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ASEXUALITY AND SEX

ISSUE THEME

As ace people, how do we comprehend the role of sex in our lives? Are sex and the asexual figure expected to abstain from engagement? If we hold desire, are we expected to suppress it? What are the intersections of asexuality and sex? “Asexual” as an identity does not represent a singular sexual reality or state of sexual being. In the ace community, we are neither entirely with or without sexual desire; with or without engagement in sexual activity; with or without sexual drive. Although there are stereotypes of the asexual figure as being wholly non-sexual, repulsed by sex or anything remotely related to sex, and without any trace of attraction towards others, the ace community remains quite diverse in its complex relationship with sexuality and attraction.

As ace people and non-ace people alike, we all must navigate life with a sexual expectation attached to our bodies. It becomes internalized, reinforced, and replicated through the major veins of society: in the classroom, the doctor’s office, by our parent(s) and/or guardian(s), and further institutions. Sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism, and other oppressive forces condition us to manage our (a)sexuality with constant consideration to our existences at the intersections of social identity. As ace people, this sexual expectation, though applied differently, constrains us to sexual considerations. As we realize our difference we may begin to believe ourselves to be broken due to our internalization of the social narrative that sex is normative.

Our asexual identities therefore remain positioned within a power grid of sex, in which the validity of our aceness is continually measured in relation to the sexual. Deriving bodily pleasure from sexual acts may place our asexuality under question, especially as inter- and intra-communal gatekeeping remain pervasive in a manner that underscores how ace people who engage in sexual activity navigate and validate their own identity. With the release of sexual pleasure may come an onslaught of guilt, as if we have “betrayed” an identity that is to be a-sexual – without sexual feelings or desires – and crossed silently in the night into a “normative” sexual realm. Would it then be correct to assert that with a sexual expectation there also exists an “asexual expectation” – a belief that if one is to claim asexuality they must live up to an existence without sex?

For our Sex issue, *The Asexual* has invited writers and artists under the ace umbrella to explore the intersections of the sexual and asexual. Many of the forthcoming pieces grapple with sex through personal narratives, defiant artistic statements, and academic approaches to asexuality. In doing so, this issue incorporates related themes of attraction, desire, gender, kink, and more. Examining sex through an asexual perspective not only addresses widespread misconceptions of asexuality as entirely nonsexual, but also propels us to consider asexuality apart and beyond the sexual realm.

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SPECTRUM

BY ELYSE JONES

Condoms, acrylic paint
4 feet by 3 feet

I created this piece to challenge the notion that all asexual people don't have sex and/or have no relationship with sex. A common problem asexual people face is infantilization, or the thought that asexual adults are childish and immature. Asexual people experience little to no sexual attraction, which others sometimes interpret as wanting nothing to do with sex, including all sexual content, thoughts, and objects. However, this is false. Asexual people have sex, asexual people have sexual fantasies, and asexual people own and use sexual objects such as condoms. Asexual people also do none of these things. Thus, I used 96 condoms to create the asexual flag. Like sexuality itself, the behaviors and desires of asexual people exist on a spectrum. Within the asexual flag, which represents the asexual community, I symbolically created this spectrum by completely opening some condoms, slightly tearing others, and leaving some completely untouched. This represents the idea that some asexual people are comfortable with sex, some feel more neutral, and some are repulsed. Some asexual people have sex often, some have it seldomly, and others do not have it at all. Some asexual people watch porn, others do not. Some asexual people are part of the kink community, and others are not. A failing of this piece is that it is phallocentric. Obviously, neither penises nor condoms are required for sex, but I used it as a sexual symbol to communicate my ideas.

Elyse Jones (she/her) is a senior college student studying English, Women's and Gender Studies, and Fine Art. She has loved reading, writing, and making artwork her entire life. She is asexual and queer. She loves Star Wars, her dog Jack, and educating people about asexuality. She presented on asexuality and race at Creating Change 2018 in Washington, DC. Follow her on Twitter: @BombshellGinge.

SUMMER CAMP

BY S.J. WARING

Summer Camp is a poetry performance piece by S.J. Waring. Written below is a transcription of this recording. You may access the audio of this performance at TheAsexual.com/article/2018/4/1/sj-waring-summer-camp.

This piece was written after one too many frustrating questions about my asexuality. Although some asexuals do enjoy sex, for me sex has always been something demanded from me or something I was left out of. I have been made to feel broken more times than I can count. I have had people tell my partners that it must be an inconvenience to date me – and I have had partners agree with them. However, after years of feeling like I was broken or that my identity made me unlovable, I learned to stop putting that kind of blame on myself and instead to take a closer look at the people and the culture that made me feel this way. This poem is a way to make up for every time I thought that my asexuality was the problem and to tell the people that criticized my sexuality that they were the ones in the wrong. I hope other asexual teens can listen to this piece and understand that they are enough, and they should not have to change their boundaries if they don't want to.

I remember the last summer of sleepaway camp, when
 everything changed in a way I could feel like molasses dripping from the air
 The girls I roomed with practiced their handjobs on tennis rackets,
 met boys on dew-wet soccer fields at six AM.
 And every midnight they whispered from their bunk beds about sex,
 What they'd done, what they hadn't done, and when they asked me
 I told them the truth, which was that I was waiting to learn what someone else's lips felt
 like
 and I have never felt so small and so stupid
 like I wasn't following the relationship rulebook and I told myself
 That I had to do better.

After that summer, I learned
 That apparently it's everyone else's business
 what you do when you don't want other people to see.
 How much money would it take for you to stop being asexual?
 How much safety would you give up if you were asked?

I have heard them talk to my partner
 About how much of a fucking inconvenience I must be.
 I know that they see me, see us,
 and think that whatever love we have
 Is half-formed and stumbling
 think that love is only for making and not
 For just being.

They do not know that I
 Kiss like the world is ending, I
 Am drawn to her arms like the tides and the moon, I
 Will spend hours with my body warm in someone else's hands
 Not doing anything but just lying there.

I have loved people who thought
 That I didn't love them
 Because I wouldn't get naked for them
 They couldn't realize that every time I sent them a poem
 Or told them a story
 I was undressing myself, peeling back silken words and lacy mystery for them
 Until i shivered in every room, skin bare, notebooks scribbled over
 Waiting for them to realize that there was value in the things I gave them
 But no one gains respect from their friends by saying
 guess what I took from Sarah last night?
 Her favorite fairytale, her fingers on the guitar strings, her baby pictures, her baseball
 cap.

Being an asexual poet is
 To write about being called broken but here,
 I am calling them broken, I am telling them right now
 That when you told me you loved me you should have meant that
 You loved every black-gray-white-purple piece of me, you should have meant
 That you would not, even as a joke, ask me who I would let you fuck if it wasn't me.
 I am saying that I should not have been asked how far I would go
 How far I have gone because I
 Am ten million miles down the road of falling in love, I
 Am at the pitstop between her heartbeat and mine, I
 am somewhere on another existential plane, worlds away
 From the point system you used in middle school on which

I score approximately five points (don't quote me on that)
because I have already broken my own personal scoreboard into tiny pieces across the
court
I have blown myself out of the water
I have already gone farther than I thought I could make it
I have stopped telling myself that feeling safe isn't sexy

And I am too old for summer camp but if I went back
I would tell them that I know what lips feel like
I know what sharing a bed feels like
I know what eye contact in the darkness feels like
And I don't need to know much more than that.

S.J. Waring is just another queer teenage girl living in New York and writing poetry. She started writing because she always has something to say and started performing so she could make people listen. She often spends hours looking for literature she can relate to online before coming to the same inevitable conclusion: it's not there because she hasn't written it yet. Find her in Rookie Magazine, Cicada, or watching conspiracy theory videos in bed.

INITIATION

BY STEPH KEAHEY

I spend hours on the couch
thinking over
how to initiate.

Maybe I'll lie on the bed,
naked, and surprise
you with my body.

Maybe I'll pounce
on you and crash
my lips into yours.

I stand by the bedroom,
hands in my pockets,
“So ... do you want to do something?”

Steph Keahey is a biromantic asexual from the Pacific Northwest. She spends her time writing to instrumental music, a cup of lemon tea close at hand. Her interests include: hiking through the mountains, playing video games, and attempting to befriend every animal she encounters. Her work has been published on ThurstonTalk.com.

SPACE FOR ACES: FINDING A HOME IN A SEXUAL WORLD

BY JENNIFER A. SMART | UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Contemporary political spaces and pop culture are rife with discussions regarding the ever-broadening spectrums of sexual identity and orientation. As societal recognition of this array of identities expands, it is instinctive to form conceptual frameworks around labels such as pansexual or demisexual. Asexual is one such label which has met with misrepresentations — perpetuated in medicine, the law, and popular media — due to both the lack of a strict definition and a pervasive “sexual assumption.” This paper explores the importance of building a strong community and support network for asexual individuals, increasing psychiatric research on the orientation to dispel pathologization, and bolstering visibility for the so-called “invisible orientation” by reframing popular representations of asexuality.

The year is 1996, and newborn baby Judy nestles into her mother’s arms for the first of countless comforting embraces. Her summation of faithfully functioning organs clothed in unblemished, suede-soft skin betrays no sign of poor health. At age 7, Judy clamps her fingers tight over her eyes when Wendy kisses Peter Pan. Her parents share amused smiles and shake their heads. At 12, Judy misses school, bedridden with the stomach-churning dread of facing a friend turned suitor. You’ll grow out of it, her parents reassure her. By eleventh grade, the groping hands crowding her nightmares beg otherwise. “Jude the Prude,” classmates mutter. You just haven’t met the right person yet, her mother consoles. At 17, she looks away when Wendy kisses Peter Pan and catches a fleeting flash of sadness on her boyfriend’s face. She ignores his open palm on the armrest. When I’m an adult, I’ll understand, she tells herself. At 18, an abstinence pamphlet placed prominently in her college’s health center proclaims, “Everyone feels sexual attraction.” Almost everyone, she mentally amends. Desperate Google searches surrender swaths of sexual dysfunction and phobic diagnoses until one result catches her eye: Asexuality Visibility and Education Network. A click unleashes thousands of forum posts telling stories just like her own, enfolding her as if to say what she always wanted to hear: You’re not broken. For the almost 70,000 members of AVEN, Judy’s experiences are uncomfortably familiar. Before finding their home online, many asexual people internalize messages that they are broken or immature from intimate sources, the unfortunate consequence of systematic erasure. Building a culture less hostile towards asexuality involves forming inclusive asexual

communities that fight for visibility and accurate representation in queer, academic and medical discourses.

Unlike other marginalized sexual and gender identities, asexuality fights an uphill battle against societal messages that it does not exist, or that it indicates a lack of humanity, notions which create an experience of omission for asexual people. The definition of asexuality has been a topic of considerable debate over the past 50 years because of the importance in distinguishing sexual attraction, behavior, and self-identification. The most commonly used operational definition is “a sexual orientation characterized by sexual attraction to no one” (Decker 22). The assumption that sexuality is uniform and universal has led to asexuality’s pathologization and association with sexual dysfunction despite the evidence that at least 0.75% of the American population exhibits asexual behavior, attraction, and identification (Poston & Baumle). The proclivity to view asexuality as a treatable illness extends beyond medical professionals to the non-asexual majority, making asexuals targets for disdain and prejudice. A 2012 study found participants more likely to view people not interested in sexual contact as machine-like and devoid of other traits linked with “human nature,” exposing undercurrents of unacknowledged anti-asexual prejudice in the average person (MacInnis & Hodson 729). Discourses of all types, from medical journals to popular sitcoms, perpetuate subtle misunderstandings of asexuality that indicate an underdeveloped societal conception of human psychosexual complexity. The issue of awareness not only prevents closeted asexuals from finding a community of their peers by depriving them of relevant vocabulary, but also bars academic and medical recognition by rendering potentially asexual spokespeople invisible.

The first battle in the struggle for mainstream recognition of asexuality is gaining understanding and acceptance from the queer community through the authority of respected LGBTQ organizations. The most commonly-used initialism LGBT literally stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, but as the sexual minority movement expanded to emphasize all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, a popular variant adopted the letter Q for Queer. Queer is an umbrella term which encompasses all of the marginalized orientations and genders left off of what would have become an increasingly lengthy alphabet soup. This is where asexuality comes in. Like homo- and bisexuals, “aces” constantly battle the presumption that they are heterosexual, are pressured to deny their true nature, and suffer extreme feelings of isolation while forced to endure the potentially prickly process of “coming out” to friends and family. Counterintuitively, specific educational efforts are often met by uninformed, superficial vitriol from collections of strangers, queer and otherwise, purportedly motivated by “pity” for asexual people. To many, asexuals are either squatters on LGBTQ territory, freeloading off of hard-earned political and social gains that they don’t need in order to practice their lifestyle, or repressed, sex-negative celibates. These knee-jerk reactions perpetuate erasure and debilitate the asexual political cause by preventing it from reaching LGBTQ institutions

that would be natural allies if properly and uniformly educated. In order to break the cycle of misinformation, one major LGBTQ non-profit needs to blaze the frontier for reframing sexuality: GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network), an institution dedicated to eradicating sexual orientation and gender identity-based discrimination in school environments. GLSEN has the unique position of being a highly conspicuous resource for questioning youth, and can therefore use its influence to alleviate a lot of teen angst by simply introducing asexuality as a possible orientation. Asexual teens face alienating media portrayals, which paint people their age as bundles of raging hormones, and dismissive attitudes from their peers and parents, who insist that they're late bloomers. A recurring theme in many asexual coming-of-age stories is the lapse into depression after attempts to ask questions about their sexual orientation in high-school GayStraight Alliances fail to reveal any answers. Because GLSEN works directly with local LGBTQ chapters and GSAs countrywide, they could easily distribute brochures and flyers detailing the basics of asexuality and pointing the way to online resources like AVEN and Asexual Explorations. Even inclusion on their prolific "Safe Space Campaign" posters—which currently only mention LGBT students and allies—would simultaneously spark curiosity in confused asexual students and encourage a movement of LGBTQ solidarity in their support, empowering them to come out and join the rallying cry against heteronormativity.

As important as it is for the asexual identity to be acknowledged by queer communities and discourses, the accessibility of a distinctly asexual forum facilitates necessary internal discussion and enables external academic research. The consciously asexual population's continual growth has given rise to multiple such outcroppings on social websites like Tumblr and Reddit, but arguably the most cohesive nexus of activity is the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Founded by college freshman David Jay in 2002, AVEN's message boards house hotbeds of activity ranging from romantic advice request threads to active visibility projects. AVEN has developed its own culture complete with in-jokes, pride symbols, and an entirely new vernacular. Terminology like "poly-pan ace" (polyamorous panromantic asexual) draws ridicule from those unfamiliar with the separation between romantic and sexual attraction, but finding words to puzzle out models of intimacy is essential in a world of non-traditional relationships. Yet for all of its richness, AVEN's legitimacy is anything but cemented. Methodological issues confronting academic research on asexuality—including lack of a consensus on its definition and qualitative differences between self-identified and "closeted" asexuals—have resulted in a dearth of hard evidence for its existence. The majority of investigation originates within the community from AVEN's yearly census and a smattering of asexual-identifying scholars such as Andrew C. Hinderliter ("Methodological Issues for Studying Asexuality") and Julia Sondra Decker (*The Invisible Orientation*). From the outside, this looks like a pharmaceutical company giving the thumbs-up to its own drugs without FDA oversight: possibly accurate, but hard to take

seriously. Generating interest within academia starts with targeting budding graduate students in Human Sexuality Studies programs at large universities. Asexuality is a relatively unexplored frontier, an enticing notion to PhD students pressed to produce original research for Master's theses. David Jay and other pioneering asexual researchers could appear as guest lecturers in core sexuality and queer studies courses and host open "Asexuality 101" events on-campus in order to give students insight into the ace community, filling in the inherent gaps in outdated textbooks. After presenting, they could remain on-call for the rest of the semester to advise interested students in terms of viable research topics and methods. Giving asexual advocates a voice in the classroom would go a long way to make ace students feel welcome on their campus; college life can be exhaustingly isolating for people who don't relate to the sex-saturated culture, so removing the pressure on asexual students to explain themselves may make them feel less alien. Incorporating asexuality into collegiate curricula and increasing the number of studies on the subject will not only generate discussion about the numerous modes of attraction and whether there are normative levels of each, but may also provide basis for the de-pathologization of asexuality.

With the pressing evidence of an extensive body of research, the American Psychological Association will be forced to divorce lifelong asexuality from Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) and reform their restrictive norms of human sexuality. The most prominent source of invalidation asexuals suffer is the treatment of asexuality as a disease or disorder that demands correction. Asexual people that seek counseling for depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues often encounter insistent attempts to instead "fix" their sexual orientation. The few studies on the subject up to the present imply that lifelong absence of sexual desire is not pathological (Bogaert), but the American Psychological Association (APA), whose Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is used worldwide as a key guide for diagnosing pathologies, is largely to blame for continued clinical refusal to recognize asexuality. By the DSM-V's guidelines, any asexual person in "distress" for reasons related to their absence of desire can be deemed mentally ill and eligible for hormone treatment with psychiatric therapy. Ironically, APA ruled Sexual Orientation Change Efforts unethical in 2007 after their task force's review of peer-reviewed journal literature on sexual orientation revealed no abnormality in same-sex attraction (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation). Assuming future research continues to validate asexual identities, AVEN, LGBTQ allies, and sexuality academics have the power to petition the DSM subcommittee of the APA to change their stance on asexuality. The first step would be to revise the APA guidelines, which currently read, "sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes" (American Psychological Association 1). While explicitly exempting lesbian, gay, and bi identities from medical stigma, this categorical conception of sexuality uses Kinsey's outdated

binary model and leaves no room for asexuality. If bisexual people do not have two distinct sexual orientations, it is nonsensical to imply that asexual people do not lack one. A truly comprehensive definition should therefore logically include attraction to no sex or gender. From there, action should also be taken to make note of asexuality in the definition of HSDD in order to either expressly exclude it or warn against misconstruing it as symptomatic of sexual dysfunction. This would set up sturdy framework for the depathologization of asexuality by first encouraging therapists to acknowledge its validity, and then standardizing sexual orientation affirmation in asexual cases. Asexuals who wish to pursue therapy should not fear erasure in what is meant to be a guaranteed safe space, and an APA stamp of approval also prefaces gradual avenues into common knowledge—the ultimate achievement for asexual visibility.

Tackling problematic representation in contemporary LGBTQ, academic, and clinical contexts is vital to setting the stage for mainstream asexual recognition. That said, in the long run, attaining goals in these areas is akin to picking the low hanging fruit in terms of increasing visibility. As lofty as these discourses may seem with such a small community, the most daunting barriers to widespread acceptance lie in more popular discourses such as television and movies. The dominant culture is one of mass consumption such that the media people partake in inform their worldview, establishing norms of gender identity and sexual orientation. Even a seemingly benign weekly sitcom like *The Big Bang Theory* has the power to lead millions of viewers by example into unintentionally intolerant behaviors. Unlike respected institutions such as GLSEN or the APA, mass media is notoriously difficult to hold responsible for any societal damages it precipitates, especially with the limited support of a comparatively tiny online community like AVEN. Massive conglomerates have little motivation to cater to quiet, niche groups of insignificant financial consequence. However, the collective force of an expanded asexual demographic backed by allies from backgrounds in queer activism and academia alike would likely raise the stakes to make accurate representation a higher priority. Only then can asexual individuals like Judy begin to look beyond the horizon to a future where their identity is not only visible, but embraced with open arms as another healthy variation of human sexuality.

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MY WAKING UP

BY ADOLFO GAMBOA

“I’d like to be like you

How am I?

Well...I don’t want to be offensive. I just don’t understand how you can withstand to be alone for so long. How don’t you have someone? How aren’t you with someone? I wish I were as strong as you. You don’t mind being alone.”

That’s an extract of a conversation that I had with a friend. After that, I just stopped talking because I didn’t know how to answer. I haven’t had a relationship in years, and even before that it took me years to be with someone. All those relationships didn’t last very long and always lacked a sexual element. I enjoyed being with someone, to feel loved, to love, to go out, and to explore mutual tastes. But always, when they asked me to get laid, I just felt disgusted. Sometimes, I pretended I liked to be near that. I closed my eyes or asked them to shut off the lights, but that never worked. I never felt excited, my body didn’t feel pleasure, and I barely felt stimulated.

In the beginning I couldn’t understand why I reacted that way. All the romances displayed in movies and books depicted sexual intercourse as the closest thing to melting with a lover, to leave behind all that sickening individuality and be part of an upper consciousness. That, or sex, would be characterized as the maximum expression of pleasure. But when I was about to live it, I rejected it. I couldn’t stop wondering why I didn’t feel aroused if, in front of me, lied the remnants of Eden. I thought that there was something wrong with me and that I was a coward because I had missed the chance to “archive” sex.

Suddenly, in that moment, many of my male friends would brag about how many people they had banged. It seemed as if it were a competition. The more sex, the greater they were. It seemed to me that to prove your manhood you had to be like a hunter – collecting female sexual partners – otherwise you were seen as less. So, I had to confront a crossroads, and the questions about my identity expanded. Who am I? What do I want? What do I like? Whom do I like? What do I want to do with my life? How do I build my masculinity?

With my family and most of my male friends, I was supposed to prove my masculinity through female sexual partners. All of them gave up quickly on me. Some of them understood that I was different, even if they didn’t say it, and they showed me respect. Others whispered about me and my sexuality. I always was the kid that preferred books over girls. They warned me that I was going to be like my uncle that, until then, had spent his whole life studying and had no wife or offspring; the only one in the family

without a divorce. He had a thriving academic career and comfortable life, but in the eyes of the family he was a failure because he was alone. I still don't understand how all the effort and work could be meaningless just because you don't have someone. It's never enough to just have a successful life. In other's eyes, you must prove that you're also sexually capable by driving it until its last consequence: a progeny.

We exist under oppressive dispositions that sculpt our minds and bodies so deeply that it becomes hard to realize who we are. Even the one who has suffered from them can make others suffer by the very same methods. They know that it is wrong and sadistic, but that's "how the things are done." When my uncle finally saw me with a girl – my best friend – he embraced me excitedly, congratulating me for not confirming what the whispers had once said. Despite everything, he assumed that the only possible relationship between a man and a woman could be one in which the female was a sexual object.

A couple of times I found myself sharing my life with people who made me feel as though my heart was on the brink of exploding. And, all those times, it was weird because I never felt attracted towards them in an aesthetic or sexual way. At very first glance, they were only common people. I could never have imagined that we were going to develop a bond so strong. Since we were kids, we have been told that we should be like "beautiful people" – white, athletic, rich, able-bodied – and that the pinnacle of love was sex. We grew up hearing that we had to admire and aspire to be with these alluring people, so that we could have sex with them and have nice children: "hay que mejorar la raza."

So, I couldn't understand why I was so in love with people who were deemed to be unattractive to the common eye. If the ultimate aim of desire was sex, to produce offspring that could go higher in this hierarchy, I was doing it all wrong. Was my desire wrong? I liked the shared laughing, the long talks about the cosmos and the nothingness, holding hands, kissing, laying on the same bed and cuddling, but when it came to sex, I was allergic. My interest toward them was not sexually based, so when things became close to sexual, everything crumbled, because I wasn't able to give them that.

It's generally understood that the base of attraction is sex. That's how the binary distinction between a friend and a lover is created. The particularity of the lover is sexual attraction. If you are in a loving relationship, you are expected to engage in sexual encounters. Following that logic, lovers are supposed to have a sexual desire. But, what happens when someone lacks it? Can they still be lovers? Are they only friends? Is it possible to have a relationship of that kind that doesn't involve sex? So, these questions were posed to me several times: What are we? Do I really like you? Do you love me?

I liked them. I loved them. But, how could I establish a coupled relationship that was not based in the assumption of a sexual ontology of desire and attraction? To them the sexual element was something unnegotiable, so we had to take different paths. I think it is possible to redefine that assumption, because non-sexual desire and attraction are real. And that is only one of many possibilities. Desire and attraction are sexually mystified

signifiers. The possibilities of love and relationships are as wide as the language itself. They can be founded almost on anything, as well, and they can be developed towards sex or not. The shared imagination and the common agreements are the limits.

Returning to my introductory conversation: being human doesn't imply a sexual ontology of desire; sex is not the ultimate manifestation of love; not all humans feel sexual or aesthetic attraction; some humans do not want to be sexually involved at all. I am not strong because I can "withstand" to not have sex or have a long-term relationship. Moreover, I don't consider myself to be strong. I am just being myself. I understand, as well, that finding someone is always a hard thing. But, as you can imagine, it turns out to be a little bit harder when you are not only asexual, but a sex-repulsed ace too. I am just trying to survive in a hypersexualized world.

Adolfo Gamboa studied political science in the UNAM and hated it. Currently he is trying to find out what to do with his life while writing his thesis. He has coedited and published in some student magazines. His main lines of interest are the history of cities, urban space and politics, religion and politics, comparative systems of thought, Sufism, and literature. He's also an enthusiast of vegetarian pozole and cinema.

THE “THREAT” OF SEX

BY LAUREN YORK

CW: menstruation mention, lengthy discussion of rape

A few years into my period, I began looking for a better alternative to pads. My mom bought me a box of tampons – the smallest they had, she said. I had avoided tampons all this time because I doubted I’d be able to insert them, but something about sitting in my own bodily fluids for hours on end finally broke my will. I studied the instruction sheet that comes in each box. I positioned myself accordingly on the toilet and tried to calm myself. It was difficult to relax, however, with the cardboard tube poking at such a sensitive place. After ten minutes of increasing pain, I admitted defeat.

When I mentioned it to my mom, I made a joke that I’d never be able to have sex. The joke lost its humor as I began contemplating how true it was. I’d heard that a girl’s first time was supposed to hurt. A chill of fear ran down my spine as I realized just how much pain I would be in one day.

Around age 19, I came out as asexual. I was ecstatic to discover that there was a word for what I was; I was asexual, not broken, not wrong, not doomed to die alone. My identities of aromantic and agender would come later, but right now, I was asexual, and I was safe. I would never have to have sex because I didn’t experience sexual attraction.

The responses to my coming out were what all of us have come to expect. My aunt said I wasn’t really asexual, that I just hadn’t found the right person yet. My grandma said that if I was asexual, it was because I’d been abused as a child and just didn’t remember it – I still haven’t completely forgiven her for that. My parents didn’t say much, but looking back, I’m sure they either didn’t believe me or didn’t understand what I was saying.

As I connected with the ace community, I heard anecdotes of the other negative but usual responses to coming out as asexual: you’ll change your mind, don’t label yourself, and my least favorite: what if your partner wants it? They made me sad at the time – sad for my ace family who had to face such ignorance. Now such responses make me tremble on the inside. It wasn’t until a few years later that I would realize why.

Sex can be a weapon – a dagger that can leave wounds that will never fully heal. I’ve heard it said that while murder kills a body, rape kills a soul. Its destructive capabilities are well-known, which I’m sure is why women are the primary targets of rape threats. Corrective rape is used as a brutal cudgel against those who are viewed as wrong. The idea that someone can be “raped straight” is yet another sickening and evil facet of rape culture. But I want to submit that there is a more shadowy threat of sex that affects asexuals in a different way than it does straight people or even allosexuals. This threat of sex – the implication that a lack of sexual attraction will eventually produce negative consequences – is why I no longer find safety in my asexuality.

Apart from the tangible monster of rape, there are specters – threats – of sex that permeate an ace’s life. Most of them lurk in the negative responses we get to coming out. All of the disbelief, even the well-meaning reassurance that we’re not *really* asexual, can be translated thusly: “You not feeling sexual attraction is *so unthinkable* that it’s impossible. You don’t truly know yourself. You will want to have sex one day. You *will*.”

My defiant nature compels me to shoot back, “Or else *what?*” What will happen if I *don’t* want to have sex, not ever? What will you do about it? What will *anyone* do about it? The obvious answer to my unasked questions makes me tense and wary.

It’s even worse when they bring up a hypothetical partner, because I can see the scene play out all too clearly. What if my partner wants it, and they won’t take no for an answer? I’m 5’3” and have trouble opening heavy doors. I’d like to think I’d be able to activate some sort of hidden beast mode to save myself, but that’s just not realistic. I’d be at the mercy of anyone stronger than me, which is just about anyone over the age of 10. So *what if* my partner wants it and I don’t? Should I hope that I picked a decent partner? Or should I close my eyes and pray?

The unwanted sexualization of ace bodies is another example of the threat of sex from society. While people who present as female usually bear the brunt of unwanted sexualization regardless of orientation, aces of color have a special struggle with sexualization. This stems from racist stereotypes – the fiery, sexy Latina; the amorous Latin lover; the promiscuous, overbearing black woman; the sexually aggressive black man. Aces of color are forced into these boxes by a sexual society that is then disbelieving when they declare themselves sexually unavailable. The backlash of rejecting sexualization when they are “supposed to be” a particularly sexual group is surely an exhausting, painful experience for aces of color at best and dangerous at worst.

A society as permeated with sex as ours is bound to show a lack of understanding towards those who have no interest in the activity. However, a conscious choice is made by people, which makes up the attitude of society as a whole, to be hostile about it. Only recently has America been more accepting of non-straight identities, and it can be argued that such an acceptance still comes with a lot of catches.

I certainly wouldn’t claim that it is the fact that non-straight allosexuals still have sex that has gained them acceptance. I *would* believe it, though, if such a similarity were used to throw asexuals under the metaphorical bus. Aces themselves are guilty of doing the same thing to aromantics – the “At least we can feel love!” shtick *others* aromantics just as “At least we experience sexual attraction!” *others* asexuals.

Indeed, there has been a shocking amount of animosity in the LGBT+ community towards asexuals. It seems to be mostly online, which is especially unfortunate since the internet is the prime and often first resource for those questioning their sexuality. The reception from that very vocal minority still creates those implied threats of sex via outright rape threats and more delicate turns of phrase that amount to the idea that aces (and

aromantics) are invalid due to their lack of attraction. This perceived invalidity is used to argue against ace inclusion in queer spaces. A threatening ultimatum is issued, whether purposefully or not: be attracted to the “right” people in the “right” ways or risk ostracism.

Finally, but not of less importance, is the threat of sex in the medical field. One of my therapists told me to my face that she didn’t believe in asexuality – in every other sexuality, yes, but not mine – and that she could “give me something” for it. Were I less educated and much meeker, I may have accepted a medication I didn’t need just because a medical professional believed that I *had* to feel sexual attraction. The medicalization of asexuality remains pervasive despite the recent declassification of asexuality in the DSM. Asexuals could be treated – or *not* treated – for disorders just because of their orientation. Medicalization, then, is less of an implied threat than a direct one, possibly forcing aces to choose between trusting their doctor with personal information and receiving treatment. If the lack of sexual attraction is treated as a disorder, it is undoubted that asexuals can be and are threatened with sex in ways other than direct assault.

Despite the rather grim tone of this article, I don’t want to give the impression that aces are doomed to have no control over their sexual destiny. It’s true that there are people who commit evil actions with no regard for the bodies of others, but that doesn’t mean aces should resign themselves to being victims at some point. Asexuality is an incredible, beautiful thing. To face a world seemingly obsessed with sex and proclaim your lack of attraction is bravery at its finest. Those of us who feel comfortable doing so can challenge the threats of sex when we’re able and encourage our allies to do the same on our behalf. It will be a process. It will be difficult. It might even be dangerous. Still, I believe that we will be able to shift the dominant narrative from *when you have sex* to *if you have sex*.

I used to wear my asexuality like a suit of armor. I found safety in my identity. That was before I realized how normalized language conveys an expectation of sexual activity, and an implication that I will eventually have no choice in the matter. To keep a partner, to be accepted in my own community, to receive accurate medical treatment, and, for some, to be considered an acceptable representation of their race – it is suggested that we must want to have sex, or at least be sexually available. The threat of sex can be explicit, but for aces, it’s often obscured by academic and well-meaning words. Fighting these threats could incur the implied consequences, but I believe that those of us who can fight, should. Only by challenging the preconceived notions of the necessity of sexual attraction will those notions be shattered, leaving a more accepting world for us all to enjoy.

Lauren York (codename: *Alice Galaxy*) is an asexual, aromantic, and agender aspiring architect and writer. When they’re not publicly raging over the world’s injustices, they can be found working on their veritable library of unfinished novels (most with queer protagonists), playing video games, or sleeping. You can find Alice’s plots to singlehandedly fix every one of the world’s problems on Twitter @jimperbammimg.

DEAR SEX ED

BY GRETCHEN TURONEK

Dear Sex Ed,

It's been a while. Long enough that I don't think anyone would blame me for burying this and moving on with my life. But the fact of the matter is that we need to talk about how toxic you are before you hurt someone.

I was, by a more conservative definition, a fairly typical teenage girl: cisgender, conventionally attractive, well-behaved, studious, and romantically interested in boys despite being chronically dateless. You were an abstinence-only sexual education program at a public high school in southeast Michigan. We existed in a culture where teenage sexuality was both an expectation and a taboo: something that was a fact of life but needed to be avoided at all costs for health and moral reasons.

This was fine with both of us. Me, because I wasn't interested in sex anyway, but wouldn't realize for several more years that I was asexual. You, because that was just the way you did things. Your message was one of fear, of denying urges that you assumed we all had. That intercourse was only to be done with an opposite-sex, lawfully-wedded spouse for procreation. That sexual partners could be represented with chewed Oreo cookies spit into cups of water. That the consequences were pregnancy and disease that could not be reliably prevented except through complete abstention.

What you said seemed fine to me. You were just another science class that I needed to pay attention to and pass. I felt no urges to experiment with sexuality, and you were an authority telling me that I was right to think and feel that way. I didn't come away thinking that I was broken or inferior: on the contrary, you made me believe that I was better than my peers for my sexual disinterest. I was special. I was "not like other girls," who expressed desires that I could only mimic through using their language.

Do you realize how much damage you're doing?

Not to me, necessarily. I was one of the lucky ones. I wasn't hurt like I could have been. All I ended up doing was confusing a handful of potential partners. It would take me a few years to figure myself out, and I probably could have done it sooner with more information, but I can't pretend that I was hurt because of you.

Do you know how many people you hurt? I can't even tell you. The people who got pregnant or sick because they didn't have the knowledge to safely explore. The people who *did* feel ashamed because they felt like some part of themselves was broken or wrong and

they couldn't help it. The people who didn't have all of the privileges that I did and that would never have the opportunity to learn otherwise.

It's true that we live in a sexual society. It's true that it's the expectation that teenagers will experiment sexually. It's true that I had a very easy time wrapping my mind around the concept of denial and, by this logic, I'm proof of concept that teenagers can simply be told not to experiment and will agree unconditionally.

But you cannot work with those assumptions. You cannot present incomplete information and expect that a room full of teenagers won't at least entertain the idea of filling in the blanks. The world won't stop being sexual once we enter it, and we need to be able to have frank conversations about that in a safe environment. Teenagers cannot afford to be ignorant about sexuality, regardless of their orientation.

So, talk to them. Talk about different kinds of attraction and assure them that they're all valid. Talk about safety, about contraception, about resources they can use to learn. Talk—*really* talk—about what does and doesn't work and show them hard numbers to back it up. If they're going to have sex, give them the knowledge they need to do it properly; if they're like me and not going to, then the information will still be useful from a health and safety standpoint.

Make them talk, too, even if it's anonymous. Have them talk about the expectations and challenges they face about their bodies and sexualities in a world where these ideals are bought and sold. Have them talk about their relationships to make sure they're healthy. Have them talk about their questions so that they can get their answers from someone who knows the answers.

You can't tell a room full of teenagers “no” and expect them to go with it. Learn how to talk to them, not for your sake, but for theirs. It would have helped me, and it probably would have prevented a lot of people I knew from being hurt. That's what you told me you wanted: now prove it.

Sincerely,

Gretchen

Gretchen Turonek is an asexual ciswoman that lives and writes in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She's also a trumpet player, tabletop gamer, wife, and cat mom. She has a website and blog where she writes about writing and can also be found spending far too much time on Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, and Instagram.

ASEXUAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: HOW OFTEN? WHY? WHY NOT?

BY **BRIAN FINK, PHD** | UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

Asexuality has been considered as the “invisible orientation.” (Decker, 2014) Research related to the asexual population has seemingly focused on the theoretical aspects of asexuality. However, there is a wealth of data available from the Ace Community Census that can be analyzed for more pragmatic purposes. Over the past decade, there have been numerous non-academic articles and online discussions where the inclusion of asexuals in the LGBTQ community has been debated. Recently, the Equinox Gym was under fire for releasing a short pride film entitled “LGBTQAlphabet: Six Letters Will Never Be Enough” because the A stood for “Ally.” Some LGBTQ groups are asexual-inclusive and may be places for asexuals to thrive, particularly if they are also another queer identity, such as homoromantic (Decker, 2014).

It would be fair to say that the asexual population is, at best, on the outskirts of the LGBTQ community. In the community-at-large, the asexual population still appears to be relatively unknown and without improvements to both the online and offline experiences, asexuals will continue to be marginalized in society.

It is estimated that approximately 1% of the population is asexual, according to a study of 18,426 individuals from England, Wales, and Scotland (Bogaert, 2004). However, it is reasonable to speculate that their prevalence has increased over the years. There are asexuals who remain hidden in the closet and this is due, at least in part, to difficulties being out among their family, friends, and the general public. One has to wonder if the online and offline communities that do exist are not only well-known to asexuals, but how welcoming are these communities?

There is debate online as to whether or not asexuals belong in the LGBTQ community, with those arguing against inclusion, in part, based on a lack of systematic oppression. For people who want to be accepted and welcomed for who they are, discrimination from the LGBTQ community is both ironic and troubling. Rather than use oppression as an indicator for inclusion, perhaps it would be best to use the fact that we are all human beings as the criterion for welcoming individuals to a place they can call home. The lack of a harmonious, welcoming environment only serves to further alienate the asexual population. Comparative victimization, in which groups may exclude others based, in part, on their level of real or perceived oppression, does no benefit to anyone.

With this in mind, asexuals may have to find asexual-only communities. Finding other asexuals may be difficult, particularly offline, where being out may not be considered safe. As asexuals continue to struggle to find inclusion in the LGBTQ community, they

may be forced to stay isolated, perhaps not participating in any asexual community whatsoever. Prior research has dealt with asexual communities and sexual norms (Przybylo, 2011), but what about asexual communities as simply, a community? Some researchers feel asexuality is at odds with traditional gender roles and threatens the self-concept (MacNeela, 2015), and can make it difficult to relate to non-asexuals (Carrigan, 2011). However, regardless of our orientation, we are all human beings. We should be able to relate at that most basic level of our existence.

This research study will both quantify asexual community participation and identify the reasons why asexuals do or do not participate in communities, both online and offline. Knowing and understanding these reasons may help in the development of real-world methods that can be implemented to improve the experiences of asexuals in existing communities. It is also possible that new communities could be created based on data that is taken annually from the Ace Community Census. This, in turn, can create more awareness of asexuals, more inclusive communities, and build greater acceptance of asexuals in the general population. The long-term goals are to ensure that asexuals feel a sense of belonging in any community so that they may be more likely to come out of the closet and enjoy their lives.

METHODS

Data from the 2016 Ace Community Census, a survey completed by 9,870 individuals from around the world, was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. The 2016 Ace Community Census was a community research project by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) Survey Team. The survey, which took approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete, was open to anyone over the age of 13, including both asexual and non-asexual individuals.

Responses to specific questions as to why asexuals participate and do not participate in online and offline communities were analyzed and themes were determined and reported. Data specific to both online and offline community participation and frequency were assessed and reported by the label that respondents most closely identify.

RESULTS

The majority of respondents most closely identified with being asexual (64.5%) and considered their sexual orientation to be asexual (71.8%) (Table 1). The reasons for participation in communities listed in Table 2 are not exhaustive, but reveal the themes that were reported by numerous respondents. Additional comments included, but were not limited to, talking about topics other than relationships, an obligation to participate, sharing political opinions, reading posts, lurking, and keeping up with opinions.

The reasons for non-participation in communities listed in Table 3 are also not exhaustive but reveal numerous themes. Additional comments included, but were not limited to, disliking the tone or level of debate, not connecting with members of the group, not having much in common with others besides being asexual, drama, and bad posting rules in online communities.

While the majority of respondents had met someone offline that was asexual, gray-A, or demisexual (Table 4), fewer than 20% participate in offline asexual groups. Of these participants, just 3.2% of questioning individuals and 8.0% of asexual individuals participate at least once per month in an offline group. In offline LGBTQ spaces, experiences tended to be positive among those who provided an actual ranking (Table 5). However, there was considerable variance in feeling the most recent offline LGBTQ space they participated in was intended for them, particularly among asexuals, as 511 of 3,350 (15.2%) reported “Not at all.”

For online communities, Tumblr was the most popular for asexual participation. Reading or watching content was most common in Tumblr, followed by AVEN, YouTube, and Facebook (Table 6). Posting or commenting in online communities was most common in Tumblr and Facebook.

DISCUSSION

One of the questions in the Ace Census asked respondents for reasons why they currently participate in asexual communities (both online and offline, where applicable). While there were responses they could have checked (to find people like myself, to learn more about myself or asexuality, to be an advocate, to talk about asexuality, to have general discussions, to find friends or partners, N/A – I do not participate in asexual communities); several respondents decided to write in their own specific reason(s) by the “Other” option.

There are many reasons why asexual individuals reportedly do or do not participate in online and/or offline groups (Table 3). Asexual individuals want to be part of a community where they feel safe, validated, are respected, and have a voice. Online and offline communities can be a place for support, friendship, discussing experiences, asking questions and seeking advice, social activities, happiness, and raising awareness of asexual individuals and their rights.

However, fear of outing oneself, age differences, familial disapproval, discrimination, harassment, infighting, unwelcoming communities, lack of nearby groups, and uncertainty of finding asexual communities are just some of the many reasons why asexual individuals in this Census do not participate in online or offline groups.

One of the strengths of this study was analyzing the Ace Community Census data collected from 9,870 respondents from around the world. Being an online survey, it may skew the responses to those more familiar with using the Internet, which tends to be

younger individuals. The mean age of respondents was 23.1 years and 95% of the study population was age 36 or younger. The ages ranged from 13 years to 109 years.

With this research, evidence-based improvements can be made to existing online and offline communities and new communities can be created that best reflect the findings from this census. Among adult asexuals, there may be a fear of meet-ups with asexuals under the age of 18. The inclusion of more age-specific discussion forums, similar to what AVEN provides online, would be a helpful method of connecting similar-age asexual individuals. Online posting policies could be edited to better create a welcoming community sent to current and new members. This action, along with diligent post moderation, could be implemented to improve the online experience and maintain a more civil, respectful, and accepting environment.

It is fair to state the asexual population is a minority within the LGBTQ+ community. Though asexual awareness has improved over the past couple of decades, the asexual population still struggles to connect with each other, while also finding their acceptance in society. Future research efforts should focus on a more practical, evidence-based approach to addressing the issues facing the asexual population.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Ace Census Population

<u>Which of the following labels do you most closely identify with?</u>		
Identity	N	%
Asexual	6,367	64.5
Gray-A	1,063	10.8
Demisexual	848	8.6
Questioning if asexual/GrayA/	1,054	10.7
None of the above	538	5.4
Total	9,870	100.0
<u>Sexual Orientation</u>		
Orientation	N	%
Asexual	7,067	71.8
Gay	109	1.1
Lesbian	218	2.2
Pansexual	354	3.6
Queer	1,044	10.6
Straight	608	6.2
Bisexual	447	4.5
Missing	23	
Total	9,870	100.0

Table 2. Reasons for Participation in Online and Offline Asexual Communities

Acceptance
Ace humor
A way to remind myself it is ok to be ace.
Ask questions and seek advice from other aces.
Be able to better defend myself against harassment.
Belonging
Clear misconceptions about non-ace people and sexual attraction.
Coping
Discuss alternative definitions to asexuality.
Ease anxiety.
Feels like coming home.
Friends
Fun
Happiness to meet other people like myself.
In hopes that younger people will figure themselves out sooner than I did.
Learn about the evolving conceptualization of sexuality.
Participate in educational dialogue with non-ace people.
Positivity
Safe place
Social activities
Spread awareness in the LGBTQ community.
Support
Talk about gender
Talking about personal experiences.
To be comfortable in my own skin.
To be in an asexual-positive environment.
To be informed enough to treat others who identify as asexual in a relatively informed manner, in order to be a more kind and decent person.
To be part of a community.
To be visible so that other aces know they are not alone.
To encourage aces to create their own community that suits their needs.

To feel normal.
 To help individuals and offer advice.
 To help my friends with understanding.
 To not feel alone.
 To stand up for our rights and the rights of all other LGBTQA+ people.
 To talk about aces in LGBT spaces.
 To talk about relationships.
 To vent my frustrations over ignorance about asexuality.
 Trust
 Understand why people have problems with asexuality.
 Validation

Table 3. Reasons for Non-Participation in Online and Offline Asexual Communities

Afraid as a demisexual that I am not ace enough.
 Afraid friends or relatives would find out and out me.
 Afraid of outing myself.
 Afraid of the impact it might have on my partner.
 Age
 Age group seemed too young for me.
 Asexual elitism
 Being called “it”.
 Busy
 Cannot drive.
 Depend on others for money and transportation.
 Depression
 Did not consider asexuality to be a part of the LGBTQ community.
 Did not know there were any communities.
 Family disapproval and prejudice.
 Fear of ace discrimination.
 Feeling the need to prove I am ace.
 Going to new places and meeting new people is scary.
 Group is far away.
 Happily closeted.
 Harassment from non-ace individuals.
 Have not come out yet.
 Have not found a suitable community.
 Have not looked.
 Homophobia.
 I am quite old now and used to being in the closet about everything towards everyone.
 I do not feel the need to be in a community.
 Infighting between various populations of the asexual spectrum.
 Introverted
 LGBT community not welcoming.
 Like observing more than participating.
 Negative discourse
 Non-ace people kept causing trouble.
 Online site “ace discourse” made the ace community contentious and unsafe.
 Online site filled with people disagreeing with asexuality.
 Religious reasons.
 Shame
 Shyness
 Social anxiety
 The vibe turned me off.
 Too much hate and toxic discourse.

Unsure about identity.
 Unsure where to find ace communities.
 Worried it would affect my career.

Table 4 – Meeting Others and Participation in Offline Asexual Groups

Have you ever met someone offline who identified as asexual, gray-A, or demisexual that you know of?						
	Asexual N (%)	Gray-A N (%)	Demisexual N (%)	Questioning N (%)	None of the Above N (%)	Total
Yes	3,954 (62.2)	698 (66.0)	575 (67.8)	507 (48.4)	397 (74.9)	6,131
No	1,910 (30.0)	253 (23.9)	192 (22.6)	400 (38.2)	80 (15.1)	2,835
Unsure	491 (7.7)	106 (10.0)	81 (9.5)	140 (13.4)	53 (10.0)	871
Total	6,355	1,057	848	1,047	530	9,837
Missing						33

How often do you currently participate in offline asexual groups?						
	Asexual N (%)	Gray-A N (%)	Demisexual N (%)	Questioning N (%)	None of the Above N (%)	Total
Never	5,071 (80.0)	876 (82.9)	712 (84.4)	943 (90.8)	454 (88.0)	8,056
Few times a year or less	752 (11.8)	115 (10.9)	89 (10.5)	61 (5.9)	39 (7.5)	1,056
Once a month	179 (2.8)	24 (2.2)	11 (1.3)	9 (0.8)	4 (0.8)	227
Few times a month	223 (3.5)	28 (2.6)	22 (2.6)	21 (2.0)	7 (1.3)	301
Few times a week	82 (1.3)	10 (0.9)	8 (0.9)	3 (0.3)	10 (1.9)	113
At least once a day	29 (0.4)	3 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.4)	36
Total	6,336	1,056	843	1,038	516	9,789
Missing						81

Table 5. Experiences in Offline LGBTQ Spaces

How was your experience in the most recent offline LGBTQ space you participated in?						
	Asexual N	Gray-A N	Demisexual N	Questioning N	None of the Above N	Total
Negative	137	26	26	21	13	223
1	156	43	24	22	15	260
2	477	82	64	67	38	728
3	821	178	117	119	97	1,332
Positive	1,473	249	213	205	179	2,319
NA	3,303	485	404	619	196	5,007
Total	6,367	1,063	848	1,053	538	9,869

To what degree did you feel that the most recent offline LGBTQ space you participated in was intended for you?						
	Asexual N	Gray-A N	Demisexual N	Questioning N	None of the Above N	Total
Not at all	511	91	76	76	32	786
1	573	121	75	77	37	883
2	756	130	105	95	61	1,147
3	589	113	79	89	87	957
Mostly	621	121	113	95	119	1,069
NA	3,317	487	400	621	202	5,027
Total	6,367	1,063	848	1,053	538	9,869

Table 6. Reading, Watching, Posting, and Commenting on Online Sites

Site	How much do you currently read or watch content from ...?						Total
	Never	Few times a year or less	Few times a month	Few times a week	At least once a day	NA	
AVEN	4,308	3,528	1,138	375	109	412	9,870
Non-English asexual forum	8,493	446	174	89	31	637	9,870
Tumblr	1,615	1,283	2,009	2,639	2,055	269	9,870
Livejournal	8,554	516	140	23	7	630	9,870
Blogs (excl. Tumblr and Livejournal)	6,950	1,333	752	211	57	567	9,870
Facebook	5,870	1,145	1,010	812	546	487	9,870
Twitter	7,166	818	751	405	189	541	9,870
Reddit	7,891	639	410	259	98	573	9,870
Youtube	5,020	2,419	1,439	410	97	485	9,870
Meetup.com	8,878	227	138	27	5	595	9,870
Chat room	8,540	370	172	103	96	589	9,870
	How much do you post or comment in ...?						Total
	Never	Few times a year or less	Few times a month	Few times a week	At least once a day	NA	
AVEN	8,379	748	178	66	46	453	9,870
Non-English asexual forum	9,121	141	72	15	4	517	9,870
Tumblr	5,041	1,970	1,514	745	244	356	9,870
Livejournal	9,207	84	19	3	0	557	9,870
Blogs (excl. Tumblr and Livejournal)	9,028	210	78	18	8	528	9,870
Facebook	7,663	906	565	197	61	478	9,870
Twitter	8,403	506	279	127	43	512	9,870
Reddit	8,903	303	109	27	5	523	9,870
Youtube	8,794	403	121	35	6	511	9,870
Meetup.com	9,145	120	45	6	0	554	9,870
Chat room	8,833	204	115	83	74	561	9,870

Brian Fink is a Professor of Public Health and an epidemiologist at the University of Toledo in Ohio. He is interested in combining his research skills with his asexual orientation to learn more how asexuals can have happier and healthier lives.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

BY ANNA MARÍA MENGANI

CW: stalking and sexual harassment

When puberty starts, many of us must face the sex talk. Not just the ones given to us by our parents or teachers, but also the ones many of us have with our friends and peers. Middle school was a very constricting place. There's a saying that goes "curiosity killed the cat." It's never once resonated with me. I was never curious... but I was scared. In middle school, I was scared to be judged, categorized, ostracized, and most of all... alone.

Being different was frightening in this environment. There was such an undeniable feeling of peer pressure to conform to societal standards, which is why I always felt like I had to conceal my asexuality. Unlike other sexualities, if you don't bring up sex, you don't really feel pressured to talk about it. It had been an easy dodge for me, until my adolescence.

My situation only worsened in high school. Thoughts of losing one's virginity are pervasive in imaginings of high school student life and are thought to be a part of the high school experience. My first year of high school became far too real for me. I would countlessly overhear porn and sexual fantasies from old friends. It was a time when I had to endure the complexities of growing into my body, being catcalled on the street, dating, and being surrounded by outright misogynistic peers. My peers would sexualize my body, and force unsolicited verbal advances upon me:

"You probably sleep around a lot because you have the body for it."

"I wish I had your boobs; I'd hook up with all the guys."

"Why don't you show some cleavage? What's the point of having boobs then?"

"Don't you feel ashamed for wearing that? You're just asking for it."

My experience as a Latina seemed to exacerbate these responses further. People would assume, just because I was Latina, that I was inherently more sexual. Latinas are often perceived to be sexy women who are passionate with voluptuous bodies and curves, which may seem positive, except when those stereotypes are reinforced upon you unwillingly. Without a choice, I would get comments from people who looked at my body rather than me as a person:

"Your hips don't lie."

"You have to sleep around because you're Latina, right?"

So, when I told people that I was asexual, I wasn't believed. My asexuality was seen as a cover up for being "prude," "celibate," or "inexperienced." Whenever I mentioned how

uncomfortable I felt talking about sexual acts in depth, or how I wasn't interested in hooking up with anyone, I felt pushed aside and ignored:

“You have to have sex. Have you really tried everything? You can't be asexual.”

Eventually, I gave in.

I started dismissing my own feelings for the approval of others. I was losing focus of my own identity, with the endless voices in my head screaming: “This isn't right, this isn't who you are.” The one screaming the loudest was, “I want to be normal.” This newfound feeling as a 14-year-old was dangerous. It was a danger that I couldn't get away from, growing more intensely by the minute. I caved into a point of almost no return. I started seeking validation of my worth from others. This search for validation led me to the worst two years of my life. I sunk into such a deep anxiety that I still suffer from to this day.

This anxiety stems from a few factors, but it originated from a person who I thought I knew. For the sake of privacy, I will call him Antonio. Antonio was the first of few people I was able to share nearly anything personal with, including my asexual experience. I considered him a close friend who I had mutual interests with. The spring of my freshman year of high school, he began acting different towards me. He started flirting and being touchy with me. It was a side I had never seen before. Soon, I realized he had a crush on me, but I never felt the same.

The one-sided love on his end transformed into anger and frustration. He would go weeks or months without speaking to me and blamed it on his home life. When we did talk, if I rejected him again he would leave for a while. He wouldn't talk to me at school, and his anger and frustration only worsened because we lived a block away from each other. When friendship turned to anger, and multiple red flags began rising, I was naive. So terrified of being alone, I thought I could fix what was already broken.

Sometimes things that are broken cannot be fixed. I ended up learning that the hard way. Living a block away from Antonio was an ordeal. He would follow me home, stalk my social media, gang up on me, and try to get physical with me.

In May 2014, I was making my way home from high school. I took the s56 bus that stopped two blocks away from my old house. There were two of the same buses that stopped. I rode the first bus, and Antonio rode the second one. I started walking down the block, taking the long route because it was a beautiful spring day, and I felt like listening to music while enjoying the weather. The flowers were blossoming, and everything looked so perfect. When I looked back at the buses he was running down the other block, and I didn't think anything of it at the time. At that time, in May, we hadn't talked for a couple of months. When walking down the second block, which I lived on, I decided to walk up like usual instead of around the block because I saw him waiting for me. I thought nothing of it, and

just thought he wanted to talk. When we met up, it felt like usual. We just talked, and he asked me about my day. Nothing felt off except he didn't usually go out of his way to walk the opposite way as me. If he saw me walking he would normally just call me over. We were friends. Suddenly, in the middle of talking... he kissed me.

I was horrified.

“Don't tell anyone,” Antonio said.

I couldn't think, speak, or move. I've rejected him three times, but three times was not enough for him. While walking home, I started crying and trembling with disbelief. My mother was waving at me by the mailbox outside the house with our new puppy, oblivious to what had just transpired. By the time I got to my house, I had wiped away all my tears, so I didn't have to explain to my mother why I was sad. My puppy leaped out of my mother's arms and ran to me. Everything faded, and I felt so relieved for a moment. There was nothing else in that moment except for my family.

A moment didn't last.

Days later, my phone was being spammed with notifications. They were messages from Antonio attempting to apologize.

I couldn't forgive him.

Actions speak louder than words. Accepting an apology from him would make it seem like what he had done was right.

It was wrong.

Even while blocking Antonio on social media, he still found ways to try to contact me by making new accounts or by bothering old friends to contact me.

The stalking online and in-person persisted until the end of my sophomore year of high school in 2015.

‘No’ was never an acceptable answer to him, always a ‘maybe.’ A ‘maybe’ turned into depression, fear, but, most of all, anxiety. I kept asking myself:

“What am I doing to make him stalk me?”

“What have I done wrong? Was I giving the wrong signals?”

“Why can't he accept I don't like him?”

“Is my asexuality causing him to hurt me like this?”

“Does he view me as weak because I'm a woman?”

Countless nights of not being able to sleep with agonizing worries about my safety almost pushed me to the point of isolation once again in my life. Towards the end of my middle school years, I lost most of my friends. I felt like an outsider, not only in my own friend group, but also at school. Getting out of bed was physically draining. My grades were slipping along with my motivation, and I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I didn't speak, and the months leading up to graduation were a blur, but I remember how I felt. I was angry at myself for being uncomfortable with a topic that came so naturally to everybody else except me. When I lost my friends, very few stayed. Months before graduation I attempted to open up, and I let someone in when I shouldn't have. Antonio misunderstood my kindness for weakness, and my longing for a friend as a longing for him. When finding out about my asexuality, he negated who I was for his own desires. Not wanting to have sex or an intimate relationship with someone should never put you at risk of harm. A threat of a restraining order should not be the reason for threats to stop. Never feel guilty for being authentically yourself.

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SPEAKING SEX: ASEXUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE LANGUAGE OF SEXUALITY

BY JOE JUKES

1. “Sexy” is not a term I have used to describe myself. It is however a term with which I have recently been confronted.
2. Sex is a term with which I do not find identification. It is a term that I have come to know and understand in a messy fashion, as well as a practice I choose to engage with and glean enjoyment and validation from as an asexually-identified person.

During one recent moment of intimacy, during sex, I was called “sexy.” The speaker – a partner, a co-agent with me in an act of sex, an evocator, an interlocutor, (a compliment-giver?) – sought to flatter and to validate me in the midst of a union forged under the watch of sexuality. I laughed; the term itself, so wholly unbecoming of my personhood, and over-extravagant in its dramatic deployment, cut through an air of tenderness and speared my body, fixing me in sex and in “sexy.” All this and more occurs in the very moment I negotiate with the culture and structure that defines my absence-identity – in sex. The two of us giggle like infants at the exchange before continuing.

But the adjective sticks in my mind. To engage with John L. Austin and Judith Butler is to understand that a term is performative in the act of speech – to be deemed “sexy” is to hold oneself in the subjectivity of the speaker or rather to be fixed there involuntarily. To become in a space and time a “self” of that which is “sexy” is to align selfhood to “sexy” and all the meanings, sensibilities, and practices with which it is to be so. When I profess to labour over my appearance and behaviour in ways that defy sexualisation, what agency can be spoken of in the moment those very things, along with the relations held between myself and a speaker, also themselves become “sex(y)”?

The question then arises whether to refute one’s name despite the relation pursued (here, what might be named a sexual union), whether to engage with “sexy” and inhabit it agentively, or to ignore the act of naming it/me altogether in a way that also ignores the beloved speaker. None are “correct,” all are weaponised, and a dialogue ensues not between two parties, but triangularly between the one who names, the one who is named, and the structure that brings the name into existence. How I allow asexuality to define me, and how I engage in sexuality and sex, are both negotiations – and fraught ones at that – caught in language as well as desire. In fact, it might be said that speech is dually driven by *the desire of speech to speak* and of *speaking desire* itself.

In formulating the above, I herald a discussion of how language and speech come to shape our understandings of sex, and by extension of asexuality. And I seek here to tentatively

explore what can be theorised through linguistic metaphors pertaining to the asexual and the sexual. I believe such a method is in large part enabled by an asexual vantage-point and comes from the daily negotiation of sexuality's grammar in our collective pronouncement of an identity marked by difference, absence and queerness.

Let us begin at the mouth. With what do we speak? I cannot bring myself to say it is with the mother-tongue. The circumstances of our conception and birth are bound – if not merely physically, then also representationally – by coitus, sexual union and a heteronormative, reproductive imperative. We are brought into the world by sex: from the missionary position to the desire to reproduce. The mother-tongue is already Oedipal, the mouth already has Daddy-issues, or less flippantly, the condition of life as asexual is always already sex itself (even queer reproductive methods cannot escape emulating to some extent or another this sexual pre-origin). Further, the individual-authentic metaphor of the mother-tongue cannot adequately account for the difference of an asexual's relation to sex and sexuality from the mother's (sexual) role of "parent." Sex birthed me, but it is not comfortably nor naturally vocalised by me. Sex is not my mother-tongue, it cannot be.

Yet to grow up "asexually" is to be immersed in the language of sex, or rather to "surface" from that immersion and come to know one's foreign relationship to a sexual-tongue. To live is to have fluency assumed and to exist under sexua-linguistic forces that aim to ensure one's fluency. I have laboured to be proficient, or more assuredly, I cannot escape my own desire for proficiency in sex as a vehicle to a legible life. What results is a deeply personal and absolute understanding of that which I am not, an intelligibility within a system of compulsory sexuality – a "sexual script" – or rather, an already-linguistic formation of myself that exists outside of sex in any active sense but sounded-out by the language of sex. To clarify, I, and copious other asexuals, know full well what "sexy" is or is supposed to mean. We are all too aware of what constitutes the attractive or desirable; that sexual attraction can be subjective and taste-based (dialectal?) despite the fact that it is to a large degree unexperienced by asexuals. Just as one can understand "Schadenfreude" based on its usage rather than any knowledge of the German language, asexuals understand the meanings of sex in its various socio-societal forms without the need for translation. My engagement with/in sex is not translation. It is mutually intelligible: a speech act in which I become a present absentee, a sexual asexual, a proficient-foreigner, a contradictory mode of legibility-as-survival. Whilst my engagement with sexuality's grammar is subject to mispronunciation, slippages in syntax, and perhaps a limited vocabulary, my language is one of necessary in-betweenness. Is it a patois?

Do I speak a slang, a hybrid? Do I speak another language altogether? Am I a mute in a language system unfit for me? Am I vernacular? Am I illiterate? Asexuality regarding sex is more than silence I am sure. Sex is a language that we necessarily speak to be heard, a

vocabulary one must use, even if to express its inadequacy, and here it is crucial to reinvoke Butler in reminding that speech acts themselves are not merely words: speech is action.

As a sex-participant asexual I ask whether my involvement within sexual-cultural systems amounts merely to a clumsy use of broken sexu-speech. Am I striking a pitiful tune of dischords and conchords with sexual scripts? All the while, I know myself to be heard, dialogue is present – even if it is triangular. In such a conversation, for the asexual, caught in the grammar of sex and its syntax which holds lives in rhythm and meter, one’s (il-)literacy pronounces one “Other,” or the non-Other, the illegible. Sex becomes mediated – and perhaps this is truism between all people – by a paranoid translation in which one’s ability to speak freely is constrained and ordered by sexual scripting, wherein touch is speech, a caress forms a sentence, a gaze becomes a question mark, a climax embodies a ...? Can kink ever become a dialect, then? Would “femme” or “butch” engender an accent? Is there potential for queer to exist as a codified slang? And how would sexual conversation ring out between and across this variability in ways that account for asexual voices and beings?

Suffice to say, just as those asexually-identified people who imbricate themselves in the form of sex raise questions, so too do the abstinent, the sex-repulsed, and many other asexuals who do not engage in sexual activity. When I say I cannot escape my desire for a legible life in “Sex,” it also follows that anyone pursuant to an “illegible life” cannot either achieve this, for the performative force of “speaking life” becomes also “speaking Sex” and/or “speaking non-Sex.” To behave “asexually” is a speech-act, to render oneself off-script is to write a non-script: and a script is still a script. Non-sex remains sexual in a framework that enunciates sex in the nth degree of every sound. Where the sexual script is absent and disengaged from, where silence appears to endure, entendre and meaning continue sexuality’s grip on the vocal and verbal. One who does not engage in sex, one who does not converse, is still called – perhaps called “sexy” just as one who does engage in sex. Words tar bodies in their vocalisation, naming continues, the space between words opens a chaste and virginal space on the page into which sexuality drains and desires. The space between words dazzle in their vast emptiness, on pages bleached white. Silence is better seen not as the non-Script, but the non-descript, the legible anti-presence.

When I dress and move, when I attempt to seduce, when I have sex, I (re-)engage with the scripts that make me “sexy.” I allow the word to speak for me, and I try to get a word in edgeways in the din that ensues. Engagement in sex is powerful because one rubs up against the language through which one exists. Engaging in sex entails often the proliferation of speech beyond and apart from the spoken word, desire flows through communicative avenues of the bodily, the atmospheric, and the psychic. It must be said that here I follow the script. The conditioning “immersion” of the media, the social, the formal-political acts

through me in the sexual relation. At once asexual self, and a sexual self, I cannot deny the snatched euphoria not of orgasm but of linguistic clarity. Within the sexual encounter, there exist turns of phrase or swells of prose in which I gain the fluency of the mother-tongue, in which translation is a moot point, and in which the phonetic or definitional distances of mutual intelligibility cease to be. A speaking-union as much as a sexual-union, the pursuit of which, whether for partner-satisfaction, physical release, or any other reason, is temporarily removed from the structuring constraints of language and speech. To repeat: a sex through which sex is transcended from (in the sense that the form of sex becomes powerless over the “named subject” in the exact moment that an asexual self can snatch a breath from the “immersion” of socio-sexual conditioning logics). To re-ground this point, I am alluding to moments of union in which even the concept of asexual and sexual are forgotten in fleeting ways – ways that render language momentarily useless. Asexual-sexual togetherness in sex (though not always in the act of sex) in which I, “the” asexual, disengage from the act of naming that calls forth my difference, my deficiency. Instead what follows is a condition in which “sexy” can only then be reconfigured, and only for a second or two, in a name-change. And I can laugh.

So yes, I can be “sexy.” Perhaps sexy is “to the eye of the beholder” too, but this does not detach it from a sexual system/script that both visualises and verbalises sex for and by the beholder. What is valuable from this discussion, I think, is mutual intelligibility within and across words such as sex and non-Sex, sexual and asexual (though these are not oppositional binaries). Asexuality becomes a language alongside Sex and Sexuality that is both not wholly foreign, and not wholly (il-)legible. Whilst I have not here considered the explicitly Gray-A or demi-sexual experiences, nor sex between asexually-identified couples, I have spoken from instances of personal experience and attempted to think through these instances with regard to speech and language. I have tried to bring into usage the concept of sexual scripts that convey both the power of Sexuality in calling forth sexual subjects, as well as ways that such scripting can be multiplied and negotiated. Many questions no doubt go unanswered but by avoiding claims that might universalise asexual narratives I hope that the present discussion holds the beginnings of ways of reimagining the sexua-linguistic contexts for asexuality today.

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ON SHEDDING SHAME: EMBRACING MY ASEXUALITY

BY MELISSA

I discovered the word “asexual” when I was 16. It was, for me, as it has been for many asexuals, a veritable revelation. I reveled in claiming this newfound identity that so keenly described my experience and connected me to a community of people like me. I envisioned an idyllic life free of romance, assuming based on my time in high school that I would never want to date.

Then, I entered college and was astonished to find that dating could actually be a possibility. There was a guy in one of my early friend groups who was knowledgeable, witty, and kind. We would eat breakfast together before class and, in the evenings, I would play piano for him in the music practice rooms. There seemed to be an electricity between us that unnerved me with its unfamiliarity, and soon he asked me to go out with him. I knew that I wanted to continue the connection we had, so I decided to be open with him and come out as asexual.

My disclosure ended up stunning him into silence. He spent an excruciating amount of time trying to decide if he still wanted to date me, before finally telling me “no.” I spent the next few weeks shedding many tears and agonizing over the incident. Was it really that bad to be asexual? Did this make me that undesirable of a person? Sure, I didn’t experience sexual attraction, but this guy and I had really connected – did that not count for anything? At the time, I had no frame of reference to know how being asexual would or wouldn’t affect a romantic relationship; I only knew that this core part of my identity was clearly something that could repulse others, and thus I came to internalize a distinct sense of inferiority and shame for it.

The next guy came along a month after that experience. He was part of a study group that would meet in the dorm lounge where I would do my homework. A casual exchange of words one day became a three-hour-long conversation, the topics of which I cannot recall but which were riveting enough to make us fall into a six-month relationship. We were spectacularly ill-matched: he was majoring in engineering and felt himself superior to humanities students while I was studying in the humanities. It was my first relationship and I didn’t recognize the host of red flags that manifested as neglect, contempt, and apathy. He would walk away from me with his friends, ignored my messages, skipped out on my birthday celebration, and would refuse to see me. And I made excuse after excuse for him, because, in my mind, I had placed him on a pedestal. Why? I had internalized the idea that I was undesirable, so I saw him as some sort of magnanimous saint for accepting my

asexuality. Every time I was wounded by his actions or inactions, I would tell myself that he was a good person and that I needed to be a better girlfriend. This led me down a road of even lower self-esteem that pressured me to remain in a relationship that was exceedingly detrimental to my emotional well-being.

Thankfully, something clicked after that ordeal. I don't recall any particularly dramatic shift in my thinking or any epiphany that roused me from my self-loathing; it was only a small, quiet miracle of self-acceptance and the gradual shedding of shame. I volunteered at the campus LGBTQ center in my second year of college and was surrounded by peers of all sexualities, genders, and presentations. In that space, our departures from cisheteronormativity were welcomed. I began to truly embrace my asexuality as something to be celebrated and a beautiful way to experience human connection. No longer did I view myself as an undesirable partner merely for my absence of sexual attraction; I realized that if others treated me as such that it was due to a lack of awareness and not any fundamental flaw that was inherent to asexuality. The spirit of apology I used to have when disclosing my orientation dissipated, replaced by a keen sense of pride.

After I adopted this attitude, the quality of my dating life rose remarkably. Instead of being a stumbling block for me, asexuality became a convenient way to filter potential dates. People who were completely accepting of asexuality also tended to be open-minded. I formed relationships with people who were compassionate, knowledgeable about social issues, and working actively to combat inequality. To them, my lack of sexual attraction was a characteristic akin to my eye color or height; it was a non-issue for our relationship, and even an aspect they found worth appreciating. My eighteen-year-old self, devastated over that first rejection, never would have imagined such a positive outcome.

My reconciliation of asexuality with dating has been a work in progress. There are occasions when someone's misconceptions of asexuality affect the way they engage with me, which can cause lingering insecurities to surface. Still, throughout this journey, I have learned so much about the ways I bond with others and have met some truly fantastic people. Asexuality is such a valuable way to experience and navigate human connection, and I now know much better than to feel otherwise.

Melissa is a queer disabled asexual and multi-generational Asian American based in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she was born and raised. When not working as a legal writer in U.S. immigration, she is usually playing music, writing, or trying to work her way out of her latest millennial existential crisis. Connect with her on Twitter or Instagram @melissarenren.

ON BEING ASEXUAL AND KINKY

BY BOB O'BOYLE

In 2016, at the age of 35, I came to an important realization about myself; something that answered many latent questions I'd had for years, explained a lot of feelings I'd had with regard to sex and attractiveness, and that helped me feel more comfortable about myself. I realized that I'm asexual. Long before that, though, before I even knew what sex was, I realized that I was not "normal" in an altogether different sort of way.

When I was a kid, I was a big fan of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I'd watch it whenever it came on, happily taking in reruns whenever they were shown, because that meant more Turtles. One episode, though, captured my attention like none of the others.

"The Case of the Hot Kimono" featured a recurring villain by the name of Don Turtelli. He was your basic gangster archetype, dressed in a nice suit and fedora, employing a couple of hapless goons. But there was one thing that Turtelli did that set him apart in my mind and captured my imagination for years to come. Whenever the Don captured someone and needed to extract information from them, he would pull out a long feather and tickle their bare feet.

It makes sense, right? This is a kid's show, so he can't do anything violent. However, most people harbor at least some small fear at the idea of being tickled, let alone tortured by tickling. It was just supposed to be a way to move the show along, I'm sure, but the second the feather stroked April O'Neil's bare sole, causing it to wiggle frantically, and her laughter emanated from the TV and entered my ears, I was captivated.

From then on, I wanted to tickle girls as often as I could, especially if I thought they were cute. It became part of my flirting technique, insofar as I had a flirting technique, and was the first thing I searched for when we got the Internet in my sophomore year of high school. I hadn't started masturbating yet, so I didn't know that tickling was a turn on for me, but I did know that I liked seeing girls tickled, particularly on their bare feet, and I wanted to talk about tickling with as many girls as I could.

While my classmates were concerned with who they could talk into seeing naked or getting their hands on any sort of porn they could, I'd read tickling stories, look at tickling pictures, and impatiently wait for tickling videos to buffer on our 56K modem. I didn't care about who the newest Playboy Centerfold was, and I didn't realize that wasn't "normal." The one time I actually got to see a Playboy, I didn't get what the big deal was. Pictures of naked women didn't interest me at all. Someone that I played soccer with got red-faced angry with confusion when I told him I didn't masturbate. He wanted to know why, and all I could tell him was that I didn't want to; that it didn't interest me at all.

I decided somewhere in this time that I wasn't going to have sex until marriage, since it seemed like the smart and right thing to do. Besides, I wasn't interested in having sex anyway, so it just made sense. But I would absolutely continue to check out tickling sites, join tickling forums, and start buying tickling videos. This is no small feat in the late '90s, because downloading and streaming videos hadn't even been considered yet. Plain brown envelopes would arrive in the mail for me, and I'd hoard the VHS tapes like a greedy dragon, despite the fact no one else was asking about them at all.

By college I'd managed to get into a relationship with someone who was also celibate until marriage, which was a perfect fit in my mind. Of course, we learned ways around that, as folks in their late teens/early 20s will do, but I still didn't feel a motivation to do anything more. Even French kissing was highly uncomfortable to me; it felt sloppy and kind of gross, but I did it because my girlfriend liked it. Tickling, however, that was different. That made me feel good *down there*, and eventually I figured out that I could do something about it.

College gave way to graduation, a distance relationship to sharing an apartment, and clumsy dry humping to attempts at "actual sex." With those attempts, of course, came complications. I'd be *ready to go*, but she wasn't, and because foreplay felt like it took forever, I'd lose interest. Or the condom was too difficult/complicated to put on, so my erection would disappear due to lack of attention. Or I couldn't feel anything through the condom, so I wouldn't orgasm, and she'd start to hurt from all the activity on her most sensitive areas. I started to worry that there was something physically wrong with me, that maybe I was impotent, because she would orgasm in no time, but I couldn't even hold an erection. Because asexuality had only been coined as a term a few years prior to us sharing an apartment, I had no inkling that could be the case.

What made things especially complicated was my prevailing interest in tickling, often looking at sites when my girlfriend was asleep, or after she left for work; really anytime I could be and was alone. By now I was getting better at masturbating, learning what worked and what didn't, and I could orgasm with no problem that way. So now the question became: am I masturbating too much and leaving nothing to enjoy from sex?

I tried to avoid masturbating entirely, but sex didn't get any better for me. She would try helping me with her hand after she was finished, but still nothing, save for complaints of a tired wrist from her. It became more notable when I did orgasm than when I didn't. But I would just shrug it off and keep doing it to please her. Now the idea entered my mind that the fact I was circumcised was the issue. After all, with no foreskin to protect the most sensitive part of me, I had just become desensitized over the years. It sounded perfectly reasonable, except that I could almost always orgasm from watching tickling videos.

My girlfriend became my wife, and we tried new ways to solve this apparent sensitivity issue. Thinner condoms, new positions, foreplay more focused on me, adding tickling to

foreplay, since by this time she knew of my fetish. None of it worked consistently. I started to get more annoyed when she would come looking for sex, partly because I knew how it would end up, but mostly because I felt like it was a waste of time, and that I'd rather be doing something else. By this point AVEN had been in existence for about five years, but I'd never heard of it, and thus had no reason to search it out.

Concerns led to discussions, which sometimes led to fights. Turns out she didn't like to be tickled and was just putting up with it for my sake, much like how I was putting up with sex for hers. We tried watching a porn video together, and the whole concept, including watching the video itself, made me highly uncomfortable. Low libido/sex drive entered my mind as a reason for this disinterest in sex, but what was I supposed to do about that? I had heard that some people who experienced a fetish became so fixated on it that they weren't able to orgasm without it. Was that happening to me?

I eventually stopped thinking about it altogether, just accepting that I was unable to orgasm from regular sex and continued masturbating to tickling things when I could. I figured there was just something wrong with me, and that was that.

Late in 2016 I reconnected with someone I used to work with who was bi and polyamorous; much more hooked on queer culture and nuanced than I ever was. She listened to my stories and suggested that maybe I was asexual. I was slightly confused, because the only asexuality I knew about was the reproductive kind we're taught about in science classes. A Google search corrected that assumption very quickly.

Finally, I knew why I wasn't interested in sex, why I was "different" from all the other teenage boys in school, why I couldn't achieve orgasm without doing it myself. I'm asexual!

But... how could I be asexual and a fetishist? Aren't those two things completely in conflict with one another?

After more reading, more thinking, and more self-analysis, I came to the same realization aces before me had come to, and aces long after me will find out: Not at all.

Asexuality is not celibacy, voluntary or involuntary, though it can take that form. It doesn't mean that you "never get horny." It doesn't mean that you never masturbate. It means, at least to me, that you don't "want" sex. It's much like a dessert at the end of a good meal; you might take it if offered to you, but you're not specifically looking for it either.

Once I finally realized this fact, seemingly so basic, I felt whole at last. All the guilt I'd felt for masturbating "too much," or losing the "mood" before anything ever got started, all melted away. I had finally come to realize the full truth about my sexuality. I am a fetishist, I am asexual, and I am wholly okay, as I always had been.

I joined Tumblr recently, and I was astonished by not only how many people were also into tickling, but also how many of them were somewhere on the ace/aro spectrum. With each new person I talked to, and each new profile I read, it seemed like this Venn Diagram was slowly converging to become a perfectly round circle. Not only were people like me plentiful, but these folks are almost always about the same age that I was when I realized tickling was potentially something more than just a fun flirting technique.

Talking with them and reading various blogs and reblogs clued me in to something else about myself that I always knew but hadn't really dwelled on before; it's not sex that I crave, it's physical affection. While tickling can be, and generally is, arousing to me, my desire is more for touch than being turned on.

As an asexual person, the sensation of feeling another person's skin against my own, the weight of their body, and the gentleness of their touch conveys all the sensations of love and feelings of desire that I imagine sex does for allo folks. As a fetishist, participating in an activity that is considered to be kinky and unusual excites me, like I'm part of an exclusive club, and partaking in a pleasure that only my play partner and I truly understand. The intimacy and trust involved in a good tickle play session, in person or online, fills me with a contentment and joy that I've never felt from any sexual experience.

It took a long time for me to come to these realizations, and quite a lot of fumbling around on the edges of what was considered "normal sexual exploration." I had to keep both feet on one side of the line for the sake of fitting in, while occasionally sneaking a toe across to see how it felt on the other side. For quite a while the words did not exist to describe what I was feeling, who I am. There was either no community for me to turn to, or a very small one, keeping themselves hidden out of necessity. But now that I know there are so many others who are just like me in both desire and deviance, I feel free and accepted, and most of all, valid.

Bob O'Boyle is a biromantic asexual male from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, by way of Northeastern Pennsylvania, looking to finally act on a longtime desire to write, and see where it goes. He can be found on Twitter @BlueArmyman117 and on Tumblr at bluearmyman.

OMOPHAGIA

BY SHASTRA DEO

you are carnivorous in your longing
night leached
to dawnbreak our

morning fettered by forgetting my
body open as
a wound

we are villainesque unrefrained
and despite my sleight of
tongue you know

all of my swords
are metaphors

my fist at the hilt my
throat not temple but sacrifice for
no-one taught me

not to want
or how to bear
baring your

belly with grit teeth
knowing we devour
all that we love

Shastra Deo was born in Fiji, raised in Melbourne, and lives in Brisbane, Australia. Her first book, The Agonist, won the 2016 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and was published by University of Queensland Press in 2017. Shastra's work deals with the intersections of trauma, memory, and selfhood, with a particular focus on corporeality and embodiment.

“MEANINGLESS SEX”

BY HEIDI SAMUELSON

Meaning. The very idea haunts me.

I studied philosophy for a significant portion of my life. And while philosophers don't actually talk about the meaning of life, they do talk about what words mean, like whether we're giving approval when we say something is "good." They talk about how shared knowledge must be communicated through meaningful expressions.

But sometimes meaning is personal, a feeling, and not communicative at all.

Even if you can't name it, sometimes you can see it. When someone lights up while talking about someone or something important to them. When you spend time with family members you don't see often and feel that inexplicable closeness of kinship. When you have a collective experience like standing outside along the shore of Lake Michigan with a group of strangers to watch a solar eclipse.

Those moments are important, meaningful. But in getting older, I have realized that sometimes it's important to recognize when something doesn't have meaning. Not everything has to be important, not every holiday has to be perfect, not every night out has to be epic. It's okay to not seize every day, to stay home, to hide. Life is full of tedious mundane actions that aren't particularly meaningful and that you'd rather not do.

For me, sex is one of those meaningless things.

In a world where who you have sex with seems to matter a lot, where regular sex is considered part of a healthy life, but where sex can be used as a manipulative tool or a weapon – here, sex has many meanings that go beyond its basic biological function of procreation.

People today use the term “sexual identity” to describe an orientation, but the way you identify boils down not to something about you exactly, but about the types of people you want to have sex with. And if you're like me and don't particularly want to have sex with anyone, there's a word for you, too.

The trouble with getting people to understand this is that “asexual” has a lot of meanings.

I know what it means for me, but I cannot speak for anyone else who identifies with the word. To me, it means I am a person without a sexuality. I'm simply not a sexual person. I can find other people attractive, and I do, but I don't associate attractiveness with sex. I don't look at people – celebrities, beautiful strangers, people I know and like – and desire to have sex with them. I get uncomfortable when I think about real people I encounter in my life actually having sex.

But I'm not sex repulsed, as asexual people sometimes are. I don't mind sex scenes in movies. I don't even mind some pornography. Sex that's fake and contrived doesn't bother me, sometimes it even arouses me.

Because I do have a sex drive. I've heard other asexual people describe it this way, too. For me it's like an itch that needs scratching or a sore muscle that needs stretching. It's a need for the physical release of orgasm and nothing else. It doesn't have anything to do with other people. It's not a social need. It's a biological function that I can satisfy by myself.

The confusing thing about my asexuality is that I can't totally rule out sex. I'm not opposed to having sex with other people of any gender identity. In an odd way, purely with regard to the act, I could be considered pansexual. I just never act on it anymore, because I don't need to and because other people imbue the act of sex with meaning.

Sex doesn't make me feel closer to another person in an emotional way. It doesn't feel like an act of intimacy. There's nothing special about it for me. If we can be honest about sex for a moment – it's a messy physical act involving some kind of friction and maybe penetration. If done right, it can feel good for all parties involved. I'm just not sure where the meaning hides.

Somewhere along the way, the idea that sex is meaningful got tied up with the idea that sex is a way to express the worth you find in another person. And that's why non-consensual sex is so dehumanizing. That's why it breaks my heart when people think their only value as a person is the sex they can perform. That's why it enrages me when people think sex is owed to them in exchange for a conversation or a date. That's why it's sad when people think their value as a person can be reduced to their sexual desirability from a partner or to the amount of sex they have.

These messages are reiterated so much in our culture that it's hard not to internalize the idea that sex has meaning – even when it doesn't feel meaningful to you.

It's hard to avoid sex when sex is everywhere. I'm made aware of it in innuendo on local news broadcasts, in advertisements that use bodies and sexual norms to sell products, in news stories about politicians and company executives abusing their social status to get sex, in health research reported by mainstream media, on the covers of "women's magazines" giving sex tips, in literature, in music, in nature.

It's especially hard to avoid sex when the message is that your life is incomplete, missing meaning, without it.

For me, having sex never completes me. On the contrary, it usually makes me feel worthless, even when I've had sex consensually. When someone is having a meaningful, intimate experience and you're not, then you become an object that someone is having sex

with. Maybe sex could work if it's mutually agreed upon that you're just using each other to get off with. Or if you need something specific out of sex like, say, within predefined rules like BDSM scenes. But when your sex partner doesn't realize that you're not on the same page, when they just don't understand that it's not the same for you as it is for them, then it makes you feel worse for not feeling what you're "supposed" to.

I'm sure it's true that sex has health benefits; researchers have found it boosts immunity and helps heart health. I'm sure some relationships benefit from regular sex. I'm sure sex can be fun if everyone involved is having fun. But I don't have enough interest in sex to seek it out or to have it anonymously. It's not worth it enough to me to find that ideal situation where I don't feel like a body that someone else sexualized, where I don't feel like an object at all, where I still feel like a person, but without the other person seeking meaning or falsely equating desirability with worth. My lingering interest in sex is probably curiosity – sex is so important to people and I'd like to understand why. But the only real purpose for it I see is a quick physical release, and I am proficient at doing that on my own.

The truth is I associate sex with regret.

It's hard to have sex when the other person tells you they love you before, during, or after, but you don't feel any love in the act.

Because love has many meanings, too.

Romantic love is something I've come to realize I don't feel. But it's the one that everyone seems to want – *eros*, the erotic love, the love that is supposedly expressed through sex. The scene in the movie where the two leads finally confess their feelings for each other and can barely make it through the front door before they have their hands all over each other.

Dating apps, heteronormative romantic gestures, being identified by the word "girlfriend," being evaluated and judged by another person for the way you live in a test of compatibility – it all makes me wildly uncomfortable.

But there are other types of love. The ancient Greeks had four words for it. C. S. Lewis even wrote a book about the "four loves."

I think there are more than four. For all I know, there may be as many loves as there are human beings. Or maybe Spinoza was right and it's all different modes of one love. But platonic love, familial love, the love for a community, the love of a piece of music that makes you feel like you aren't alone in the world – these are the forms of love I can feel. But socially, these are somehow less valuable, less meaningful than the kind of romantic, sexual love I don't feel. You're supposed to be paired off, to want companionship, to crave

intimacy. Marriage is the basic social unit of most contemporary societies, and marriage has come to be associated with love.

But it doesn't work that way for me. What I really love is being alone.

I've tried to compromise. I've tried to convince myself that I feel more than I do. I've tried to appease other people at the expense of myself. Sometimes I think it might be nice to have someone who knows that if I'm listening to *Wiretap Scars* I'm probably sad, or to have someone to bounce ideas off of when I'm trying to make a mundane decision. But when it comes down to it, I really just want basic validation. It doesn't seem to be "normal" to feel this way, to be this indifferent to romantic love and sex – things that carry so much importance to other people across the spectrum of orientations and identities.

This is simply who I am.

But because I don't feel that love, because I don't see sex as an expression of meaning, somehow, in this world, who I am is less meaningful, too.

Heidi Samuelson is a writer based in Chicago and a former academic philosopher, earning her PhD in 2012. She wishes she knew what asexuality and aromanticism were when she was in her teens and early 20s. Her writing has appeared in the Open Court popular culture and philosophy series and can be found on Medium: <https://medium.com/@heidisamiam/latest> and Twitter: @heidisamiam.

BEYOND SEX: THE MULTI-LAYERED MODEL OF ATTRACTION

BY MICHAEL PARAMO

This article was originally published via [TheAsexual.com](https://www.theasexual.com) on March 9th, 2018. Online publishing platform Medium selected this article to be featured for the topic of Sexuality in March 2018.

Coming of age, I knew I was gay. But, something always felt... *different*.

At the age of sixteen, you could probably find me adoringly gazing at a male classmate in my Physical Education class. It was every weekday at third period. I knew that I couldn't be seen looking fondly at the guy across the gym. There were cultural scripts to follow and threats of violence to evade. A gay boy like me wouldn't dare to cross them in such a toxic environment. I remember most vividly how his body allured me, and I wanted to be close to him. He lit a torch in me – a burning desire that I couldn't dare act upon. Oh, the flurries of gay adolescent love. But, more importantly, it was a deep affection that I was not even certain *how* to act upon. I knew I loved men, but *how* did I love them?

In those glorious days of high school (I hope the sarcasm is conveyed properly here), I was a shy “overweight” gay adolescent boy who wanted to be left alone. I socially cued most of my peers to grant me my wish. I hid away at the third and fifth bell's ring, which signaled the social deathmatches known as “Break” and “Lunch.” I shuffled on campus with my eyes plunging into concrete – a walking embodiment of “awkward silence.” While it was an effective strategy for getting most people to ignore my existence (or perhaps laugh at it from afar), it also ensured that I received what I utmost did not seek: attention. Because of that, I was never able to avoid the interrogations:

“Are you a faggot, Michael?” “Do you like dick? I know you do, fucking faggot.” “Do you want to have sex with men? Do you like it up the ass?”

It was a call with no response, an attack without defense. I was frozen, never able to rip words to counter from my throat. While others were convinced they saw in me what I could not see in myself, I was lost in the labyrinth of attraction. Rather than scream out my confusion, my insecurities and instabilities, I dealt with this puzzle internally. I knew, on *some level*, that I was drawn to others “like me” – from my male peers who would mock me to men of an older age, they brought me warm yet perplexing feelings. Still, it did not take long for me to learn that I was ambivalent to their “sexual play things,” which never did much to unearth soothing tingles of pleasure within me. I had detached their genitalia

from their bodies, and it was this dividing of the body, being charmed by certain parts and repulsed by others, that propelled me to asexuality.

While my identity is still in flux, internally confronting these traumatic interrogations buried the seeds of how I would come to understand attraction as multi-layered, in which various forms may function in social congruence or conflict with one another to construct our individual attraction-based positions. Attraction should not merely be classified as a sexual endeavor, a singular or universal mode of experiencing desire, love, or yearning passion towards another human being(s). Attraction is complex. For me, it is that feeling of, yes, that man is the eye of my desire, I crave to be with him, not with his dick (if he even is to have one) and not to engage in sexual intercourse, but because I want to embrace his body, to be close to him at night, to share my life with him, to tell him my secrets as we spill our emotions out to each other.

Yet, in terms of identity, what does this really mean? How do you navigate a society that seeks to unravel you carelessly and toss you away into overstuffed boxes that don't really fit you, but also, for some of us, kind of do? It is difficult to speak of attraction as existing *beyond sex*, out of reach from its suffocating grasp, to those who understand it as solely being sexual object choice. I use *beyond sex* here not to claim that other attraction-based experiences are superior to the sexual, but to assert that they have agency to exist and thrive beyond its touch. In a society where love, attraction, and desire are intrinsically tied to sex, it is critical to consider how these experiences can operate beyond its reach. This is to say that if someone were to tell you that they were *attracted* to you, most people would assume and expect sex to be *the* core or defining part of that attraction, not a mere possibility. In our society, attraction *implies* sex. And, really, there is unfortunately no other way around it. The repercussions of this manifest in a widespread silencing of other forms of attraction as experiences that may exist independently from sex.

When sex is positioned as attraction's *ultimate* expression, we are restricted, only able to engage in romance, in sensual play, in adorning our bodies in *sexy* garments, for that greater goal: to *reach* sex, to *touch* sex, to *feel* sex. It is the sexual which is seen as the most real, the apex expression of love between humans and bodies. Sexual attraction is hegemonically understood as attraction itself. As a result, most people simply assume that “the rest” of a person's desires line up automatically and accordingly. This “rest” may involve any other dimension of attraction-based experiences, from traditional romance, to sensual pleasure, to aesthetic adoration, to emotional and intellectual intimacy, but it is always presumed to run in parallels, along preconceived notions of orientation. That is to mean, if someone is heterosexual, they are also to be heteroromantic, heterosensual, heteroaesthetic, and otherwise to be forever socially-exalted as “hetero.”

Of course, most of the time, they are. But before I progress onward, it is critical that I clarify what I mean here by *forms* or *layers* of attraction. Attraction is complex, as has been previously declared. Most people claim to experience each layer of attraction in parallel directions, so they never consciously confront any form independent of or beyond sex. Of the numerous forms in existence, these are several:

Aesthetic Attraction: Attraction based on a visual appreciation or captivation of the physical appearance or allure of another person(s). Aesthetic attraction may be completely disconnected from sexual or romantic attraction, and instead considers the visual aesthetics of another person(s). It may be described in a similar manner to appreciating or being captivated by the beauty of a striking natural setting. You may feel as though the person(s) in question is simply more visually intriguing than others, but not necessarily because of a sexual or romantic component attached to the attraction.

Emotional Attraction: Attraction that is predicated on personality rather than the physical appearance of another person(s). Emotional attraction often includes or represents the desire to be in non-tactile contact with another person for the purposes of forming, fostering, or maintaining an emotional and personal bond with them. You may feel fascinated or drawn to a person(s) based on their personality or aura, which may result in you wanting to be around them increasingly, without involving anything sexual, romantic, aesthetic, sensual, or physical.

Intellectual Attraction: Attraction that involves a desire to form, foster, or maintain an intellectual or mental connection or engagement with another person(s). Intellectual attraction may involve a connection to someone mentally that is separated from the rest of their bodies. It grapples with what the person(s) in question is thinking, and potentially includes a desire to interact or engage with that person(s) further in intellectual or mental respects, without necessarily involving any other form of attraction.

Romantic Attraction: Attraction to another person(s) predicated on a desire to experience contact that may be conceptualized as "romantic." How romantic attraction is defined remains relatively amorphous, yet clearly strays from sexual attraction, and is frequently entwined with a desire to be in a romantic relationship with another person(s). Romantic attraction does not have to be in congruence with sexual attraction, which is exemplified most

prominently in the asexual experience. Asexual people may be both asexual and romantically attracted to anyone or no one.

Sensual Attraction: Attraction predicated on an inclination or passion to engage with another person(s) in a manner that could be described as physical or tactile, as well as intersecting with any of the senses. Sensual attraction may include the desire to hug, kiss, cuddle, hold another's hand, etc., while not including the desire for sexual activity or engagement. It may also include gaining gratification or being aroused by another person(s) through other sensory experiences such as smell.

Sexual Attraction: Attraction to another person(s) that spurs a desire to engage in sexual activity, most often, but not always, being sexual intercourse. To be sexually attracted to someone is predicated on your desire to engage in contact with them sexually or to be aroused in a manner that generates such interest. This attraction may be based on physical qualities of the person(s) in question as well as other non-physical aspects yet remain tied to sexual desire or a desire to sexually be in contact with that person(s).

Beyond the sexual, other forms of attraction are not understood as independent, but rather, they are positioned in a *flattened congruence* in the shadow of sexual attraction. The hegemonic perspective on attraction may therefore be visualized as existing at the center of an orbital overlay. From this position, those who have internalized a "sex equals attraction" type worldview only gaze forward, always at the nearest, the most pervasive: the sexual. Their reach extended, they forever hold and never let go of sexual attraction. Their awareness to what lays beyond is eclipsed, blurred by sex. Of course, if the forms align, what exists *beyond sex* may not be so crucial to the person in question. However, when layers of attraction are not in congruence, things become messier, and far too complex to fit in the confines of such a limited model.

Attraction is multi-layered and molded by our individualized experiences. While sexual, for many people, is their primary mode of understanding their attraction-based position in this world, it's not exclusive. For example, I am a gay person. I know I like men. If I wasn't asexual and aromantic, I probably would be at brunch right now on a Grindr date looking for sex with a man (it's a joke). The point is, sex occupies a non-important and relatively nonexistent position in my construction of self and in relation to how I understand my gay attraction and desires. For many people in my life, this is difficult to grasp. When I say, "I'm gay," the majority tend to think: "oh, he wants to have sex with men" and not "oh, he

may want to be in a romantic non-sexual relationship with a man" or "oh, he wants to be in a nonsexual sensual relationship with a man."

This is because sex is first to be understood – positioned as necessary in the conception of attraction and in interpreting desire between humans. Sex eclipses other forms of attraction that arrange themselves in its unending shadow. For those of us (mostly ace and aro people) who find ourselves outside of this "sex equals attraction" worldview, our expressions of desire, love, and passion tend to be confronted with disbelief at best and perceived as outright lies at worst. When ace and aro people assert our asexuality and aromanticism as legitimate, our legitimacy is questioned, or we are ignored completely. Attempting to validate our relationships can thus prove to be difficult, wherever we happen to exist in the maze of identity.

All of us experience attraction in what I refer to here as a multi-layered model. We experience sexual attraction, or we don't; we experience romantic attraction, or we don't; we experience sensual attraction, or we don't; we experience emotional attraction, or we don't; we experience intellectual attraction, or we don't. Like a beautiful but chaotic conglomerate of multi-colored threads or clay that comprises a vibrant whole; the levels mesh together and can frequently feel messy. Some colors may be missing completely, others may be deeply immersed in each other, while another is loose, hanging, nearly free. Each form of attraction may exist independently yet simultaneously in relation to others. Together, our experiences with attraction come to define each of our social attraction-based positions within this model.

Some may experience sexual attraction, and the passion they feel towards others may be heavily entwined with sensuality and aestheticism. In other words, they may feel that their sexual attraction exists *because of* or in direct relation to their sensual and aesthetic pleasures that they derive from the act of physically viewing or touching another's body. In this sense, the layers of the sexual, sensual, and aesthetic may be merged, overlapped, in direct intimate contact with one another. One could not exist without the other. At the same time, for others, one layer or form may not be so deeply linked to another. As an asexual aromantic gay person, my gayness is not enmeshed with my (lack of) sexual or romantic attraction. Rather, for me, it is sensual love and emotional intimacy that defines my gay attraction, while sex and romance are relatively nonexistent from my attraction-based position. It is not *because* I lack sexual or romantic attraction that I am gay.

To further communicate the complex possibilities of attraction-based positions and their potential relational existences to each other, let us briefly consider the following examples that may further aid in conveying the attraction model explained in this article:

Person A is a cisgender heterosexual man. While he is sexually attracted to women, he experiences homosensual bonds with other men. However, since sexuality and gender are heavily policed in our society, largely due to toxic masculinity, Person A never expresses his sensual attraction towards men for fear of having his privileged position as a heterosexual being called into question. As such, Person A simply assumes his position as strictly "hetero" or "straight" and does not explore these other facets of self. As such, his sensual desires that may deviate from heteronormativity remain silenced.

Person B is an asexual aromantic non-binary person. They do not experience sexual attraction or romantic attraction. Person B primarily identifies by their aesthetic and sensual inclinations, which happen to be panaesthetic and pansensual. Person B struggles with feeling validated. Their panaesthetic and pansensual identities are called into question due to misconceptions that asexuality and aromanticism means "no attraction" and "no desire." They often have to erase their asexual and aromantic identities and frequently feel pressured to engage in sexual and romantic activities in relationships.

Person C is a cisgender homoromantic asexual woman. Person C attempts to navigate queer and gay spaces, but encounters issues due to her asexuality being perceived as "unqueer." Some gay people refer to her as "still in the closet" or afraid to "come out all the way." When she tells others that she is gay and also asexual, people assume that she is simply using the latter as a cover to be "respectable" or that she just hasn't "found the right person yet." As a result, navigating queerness proves to be difficult for Person C.

Person D is a homoromantic heterosexual person. As their experiences with attraction exist in social conflict with one another, they feel a sense of internal division and strife. Person D feels constantly conflicted in expressing their passions and desires for a relationship. Person D wants to be in a romantic relationship that could be defined as "gay," but finds themselves only sexually attracted to the "opposite" sex. As such, they are divided on whether to refer to themselves as gay or straight due to their blurry existence on this binary.

Attraction may be a process that envelops and pours out on and through our bodies in tandem or it may be a very distant appreciation, a relationship without touch, a coupling

without romance, a deep love without sex, yet still one that is valid and deserving of fulfillment. When attraction opens up, so do the identities that many of us construct our individuality upon. Is someone still to be classified as "straight" or not if they are heterosexual and homosensual? Is someone to be classified as "gay" or not if they are homosexual and heteroromantic? While it is presumed that most often attractions tend to not run in such immense social conflict with one another, these binaries may begin to destabilize as more people are encouraged to express the complexities of their actual attraction-based positions rather than defining themselves upon the gay and straight binary that is heavily embedded in society.

As the attraction aperture expands, exploring attraction in more depth may challenge and change the meanings of various labels, from "straight," to "gay," to "queer." When does one gain access to queerness, and does any convergence from "hetero" attraction open that person to queer identity? Understanding attraction in this multi-layered way operates in inherently subversive respects to these binaries and the current status quo. Of course, at the forefront of this movement are ace and aro people, who have been identifying by these various forms of attraction beyond sexual and romantic for many years. It is there, out on the horizons of queer intelligibility, that attraction exists as a multiplex of love, intimacy, connectivity, passion, and desire. It is where expressions of attraction between humans are no longer based solely in the sexual, where passions beyond sex no longer are eclipsed, and where they may break free from its dark shimmer to be free.

Michael Paramo is a gay aromantic asexual Latinx graduate student studying (a)sexuality, gender, attraction, and intimacy. On the gender spectrum, they gravitate nearest to agender followed by male and prefer they/them pronouns but accept he/him. They created The Asexual journal after witnessing an absence of ace-centered discourse on queer-focused and general media platforms. They presently manage the journal and website. They are currently finishing an MA program in American Studies and will be submitting their PhD applications in Fall 2018.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

VOL. 2, ISSUE 1

Lead Editor

Michael Paramo is a gay aromantic asexual Latinx graduate student studying (a)sexuality, gender, attraction, and intimacy. On the gender spectrum, they gravitate nearest to agender followed by male and prefer they/them pronouns but accept he/him. They created The Asexual journal after witnessing an absence of ace-centered discourse on queer-focused and general media platforms. They presently manage the journal and website. They are currently finishing an MA program in American Studies and will be submitting their PhD applications in Fall 2018.

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