

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND SOCIETY

Asexualities

Feminist and Queer Perspectives

Edited by

Karli June Cerankowski and
Megan Milks

ROUTLEDGE



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Megan Milks**

First published 2014
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Asexualities : feminist and queer perspectives / edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks.

pages cm. — (Routledge research in gender and society ; 40)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sex. 2. Sexual attraction. 3. Sexual orientation. 4. Sexual desire disorders. 5. Feminist theory. 6. Queer theory. I. Cerankowski, Karli June. II. Milks, Megan.

HQ21.A779 2014

306.7—dc23

2013042199

ISBN13: 978-0-415-71442-6 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-1-315-88267-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by IBT Global.

Indexed by
Clive Pyne Book Indexing Services
38 Inglewood Place, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 4C7 Canada
(613) 722-7998
cpyne@magma.ca
FAX (613) 482-7064

Asexualities

What is so radical about not having sex? To answer this question, this collection of essays explores the feminist and queer politics of asexuality. Asexuality is predominantly understood as an orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction. In this multidisciplinary volume, the authors expand this definition of asexuality to account for the complexities of gender, race, disability, and medical discourse. Together, these essays challenge the ways in which we imagine gender and sexuality in relation to desire and sexual practice. *Asexualities* provides a critical reevaluation of even the most radical queer theorizations of sexuality. Going beyond a call for acceptance of asexuality as a legitimate and valid sexual orientation, the authors offer a critical examination of many of the most fundamental ways in which we categorize and index sexualities, desires, bodies, and practices.

As the first book-length collection of critical essays ever produced on the topic of asexuality, this volume serves as a foundational text in a growing field of study. It also aims to reshape the directions of feminist and queer studies, and to radically alter popular conceptions of sex and desire. Including units addressing theories of asexual orientation; the politics of asexuality; asexuality in media culture; masculinity and asexuality; health, disability, and medicalization; and asexual literary theory, *Asexualities* will be of interest to scholars and students in sexuality, gender, sociology, cultural studies, disability studies, and media culture.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all of our contributors for their luminous insights, rigorous work, and continual patience during what turned out to be a long journey to publication. We are also grateful to the many peer reviewers who gave their time to carefully read these chapters and provide the authors with feedback; this book is that much stronger because of their generosity. We would also like to thank the editorial board at *Feminist Studies* for soliciting and publishing the initial commentary that would evolve into this book project; Michael Kimmel and Suzanna Walters, whose feedback on an earlier prospectus was invaluable; and our editorial team: Jennifer Morrow, who patiently fielded our questions and managed logistics, and our editor Max Novick, whose patience and flexibility got us to the finish line.

Megan would like to thank Judith Gardiner, who supported this project throughout its development; and the graduate students and faculty of the English and Gender and Women's Studies Departments at the University of Illinois in Chicago, particularly my great friend and colleague Cynthia Barounis and the Queer Theory Reading Group. I am also grateful, tremendously, to my co-editor Karli Cerankowski, with whom collaboration has been both wildly generative and wonderfully smooth.

Karli would like to thank Benjamin Kahan, who contributed insight and inspiration as this project began; Heather Love, who believed in this project and was supportive from the start; Andrea Lunsford, who gave useful tips along the way; Celine Parreñas Shimizu, who saw groundbreaking potential in this work from its earliest stages; Stephen Sohn, whose mentorship and advice every step of the way were invaluable to this book's existence; and all my friends and colleagues at Stanford University and beyond. Endless thanks go, of course, to Megan Milks, who has been a superb collaborator from the moment we met years ago; our work together is some kind of magic.

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Introduction

Why Asexuality? Why Now?

Megan Milks and Karli June Cerankowski

In 1984, Gayle Rubin famously wrote, “The time has come to think about sex.”¹ Indeed, that time has come, and it seems to have never left. Rubin was responding to the feminist sex wars and what she identified as an incapacity of feminist theory and politics to adequately understand and challenge sexual oppression. Since—and partially in reaction to—the publication of this essay, feminist and queer scholars and activists have thought a great deal about sex, so much that whole fields have emerged (e.g., sexuality studies, lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory). These fields have produced expansive and expanding bodies of knowledge on sex, sexuality, and the intersections of both with multiple political and identity categories—conversations that are robust and ongoing. To think about sex remains undoubtedly important. But now the time has come, we suggest, to also think about asexuality.

“Asexuality” as an articulated and named identity has a fairly short history that reaches back just over a decade. The asexual movement emerged in the early 2000s with the political goal of establishing asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. The solidification of this movement is largely due to the efforts of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Since its launch in 2001, the online community has grown exponentially. AVEN, hosted at asexuality.org, defines “asexuality” as a sexual orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction. Through this web presence and local activism, AVEN has primarily focused on divorcing asexuality from presumptive pathology and legitimizing it as an orientation. By promoting a platform for asexual politics and inciting asexuality education and discussion, AVEN has provided a centralized base for the international asexual community. However, this community exceeds AVEN, and its politics are not monolithic. Numerous other groups devoted to asexuality, both on- and offline, have grown and exist alongside AVEN, some with different understandings of what it means to be asexual.

With the expansion of the meaning of “asexual” comes an expansion of the historiography of asexuality. As several of the chapters in this volume suggest, asexuality has a history beyond the establishment of AVEN: whereas it has a more contemporary history in online forums, such as

Haven for the Human Amoeba, which discussed the issue before the invention of AVEN,² it also stretches further back in time in different iterations, from the categories of early sexology, as explained in this volume by Eun-jung Kim, to its racialization in the era of American slavery, as explored in this volume by Ianna Hawkins Owen. A fuller understanding of asexuality demands a sense of historical context and the multiple iterations of sexual non-practice and non-desire that have come before.

Although the historical record reveals few references to “asexuality,” the concept of a person not experiencing sexual attraction, or desiring to not have sex for various reasons is certainly not anything new. What is relatively “new” is the formation of communities around the common language of asexuality as it is understood today—communities in which new categories exist around the concept of asexuality or “being ace,” where people can discuss romantic or aromantic orientations in relation to or apart from sexual desires or non-desires. This culture grew out of recent trends in (a)sexual movements within the past decade. The time to think about asexuality is, in fact, long overdue.

FEMINIST AND QUEER APPROACHES TO ASEXUALITY

In 2010, we co-authored an essay in which we suggested a field called “asexuality studies” might come to exist soon enough.³ Indeed, since the publication of that essay, the body of scholarship on asexuality has grown significantly. Initially the scholarly field emerged with a focus on social psychology and the development of physiological explanations for asexuality, but the discourse has since expanded into the realms of literary studies, disability studies, cultural studies, legal studies, and more.⁴ In our 2010 commentary, we urged scholars in the humanities to take the study of asexuality more seriously and additionally chided the slow approach in feminist and queer academic circles to acknowledge asexuality as a scholarly object. Although feminist and queer scholars have more recently entered the dialogue on asexuality, the gaps in scholarly literature produced on the subject remain palpable. This collection, which brings together scholars across many fields, from the social sciences to the humanities, is the first book-length project to explicitly focus on feminist and queer approaches to understanding asexuality.

With increasing scholarly interest as well as activist momentum, the moment for thinking about asexuality is here now—but that does not simply mean *not* thinking about sex. Without feminism, the sexual revolution, and the LGBT and queer movements, or the academic disciplines that emerged in relation to them, we would never have the tools we have now to think about why asexuality matters so much today in Western society. Following the legacy of the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s to the rise of a lesbian and gay movement in the 1990s to the burgeoning movements around transgender rights and radical queer activism today, the twenty-first

century ushers in a new era of queer theorizing built on the backbones of feminist and LGBT rhetorics. We undoubtedly view this project as a queer one: making sense of the social marginalization and pathologization of bodies based on the preference to not have sex, along with exploring new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures—how could that not be queer? But this project is equally feminist in its attention to structures of power and oppression, specifically around gender, as well as sexual object choice (or non-choice as it may be). This project recognizes and takes up the ways in which (a)sexuality has been co-constructed with femininity, has been gendered through the figure of the “frigid woman,” as discussed in this volume by Kim, and has been implicated in debates about what constitutes radical feminist praxis, which Milks analyzes in this volume. We could not imagine a book on asexualities as anything other than a feminist and queer project.

As the archive of cultural production and media coverage on the topic of asexuality grows, the topic of asexuality has become paradoxically “sexy.” This book asks big questions that are shaped by queer and feminist theories and politics, and that promise to reshape the fields of feminist and queer studies in turn. These fields have largely operated with a universal sexual assumption that ignores the possibility of asexuality as a viable lived experience. The recognition of asexuality in such a context can have explosive, widely generative effects, necessitating the addition of an “A” in the sexuality studies field, in courses on gender and sexuality, in activist movements, and in discussions of minority representation and visibility. Acknowledging asexuality from both theoretical and phenomenological perspectives challenges strands of sexualized politics within feminist and queer circles, and requires us to think anew about what is so radical (or not) about having sex (or not).

GETTING PERSONAL

As with many so-called “identity-based” studies, the production of scholarship on asexuality necessarily provokes questions about privilege and positionality. Who can talk about asexuality? When and why must one address one’s own affinities and identifications? Understandably, members of a community express a certain anxiety around becoming objects of scholarly scrutiny by those outside the community. In asexual communities, we have seen this anxiety expressed in the concerning phrase “sexuals talking about asexuals,” and have met with our fair share of questions regarding our own positionality in regards to asexuality.

The anonymous blogger of “An Asexual Space” wrote this about our 2010 commentary:

It was just . . . sexuals talking to sexuals about asexuality. I admit I’m assuming that the writers are sexual. I feel like they would have

mentioned being asexual. And at one point one of them talks about attending the Pride parade in San Fran and walking with the AVEN group, and didn't make it sound like she was "one of us," so to speak.

The post generated comments that mostly took a similar line, lamenting how "they" (we, the authors) represented "us" (the asexual community). Commenters also speculated about our identities, and chastised us for not engaging asexual people or speaking to an asexual audience. When we wrote that essay, we were writing for an audience of *Feminist Studies* readers, who we presumed would have given little, if any, thought to asexuality, especially as a worthwhile object for understanding theories of sex, gender, sexuality, and their attendant politics. Our goal with the commentary was to rouse feminist and queer scholars to a topic they may have never considered before; we wanted to call out these shortcomings while making suggestions for how we might begin to fill the gaps. Because we were providing an overview of the state of the field, we did not feel it necessary or prudent to divulge our own identifications, affinities, and personal investments.

However, the essay (happily) reached a wider audience; while we might not have expected it to do so, we would have preferred a more positive reception when it did. We acknowledge the discomfort our commentary produced for these readers, who felt that their voices were not represented. At the same time, the presumptions made about our identities make *us* uncomfortable. On the one hand, this volume and the chapters we have chosen to include in it are designed to stretch the limits of existing asexual discourse and push back against precisely these kinds of in-group and out-group definitions and rhetoric around asexuality. On the other hand, encountering this kind of rejection of our work from one of the communities with which it hopes to engage has taught us a necessary lesson about the importance of disclosure, and we are only doing our due diligence in sharing our personal investments in understanding asexualities. After all, in true feminist fashion, we are called upon to remember that not only is the personal political, but the scholarly is also personal (as well as political). So for the curious, for the suspicious, for our communities, here are our stories.

We first met in 2008, at a graduate student conference where we each happened to give papers about asexuality on the same panel, before either of us was aware of the other's work. Over lunch, we both lamented the paucity of scholarship, particularly gender and sexuality scholarship, on asexuality, and discussed the idea of putting together a journal issue or volume of essays on asexuality from a feminist/queer perspective. Interestingly, neither of us brought up the topic of our own identifications until a year or two into this project. We each, perhaps, presumed the other was asexual-identified. We also, likely due to our mutual adherence to queer conceptions of identity, shared a suspicion

of identity categories that seemed to render the matter of identification irrelevant. We did eventually enter into a conversation about our identifications, and discovered that our respective relationships to (a)sexuality and (a)sexual identity and politics are both rather complicated.

We are going to individuate now and share with our readers a bit of our personal investments in and relationships to asexuality:

Megan

For many years, I might have described myself as asexual—had I been exposed to any kind of positive understanding of asexuality. Unaware that an asexual movement existed, I did not use the language of asexuality to describe myself but words like “repressed,” “cold,” “weird,” “wrong.” But these were words I used privately, not publicly or even with friends. In fact, I was so mortified about being disinterested in having sex in a culture that so intensely vaunts it, I increasingly made up (hetero)sexual experiences to fit in—masquerading not only as heterofeminine, but also as normatively sexual. I am not proud of these deceptions.

When I shifted into a queer identification, the shift was initially cultural and political, as opposed to sexual. I was oriented toward queer aesthetics, culture, and community—toward camp, artifice, and the grotesque, toward people who lived gender with intention and political critique—if not toward queer sex. Within queer communities as within straight ones, I found myself alienated by the emphasis placed on sex and the pursuit of sex, especially as a single person whose nonsexual intimacies continually got trumped and displaced by my friends’ sexual ones. While I have since moved into a more sexual (as opposed to asexual) queer identity, largely as my gender identity/presentation has shifted from nervously feminine to a more comfortable androgyny, my relationship to sex is never uncomplicated and I do not feel it would be accurate to call myself either sexual or asexual.

One interpretation of my sexual history might suggest that queerness, or genderqueerness, “cured” my asexuality; I resist that reading because it presumes the existence of a stable, essential sexuality that was always there, just needed excavation. Such a reading assumes that the periods of asexuality I experienced were false, inauthentic, or pathological, when in fact they were real, genuine, and (except for the anxiety derived from assuming something was wrong with me) contenting; and second, that my current identity, because it is more sexual, is the endpoint. I am comfortably non-asexual, perhaps; but not comfortably sexual, as such a positive orientation towards sex does not effectively describe my grayish experience of sexuality. “Gray-A,” maybe, or “demisexual”—I prefer the flexibility of “queer.” My own interest in asexuality research, then, stems largely from having experienced some of the marginalizations experienced by many people who identify as asexual, particularly the pressures of compulsory

sexuality and the bafflement that comes from living in communities that treat sex as the most highly valued prize.

Karli

I have always felt pretty queer. This was most tangibly felt through gender, when as a young child, I told my parents repeatedly that I wished I were a boy—my mother jokingly called me her little “tomboy.” As I grew up, I grew into my queerness. Ever the tomboy, I faced the taunting of high school bullies who called me “dyke” amongst other names, despite having had my fair share of boyfriends. Attending a school that offered no support whatsoever for LGBT students, I struggled, as many of the other queer kids did, just to get by and pass as normative (as much as it was possible to approximate the norm). I felt this pressure to fit in not only around my gender presentation but also in regards to sexual expression. I dated and pursued heterosexual relationships as I thought I should, but opted out of them as soon as sexual contact became a real and immediate prospect.

As I entered college, my queer gender brought me to LGBT community, where I found it comforting that my genderqueerness was no longer a site for ridicule, but was in fact desirable and sexy. Ego boost aside, sexual desirability became a point of struggle for me. I again found myself bailing as soon as sexual intimacy entered the picture. It became apparent that I simply was not interested in having sex with anyone. How did my gender (and general romantic orientation towards women) link me to queer communities while my sexual non-desires alienated me? For a period of time, I felt like more of a queer ally than a queer member of the group, despite feeling so queer myself. In some ways I felt utterly unqueer. At that time, like Megan, I did not have the language to describe myself as asexual, nor the community that came with that identity. Instead, I simply considered myself celibate.

Over the years, I shifted yet again and began to explore intimacies that eventually led to sexual partnerships. On the continuum that is asexuality, one might say that I moved from being strictly asexual to being something more like demisexual, desiring sexual contact only within an intimate committed relationship; though just as with my gender, no label fits like a well-worn shoe. My gender and sexual identities have never been static, but have always been decidedly queer. However, opting out of certain economies of sex and desire makes me feel oddly (or queerly) unqueer in the communities I move in and around. It is this continued sense of alienation that motivates my research and writing on the cultural and political implications of asexuality and the tensions between and amongst queer and ace communities.

As our stories illustrate, (a)sexual identification is complex, multi-faceted, and not necessarily fixed in time or in the body. However we move