“Reading After Sexuality with Henry James” takes up recent work in celibacy and asexuality studies to probe what role relatively minor, grey feelings might have in James’s work, and how they might emulsify some of the tensions and reflexes queer work often takes for granted in James (namely, that James was overflowing with erotic desire, a desire that elevates his writing into an almost non-discursive and anti-social abstraction). “Interest” and “liking” as enduring, fluctuating, crisis-averse feelings became central to the argument as I searched for alternatives to desire and erotics as core terms through which to understand James’s aesthetic and social projects. I argue that James put these increasingly devalued feelings to work as an aesthetic and relational ethic to counteract the emergence of sexuality as a core category of experience and biopolitical adjudicator of viable life. I begin to consider what a 19th century asexual politics looks like during a period of sexuality’s rapid expansion.

More generally, I am interested in tracking what minor genres of experience take on historically major roles when we look under dimensions of the self that seem at first immoveable (libido, personality, memory).

This paper is a major rewriting of a previous paper, and is very much a rough draft. It’s very fresh, and I apologize for the typos, fragments, and distended prose that I’ve not had a chance to correct. From the workshop, I’m looking for help reeling in the scope and repetitiveness of the argument, which is to say, I’d love feedback on where I could push this paper historically or theoretically to give it a bit more texture and precision. Related to this, I’m interested in people’s thoughts on how to balance the aesthetic versus social parts of the argument, as I perhaps too quickly come to make the two isomorphic. More generally, I’d love general input on what was compelling versus what felt boring, uninteresting, or confusing, as well as potential problems in my argument’s political claims.