionable and circulate it amongst their followers, who may or

may not add to the list. In this way, blocklists can be added to and shared amongst a wide swath of a community, and a user who comes upon such a blocklist can simply go through it and block all individuals on the list.

Exclusionists tell me that inclusionists have, however, placed them on blocklists alongside TERFs and neo-Nazis; they find this troubling as a rhetorical move and in what it implies the users think about them. Moreover, verbose-chainsaw tells me, this equates exclusionists, who are often LGBT people, with “people who would see harm to them.” This generalization, which he sees on both sides, is one of the things he personally “would critique about The Discourse.”

Some bloggers create a safe space for themselves by “being liberal with the block button,” as curly-parakeet did; The Discourse caused em a great deal of anxiety and worry until they learned to “block people that disrespect [eir] identities.” Multiple inclusionist Discourers mentioned the pain and stress of interacting with people who are constantly invalidating their identities; from their perspectives, blocking individuals who say hurtful things makes a great deal of sense. When Tumblr is a user’s only safe space, and the only space where they can live their true identity and discuss it with others like them, having that safe space also contain individuals questioning or invalidating that identity can be hurtful and anxiety-inducing. However, as verbose-chainsaw mentions, it is very easy to create an echo chamber for oneself on Tumblr; a user can search the “Discourse” tag and very easily “be like, I agree with this person - follow - I agree with that person - follow - I don't agree with that person - block - and you're creating that environment for yourself...” verbose-chainsaw discusses the merits of a liberal-arts discussion-based environment with respect to dealing with controversy, telling me that “you can't choose

like, I'm only going to be in classes with people who agree with me on this. and that's really hard, I feel like, starting college, when you start going to discussion-based classes ...all of my classes were discussion-based, but you could see who the people were who were like, "what? there's people like that - there's people here who think different from me?"” Things like the blocking and no-platforming concern him because, he says, “I think that has really helped with the escalation of opinions on both sides, because they're both in their own worlds.”

Decentralized Authority and the Danger of Ideas

To what end, then, does the participatory surveillance of The Discourse operate? I argue that it acts to enforce the collective authority of the Discourse faction involved in surveillant behavior. In The Discourse, no truly centralized authority exists from which surveillance is conducted, moral codes enmate, and punishment is meted out. Instead, authority in The Discourse is generally decentralized; it is situated amongst each Discourse faction's members. While blocklists represent a case of centralization of morality to some degree, because they are circulated amongst members of a (usually inclusionist) community, the authority to add an individual to the blocklist or the impetus to question their presence sits with each individual who sees the post, rather than entirely with the original poster. Questions of right and wrong become a question of group consensus; once that consensus reaches a steady state, though, questioning the status quo is sketchy at best and, on average, dangerous. Punishment, likewise, is distributed and up to (usually anonymous) individuals' consciences.

Ideas have real weight in The Discourse; Discourers behave as if the ideas espoused online can do real harm offline. One current controversy involves the treatment of pedophiles; like many

questions not related to The Discourse on the surface, it nonetheless splits along factional lines. Inclusionists argue that pedophilia -- inborn sexual attraction to minors -- cannot be cured and therefore pedophiles who have not offended (i.e. people who are attracted to minors but refuse to act on that attraction) ought to be treated humanely and given access to treatment for their condition as would be the case for any other mental illness. Some non-offending pedophiles (or MAPs -- "minor attracted people") exist on or peripheral to the inclusionist faction, trying to raise awareness and build community amongst themselves to seek treatment and make sense of their condition. Exclusionists, however, believe that no pedophile is redeemable and all pedophiles are irredeemably dangerous. Many exclusionists will tell known non-offending pedophiles to kill themselves or that they deserve to die; in some cases, they routinely send these people death threats under their own URL, while other types of hateful reactions tend to be anonymous. Exclusionists are deeply concerned by the inclusionist concept of pedophilia and attitude toward pedophiles; they believe that the inclusionist approach normalizes child abuse and attempts to redeem the irredeemable. This attitude, they argue, can do very real harm offline.

This extreme example is illustrative of the notion of harm in The Discourse; while vitriolic reactions to bad Discourse posts arguably do harm to the original poster, Discourers are more concerned with the harm that the bad ideas contained in bad Discourse, or implicitly endorsed by a Discourse participant's (mis)behavior, can do offline. Free speech online has turned out to be a gnarlier problem than John Perry Barlow believed it to be when he wrote "A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace;" The Discourse certainly defies his assertion that cyberspace is "a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without

fear of being coerced into silence or conformity¹⁰⁹.” Barlow saw cyberspace as a place where ideas could spread freely, judged by principles of “ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal” -- but The Discourse is no civil libertarian paradise. Pervasive awareness of the surveilling gaze indicates that Discourse participants are not operating in a space that draws on libertarian principles for collective self-governance. Discourse participants reject the idea that individual free thought and rationalism are enough to combat dangerous ideas and harmful speech; instead, they employ collective silencing tactics like callout posts and dogpiling to stifle such speech. While in a civil libertarian technological utopia such speech would be dealt with in the court of the individual mind, and found to be lacking and irrational, in The Discourse speech and ideas are governed by the decentralized authority that enforces each faction’s party line. The very existence of such a networked, distributed manifestation of authority for purposes of imposing and spreading an ideology suggests that the people involved in The Discourse do not trust each other’s rationality -- or fear so much for others’ vulnerability -- that they do not wish to leave the evaluation of ideas to a networked citizenry absent any authority or centralized ideology.

Safe Spaces and Ideas of Harm & Danger

Blocklists are a significant and pervasive feature in The Discourse. Exclusionists are upset by their placement on blocklists with “those who would see harm to them,” as verbose-chainsaw puts it. Inclusionists equate exclusionists “with neonazis and pedophiles...and they think it's an attack because a lot of these people who are called REGs (reactionary exclusionist gatekeepers are actually LGBT people.” Jubilant-umbrella was frustrated with the same issue,

¹⁰⁹ Barlow, “A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace,” (1996).

accusing inclusionists of “putting lgbt, jewish, and trans people on a massive blacklist with nazis, terfs, and pedophiles.” For inclusionists, though, blocklists and the block button are an important tool. For curly-parakeet, the block button was important to eir mental well-being while participating in The Discourse. “People would be nasty and I was worrying about this, even outside my time spent on social media. But then i learnt to be liberal with the block button. I’m not afraid to block people that disrespect my identities,” ey told me. Silver-sniffle discussed the pain she felt when hearing people rationally discussing her “basic humanity” with me; when people “still won’t listen or understand,” even though some part of her wants to refuse to “let this injustice stand,” she knows that the user who is refusing to hear her is “just going to upset me or hurt me.” The Discourse can be incredibly painful and emotionally exhausting to deal with, and users have found different ways to navigate it and make sense of it while still keeping themselves safe.

There has recently been a great deal of discussion on safe spaces and trigger warnings -- what constitutes a safe space, the appropriate role of safe spaces in society, the utility and impact of the trigger warning, and so on. On Tumblr, many individuals deliberately create, curate, and actively maintain their social media experience as a safe space. For example, tagging possibly triggering content is a common practice; users will tag content that may be triggering or objectionable for others with tags like “tw: rape” [trigger warning: rape] or “cw: food” [content warning: food] or simply “drugs\.” Here, the purpose of the backslash is to make the tagged content unsearchable under the “drugs” tag while making it appear as “drugs” to a Chrome extension such as the popular XKit, which allows users to “blacklist” certain tags and avoid all posts tagged with certain words. Most users tag common triggers such as “rape,” “death,” or

“food” and allow followers to request that more specific things be tagged. Users can also curate who they follow, unfollowing or following people at will, and the “block” feature makes it possible to completely banish someone from your Tumblr experience such that they can’t view your posts, message you, or even @-mention you in a post.

What a safe spaces ought to be, and what an LGBT-specific safe space ought to look to, is a fraught question in The Discourse. In jubilant-umbrella’s opinion, “safe spaces are only safe because they don’t include everyone, you have to exclude some people to be safe - which they [inclusionists] think is fair to compare to TERFs, who actively misgender and harm trans women, because they’re “excluding” them too.” Sturdy-bassoon echoed their sentiment, saying, “I think people just want to feel safe in their community, because with accepting asexual people on the basis of being asexual, or aromantic people which I haven’t brought up, actually, but in the same vein, if they’re straight and cisgender, it can actually cause a lot of harm for people in the community - LGBT people...I think mostly [inclusionists] just kind of want to feel safe and not be around people who have power over them in their own community.” Even tags function as a sort of “safe space,” where LGBT people or ace/aro people will search through the “LGBT” or “ace” or “aro” tag on Tumblr in search of like-minded bloggers and affirmation. Violation of such spaces is taken seriously; some inclusionists were recently very upset when exclusionists started posting “invalidating” content in the “ace positivity” tag. As verbose-chainsaw explained to me, “if you can’t go through your tag that you always like to search, seeing something negative towards you on there, you also probably will start to feel unsafe.”

Safety, affirmation, and a sense of validation are vitally important to marginalized populations, regardless of the source of that validation. Silver-sniffle feels as though LGBT spaces are a place where she can feel understood; she cites “the universal human need for acceptance” and the way she felt “blown away by [the LGBT community’s] inclusivity.” She is also grateful for the way she was pulled into activism, awareness of intersectionality, and by the LGBT community. Verbose-chainsaw is aware that the LGBT community might be of great benefit to some ace and aro people: “the inclusionists feel like they don't have a safe space, because nobody takes them seriously, because this is such a new concept overall, of asexuality and of things that isn't known in the mainstream, but they do want a space, and so they're like, there's already these LGBT clubs and organizations that I can go to, and if that one space to be safe and included, and they're not being let in, that could be one thing in their...like the weekly thing to look forward to - be like, I need this; I...you know, and so it is like a huge deal at that point, being like, this is what I need to function, to feel included, and I'm so lonely, and I feel like the whole world is against me - I can't get into this, or I don't feel safe and included in this space...” He also sees the exclusionist perspective, though, telling me, “now my opinion is like, okay, but you do have to understand that if some people are uncomfortable with you being there, a cishet ace, or you do have to understand that your experiences of oppression aren't the same...” Ultimately, though, he ended up being unable to identify with either side because the tactics were so extreme; although he understood both sides’ need for a safe space, he “just couldn't align [himself] with either group in general” because of “the toxicity of it.” Overall, though, he gave me an insightful description of the pain and fear participants in The Discourse are feeling, telling me, “people -- especially thinking about people who live in rural areas or small towns -- you know, like, this is my one escape in the physical world...in the online community.. .You know,

that is some people's entire world, and they feel like that particular world is being threatened, and they have to do what they can to keep it safe. and I think that is to an extent what's happening on both sides.”

Both sides also have difficulty avoiding talking past each other; it's very easy to fall into an echo chamber in The Discourse. Certainly not all parts of Tumblr provide equally reliable information and, according to jubilant-umbrella, “if you're unable to look at [information] critically and from other perspectives, you end up believing in things like MOGAI and their twisted idea of how oppression and privilege work.” Regardless of one's belief in MOGAI, Discourserers still agree that approaching one's beliefs critically is vitally important; silver-sniffle told me, “everything you accept needs to be critically accepted,” and she advocated for intentionally building one's communities, drawing her rhetoric from the liberation theology she studied in undergrad. According to her reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one must “create every space you create intentionally” and “be critical of everything you think.” That intentionality may take different forms - and therefore form very different sorts of spaces. Verbose-chainsaw saw a lot of echo-chamber-building in The Discourse: “people I have been seeing have been going through the tags and looking at anyone who disagreed with the inclusionists' ideas and have just been blocking anyone who seems like they would disagree, which on one hand I understand, because it's the whole concept of making Tumblr safe again, but on the other hand a lot of the critique about that has been okay, but you're not letting people give a chance -- you're not giving people a chance to talk.”

In late December, inclusionists coordinated a “no-platforming” movement in which they agreed to stop giving exclusionists a platform by stopping arguing with their posts. Instead, they would only post positivity and education. The initial reactions to the movement were delight on inclusionists’ part because it shielded them from engaging with the most toxic aspects of The Discourse (and, to be fair, contributing to them) and allowed them to focus on education and affirmation of their own identities. The exclusionists were displeased with the no-platforming because they felt it equated them with neo-Nazis (apparently it was alleged that “no-platforming” as a rhetoric and tactic was originally used on neo-Nazis) and deprived them of the chance to have their voices heard. It seems that the no-platforming initiative gradually faded out, because March and February have been ripe ground for observation of argument between inclusionists and exclusionists. Some bloggers who were champions of the no-platforming initiative seem to have stuck with it, but Discourse as normal has resumed for the most part.

Vulnerability, Care, and Truth-Making

Fear for others’ (or one’s own) vulnerability is an impetus behind many practices within The Discourse. One critique of libertarianism is that it fails to adequately provide for the fact that that some people are more vulnerable than others, and one of the functions of the state is to protect vulnerable minorities on the wrong side of power differentials from the whims of the majority. The Discourse, in contrast, seeks to protect the vulnerable from the majority; exclusionists try to protect LGBT folks from invasion of their safe spaces by “cishets,” who they believe to be their oppressors, and inclusionists want to protect asexual people from persecution by exclusionists. Each side perceives a power differential tilted against them, and takes umbrage at words or actions that are hurtful or harmful to them -- especially for the sake of the most

vulnerable of them. Inclusionists like silver-sniffle express concern for “ace [asexual] babies” who hear only negativity about their identity; she worries that asexual youth will come to a point where they “see this nonsense [anti-asexual Discourse] and be like, that's it, never coming out.”

Discourse Tumblr is often a site of radical vulnerability; users engage in a great deal of self-disclosure to the point that fuzzy-pancake expressed concern that the younger generation on the site “has boundary issues of some sort” because they readily share “all kinds of really painful things about themselves.” boyd discusses the complicated relationship with online privacy that youth have worked out -- privacy is highly contextual for youth, and the rapidly proliferating plethora of online contexts makes it “one heck of a cultural labyrinth” to navigate¹¹⁰.

Vulnerability on Tumblr may be perfectly acceptable within the context of the site -- users generally don't associate their online identity with their offline identity or connect exclusively (or even primarily) with people they know offline -- unless contexts are collapsed and one's life on Tumblr leaks into one's life offline, or vice versa (which is a whole nother thesis). The culture of Tumblr also makes users acutely aware of others' vulnerability; many users I interviewed cited Tumblr as a site of education and activist consciousness-raising for them. Silver-sniffle currently follows “a lot of really great blogs...trans and nonbinary women, women of color...people sticking the hell up for their queer family” and has learned a great deal about intersectionality, privilege, and allyship on Tumblr. She told me that her experiences on the site have made her “more active, more caring, better at listening;” one important lesson she has learned is that at times, “mine is not always the voice that needs to be heard right now.”

¹¹⁰ Boyd, *It's Complicated* (2014): 52.

Truth-making in The Discourse often rises out of a cacophony of voices, most speaking with raw vulnerability and deep emotion. The stakes for Discourse participants feel high because they are fighting for safety: exclusionists are fighting for the very precarious sanctity of their hard-won community and inclusionists are fighting for their inclusion in and recognition as members of the same community. The Discourse's culture of radical vulnerability means that emotional appeals have a certain ring of truthiness about them and others' pain and vulnerabilities have a particular urgency. Discourse participants' style of meaning-making stands in direct opposition to that of Internet trolls, another well-studied online subculture.

Whitney Phillips, in her book on Internet trolls *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* , explains the troll's value set and ways of meaning-making: trolls “[privilege] cool rationality over emotionalism” and have as their end goal “successfully exerting dominance over a given adversary¹¹¹.” They also prioritize “lulz” -- “a particular kind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter” that “functions as a pushback against any and all kinds of attachment” to sentiment, political convictions, or ideals¹¹². Essentially, the average Tumblr Discourse user is a troll's ideal subject: they react to provocative content, they are passionately attached to their beliefs, and they lead with their emotions. This mix of characteristics means that when people react to bad posts or misbehavior, they react strongly and predictably - because of Tumblr's culture of vulnerability, their upset is almost performative, and it serves as an incitement to further Discourse in much the same way that trolling incites further lulz.

¹¹¹ Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* (2016): 124.

¹¹² Ibid., 24.

People also think through vulnerability culture on Tumblr by building safe spaces. While interview participants frequently made explicit references to safe spaces within the LGBT community (especially exclusionists, who were worried that “cishets” were invading LGBT-only safe spaces and therefore violating their sanctity), what emerged over and over again in my interviews and digital fieldwork was a pattern of implicitly creating safe spaces through one’s actions and use of site affordances. Users tag posts with common triggers (e.g. “tw: rape” [trigger warning: rape], “food mention,” [post mentions food], “cn: self-harm” [content note: self-harm]) so that others using XKit or similar Tumblr super-user browser extensions can avoid such posts appearing on their dash. They will also censor slurs or contentious words like “queer” (q**er & variants) in what is perhaps an acknowledgement and reduction of their power to do harm. Many users indicate whether or not they are a minor so that minors can avoid following or interacting with adults as they choose.

Such curation of one’s networking behaviors and creative output is a sort of digital stewardship of one’s immediate surroundings -- an act of care for the online environment one inhabits. Phillips’ trolls operate in what she calls an “androcentric” model -- a model of the world that “naturalized male-focused thinking¹¹³”. Trolls employ the “adversary method,” a method of argument in which one remains cool and rational no matter what, with the end goal of defeating one’s opponent. I argue that while trolls represent a worst case of androcentric thinking, The Discourse can be used as an example of non-androcentric thinking in a contentious environment. While users often engage with the intent of proving others wrong or angering one’s opponents, success is not defined by remaining rational or by defeating one’s opponent. Emotion need not be removed from the equation for one’s arguments to be valid, and the endgame in The

¹¹³ Ibid., 124.

Discourse is to have an LGBT community that is safe for those who need it -- a much more collectively defined endgame than what trolls are working with. Making sense of those central questions -- who needs the LGBT community, and what does it mean for it to be safe -- is the main task at work in The Discourse.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we've tried to make sense of The Discourse, a participatory community on Tumblr that has coalesced around debates about the role and makeup of the LGBT community. The Discourse isn't just a bunch of young people yelling at each other over the Internet; Discourse participants are doing sophisticated curatorial, discursive, and rhetorical work within the framework The Discourse and the affordances of Tumblr provide them. They demonstrate deep awareness of the social surveillance culture that is pervasive within the Discourse community, making use of Tumblr's features to broadcast that which needs to be visible and hide things they would prefer not to spread. Discourse participants also spend a great deal of time thinking about the subject positions they occupy and who therefore ought to speak on what topics; this can be well-intentioned but dangerous when used as a silencing tactic.

While conflict online usually evokes the spectre of the troll and his deliberate projection of affective invincibility, The Discourse has a very different pattern of engagement. Discourse participants act from a great deal of concern for the most vulnerable among them, employing trigger warnings, delineating and enforcing safe spaces, and censoring content to avoid upsetting or alienating vulnerable groups or people. Both patterns of engagement -- the androcentric, argumentative style of the troll and the deep concern for the vulnerable exhibited in The

Discourse -- are dangerous when not practiced in moderation: the troll's style for obvious reasons (focusing on "winning" and proving oneself more logical than one's emotional victim can quickly lead to harm for the target of trolling) and The Discourse because concern for vulnerability can stifle speech about difficult issues or lead to the unintended creation of echo chambers.

Although The Discourse is often full of awareness of the existence and situation of the most vulnerable participants, it is also at times a vicious, vitriolic environment to exist in, one that presents its own methodological, ethical, and emotional challenges. The harassment and suicide-baiting that goes on in The Discourse is symptomatic of the pervasive mutual surveillance that is ongoing, but also illustrates the seriousness of the discussion for many of the participants. These people do not lack empathy or affect, unlike trolls who prod their victims hoping to elicit "lulz" - when they engage in harmful behaviors, it is born of a desire to defend the sanctity of their vision of the LGBT community and fight those who would see it otherwise composed.

Yet The Discourse still manages to confront difficult issues, most notably the nature of the LGBT community. For this thesis we focus on the "ace discourse" -- the debate over asexual people's inclusion in the LGBT community. Inclusionist rhetoric employs concepts and ideals from radical queer activism, while exclusionist rhetoric (while not an exact parallel) has threads in common with assimilationist LGBT activists who were active in previous intracommunity debates, notably the debate over marriage equality and discussions around sexual ideology. This indicates that The Discourse is not a new phenomenon entirely born of the Internet and Tumblr, but instead a thread of a discussion that has spanned decades. As queerness enters the

mainstream more and more, and becomes co-opted by people who would, by their actions or words, defang the movement, the question remains -- what will become of queerness the ideal and the very real, still-vulnerable LGBT community? The Discourse is trying to make sense of that, and we would do well to listen.

Appendix I: Glossary

Asexual: Someone who has some degree of lack of sexual attraction is asexual. Inclusionists and exclusionists disagree over wording (specifically whether or not the term “a-spec,” meaning asexual-spectrum, was appropriated from the autistic community is a point of contention), whether asexual people having sex constitutes abuse or coercion, and whether or not asexual people belong in the LGBT community by virtue of their asexuality. Often abbreviated “ace.”

Aromanticism is asexuality’s counterpart for romantic attraction; someone who is aromantic or “aro” may experience sexual attraction, but has some degree of lack of romantic attraction.

Ask: A message sent to a blog, usually intended for publication. A follower, fan, or other interested party can send a blogger an “ask,” originally intended to be a question for the blogger. Since Tumblr’s inception, asks have morphed into a way for people to ask each other anonymous questions, send advice, ask for help, send compliments, call out problematic behavior and, of course to send hate mail. When a user receives an “ask,” they have the option of publishing it to their blog or answering it privately if it is not anonymous. If the ask is anonymous, a blogger has to either archive the message or publish the answer if they want it to reach their audience. Here is a hateful anonymous ask:

And here is the user interface to publish/answer asks:

Blog: I think the best way to define this is “a stream of content curated/created by at least one individual.” One user can have multiple blogs, and one blog can have multiple moderators or curators. Some users link to the multiple blogs they own, while others don’t, and keep their side blogs and their “main” blog separate. Generally a user has a “main” blog most closely tied to their semipermanent identity on Tumblr, and any number of “side blogs” dedicated perhaps to a certain theme or facet of one’s identity. A blog can be comprised of original content, reblogged content, or some mixture thereof. Blogs can also “like” posts, answer “asks” (messages from followers and others), and publish submissions.

Cishet: Cisgender (identifying with one’s assigned gender at birth) and heterosexual (exclusively attracted to the “other” binary gender). Exclusionists argue that “cishet” asexuals should not belong in the LGBT community by virtue of their asexuality; other asexual people who are not cis or not heterosexual/heteroromantic are allowed in the community, however,

Dash: Tumblr’s main user interface. A user scrolls through posts on their “dash” from various bloggers they follow and can interact with the posts as they choose, perhaps “liking” or “reblogging” the content before moving on.

Latinx: Gender-neutral term for someone of Latino/a descent.

LGBT+: LGBT+ denotes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other individuals. There are many different versions of this acronym (LGBT, LGBTQ (LGBT + queer/questioning), LGBT+ (LGBT & related communities)); I have chosen LGBT+ because I believe it provides the best balance of brevity, non-controversiality, and inclusivity here.

Reblog: A user who sees a post they enjoy or want to contribute their own content/opinions to can reblog it to their own blog. That means that the post that was previously on another user's blog will now also be on their blog, with attribution to the users who had previously reblogged it before it ended up on their dash. Posts can be reblogged without commentary, or a user can add their own commentary to an existing conversation. Diagonally staggered URLs with text or images underneath indicate which content comes from which user, with the content above all the URLs coming from the original poster. See for example this "classic" Tumblr post, none pizza with left beef:

Tags: A Tumblr user can tag a post with a lengthy sequence of tags (or none at all); these tags may be standard topics, such as post type (“poetry”), the name of a TV show (“game of thrones”), or a topic (“the discourse”). Users can search a particular tag, which will bring up a time-ordered dashboard of all posts tagged under that topic. It is also possible to “blacklist”

certain tags if one has the XKit Tumblr extension or similar software installed on one's browser. This allows the user to avoid any post tagged with a certain term or set of terms. It is now considered common courtesy to tag common triggers (e.g. "rape," "death," "food") and uncommon ones if asked by a follower.

A fascinating emergent use of this feature is tags-as-comments: users will write commentary on the post or thoughts they do not want visible to a larger public in the tags. Because tags from the original poster are not visible when the post is reblogged, the audience for things written in the tags is inherently limited. Some users use this affordance to add messages or commentary to a post meant only for their followers.

See for example this post below from NASA's Tumblr, where tags indicating topic ("nasa", "space," "spacestation") are used alongside tags expressing opinion about the content of the post ("awesome," "awesomesauce").

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