

back cover

f-ace-ing silence
(Issue 3)

June, 2015

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And thank you for reading them.

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front cover

f-ace-ing silence

Issue 3
June, 2015

**words by aces—
silenced in asexual / ace spaces**

Content Warnings:

Content warnings (cw) are a “heads up” about topics that some people find upsetting. If they seem like “overkill” to you, please respect that they’re for someone else. All writings in this zine address alienation and feeling / being silenced.

Definitions:

asexual: experiencing little or no sexual attraction and / or sexual desire for sexual contact with anyone

ace: abbreviation for “asexual”; can also include the whole complex asexual spectrum (e.g., grey- & demi- sexual)

aromantic: experiencing little or no romantic attraction and / or romantic desire for romantic relationships

aro: abbreviation for “aromantic”; can also include the whole complex aromantic spectrum (e.g., grey- & demi- romantic)

allosexual / zedsexual (or alloromantic / zedromantic): people who are *not* on the asexual spectrum (or aromantic spectrum)— an alternative to simply calling people “sexual” (or “romantic”) to avoid hypersexualising people who are already marginalised via hypersexualisation¹. Since “allosexual” draws on and perpetuates clinical authority (and so is harmful too), “zedsexual” / “zsexual”² is increasingly being used.

compulsory sexuality: set of social attitudes, institutions and practices holding that a) *everyone should have or want to have sex* (of the “right” kind... or at all); b) empowerment equals having or wanting sex; and c) sex or sexual access can be “owed”

amatnormativity: the normative privileging / prioritising of romantic relationships above all other kinds of relationships— the social force treating romance as intrinsically superior to, or more intimate, important or “normal” than other kinds of relationships

¹ <http://rotten-zucchiniis.tumblr.com/post/105421963160/some-reflections-on-sexual-and-allosexual-ace>

² <http://rotten-zucchiniis.tumblr.com/post/109820768930/z-sexual-zedsexual-as-a-deliberately>

Table of Contents:

- *Content Warnings*.....inside front cover
- *Definitions*.....inside front cover
- *Table of Contents*.....page 1
- *Situating This Zine & The Ace Sex Wars*.....page 2
- *Naming “Compulsory Sexuality”*..... page 24
- *Further Reading Re: The Ace Sex Wars*.....page 26
- *Ongoing Call for Submissions*.....page 27
- *Editorial Note*.....page 28
- *Accessible Formatting Note*.....inside back cover

Word by aces— silenced in asexual / ace space:

- Anonymous.....page 7
“You know but let me tell you”
“Disclaimer”
- Laura.....page 10
“Faith, Islam, and Asexual Community Politics”
- The Anonymous Asexual.....page 14
“Abuse and Some Consequences”
cw: psychological / emotional abuse, masturbation, sexual self-harm, possible sexual coercion, mention of pornography, mention of sexual abuse
- Omnes et Nihil.....page 20
“Amatonormativity, I Marvel”
cw: discussion of partner abuse, mention of sexual violence

Situating This Zine & The Ace Sex Wars

cw: discussion of sexual violence

The first issue of “f-ace-ing silence” happened kind of by accident when I was struggling to start a conversation about violence in queerplatonic (non-romantic) relationships.³ Zines rarely go as expected, and I stumbled onto a very important something else: I found aces in silence, aces facing silence alone.

Those stories needed to be told and still do— there's a lot of stuff aces feel silenced about *in ace spaces* or that people just aren't (yet?) talking (enough?) about among aces. This issue has fewer submissions than the first two. And there's a reason.

I had originally planned for this issue to focus on “sex-positivity” (as it affects ace spaces) and critiques of sex-positivity. It's not that this was an untouched-topic— aces have already written so much on the topic in the last couple years.⁴ But there's been a lot of controversy and conflict mounting around the topic, especially in the last year focused on representation of sex-repulsed aces and/or aces who do not have sex vs. aces who are actively into sex and/or who do have sex.

I'd been watching friction mount, hoping it wouldn't get where it seemed to be going. But we're already there now. These are the ace sex wars (kind of like the 80s' & early 90s' “feminist sex wars” between anti-violence/anti-pornography feminists and pro-sex feminists), and I don't see them ending soon.

In all the hostility, I figured there would probably be a lot left unsaid— stuff people felt silenced about. Apparently there is, especially around issues of sexual violence and iffy consent. But it's also not stuff people are *quite* ready to talk about.

Several people have been working on pieces about stuff that they're not quite ready to put out there and don't know exactly when they will be. But the flip side is that four people already offered to submit pieces to the *next* issue (#4).

³ If the topic resonates with you, the zine and ongoing info are here: <http://rotten-zucchini.tumblr.com/rotten>

⁴ Those writings might be hard to find if you don't already know where to look. Sciatrix put together a linkspam a while back (in the context of an advice blog question). That's a good starting point: <http://writingfromfactorx.tumblr.com/post/95193486254/hello-i-was-wondering-if-you-knew-of-any-articles>

This is the third issue of “f-ace-ing silence” which actually makes it the longest running ace zine⁵ that yet exists. That's not a particular accomplishment of this zine— it speaks more to ace zine culture (or rather to how there hasn't really been one). But that might be in the process of changing.

As I write this there are at least half a dozen calls for submissions out there for zines focused on ace topics, and another good half a dozen calls for submissions for zines about other stuff that mention ace stuff in the call. That's exciting.

Zines are like little time-capsules, preserving moments in time. Things change so quickly in ace spaces... not just the language but also the ideological landscape.

I look back at the couple ace zines from 2009 (i.e., “Weird Terrain”) and 2010 (e.g., “Asexual Feminism”) when ace sex-positivity was unjaded and more importantly *optional*... and often looked like “sex is great... if you're into that: NO THANKS!” (When sex-positivity still offered a reasonable, comparatively effective pathway toward pursuing the right to *opt out* of sex).

This was before we'd had time to see “sex-positivity” play out in ace discourse in harmful ways, as a tool of compulsory sexuality within our own community; before we watched “enthusiastic consent” used as a weapon of sexual coercion; before all the ace (on ace) sex-cheerleading...

This was before anyone expected sex-repulsed aces to be having (mutually unwanted) sex *with each other*, or anticipated we'd be having to deal with ace-on-ace sexual violence. (If people were talking about that stuff back then, it really wasn't part of the dominant ace discourse— it's not part of the *dominant* ace discourse even now.) Heck, that was back when compulsory sexuality was still just starting to be named as such.⁶

⁵ At least as far as I know— but if there were another out there with more than 2 issues, I'd probably know about it because I've been working on an Ace Zine Archive project with someone who has serious zine-finding skills. (<http://acezinearchive.wordpress.com>)

⁶ Nobody really knows where the specific term “compulsory sexuality” originated. I suspect many people independently invented until it stuck— a(n ace) convergence around 2010-ish to a shared conceptual spaces, resonating connections back to Adrienne Rich's white lesbian-feminism of “compulsory heterosexuality”. (But more on that in the “Naming 'Compulsory Sexuality'” section.)

Overall, that was a time before the limited mainstream recognition of asexuality collided with an (insidiously neo-liberal / individualist version of) “sex-positivity” to promote the all-familiar “we’re just like everyone else except for sexual attraction... and look even aces have sex!” ace assimilationism. Before most of the stuff took shape giving aces a stake in our own collective subjugation to compulsory sexuality.

Most significantly, it was a time before zedsexual people started (en masse) appropriating ace educational materials and mainstream ace discourse to perpetrate and / or justify anti-ace sexual coercion and rape— not all of which, but much of which is specifically focused on sex-repulsion (that is, “anti-sex-repulsed-ace” violence).

A lot has changed in the past few years, and I hardly even know where to start (because all that stuff has now happened).

There are issues of who’s considered “more legitimately ace” in different contexts (with everyone feeling alienated and assailable). There are heated arguments over who suffers worse than whom and how to deal with the *“some but proportionally few aces have sex, and this often highlighted in ace educational materials to promote ace acceptability, but the information that some aces have sex is routinely used to do sexual violence on aces who don’t want to have sex, but not acknowledging that some aces have sex invalidates those who do have sex, so what do we do?”* conundrum.

Individual critiques started mounting and things have escalated to where we are now, watching the ace sex wars play out— the schism of political priorities over whom should be centred in ace spaces and discourse, and how.⁷

On one hand there’s the focus on sex-repulsed aces, ace survivors of violence and the sweeping agenda of recognising / resisting against (gendered and racialised) anti-ace violence and related violence targeting sex-repulsion. On the other hand, there are aces who are actively into sex or who frame sex as an “empowered choice” and the sweeping agenda of detaching ace identity from assumptions about behaviour and focusing instead on individual freedom to pursue and value personal choices.

⁷ In many ways these parallel the feminist sex wars of the 80s and early 90s between “anti-violence (but not anti-sex)” and “pro-sex” (but not pro-violence) feminists, and the kinds of anger, mistrust and misunderstandings they provoked.

(Clearly the two sides are not mutually exclusive. And clearly I am not a neutral onlooker— not that such a vantage point exists.)

This moment of internal ace community conflict, poised in time, will undoubtedly be lost to future generations— generations in ace community time being a year or two (instead of twenty). I don’t know how it will seem in hindsight.

Within this context, there are so many things aces can’t talk about without risking another wave of attacks. So there’s a lot that aces just don’t say— a lot of stuff there in the silence. That space, generally, is what this zine is about.

Ultimately, my vision of the theme for this issue ended up being just a starting point. People wrote about different aspects of their experience that are rarely talked about— from a counter-narrative of positive relationship with Islam, to breaking silence about sexual self-harm.

I wouldn’t have predicted those topics, or have imagined that *that’s* what the theme would have inspired people to write. That’s the thing about stuff people feel silenced about (or stuff that isn’t talked about much): it’s not out there for everyone to see. It’s hard to know what’s there until we make space for whatever it is... and wait— wait for people to fill that space with their silence. (And they will.)

This issue is not what I expected... and that’s the point. These stories don’t recount the casualties of the ace sex wars— they’re stories that were overlooked because of them. I hope, dear reader, that these stories of silence give you pause.

-- Omnes et Nihil

Words by aces— silence in ace spaces

Anonymous

Bio:

I'm a grey-romantic greygender asexual, late twenties and racially Jewish. I discovered asexuality six or seven years ago, which both cleared up some of my depression issues and also explained why my peers were so puzzling. While I'm okay with myself, I'm still trying to work out how that will affect the world around me, so coming out will have to wait. I live in the U.S. in a simultaneously conservative and liberal culture which clears up none of my uncertainty but allows me to remain an unbothered oddity.

“You Know, But Let Me Tell You”

I started a sentence because I wanted to say what I thought
 But I had to rethink it and the problem wasn't what I was going
 to say but what I was not.
 After starting out with what I meant I had to add a few things so
 no one would get offended
 Or at least if anyone was getting there I could head them off and
 they'd be quickly mended.
 I can see why this is called positivity, because whenever I state a
 position
 There's a constant need for addition.
 I don't want something that most people do
 And for some reason every time I say it I need to remind
 everyone it's okay to like it, too.
 Plenty of people like horror movies and I don't have to tell them
 that's okay.
 Also if they like massages and I don't that doesn't hurt them in
 any way.
 So I don't see why having a personal objection to sex is such a
 big deal;
 Normally when I state an opinion I don't have to note that I'm
 not requiring anyone to feel the way I feel.
 On the plus side nobody gets their nose out of joint
 But it always sounds like I'm diminishing my point.
 Maybe someday my reassurances will be repaid,
 And every time someone says sex is wonderful they'll have to
 add it's okay to want not to get laid.
 For now I have to make sure that everyone whose views I don't
 hold will always have my back
 Or I might come under attack.
 Whether it's the allies who start feeling left out,
 Or the sexually active aces who think their choice is being called
 into doubt,
 Or everyone trying to make sure outsiders don't think when we
 look at them we're looking down,
 At any rate someone's wielding a frown.
 I try, but all this work to support everyone and encourage
 everything and offend no one leaves me huffing and
 puffing,
 And by the time I finished that sentence I'm positive my point
 added up to nothing.

“Disclaimer”

Why must I assure you that your thirst
 Is beautiful and righteous when I try
 To tell you what to me is something cursed?
 Why must you assume that I imply
 Something in the words I do not say?
 You defend your place with this demand:
 To avoid offense in every way
 I must be in your shadow if I stand.
 Why must I dilute the words I write
 By encouraging what I abhor?
 Why must I confirm that you are right,
 Permit what you need no permission for?
 Why not let me use the words I mean?
 There's no malice hiding in between.

Laura

Bio:

I'm a 41 year old white cis woman and asexual. I converted to Islam in 1999 and am active in various online and offline Muslim communities. My experiences with asexual communities have been entirely online and primarily on Tumblr and on blogs that share audience with Tumblr.

“Faith, Islam, and Asexual Community Politics”

Five times a day, I stand before my Lord in prayer, bow and prostrate. This June and July, I'll be doing a month straight of 18-hour fasts for Ramadan. I do this because my faith grounds and centers me.

This isn't the queer Muslim story that it seems most people in LGBTQ and asexual spaces want to hear.

The queer Muslim narrative that people in these spaces seem to want to hear is about how I struggle with religious rules that were not designed with my sexuality in mind.

That is an important story, and one worth telling. Islam, like many other religions, has something to say about sexuality and I can't exist as an asexual person in Muslim spaces without eventually running into that.

But my asexuality is not all of me. I exist as a whole person, a flawed human being seeking a structure for shaping my life according to moral guidelines, a believer who seeks reminder of and connection with the divine, a perspective that this world is not all that there is.

When I accepted Islam in 1999, that faith was why. When I continue to practice it, that faith is why. Being asexual means I may run into more obstacles in living my faith than a straight person does, but the faith is already there, rooted in my heart, before it meets those obstacles.

I am an *asexual Muslim* - Muslim is the noun, modified by my asexuality.

According to the 2014 asexual community census [1], 58.6% of respondents identify as atheist, agnostic, or other non-religious. But I believe it's not just because aces of faith are in a numerical minority that faith perspectives can be marginalized in ace spaces.

Rather, I believe that when faith perspectives are marginalized, it is because of how LGBTQ communities - and the asexual communities that are modeled after them - tend to define themselves in relation to religion.

Specifically, these communities often perceive religion as seeking to repress sexuality, and part of the “ideal queer narrative” [2] is a triumphant progress from repression to healthy, sex-positive Pride.

In such a narrative, religion often appears only as something that a person needs to leave behind in order to become liberated. In such a narrative, there seems to be little or no space for faith as a positive force in a person’s life.

In the case of Islam, this narrative is further complicated by stereotypes common in Western societies that Islam is uniquely oppressive to women and to LGBTQ people of all genders.

In this view, Islam is such a negative force that no one in their right mind could choose it freely. LGBTQ Muslims must exist in a state of victimization by their families or cultures, ready to be “rescued” to a secularized (and usually capitalist-friendly) Western identity.

In the context of Western political and military interventions in Muslim-majority countries, LGBTQ politics can become homonationalism [3].

The invisibility of asexuality means it is not overtly deployed in these types of discourses.

However, nearly half of asexual-spectrum respondents in the 2014 community census identified themselves as “sex-positive” and just over half consider themselves part of the LGBTQ community while the vast majority think asexuality *should be* part of the LGBTQ umbrella [4].

This means that sex-positive LGBTQ-inspired politics are a significant factor in online asexual discourse.

Online asexual communities have begun to analyze sex-positivity and how it affects those on the asexual spectrum [5]. As we do this, we should also examine how sex-positivity impacts aces of faith, especially aces who belong to non-Christian religions such as Islam.

We should examine whether we make assumptions about religion that allow no room for faith as a positive force in the lives of many aces.

As an ace of faith, I don’t need the majority of other aces to share my experiences. As a member of a tiny religious minority within asexual spaces [6], I know that they do not.

But I often feel that I cannot talk freely about my experiences of faith, or that when I do speak about it, it is ignored.

I feel that I need to leave an important part of myself behind when I enter asexual spaces. Given the lack of awareness about asexuality in the larger world, I feel that there is no place I can be wholly myself as an asexual Muslim.

Footnotes

[1]

<https://asexualcensus.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/2014census-preliminaryreport.pdf>

[2] A good examination of these narratives (and how they can have negative effects on aces) can be found in “Stunted Growth” by Megan Milks, in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (partial content available online at <http://tinyurl.com/lzdcrcf>).

[3] For more on homonationalism and its impacts on the Muslim world, see “The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad” at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10461/the-empire-of-sexuality-an-interview-with-joseph-m> . For a book-length treatment, see *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, by Jasbir Puar at <http://amzn.com/082234114X> .

[4] According to the census, 44.3% of ace respondents identify as sex-positive. 52.1% consider themselves part of the LGBTQ community. 88% think that asexuality should be part of the LGBTQ umbrella.

[5] For example, see the June 2013 Carnival of Aces on sex-positivity at <http://www.demigray.org/post/54340233708/june-carnival-of-aces-sex-positivity> .

[6] According to the census, just 0.5% of respondents are Muslim.

The Anonymous Asexual

Bio:

I'm a white American asexual cis woman in my 20s.

cw: psychological / emotional abuse, masturbation, sexual self-harm, possible sexual coercion, mention of pornography, mention of sexual abuse

In the couple months since I wrote this things have changed so fast. I've accepted my trauma for what it is and have been coming to new understandings of myself. And I've even realized some of what I've written in this piece is incorrect. But I'm leaving it as is because you don't have to wait until you're 1000% sure of your own history and inner workings before you speak up. It's okay if you're wrong! This is how one ace understood herself at one point in time, and that's as relevant as how she later views herself.

“Abuse and Some Consequences”

My brother was in an emotionally abusive relationship with a mutual friend. Even though it was him in the relationship, it had deep effects on me. Before it began, I considered my brother my closest relationship, and was squishing on the abuser. We went to school together and enjoyed each other's company every day. Until the friend and my brother got together.

The abuser worked hard to isolate my brother. He encouraged him not to socialize with our circle of friends. At his prompting, my brother told me he didn't like me or any of his friends, and never had, only his boyfriend.

The abuser did whatever he pleased, no matter how much it inconvenienced others or made my brother uncomfortable. Refusing to leave my brother's room, no matter what things we had planned to do or how late at night it was. Demanding preferential treatment on others' birthdays. Me and my brother's pleas were ignored.

Apologies, on the rare occasions given, only meant “It's too bad you were hurt,” rather than an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Hugs and kisses were tools to silence my brother. Every “I love you” was poison. Every part of my brother's life was demanded to be known, down to the obscure inside jokes from childhood. To resist was to be treated like a misbehaving child. He expected to be, and was, waited on hand and foot. He explicitly declared his ownership.

I didn't quite know what to make of all this, but I knew it was bad. I tried to get help from friends, but no one believed it was a big deal. My parents didn't seem to notice, and when I tried to bring it up with them, they took the attitude that my brother needed to be allowed to make his own mistakes in life. My then therapist only said I was obsessive.

And if I brought up the abuser's behavior to him, he spit back a list of all my flaws, or told me my brother was okay with it all when his emotions clearly testified otherwise.

I tried to continue on as things were with my brother and friend-turned-abuser, but that was impossible. Two very important relationships to me were destroyed. And with me and my brother living with our parents, I couldn't escape seeing the abuse.

My entire life was unraveling, and I became extremely depressed. I started failing classes, and distracted myself from life with various unhealthy habits (more on this in a moment). When I started failing in my home life—staying in bed all day, not joining the family for dinners and birthdays, skipping chores—my brother got angry and would call me disgusting.

In the past I wanted to consider my relation to the abuse solely as someone distressed at witnessing the abuse of a loved one. It was my brother having all the troubles; he was the one in the romantic relationship. Anything I faced from the abuser was lesser, and deprioritized in the name of protecting my brother. I'm currently reassessing this.

Being so protective of my brother, I haven't wanted to consider all the times I was hurt by his words. It was all just the abuser, telling him how to feel, right? My brother, dearest person in the world, was just being made to say all those terrible things, right? It's only been in the middle of writing this piece I've considered my brother may have his own accountability.

Now about those habits... I started to masturbate. A lot. Before all my troubles, it was something I didn't care about much. I did touch myself, sometimes, in a slow way that was more soothing than arousing. But what used to be rare became something I did several times a week, or even several times daily. And what used to be slow became something much more vigorous.

Why, exactly, is something I'm still struggling to understand. I only have some guesses. Masturbation's something both easy to do, and with a fair amount of intensity. I can engulf myself in the activity and not have to think about other things. But I'm pretty damn sure I don't do it for sexual satisfaction; I've never experienced an orgasm. I don't know if I can't, or if it's just that I back off before it gets too intense.

Many of the times (or even most), I'm not even really properly aroused. By which I mean, I don't have any natural lube. I've made myself bleed many times, and I'm not entirely sure if I didn't want to hurt. Both masturbation and self-harm are supposed to release chemicals in your brain that make you feel good.

There's one final reason I can think of. I know the abuser and my brother had a sexual relationship. The abuser seemed quite proud to declare they started having sex after a few months. His pride seemed just another sign of the ways he felt ownership of my brother. Sometimes the abuser would do sexualized things in front of me, like putting his hands all in my brother's shirt.

With all the problems with how the abuser used romantic gestures, with how controlling he was, I could only agonize over whether he also exerted control over my brother's sexuality. Me and my brother's rooms share a wall, and I was often worried that they could be having sex on the other side. I may have used masturbation as an outlet for all these sex-related anxieties.

Despite all these "benefits" of masturbation, I hate it. I hate the intensity, and I hate thinking of myself as someone who does any sort of sexual activity.

And there's also the pornography. I hate porn, but I still utilize it in masturbation. No matter how many times I hear how bad it is, articles saying that anyone watching it comes away more misogynistic (even feminists), I think it might actually have made it worse. I feel terrible and devalued, and I wonder if I don't want that too.

Originally I was sex-indifferent, even a little sex-favorable. Now I'm very, very sex-averse. As I said, I had a lot of anxieties around the sexual nature of the abuser and my brother's relationship. Seeing any romantic physical or verbal intimacy around me, from them or any other couple, became a source of panic. I suspect my habit of masturbation itself also contributed to my sex-aversion, being such a hated activity I kept putting myself through.

The abuse ended years ago, but my habits haven't improved much. I don't feel like I can get help anywhere for this thing I know is bad for me. With my sex-aversion, I feel very anxious to think of anyone associating anything sexual with me. I've never been to a gynecologist; I'm too afraid I'll have some sort of visible injuries and they'll ask questions. I've tried to steel myself to tell my therapist quite a few times and failed.

I tried looking up information online about sexual self-harm but there's very little out there. What little there is, beyond brief mentions of its existence, are all narratives about people who were sexually abused. Since I wasn't sexually abused, and I never learned of any sexual abuse happening to my brother, I haven't felt like it's all that helpful.

I'm also wary that help outside the asexual community may want to fix my sex-aversion. And maybe 'fixing' my sex-aversion might be healthy for me. My romance-aversion has improved over the years, and I do feel better for it. But if I was to get help for sex-aversion, help built for an allosexual context wouldn't likely suit me.

Once I actually did try to get help from (non-asexual) friends. I told one friend who encouraged me to get rid of the things I use, but then we never talked about it again and drifted apart due to other factors. I told another friend who said I wasn't hurting myself; I was just horny like normal people and needed to go out and buy a dildo.

I told a roommate I self-harmed without specifics, and she told me it was very hard on her because she herself struggles with self-harm. To live in the same apartment as another self-harmer made it hard on her own mental health. Even with the positive response from the one friend, I end up fearing similar responses: I'll either not be believed or will hurt people by telling them.

Inside the asexual community, the closest place I know for help is "Resources for Ace Survivors" on Tumblr, "for asexual spectrum and questioning people who have experienced sexual violence." You can see I don't fit their target demographic.

In many instances, I go around in mental circles worrying about whether I have legitimate grounds to get help in any one area. Self-harm support forums? Well, do I really self-harm, or is it merely a maladaptive habit?

Or how about abuse support? I then have to wonder if I even have the right to use that word in my own narrative, and besides that, I've never found any resources for people witnessing the abuse of a sibling. And it's only now it's occurred to me that I might benefit from resources for those directly abused.

This is something I have to deal with, and I need help to do it. It's holding me back from emotionally healing. I don't think I will find a group where I can address my problems. To get help outside of myself, I think I first have to put myself out there.

I didn't feel like I was ready to speak on this topic, when I got down to writing, but I've felt this way time and time again. I forced myself. Writing under a new name, I'm able to break my own silence.

Resources For Ace Survivors (of Sexual Violence):

<http://asexualsurvivors.org/>

Omnes et Nihil

Bio:

I'm a 31-year-old queer asexual non-binary freak of the (sort-of- Jewish) white person variety, and enough of a hard-hitting feminist to get regularly called a bitch. I'm in the *really* dark grey zone of the aromantic spectrum to the point of being aroace. I don't do the romance / dating thing and I really never have. I hail from a large Canadian city where I spend a lot of time alone with the cat who claims me as her person.

cw: discussion of partner abuse, mention of sexual violence

I do significant, long-term non-romantic, non-normative relationships. Those relationships work for me. Most of these relationships have been and continue to be positive. However, one of these lasted more than a decade, was unhealthy for much of that time, and was especially abusive toward the end. That relationship “broke up” almost 2 years ago although we still have ongoing contact in the context of community.

I am still working through the whole experience and its impact. It's a process. I've written more about the experience in the zine “Rotten Zucchini” (Issues 1 and 2):

<http://rotten-zucchini.tumblr.com/rotten>

This piece is about a different side of that experience and the impact of amatonormativity.

“Amatonormativity, I Marvel”

I don't think I will ever again know anyone as completely as I've known her. People don't usually know people like that—not even when they're talking “love of my life” type stuff. We were epic. That didn't really sink in until recently.

I've been feeling very alone for a lot of reasons— and it's not that I don't have anyone significant in my life because I do. And I've been trying to process a lot of stuff to do with that relationship— a lot of negative stuff. (The relationship was abusive— she was abusive— but that's still hard to say even now after so much time.) But it wasn't all bad. It was complicated and multifaceted. And there isn't a lot of space for that complexity.

I don't think it's inherently unhealthy to know someone so well. But knowing someone won't magically turn them into a good person. And it won't make them caring or respectful. And if they value things that are hurtful, knowing them better just makes that more clear... it won't make them stop. Knowing someone doesn't change them.

And it is totally possible to love someone who hurts people. It's possible to love someone who hurts you. I wouldn't recommend it. (I also know it's possible to stop loving someone who hurts you—or at least to make them no longer relevant to your life... not necessarily easy but possible.)

The basis of our relationship was primarily that I understood her but that she didn't understand me. Even though we were also close apart from that, “closeness” and “intimacy” aren't the right words for that because they're commutative: if a chair is close to a table, the table is also close to the chair. I'm talking about something else. Knowing someone is a one-way phenomenon—they might or might not also know you back.

I understood her and she didn't really understand me. That's why we worked. And also why we didn't. There was a lot that was unhealthy and she did a lot of terrible things, consistently over the course of a very long time— so many in fact I don't generally recognise them as anything at all.

But the other side of that coin was that I **did** know her extraordinarily well and always understood exactly where she was coming from even when she did hurtful stuff.

I wouldn't recommend knowing someone so well if they're going to hurt you (because understanding why they hurt you makes it pretty hard to ask or expect them to stop). But the point is that I **did**.

And I don't think I'll ever know someone like that again. And I miss that. There should be room to miss that. And there should be room to recognise that that was special, even if other stuff about the relationship was bad.

I have to believe that it's possible to know someone that well without them hurting you. Knowing someone makes it easier for them to hurt you if that's what they're going to do— it makes you more vulnerable to the hurtful things they'll do, but it won't make them do hurtful things in the first place.

I guess it's a matter of finding someone to get to know who won't do hurtful things— but how can you know that before getting to know them?

But even if the conceptual territory were there, I'd still feel bad for missing that closeness, like it's somehow a kick in the teeth of those who are close to me now— not because of monogamy or jealousy issues but because she hurt them more than she hurt me. She never sexually coerced or raped me.

I've spend so much of my life railing against social relationship hierarchies that privilege romantic relationships. I've spend too many years of my life fighting for people to recognise the important non-romantic relationships in my life— recognise them as important without mistaking them for something else.

Challenging amatonormativity is kind of an all-consuming pass-time for me, and something I do as much for my own emotional survival as I do because of my political commitment. I'm pretty used to unpacking all that stuff. But even still... I never really clued in to how special that relationship was, or how intense compared with what else is out there.

We talk about relationships a lot in ace spaces— relationships right left and centre. There are theories, models, new words and even graphs. But for all the talk, there isn't a lot of experience-sharing— mostly I imagine because people don't usually share that kind of personal stuff.

I always assumed with all the fuss— the words, the music and art, the self-destructive irrationality— over romantic relationships and even best friends... that people's primary relationships were usually epic. That it's not just that people tell their partners stuff they don't tell anyone else and Feel Things... that they actually know each other near-perfectly. They don't. And I guess on some level I was aware of that but it just didn't click.

People have romantic ideals of partnership but for the most part, people are fundamentally alienated from their partners— keep secrets or parts of themselves to themselves. And that's woven into the fabric of marital and co-habiting romantic relationships: the (usually unspoken and typically gendered) stories (especially in hetero contexts) about what husbands keep from their wives—whether through avoidant pride or protectiveness— and how women look to their women friends for the emotional support and connection missing in marriage, and too often also for the strength to survive it...

We know that people who claim to be monogamous often aren't and that people keep hidden problems with anything from money to experiences pathologised as mental illness.

There's the all-familiar trope of intimate strangers or civil-minded roommates. People who live together for a long time, and build a life together, know each other well. But people are still separate people and don't usually get inside each others' heads.

I know what it's like to know someone that completely, to know her better than she knows herself and better even than I know myself. The downside is that I feel responsible for all the hurt she's caused— because I wasn't able to stop it. But understanding someone isn't the same thing as controlling them. And yet, that's not really the point.

People rarely understand other people better than those people understand themselves. I have. And even though fighting amatonormativity defines my social existence— and has for more years than the phenomenon itself has had a name— I didn't realise until recently that that experience was anything special.

That's worth noting because that is the power of amatonormativity's pervasiveness. And I marvel in awe.

(But I am not defeated.)

Naming “Compulsory Sexuality”

The story of naming “compulsory sexuality” and the analysis behind it gets a little complicated because the theory comes from two different places— two different convergent genealogies: one is the extrapolation from Rich’s 1980 conceptualisation of compulsory heterosexuality⁸ and the other is seeded in the basis of intersectionality itself. Most ace discourse (not surprisingly) holds tightly to the former.

I’ve often seen Lisa Millbank credited for coining the term “compulsory sexuality” in her manifesto “Ethical Prude: Imagining An Authentic Sex-Negative Feminism”⁹ from February 2012. As far as I know, she was the first person to theorise extensively on “compulsory sexuality” by that name, and did so in the (race-non-specific) framework often taken for granted in ace community discussions.

Millbank didn’t coin the term (and doesn’t claim to have). I’ve seen it used in an (ace-related) academics from 2011¹⁰ and in some offline ace discussions from at least 2010. But Millbank’s writing is probably what popularised the term via ace bloggers quoting her work, galvanising it within ace discourse.

Now, this conception of “compulsory sexuality” came out of a self-proclaimed “sex-negative” reaction against sex-positivity. There is tension between the agenda of recognising & resisting the violence of compulsory sexuality, and the agenda of sex-positivity. (And the ace sex wars have born that out.)

But Millbank is not ace and her critique doesn’t acknowledge asexuality. It even ends by clarifyin she does *not* endorse a pro-celibacy mandate (although presumably celibacy is acceptable). She is, however, coming from a political lesbian¹¹ perspective, within a lesbian transfeminist framework.

⁸ You can read a re-print with a forward & afterward by Rich herself: <http://www.posgrado.unam.mx/musica/lecturas/Maus/viernes/AdrienneRichCompulsoryHeterosexuality.pdf>

⁹ <https://radtransfem.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/the-ethical-prude-imagining-an-authentic-sex-negative-feminism/>

¹⁰ CJ Chasin’s “Notes On Compulsory Sexuality And Asexual Existence” (cj.chasin.ca/Chasin_Compulsory.Sexuality.Slides_Dec.2011.pdf)

¹¹ There various versions of political lesbianism— it certainly *can* be ace-friendly. I don’t know how Millbank’s political lesbianism would approach ace women-classed people (some of whom are trans)— but, it evidently includes trans women (some of whom are ace).

Ace discourse has taken up “compulsory sexuality” for an ace context, writing about it without necessarily going back to (much of any of) Millbank’s (longish) original text, or the other writings that contextualise and expand on it. But in doing so, ace discourse has left behind the radical transfeminist politics and political lesbian context that inspired her analysis (without necessarily even being aware that those were its politics).

On the other hand, Black feminists and Womanists (at least in a US context) have long had complex analyses of how the simultaneously sexist, racist and classist violence of forced sexualisation and rape specifically target Black women.¹² They didn’t describe “compulsory sexuality” in those terms because their work *pre-dates* Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality”.

Their analyses are fundamentally intersectional— in fact, analyses like theirs are the *basis* of “intersectionality”: that’s where it all started. So it seems odd from that perspective to observe a white-centric ace community taking a superficial “cross-the-board blanket social pressure” perspective on “compulsory sexuality” and then sometimes trying to build in “intersectionality” via a recipe of “add diversity and stir”.

It seems odd until it becomes clear that there are two streams of analysis— one intersectional one from Black women and one descendent from “universal” theory of White women. (That’s not that “compulsory heterosexuality” doesn’t play out broadly or that radical critiques of heterosexuality can’t address race— because it does and they can. But for that the original theory needs adaptinng— reading through intersectional lenses.)

In short, Black feminists used their own language to build their own theory around their own experiences, and in doing so, they got there before anyone else. But because the white centric ace community came to unpack compulsory sexuality via the analytical descendants of a white woman’s theory there’s a disconnect. And since this white woman’s theory was specifically produced through a political lesbian, radical transfeminist reaction against “sex-positivity” and most of that political context is routinely left behind, there’s another disconnect. And I don’t know how to bridge those gaps.

But now we have the ace sex wars unfolding... somehow.

¹² For example, check out the Combahee River Collective Statement from 1977 / 1978: <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

Further Reading re: The Ace Sex Wars:

These are *not* key moment of the Ace Sex Wars— just ones that I think illustrate some key points of the conflict & tension.

December 2013, Sciatrix responded to recently noted the absence of sex-repulsed perspectives in ace spaces:

<https://asexualagenda.wordpress.com/2013/12/03/i-am-not-your-sex-cheerleader/>

End of June, 2014, materials created for the AVEN contingent in the World Pride Parade in Toronto sparked controversy— especially the leaflet that listed the first option for dealing with ace/non-ace romantic relationships to be aces having compromise sex. (There was little / no participation from local Toronto ace community in developing these leaflets.)

<http://bessibel.tumblr.com/post/90280870827/my-ace-pride-includes-disabled-aces-my-ace-pride>

The August 2014 blog Carnival of Aces focused “the unassailable asexual” and had a record participation (and the comments on some pieces revealed lingering hostility).

<http://queeniofaces.tumblr.com/post/96381155003/august-2014-carnival-of-aces-round-up>

The July 2014 topic (sex-aversion and sex-repulsion) also was a hot topic:

<https://luvtheheaven.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/carnival-of-aces-july-2014-round-up-of-everything-submitted/>

This followed closely after the eruption of controversy over the term “sex-favourable” aces (July, 2014):

<https://asexualagenda.wordpress.com/2014/07/25/reflections-on-the-use-and-boundaries-of-sex-favourable-asexual-as-a-term/>

And the conflation of “sex-favourable” and “sex-positive” aces continues with more recent reflections (April, 2015):

<http://metapianycist.tumblr.com/post/116248278028/miscellani-i-really-insert-negative-emotion/>

Sciatrix's overview of relevant issues (August, 2014):

<http://writingfromfactorx.tumblr.com/post/95333494889/sorry-for-the-delay-ive-just-now-seen-your/>

Ongoing Call for Submission: f-ace-ing silence

As aces, we’re often silenced in our non-ace communities. **But we’re also silenced even in ace spaces— surrounded by other aces: that’s what this zine is about.**

Feeling silenced doesn’t necessarily mean having been *actively* silenced (although it could).

It’s also about feeling like you can’t talk about some part of your experience, or like there isn’t room to talk about it (yet?). And sometimes it means feeling alienated or alone because nobody is talking (yet?) about some part of your experience.

- **What asexuality-related thing do *you* feel *silenced* or *alienated* about in asexual / ace communities?**
- **Is there some asexuality-related part of your experience that nobody seems to be talking about (yet?) in ace spaces?**
- **And what do you have to say about it?**

4th issue theme— as an optional guiding suggestion only

- iffy, questionable and / or confusing sexual “consent”
- sexual harassment & coercion, and other sexual violence

Words, images... anything that can be printed on regular letter-sized (8.5”x11”) printer paper— and contributions can be anonymous if that’s what you prefer.

This is an ongoing zine. For info about upcoming and past issues check out: <http://rotten-zucchini.tumblr.com/f-ace-ing>

Please e-mail contributions, questions, comments... to: rotten.zucchini@gmail.com

An editorial note:

I included every submission I received. These are the stories of the contributors, in their own words. As the zine's editor, I provided feedback on drafts— asked for clarification— and pointed out where I thought pieces could be stronger. But changes, if any, were up to the contributors: there were no ultimatums.

I do ask that people situate themselves in their bios in terms of a number of things including race (unless they have good reasons not to) because:

- a) these things matter when it comes to understanding people's experiences and
- b) it's important to be able to see whose perspectives are represented and whose are missing.

These words belong to their authors. I don't necessarily understand them or agree with them.
 (That's not really the point.)
 They matter to me *because* they are the words that these people wanted to write.

It's a diverse silence we face,
 and we do that each in our own ways.

— Omnes et Nihil

Formatting for “Readability”:

When formatting this zine, I tried to make it as easy as possible to read— especially for people with different reading difficulties (e.g., dyslexia & hyperlexia):

- the paragraphs are as short as possible— unusually short— with obvious paragraph breaks
- there are spaces before and after punctuation marks like (parentheses) and / slashes /
- the font (Trebuchet) is one of the fonts that people with dyslexia apparently find easier to read
 (according to the British Dyslexia Association:
<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about-dyslexia>)
[/further-information/dyslexia-style-guide.html](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about-dyslexia/further-information/dyslexia-style-guide.html))