REFERENCES

New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice

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FEMINIST STUDIES, women's studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, transgender studies . . . asexuality studies? Although asexuality may not necessarily belong to its own field of study (yet), and may not make an easy fit with any preexisting field of study, the emergence and proliferation of the asexual community pose interesting questions at the intersections of these fields that interrogate and analyze gender and sexuality. As we know, these fields are neither independent of one another nor are they easily conflated; and they are ever shifting, revising, expanding, subdividing, and branching off. Where, then, might we place the study of a "new," or at least newly enunciated, sexuality? How do we begin to analyze and contextualize a sexuality that by its very definition undermines perhaps the most fundamental assumption about human sexuality: that all people experience, or *should* experience, sexual desire?

These questions are not readily answerable, especially in this brief dispatch; for now we are compelled simply to pose them in an effort to open up a ripe new space for inquiry. Indeed, asexuality has won little attention in any of the fields listed above or in academic fields generally. The discourse of asexuality has been primarily concentrated in the social sciences, despite its clear connections with theories of gender and sexuality. In this article, we are particularly interested in pushing beyond scien-

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tific analysis, as young scholars like ourselves are beginning to theorize asexuality in relation to sexuality studies, feminist studies, and queer studies—all interdisciplinary fields that span not only the sciences and social sciences but also the humanities. Recognizing that asexuality has a meaning both plural and mutable, we believe it necessary to expand and complicate the scant amount of scientific research on the topic. In that vein, we would like to consider asexuality as it relates to identity, orientation, and the politics of an asexual movement, which has given a name and a new understanding to what has commonly been viewed as dysfunctional or repressed sexuality. As we trace the possibilities for the future study of asexuality, we would like to begin by introducing our readers to asexuality in general—its definition, community formation, and politics. Then, we briefly survey the literature on asexuality before turning to a few of the many implications, questions, and possibilities the study of asexuality poses for feminist and queer studies.

Introducing the Asexual Community

"Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction." This definition is provided on the homepage of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a Web community where members from around the world communicate with each other via Web forums, often using these communication networks to arrange in-person meetings for social or political action.[1] It is around this definition that the asexual community has organized, but that is not to say that it is a homogeneous group of people, nor even that all asexual individuals agree with this definition. As mentioned, members of AVEN are located around the world, coming from different backgrounds; identifying with various genders, races, and classes; forming different types of relationships; and even variously identifying as romantic and aromantic, monogamous and polyamorous, gay, straight, bisexual, and lesbian. This variation is unsurprising given the community's large and growing membership. Since its founding in 2001, the online community has amassed just over 19,000 users worldwide, with the most significant growth occurring between 2006 and 2008 when membership more than doubled from the near 6,000 users accounted for in January 2006. AVEN founder David Jay states that when

he adds that number to the sum of members using the forums in languages other than English (these forums can be linked from the AVEN site), he accounts for nearly 30,000 members worldwide.[2] Although, as with most online communities, it is difficult to know how many registered members are unique users, and in this case, it is difficult to know if these unique users identify as asexual, we suggest that the increasing numbers of registered AVEN users indicate that the community of self-identified asexuals and their allies is indeed growing.

The AVEN Web site is more than just a meeting site and organizing tool; it is also one of the most comprehensive sources of information on asexuality. The site contains several different pages of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) aimed at a range of audiences, from self-identified or questioning asexuals to friends and family of asexuals to anyone with a general interest in the topic. The Web site also links users to video clips portraying David Jay and other "AVENites" in the television media, including *The Montel Williams Show, The View,* and *20/20.* In addition to perusing the information on the site or linking to blogs and videos, users can visit the AVEN store to purchase T-shirts, hats, stickers, or coffee mugs with slogans such as "Asexuals Party Hardest" or "Nobody Knows I'm Asexual." Such merchandise, in combination with Web presence and other community projects, such as tabling and passing out literature, marching in Pride parades, and appearing on radio or television specials, aims at increasing public visibility and education, AVEN's nominal goal.

As the AVEN community grows and becomes more visible, it is inevitable that asexuality will garner more public attention. Yet such interest is no longer restricted to daytime television talk shows, such as those represented in AVEN's archive. For example, Arts Engine Inc., an independent organization focused on creating "social-issue documentaries," is currently developing a feature-length documentary entitled *Asexuality: The Making of a Movement*; it purports to "explore asexuality as a sexual identity, a lifestyle and a budding social movement."[3] Several members of AVEN are a part of the film, which promises to contribute new material for discussions on asexuality and representation. With this expanded attention, it seems only appropriate that asexuality is explored more extensively within academic discourse as well.

Locating Asexuality in Academic Discourse

The modest attention human asexuality has received has come mainly from medical and psychological discourse, which has acknowledged asexuality only relatively recently, and then solely in pathologizing terms. In the 1980 third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*), the American Psychiatric Association added the diagnostic category "inhibited sexual desire," later renamed Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) in the *DSM-IV* (1994) and defined as "persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity."[4] Although there are cases in which these diagnoses must be taken seriously, cases that demand psychiatric or medical attention, the presumption that all cases of disinterest in sex are pathological is what has contributed to the pejorative flavor of the word "asexual," a view that the growing asexual community has been working with some success to change. In fact, the group has put together a small taskforce to "create a new definition (of HSDD) that's more friendly to asexual people," which they hope to include in the newest edition of the *DSM*.[5] We would like to emphasize this point: there is a marked difference between those who experience a decrease in sex drive or lack of sexual desire and are distressed by this and those who do not experience sexual desire and are not distressed by this supposed "lack." We are interested in the latter group here and in locating asexuality as a viable sexual and social identity.

The project of separating asexuality from presumptive pathology has been taken up in a handful of social sciences studies published in the past six years. Two studies by Anthony F. Bogaert, who works in social psychology, are groundbreaking in this respect. In his 2004 article based on preexisting questionnaire data, Bogaert suggests that approximately 1 percent of the population is asexual; this is the first known empirical study of asexuality. Later he asks in a conceptual article, published in 2006, whether asexuality, here defined as "a lack of any sexual attraction," should be viewed as a unique sexual orientation and argues that indeed it should. Bogaert's two articles have accomplished much in distancing asexuality from pathology. His work has since been expanded by psychologists Nicole Prause and Cynthia A. Graham, whose 2007 study is the first (that we have come across) to analyze responses produced by individuals who self-identify as

asexual. In 2008, Kristin S. Scherrer, working within sociology, furthers Prause and Graham's study with one that also uses responses from asexual-identified individuals in an attempt to more fully understand the identity-based (as opposed to behavioral and desire-based) aspects of asexuality.[6]

In addition to these short studies, we note one book-length exploration of asexual relationships, published in 1993, that focuses specifically within the lesbian community. *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships among Contemporary Lesbians* is a collection of theoretical articles and personal stories edited and compiled by psychologist Esther D. Rothblum and psychotherapist Kathleen A. Brehony. Describing their research process, they suggest that thinking through asexual relationships forced them to confront their own biases about sex and intimacy: they write that they "hope that readers will be challenged to reconsider the very basis of what constitutes a lesbian relationship."[7] Indeed, the selections in the book open up interesting possibilities for rethinking intimacy in relationships, and although the focus is on lesbian relationships, such a project resonates across many populations and communities.

Although we consider the work on asexuality thus far to be extremely important, we also believe that it is open to criticism, revision, and expansion. Specifically, we suggest that further analysis can most fruitfully occur through a more in-depth cross-disciplinary/interdisciplinary approach to the topic.

An Emergent Field

We opened this article suggesting the possibility of a new field of inquiry in human sexuality–asexuality studies. Although we draw awareness to the need for critical analytical work on asexuality, we do not purport at present to demarcate a field (though we predict it will eventually become one); rather, our current interest is in considering how asexuality intersects with feminist and queer theories of sexuality and with feminist and queer movements and politics. In this way we hope to begin an ongoing conversation about asexuality and the asexual movement within the discourses of feminist and queer theory.

These interdisciplinary fields seem to be ever in flux, constantly interrogated by new identity categories. As an example, we might look back to

how Gayle Rubin in 1984 first raised the question of whether feminism, as a "theory of gender oppression," could adequately theorize sex and sexuality in all their complexities. With foresight for the development of the field of sexuality studies (and later queer studies), in her landmark essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Rubin suggests that "in the long run, feminism's critique of gender hierarchy must be incorporated into a radical theory of sex, and the critique of sexual oppression should enrich feminism. But an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality must be developed." Rubin believes that the study of sexuality is indeed an important component of feminist thought, but she also suggests the need for a new field of inquiry that would continue to enrich the feminist conversation. Similarly, we might consider the more recent development of the field of transgender studies. In the introduction to the voluminous *Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker describes how transgender studies developed at the nexus of feminism and queer studies: "Neither feminism nor queer studies, at whose intersection transgender studies first emerged in the academy, were quite up to the task of making sense of the lived complexity of contemporary gender at the close of the last century." She goes on to describe how "transgender studies emerged in the 1990s not just in conjunction with certain intellectual trends within feminism and queer theory, but also in response to broader historical circumstances." Here Stryker is pointing to the historical and contextual necessity for the emergence of the field of transgender studies, not entirely separate from, but indeed very much informed by, feminist and queer studies. Similarly, we suggest that the current historical situation demands a concentrated study of asexuality, which is most appropriately begun at the crossroads of feminist and queer studies, as asexuality challenges many existing assumptions about gender and sexuality.[8]

Asexual Feminisms, Feminist Asexualities

In thinking about relationships and connections between asexuality and feminist studies, perhaps the key question to address is how the recognition of asexuality as an identity meets and potentially challenges feminist conceptions of sex and female sexuality. Although asexuality compels us

to reconsider multiple approaches to the feminist project of liberating female sexuality, it is perhaps especially conversant with radical feminism, pro-sex feminism, and the oppositional discourse that characterizes both.

Summarizing the anti-porn/pro-sex "sex wars" of the 1980s, Elisa Glick, in "Sex-Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression," explains both radical feminism and pro-sex feminism in terms of their opposing, but similarly liberatory, views of female sexuality: where radical feminists sought out "a sexuality purified of male sexual violence and aggression," pro-sex feminists sought out "a politically incorrect sexuality" that would transgress normative boundaries. Both camps saw themselves as espousing transgressive, liberatory sexualities that, in the case of radical feminism, combated the repression of female sexuality by the patriarchy and, in the case of pro-sex feminism, saw "repression as produced by heterosexism and 'sex negativity.'" Although both sides were engaged in conceiving sexual practices "as utopian political strategies," the discourse's divisive rhetoric oversimplified their rival approaches into an "anti-sex'" versus "pro-sex" dichotomy that Glick challenges in her critique of contemporary pro-sex theories.[9]

The emergence of the asexual movement compels us to reconsider the ways in which female sexuality was and still is framed by the rhetoric of liberation in the feminist movement. The crucial problem of the discourse surrounding the anti-porn/pro-sex debates is that it situates female sexuality as either empowered or repressed: the attendant assumption is that anti- or asexuality is inherently repressive or dysfunctional. The asexual movement challenges that assumption, working to distance asexuality from pathology and in so doing challenging many of the basic tenets of pro-sex feminism—most obviously its privileging of transgressive female sexualities that are always already defined against repressive or "anti-sex" sexualities.

Even as the asexual movement boldly challenges sex-positive feminism's view of asexuality as repressive, however, it is not necessarily more easily aligned with radical feminism. Although radical feminists did produce a few concepts of feminist asexuality, it is unclear how the asexual movement might reckon with their politicization of asexuality as a way out of phallocentric sexuality. Thus far, asexual individuals have not

politicized their (a)sexual practices in the same way that radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin have.

So what might feminist theorists do with asexuality, and what might asexuals do with feminist theory? Although the distancing of asexuality from pathology retains political primacy for an intersection of asexuality and feminist theory, at least with respect to the asexual movement's goals of visibility and education, we want to also identify two impulses that we can see as potential approaches to a feminism that acknowledges asexuality. The first impulse is to look at asexuality as a way to critique the liberatory rhetoric by which sex is still to a large extent framed within feminism. The second impulse is to theorize modes of asexuality that are or can be feminist, likely beginning by extending the work of radical feminists.

One approach to thinking through asexuality from a feminist perspective is to consider how asexuality might critique the rhetoric of liberation in which sex is still steeped within feminism. The asexual movement's politicization of sex is at this point very basic, its nominal goal being visibility and education, with no gestures toward explicitly challenging norms. That is, asexuality thus far is not politicized in the same way that female sexuality has been. (Of course, this does not mean that the asexual movement is not heading in that direction.) Whether female sexuality is conceived of from a radical feminist or from a pro-sex perspective, both are too steeped in the rhetoric of liberation to make sense in a way that can be inclusive of asexual persons who are simply uninterested in having sex and who may not be actively or explicitly engaged in radical politics.

As Glick argues, the liberatory rhetoric of the sex wars has led to rivaling erotic chauvinisms that still to a certain extent exist within a contemporary sex-positive feminism that privileges subversive sex. In contrast, the asexual community has so far taken pains to strive for inclusivity, separating itself from any presumptions that asexual individuals are against sex or somehow "better" than "sexual" individuals. The asexual community thus may push the feminist movement to recognize and avoid creating hierarchies of sexual practices while also urging us to look carefully at the ways in which words such as "repressed" and "dysfunctional" are used rhetorically to justify such erotic chauvinism.

A second approach to thinking through asexuality from a feminist perspective might attempt to theorize asexuality as feminist. In doing so, we would do well to begin with theories of feminist asexuality and anti-sexuality that emerged from radical feminism. Dworkin, for instance, in *Intercourse*, holds up Joan of Arc as an example of someone who has, exercising feminist agency, dropped out of phallocentric sex.[10] In the early fifteenth century, Dworkin argues, Joan of Arc's anti-sexuality indicated freedom from the inferiority of a female subjectivity. Dworkin's use of the word "virginity" to describe Joan of Arc's sexuality is perhaps problematic when linked with theories of asexuality; however, Dworkin's virginity is understood not as pureness or innocence (a sexist and repressive configuration) but as resistance to sexism and misogyny (a feminist configuration).

Can Joan of Arc be considered asexual? The question takes us back to the definition of asexuality. It seems clear that AVEN's "official" formulation of asexuality as not a choice, but a biologically determined orientation (a definition that itself opens up the larger ongoing nature/nurture debate in studies of human sexuality), does not easily map on to a theory of asexuality as a chosen, feminist mode of resistance. In fact, AVEN repeatedly opposes asexuality to celibacy, in its literature, in the General FAQ, and on the AVENwiki. For example, in an informational brochure, AVEN claims, "Celibacy is a choice to abstain from sexual activity. Asexuality is not a choice, but rather a sexual orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction. While most asexual people do not form sexual relationships, some asexuals participate in sexual behavior for the pleasure of others."[11] This not only raises questions about choice versus fixed identity but also forces us to question to what extent the practice of or abstention from sex acts matters to the definition of asexuality.

Importantly, that definition is not fixed; nor is it agreed upon by self-identified asexuals. AVEN's AVENwiki contains several pages devoted to competing formulations of asexual identity. We do not have the space to detail them here, but one seems especially of note: the Collective Identity model. This model constructs asexuality as a collective identification: someone who has no sex drive but does not see herself as asexual is not asexual; but someone who does experience a sex drive but sees herself as

asexual is asexual. In theorizing feminist asexuality, then, we might look to this model, which proposes that those who describe themselves as asexual have "*chosen* to actively disidentify with sexuality" (our emphasis).[12] This model, which seemingly contradicts AVEN's more widely held essentialist formulation, is perhaps the most likely model to dialogue with radical feminism. A feminist mode of asexuality, accordingly, might consider as asexual someone who is not intrinsically/biologically asexual (i.e., lacking a sexual drive) but who is sexually inactive, whether short-term or long-term, not through a religious or spiritual vow of celibacy but through feminist agency.

Whether we accept Dworkin's virginity as a feminist asexuality, it seems clear that the feminist movement has paid inadequate attention to asexuality as a viable feminist mode. The emergence of the asexual movement compels us to revisit feminist theories of sex and sexuality in ways that will likely complicate the politics of both the asexual and feminist movements. The asexual movement encourages the feminist movement to think further about how to theorize a feminist asexuality that cannot be dismissed as conservative, repressive, or anti-sexual. On the other side of things, revisiting feminist theories of sexual practice and sexuality may complicate AVEN's definition of "asexual" and bring more attention to the various ways of being asexual that already exist within the community. Further, in light of the important developments of feminist theorists of color, and with a nod toward queer scholarship, we are compelled to question the isolation of sexuality as a solitary category of analysis to allow for the possibility of shifting meanings of asexuality across different racial, ethnic, cultural, and class contexts.

Is Asexuality Queer?

In the General FAQ on the AVEN Web site, this question is framed as such: "I think asexuality is inherently queer. Do you agree?" The response to this question provides a perfect example of the palpable ambivalence between queerness and asexuality: "This has been the subject of much debate and discussion. On the one hand 'queer' is 'anything that differs from the norm,' especially the norm of sexuality, and there are asexual people who consider the relationships they form to be completely uncon-

ventional and therefore queer. Other asexuals consider their relationships to be entirely conventional and do not identify as queer in any way."[13] This response hinges upon the definition of "queer" as nonnormative, and such a definition comes up against the ongoing conflicts and questions within queer studies: how do we define "queer" and can anyone be queer? Such questions are specifically linked to the focus on sex as part of the definition of queerness. There is an ongoing worry among queer theorists and activists that "queer" is becoming a blanket term for, as the AVEN definition suggests, any variation from the norm. In such a universalizing move, as Leo Bersani has argued, "queer" desexualizes the gay and lesbian movement. Building from Michael Warner's suggestion in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* that queer struggles are able to challenge social institutions, Bersani suggests that such a challenge is impossible "unless we define how the sexual specificity of being queer (a specificity perhaps common to the myriad ways of being queer and the myriad conditions in which one is queer) gives queers a special aptitude for making that challenge." Although Bersani often returns to "an erotic desire for the same" as the definitive way of being queer, we think a more generous reading is possible, wherein asexuality is one of Bersani's sexually specific "myriad ways of being queer."[14] By its very definition, asexuality brings a focus to the presence or absence of sexual desire as a way to queer the normative conceptions about how sex is practiced and how relationships are (or are not) formed around that practice.

Warner's follow-up to Bersani's critique, however, raises some doubt about the happy reception of asexuals within queer communities. In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life,* Warner advocates "a frank embrace of queer sex in all its apparent indignity" in an attempt to shift the politics of shame and to bring sexual specificity back into queer politics. We certainly do not disagree with such a politics, but the worry is that by the end of his book, the asexual is almost posed as a threat to the sexualized queer movement that Warner imagines. He writes, "[Gay men] cannot be expected to live asexual lives." We want to be careful to contextualize this quotation and note that Warner is specifically referring to the impulse for gay men to closet the specificity of their sexual lives within the public sphere (especially in the wake of HIV and AIDS), but the question we

would like to raise is how the gay man (or other individual) who *does* live an asexual life fits into this rubric of queer politics. Warner takes this further as he anticipates regulatory restrictions on sexual practice as a possible HIV prevention strategy: "Prohibitions on sex don't work either, since it is inhumane to mandate asexual life for anyone, let alone for queers, for whom sexual culture is a principal mode of sociability and public world making."[15] Although asexual life should not be mandated, nor should any type of sexual life for that matter, and while we do not want to dismiss the importance of HIV and AIDS to queer theorizing, we would like to focus our attention on Warner's emphasis on sexual culture as a "principal mode of [queer] sociability and public world making." How might asexuality fit into a community where sexual culture is at the center? Paradoxical as it may seem, is it possible that not desiring sex can be part of that radical sexual culture? In short, does the asexual person threaten to remove sex from politics all over again, or does she or he challenge the ways we think about sex and desire even within queer communities?

We would of course argue for the latter, as we suggest that asexuality as a practice and a politics radically challenges the prevailing sex-normative culture. If the asexual community is indeed a part of a radical sexual political movement, we believe that it is critical to continue the conversation about whether queer communities can provide at least a coalition site for community building and social activism, even while challenging queer conceptions of sex and relationships. In other words, does the asexual movement as a visible political entity require that the queer movement rethink its equivalence of radical sex with radical politics or, even more, its definition of what constitutes radical sex? Within this discussion of queerness, the questions of oppression and marginalization also arise. The reality is that asexuality is often pathologized and medicalized and also that asexual people are often told that they are inchoate, that they haven't yet fully developed and experienced their sexuality, or they are interrogated about past trauma and sexual abuse. Similarly, asexual individuals experience the alienation that comes from lacking sexual desire in a world that presumes sexual desire and that attaches great power to sexuality. How does this experience compare with that of queers living in a heterosexist world? The parallels to the historical treatment of homosexuality and other queer

modes of being should be clear, but is that overlap enough to ally asexual persons with those who practice queer sex?

One of us had the recent experience of marching with AVEN members at the San Francisco Pride march in June of 2009, the first-ever U.S. Pride parade in which a group of asexuals and their allies marched. The group was well received, as the crowd continually cheered in support and readily accepted informational handouts defining what asexuality is and is not. In addition, the group's allegiance to queer pride was visibly demonstrated, as one woman wore a T-shirt that read "Asexy Dyke" and David Jay (AVEN founder) rollerbladed alongside the crowd playfully flirting with bystanders and shouting "I love that you love sex!" In connection to both theory and practice, then, perhaps the follow-up to Jay's declaration is the implied question, "Can you love that I [or other asexuals] don't?" Further, we might question the idea that Jay can speak on behalf of all asexuals in his embrace of not just sex but queer sex. A reading of the AVEN General FAQ page as well as the discussion boards on the Web site quickly reveals that Jay is not the universal voice of the movement; rather, there remains an ambivalent relationship between the asexual and queer communities, a relationship that we believe, with critical examination, can lend itself to exciting and innovative political possibilities.

Conclusion

Admittedly, we more so raise questions here than provide answers. In doing so, we hope to open up a new field of interrogation in the study of human sexuality. It is with an affinity to our own academic interests, and with attention to the interests of the readers of *Feminist Studies*, that we have focused our dialogue primarily on feminist and queer theories. Although we do not suggest that asexuality is decidedly feminist or queer, we do think that the study of asexuality informs, and is fruitfully informed by, both feminist and queer studies. Additionally, we realize that we have only touched on a miniscule sample of feminist and queer writing and readily acknowledge the much larger realm of dialogic possibility that we cannot give mention to here.

We would like to end by noting the exciting work that is being produced in conversation with and beyond not only the sciences but also

these two concentrations. Within the (relatively) newly emergent field of disability studies, Eunjung Kim is working to raise critical awareness of the "cultural representations of asexual individuals with disabilities and their relationship with the totalizing perception of asexuality of disabled people." She argues that "perceived asexuality is constructed by social desexualization that denies the diverse sexual and asexual embodiments of disabled people."[16] Additionally, one of us, Cerankowski, is working not only within queer studies but also within performance studies to theorize what visibility means to asexual politics and how asexuality is performed in media appearances, in public spectacles, such as the aforementioned Pride parade, and in everyday life. The other of us, Milks, is examining how the emergence of asexuality may reconfigure the rhetoric of contemporary queer and sex-positive feminism, specifically with regard to the anti-porn/pro-sex debates it has grown out of. Together, as interest in the topic is piqued, we plan to edit a volume to bring together various studies and theoretical perspectives on asexuality. With all this recent scholarly development, we can only predict that the study of asexuality will soon explode into conversation with theorists across the disciplines.

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