

Book Review: Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology edited by Mark Carrigan et al.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/07/18/book-review-asexuality-and-sexual-normativity-an-anthology-edited-by-mark-carrigan-et-al/

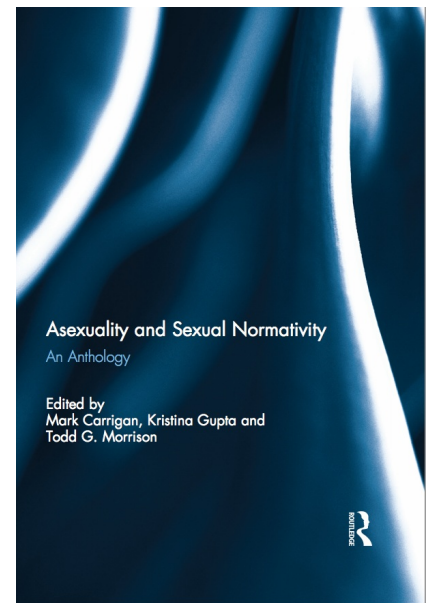
2014-7-18

The last decade has seen the emergence of an increasingly politically active asexual community, united around a common identity as ‘people who do not experience sexual attraction’. This collection covers the emergence of the concept of ‘normal’ sexuality in the late eighteenth-century, early-twentieth-century public sex education campaigns, and how asexuality is different from hypoactive sexual desire disorder. Iro Filippaki finds that each and every one of the articles truly contributes to the disambiguation of the notion of asexuality in the present.

Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology. Mark Carrigan, Kristina Gupta and Todd G. Morrison (eds.). Routledge. April 2014.

Find this book: 

Discussion about asexuality has been on the rise since 2010 and there are quite a few collections of articles that have attempted to define asexuality as a movement within and out of the margins of sexual normativity. Compiled by academics and smartly divided into chapters, the present collection of research articles endeavors to explore the obscure issue of asexuality as a social construct, an alternative (non) expression of desire, and, interestingly enough, a parallel political path. Painstakingly collected statistical evidence is provided in many of the articles, and it is this evidence which runs in perfect harmony with Michel Foucault and Judith Butler’s more theoretical concept of gender as a socially constructed identity which the average person needs to perform on a daily basis in order to fit in a given social norm.



The importance of late eighteenth-early nineteenth century thought is particularly emphasized, and rightly so, since that time saw the emergence of the discourse of the “normal,” a discourse that was contested by Foucauldian criticism a few centuries later. Some articles, such as “Sex as a normalizing technology: early-twentieth-century public sex education campaigns” (p. 82) and “The average and the normal in nineteenth-century French medical discourse” (p. 95) touch on various moments in history and relate them to the normalizing discourse of sexual expression; this is particularly crucial in telling the story of asexuality and in realizing why it has been narrativized as deviation from the norm. Historicising asexuality in such a manner sheds light on its current social reception within cemented norms.

One such norm that needs to be contested is that asexuality is a disorder; one of the most crucial links discussed to that effect is that between asexuality and mental illness in general. According to Morag Yule, Lori Brotto, and Boris Gorzalka in their gem of an article entitled “Mental Health and interpersonal functioning in self-identified asexual men and women,” it is not clear but remains a strong possibility that asexuality causes distress due to its anti-social, in a sense, nature: “the experience of the asexual individual, who lacks sexual attraction but exists in a society seemingly focused on sexuality, might lead to distress and perhaps mental health difficulties” (p.26).

The institutionalization and appropriation of asexuality by the mental health system has unsurprisingly caused asexual individuals to be falsely categorized under the spectrum of mental illness, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of those individuals suffering indeed from mental and emotional instability. Much attention is therefore drawn to the controversial and obtuse topic of suicidality and asexual tendency, which needs to be further explored.



Toronto Pride Parade 2011. Credit: nouspique CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

A good deal of the articles are founded on the consistent genealogy of asexuality that was written by [Anthony Bogaert](#) in 2004 and this serves the purpose of unification, while at the same time the different approaches of the writers that often result in conflicting arguments work as a prism of interpretations for Bogaert's rather rigid definition of asexuality. Jacinthe Flore's piece "HSDD and asexuality: a question of instruments" appears to be the only one that directly addresses the blind spots of the narrativisation of asexuality: "Bogaert's definition of asexuality as someone who never experienced sexual attraction towards anyone at all is insensitive to issues of fluidity" (p. 45). Flore here further digs into what Yule, Brotto, and Gorzalka uncovered in the previous chapter, when she states that "by emphasising the ideology that sexual desire is natural, sexology and psychiatry have produced a discourse that stigmatizes individuals who experience low or no sexual desire, or who experience it in a way not fitting 'normal' sexuality" (p. 44). Now this might seem self-evident to devout Foucault followers, but when it comes to the notion of asexuality and the ways through which it has been narrativised, it is really a trailblazing assertion.

Flore's suggestion of "experiencing otherwise" (p. 51) resonates with the gist of the collection found in Randi Gressgård's "Asexuality: from pathology to identity and beyond" (p.68). It appears that there is a clinical side and a social side to asexuality, and inclusion in one side means exclusion from the other: "the call for recognition of asexual identity could be conceived as a political struggle aimed at positing new figures of the intelligibly human so as to envision personhood anew" (p.76). Following that, it becomes evident that the choice of sexual preference is a political choice, and therefore, appropriation of the expression of sexuality means control over the political body of a given society. Gressgård brings our attention to the fact that whether asexuality is a social identity or a clinical disorder, its discussion alone constitutes "subjects that are particularly suitable for self-regulation within the parameters of a (neo)liberal citizenship" (p.69). Nevertheless, the current research on asexuality is a step towards "imagin[ing] other pathways of affiliation and other conceptions of personhood, beyond the tenets of liberal humanism—gesturing instead towards new [...] meanings of sexual citizenship" (p. 77).

The most significant feat of the present collection of articles is that it consistently emphasizes, as a whole, the metanarrative of abnormality and the arbitrary division between sexual normativity and sexual pathology. Although some of the articles focus on detailed accounts of case studies, the structure of each chapter helps the reader navigate around the complex issue of asexuality, focusing on different elements—i.e instruments, research methods,

results—according to interest. Admittedly, some parts of the book are perhaps too focused in theoretical and academic research; having said that, though, each and every one of the articles truly contributes to the disambiguation of the notion of asexuality in the present, and is work scrupulously filtered through numerous sources.

Iro Filippaki graduated from the English Literature department in Athens, Greece in 2009, completed her MA on Ideology, Politics and Narratology in 2011 and is currently a PhD student at the University of Glasgow in Medical Humanities, where she is researching body and language politics in WWII metanarratives.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books