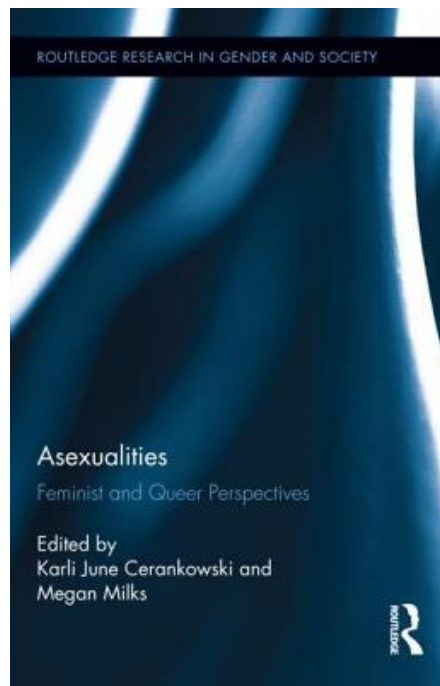




Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives

Megan Milks (Editor) , Karli June Cerankowski (Editor)

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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 book 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.

Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives Details

Date : Published March 5th 2014 by Routledge (first published November 7th 2013)

ISBN : 9780415714426

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Format : Hardcover 396 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Glbt, Queer, Feminism, Lgbt, Sexuality

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Faith says

Mixed bag.

There were a couple chapters I particularly liked (Erica Chu's chapter on radical identity politics stands out as being both interesting and fluidly written; I also appreciated the fMRI chapter and its more scientific approach to the topic, as a counterpoint to the social science theorizing).

I will say, however, that a lot of the scholarship seemed to be less about asexuality itself and more about using asexuality in service of some other goal, or as a challenge to heteronormativity -- crafting an asexual politics, or shifting understanding of current feminist/queer theories, or whatever. Which is well enough, I suppose, but disappointing when there is such a dearth of scholarship on asexuality. I want research that attempts to understand it on its own terms, before we go about applying it to everything else.

Anna says

I have been waiting for this book to come along. It's only the second hardcopy book to be published in the UK on asexuality and is very different from the one that preceded it, *Understanding Asexuality*. That did the groundwork of explaining that asexuality exists and describing what it seems to be, before veering into some slightly odd areas of speculation. 'Asexualities', by contrast, is a series of essays across multiple academic disciplines, exploring the implications of asexuality. I love this kind of thing, as it allows interesting cross-disciplinary comparisons and connections to be made. All in all, it's a thoroughly interesting collection. Chapters two and three provide an especially invigorating juxtaposition. The former investigates the neuroscientific basis of asexuality, by placing an asexual woman in an fMRI machine and showing her porn films. The latter is entirely theoretical and seeks to find a location for asexuality in Lacan's psychoanalytic work. In both cases, the research is initial and exploratory, but promising in that the major implications of not everyone experiencing sexual attraction are starting to be considered. The contrast between the two also illuminates two divergent directions of sexuality (and wider human behaviour) research - in terms of brain activation and in terms of psychoanalytic theorising. As a warning, unless you're familiar with psychoanalytic theory I recommend something like *Introducing Lacan* before reading chapter three. Lacanian terminology is remarkably obtuse and I struggle with it.

Subsequent chapters address asexuality from a range of directions, including race (chapter six), queer theory (chapter four), medicine (chapter fourteen), disability (chapters twelve and thirteen), masculinity (chapter eleven), media analysis (chapters seven and eight), and literature (chapters fifteen and sixteen). Each chapter is distinct and provides an original set of insights. I am not going to go through each, as this review would get too long. The main message that I took from the book as a whole was that asexuality throws light on how normative sexuality is constructed, across all disciplines. It thus has an appealingly disruptive potential to raise questions about the meanings and articulations of desire and attraction.

Although I found something interesting in every chapter, I think my favourite was twelve, 'Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy'. This included a potted history of female sexuality according to the 19th and early 20th century sexologists, much of which is sexist to point of laughable absurdity (with

the benefit of hindsight!). For example, in 1893 Lombroso and Guglielmo claimed that women experience less sexual feeling than men because they experience all sensory stimuli less intensely, thanks to smaller eyes, ears, and noses. They extrapolated to this to claim lower emotional and moral sensitivity in women, evidence (if any was needed) that sexism has no underlying, lasting logic. As for those women with 'intense passions', to Lombroso and Guglielmo they were, 'born criminal[s] more terrible than any male counterpart'. The chapter discusses the extent to which sexologists work genuinely reflected or influenced contemporary beliefs, constructing a picture of how absent or limited interest in sex has been pathologised, largely in women. This is then advanced to explain why asexuality activists take care to refute disability narratives. As another chapter describes in more detail, this is mirrored by disability activism, which emphatically refutes asexuality narratives. The linkage between the two is medical pathologisation - of asexuals as in need of treatment and of disabled people as excluded from sexuality. I hadn't seen this explained so clearly before and it illustrates the narrow range of normative sexuality and its ideal practitioners: white, cis, able-bodied, young, and heterosexual. Whilst it's easy to mock the century-old views of sexologists, current understandings of sexuality, in the media, society, medicine, and academic research, still contain that sexist, racist, ableist legacy. Analysis of asexuality demonstrates this in a new way.

I was least taken with the final chapter, which advances an asexual theory of narrative, essentially, as a boring novel in which nothing happens. This is, perhaps inevitably, tangled up with Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of the life and death drives. It seems a *reducto ad absurdum* to state that asexuals as a group don't experience desire (or 'jouissance') and therefore are just waiting (longing?) for death. Nonetheless, there is appeal here in the attempt to reconcile a sex-centric theoretical construct with asexuality. The difficulty of doing so suggests to me some weakness in the underlying theory. Several chapters also seek similar theoretical reconciliations, fitting the asexual into the archetype of clown or artist. The more practical and useful chapters are perhaps four and five, which discuss the integration or otherwise of asexuality with identity politics and sex-positive campaigning. Both offer insights into asexuality's fit within feminist and queer movements.

In short, there is a lot of fascinating material in this book and it's encouraging to find asexual scholarship moving beyond introductory ('101') writing. If you can get hold of a copy (from a copyright library, in my case), I highly recommend it. I'll end with a reading list of other books on asexuality that I'm aware of:

Understanding Asexuality, Bogaert.

Asexuality: A Brief Introduction, available at <http://www.asexualityarchive.com/>

The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality, Decker. (I haven't read this yet; as it isn't in a copyright library it may not be published in the UK?)

These two feminist books are older but still illuminating on the subject:

Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians, Rothblum.

Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present, Faderman.

Darnell says

If this book is representative of asexual scholarship, then as an asexual I am disappointed in the state of the field. Two stars because I did appreciate a few elements, but as a whole I found this volume to be deeply problematic. Instead of engaging asexuality practically or theoretically as something that is central to some people's lived experiences, it seems mostly interested in appropriating it as a tool in a battle against

heteronormativity, thus participating in the erasure of asexual oppression under sexualnormativity.

Spark says

Ich sag nur eins...:

Go Feminin Forum:

"So, da ich nun mit meinem Latein am Ende bin, hoffe ich auf Eure Antworten:

Ich habe einen Freund, seit nunmehr 8 Wochen. Er ist 43.

Das Problem: Er hat angeblich keine Lust auf Sex. Hierzu meine Frage: Bekommt ein Mann auch ohne Lust auf Sex einen hoch, wenn ich ihm über den Bauch streichel oder ihm nah komme? denn so ist es bei ihm.

es ist also nicht so, daß er potenzprobleme hat, sondern vielmehr, daß er meint, er hätte keine lust.

einmal hatten wir sex, aber er hat auf einmal mitten drin gesagt: laß uns bitte aufhören.

auch als ich ihn oral befriedigt habe, dann wird er auf einmal unruhig und ich soll sofort aufhören.

er faßt mich auch nicht an. er liebt mich, da bin ich mir sicher.

ich weiß wirklich nicht mehr was ich denken soll.

bitte, wenn euch etwas dazu einfällt, schreibt mir."

Solche Ansichten von Frauen nerven echt tierisch. Ich kann aus eigener Erfahrung sagen wie bitter dieses Thema ist. Nur weil man grad auch als Mann mal nen Ständer hat, hat das rein GAR nix mit LUST zu tun! Ich hasse es. Lustempfindung entsteht im Kopf. Nur wenn ich mal nen Ständer hab muss das rein gar nix heißen. Im Gegenteil, ich hatte und hab teils oft hart zu kämpfen damit, weil viele eben meinen "oho sexuell angetan." Von wegen. Das sagen ja nur die, die eben nix anderes kennen. Ich bekomme auch einen Ständer unter Umständen, wenn mir ein Musikstück gut gefällt, oder ich mich bei jemandem wohl fühle, aber das hat nix mit Sexualität zu tun. Das ist eben nur ein Ausdruck von Wohlbefinden, aber nicht grad in sexueller Hinsicht. Es schmerzt regelrecht sogar, wenn Frauen oder Männer meinen, man hätte nun sexuelles Interesse. Wir können uns das leider nicht aussuchen, darum schmerzt es ja, wenn Menschen dann einfach alles auf Sexualität schieben. Abbauen kann man das leider dann eben in dem Moment auch nicht. Mann muss sich den Penis eben als Muskel der Entspannung vorstellen und wenn man sich sehr wohl und entspannt fühlt, dann kann es schon mal vorkommen, dass da dann u.U was steht, was aber rein gar nix mit Sexualität zu tun hat. Und ich kanns nur wieder sagen, es ist einfach eckelerregend, wenn Frauen meinen, hinter dieser Sache stünde auch nur ein Hauch Sexualität. Wenn sie das brauchen, sollen sie gefälligst wo anders hin gehen, just disgusting so ne Denke. Und schon alleine das dumme Gesellschaftliche denken, früher hatte ich sehr große Schwierigkeiten mit meiner Asexualität gerade eben weil ich durch die Gesellschaft meinte ich wolle Sex oder hätte Triebe wie andere, aufgrund eben jener körperlichen Reaktionen. Gerade auch die Gespaltenheit, wenn man Pornos ansah, fand mans eckelerregend, oder alles was man sonst damit zu tun haben konnte, und wenn man sich dann aber auf einmal einer Person wirklich angenehm nahe fühlt, sich wohl bei ihr fühlt, dann auf einmal war man durcheinander, denn der Körper zeigte ja die Dinge an, die Menschen in der Regel als "sexistisch" oder "lüstern" bezeichneten. Weit gefehlt. Das wichtigste ist, wie man im Kopf denkt und wie man selbst von der Sache denkt, und nicht was die Gesellschaft dazu abgibt. Lasst euch nicht unterkriegen. :-)

Schwierig, in der Tat, stimmt, is es eben, wenn man einer Person nahe sein will, die das Thema Sex groß schreibt. Derzeit fühle ich mich einer Person stark hingezogen, er steht mir auch, aber eben nicht aus sexuellen Gründen, sondern aus ethischen Gründen. Schwierig würde es nun werden, wenn die Person merkt, dass mein Körper reagiert, denn meine Reaktion ist nicht die Allgemein Gesellschaftlich-Sexuelle welche. Ich fühle mich wohl und darauf reagiert mein Körper nun mal. Vielleicht sollte man eben zu Beginn grad auch sexuell sehr

stark aktive Menschen nicht von seinem Problem erzählen, da sie dies sonst evtl missdeuten könnten und meinten man übe im Kopf grade Lust aus.

Jessica says

As is always the case with an edited anthology like this, some sections worked better for me than others. (And some chapters I skipped entirely.) I'm going to focus on the parts that I particularly enjoyed.

Chapter 2 Inhibition, lack of excitation, or suppression: fMRI pilot of asexuality by Nicole Prause and Carla Harenski

"These diagnostic tools not only build on the idea that having a sexuality and experiencing sexual desire is non-contestable, they also presuppose the existence of a healthy sexuality. Hence those individuals whose sexualities, or absence thereof, do not fit into a scientific model of sexual normalcy appear in psychiatric frameworks as disordered and pathological."

Chapter 4 ties with Chapter 13 as my favorite.

Chapter 4 - Radical identity politics: asexuality and contemporary articulations of identity by Erica Chu explores how aromantic/asexual (ace) identities can support radical pluralism, because their existence raises questions about the relationship between sexuality and romantic attraction.

Chapter 5 - Student growth: Asexual politics and the rhetoric of sexual liberation by Megan Milks includes my favorite new term: **sex neutral, which signals respecting someone's desire to engage in consensual sex -- or not -- in whichever way they choose.**

Chapter 13 - Asexuality and disability: mutual negation in Adams v. Rice and new directions for coalition building by Kristina Gupta explores how the disability rights and asexuality awareness communities set themselves at odds with each other for historical reasons (people with disabilities viewed as asexual without their input, people who identify as asexual viewed as damaged/disabled without their input). This puts those people who are both disabled and asexual, happy to be both, in a difficult place, not recognized by either already marginalized community.

The one downside I noticed was that sometimes I got the sense that some of the authors weren't fully cognizant of the differences between asexual, aromantic, and agender. From the introduction it was clear that the editors are aware that those are different things, so I'm not sure what was going on there.

M. says

I co-edited this -- out in March! Multidisciplinary, groundbreaking volume -- the first booklength volume of essays on asexualities ever published.

Stephen says

I would give this groundbreaking editorial collection SIX stars if I could. Bravo!
