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A Sexuality Without Orientation: “Coming Out” on

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network

In 2006, the founder of AVEN (The Asexual Visibility and Education Network), David Jay, publicized his own asexuality and created an online forum for discussion for asexuals worldwide. Unlike the social and political marches that often define LGBTQ visibility, AVEN raises awareness and creates asexual visibility through its website. Striving to create open and honest discussion about asexuality among sexual and asexual people alike, AVEN frames asexuality as a sexual orientation. In fact, it is AVEN that has defined asexuality (both as an identity and as a sexuality) within the public forum. Investigating the interrelationships between public and private and creating a space for asexuals online, AVEN enables the construction of asexuality as a sexual identity and encourages asexuals to “come out.”

Interrogating the ways in which asexual visibility is created, constructed, and represented through AVEN, this paper draws on critical and cultural studies as a means of examining how identity and power are constructed via this online community. Focusing on the sociocultural implications of creating social movements through online media, this paper also addresses the ways in which discourses of power, identity and location become visible through new media and new communication technologies.

Through an in-depth study of AVEN's online discourses, this paper will analyze the ways in which AVEN represents asexuality as a cultural (and sexual) identity through its surveys, videos and other pages. Rethinking the intersections between these cultural positionings also enables us to rethink the interconnections between theory and new media practices. Focusing on the ways in which ideas of sexual identity are seen as cultural norms constructed by social privilege also points to the curious and contested connections between these categories. In this context, this paper will address the ways in which non-normative sexual practices associated with asexuality and the cultural narratives present on AVEN's website call into question the stability of sexuality as a category of analysis.

#### AVEN: Histories, Methods and Definitions

In 2001, AVEN was founded with two goals: "creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community" (AVEN, 2008). According to sex researcher Anthony Bogaert, between 1 and 6 percent of the American population describe themselves as asexual (2004). With over 19,000 users worldwide, AVEN hosts the world's largest asexual community and serves as a resource for the asexual community and its allies (Scherrer, 2008; Cerankowski and Milks, 2010). The site also hosts a large archive of resources on asexuality, including frequently asked questions, a survey about asexual demographics from 2008, a wiki, a bimonthly newsletter/magazine (AVENues), video links, and a number of forums on everything from asexuality itself, to meet-ups, personal ads, visibility and education projects, and an open-mic poetry area. However, for the purposes of this paper, I am limiting the discussion of

the site to the presence of static content on AVEN, rather than including the forum posts of other members of the site.

AVEN constructs and defines asexuality as a sexual identity and provides site users with multiple narratives of asexual experiences. Enabling asexuals (as well as their friends and families) to articulate and describe their own experiences, these narratives serve as a means of culturally, visually, and publicly constructing what it means to be asexual. Nevertheless, an examination of these forums and how the members of AVEN themselves represent race, class, gender, and sexuality in relation to asexuality and asexual visibility is certainly worthy of further investigation.

Focusing on the site's use of FAQ's, the results of a 2008 survey and links to videos previously shown on television, this paper investigates how AVEN defines and denotes asexuality, asexual identity and asexual visibility via its representation online. Perhaps most significantly, AVEN serves as an informational resource for the asexual community and a space for defining asexuality itself. At the same time, it has also worked to publicize and raise awareness about the asexual community more broadly. The site defines asexuality as a sexual category and a sexual identity, noting that it is "a person who does not experience sexual attraction" (AVEN, 2008). Unlike celibacy, which is understood as a personal choice, asexuality is understood as a sexual orientation (AVEN, 2008). In this context, the site itself serves as a means of both defining asexuality and creating a space for asexuals to define themselves. In fact, the site encourages anyone who is asexual, questioning their asexuality or an ally of asexuals to join in the conversation and participate in the AVEN community.

## Asexual Visibility and Online Community

Social movements have long been defined through their participation within the public sphere. Marches, protests and rallies have been the hallmarks of visibility for a variety of social movements. However, with the advent of online social networking sites, the public sphere has shifted from a literal space within communities to a virtual world encouraging larger scale community involvement. Online platforms such as the Asexual Visibility Education Network transgress the boundaries of how social movements function, raise awareness, and create a public forum where the nature of public participation constantly shifts and is redefined.

Hosting the world's largest online asexual community, AVEN purports to represent asexuality online ([asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org)). As an informational resource, AVEN serves as an online space for education, community and virtual connection. As Howard Rheingold writes, "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (1993, p.5). The accessibility and availability of this online site creates a space for asexual voices to be heard, raising awareness about a sexual identity that has been largely invisible within the cultural imaginary. But, at the same time, this paper questions the idea that the site must be understood as a Utopian space that allows "everyone" access and all to have a voice. As founder of AVEN, David Jay, points out in his essay, "The Computer in the Closet: A Look at Online Collective Identity Formation," in order to find the AVEN website, computer users must type asexuality into a search engine, have online access to a computer, and understand the English language. Though AVEN reaches users in over

twenty countries worldwide, the primary users of AVEN are from the US and UK (AVEN, 2008). Thus, though AVEN creates a virtual community through its forums and discussions, member participation is limited by economic, national, language and educational constraints.

As many critics including Sherry Turkle (1995), Shawn Wilbur (2000), Lisa Nakamura (2008), and Mary Gray (2009) have noted, the internet has created a virtual space for highly stigmatized, marginalized groups such as LGBT, ethnic and national minorities. In these online spaces, these groups find both community and often a (safe) space to share their ideas and experiences. As Margaret Cooper argues, the internet community is an arena in which one can “1) question her identity in a safe risk-free environment, 2) construct alternate systems of support, family and community, 3) gather advice from others...4) gather assistance in transitioning from one identity to another, 5) obtain education about gay and lesbian identity categories and resources” (2010). Via AVEN, asexuals and questioning individuals may learn about how to not only articulate and discover their own asexualities and “come out,” but also gather information and seek education and community support in a relatively risk-free environment.

### Asexuality and Queer Identity

One cannot discuss the cultural significance of asexuality without also taking into account its relationship to queer theory. In fact, queer theory was created as a means of moving beyond the homo/hetero divide and addressing the diversity of sexualities present within culture. Indeed, “queer” often refers to the impossibility of defining any “natural” sexuality, perpetually challenging normative categories of identity and subjectivity. In

this way, asexuality itself can be understood in relation to queer theory since it questions the interrelationships between sex, gender and desire.

I argue that imagining asexualities together with all of their pluralities and intersections allows for a redefinition of “queer.” In this way, I imagine incorporating an “A” for asexuality within constructions of LGBT and queer identities and identifications. The inclusion of asexuality within these ideas of “queer” will also be used as a means of extending “queer” beyond the homo/hetero divide and towards a redefinition of “queer” in terms of erotic variety. In this context, asexuality puts into question traditional understandings of sex and sexuality within queer theory.

One of the most significant contributions of queer theory to the study of asexuality is Michel Foucault’s (1990) description of sexuality as *the* open secret. Foucault argues that in modern societies, sexuality is both obsessively talked about and condemned to prohibition, repression, and silence. Thus, sexuality itself is seen as both private and public. Indeed, following the ideas of Foucault, feminist and queer critics Eve Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1999) have incorporated the ideas of speech acts and silence into their own theories of power and sexuality. Within the cultural imaginary, asexuality itself shares a particular relationship to the open secret and to silence. Since asexuality has been historically and culturally understood as taboo, pathologized, or even non-existent, its entrenchment within the silence of the closet has often restricted discursive access to these ideas and identities (Bogaert, 2006). The creation and presence of AVEN online and worldwide draws attention to this need for asexuals to increase their visibility and to come out of the closet.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*,<sup>1</sup> Eve Sedgwick uses Foucault's ideas to argue that homosexuality is *the* open secret. For Sedgwick, the closet is the defining structure of modern knowledge and of gay oppression. In the trope of the closet, she creates a model of sexuality that incorporates not only sexuality, but other forms of language, knowledge, and existence. In this way, the marking of the binary categories of heterosexual/homosexual can also be mapped onto other binary divisions at work within our society: between secrecy and disclosure, nature and culture, new and old, domestic and foreign, active and passive, private and public, masculine and feminine, etc.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant contributions that Sedgwick makes in relation to asexuality is her construction of other means of differentiating people in relation to sexuality besides sexual object choice. For instance, Sedgwick asks, why couldn't we be differentiated based on whether we prefer to have lots of sex or very little, whether sexuality makes up a large share of our self-perceived identity, whether auto-eroticism is a significant portion of our sex lives, etc. This move to break away from the hetero/homo divide and map sexual identity beyond binary categories is a particularly queer move. Thus, Sedgwick provides a model of sexuality that moves beyond essentialist oppositions and opens up a space for redefining sexuality through its intersection with other modes of being. Asexuality fits very well into this reading of sexuality and queerness since asexuality itself enables a rethinking of sexuality beyond its seemingly necessary relationship to sexual desire. At the same time, imagining sexuality in terms of whether it makes up a large part of our identities or not also enables us to create a place for asexuality within both queer theory and the LGBTQ(A) community.

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Up until recently, asexuality was understood as a pathology, or a psychological or mental disorder. Rather than being seen as a sexual orientation, asexuality was associated with Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) and characterized in the DSMIV as a mental disorder defined by lack of interest in sex (Bogaert 2004, 2006). In fact, asexuality has only recently been acknowledged as a sexual identity. And, these links between asexuality and mental and sexual dysfunction are also reminiscent of the historical interconnections between homosexuality, sodomy, and queerness in the terms of abnormal psychology (Bayer, 1987; Irvine, 2005). In many ways, the creation and presence of AVEN online and worldwide is taking on the project of the LGBTQ community by drawing attention to this need for asexuals to raise awareness about asexuality as a sexual identity, increase asexual visibility and come out of the closet.

Nevertheless, AVEN's own definition of asexuality is not necessarily defined in relation to queer identity. Rather, in answer to the Frequently Asked Question on the AVEN website, "I think asexuality is inherently queer. Do you agree?" the site proposes,

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 asexuals that consider the relationships they form to be completely unconventional and therefore queer. Other asexuals consider their relationships to be entirely conventional and do not identify as queer in any way (AVEN, 2008).

This relationship between asexuality and queerness is one that is alluded to often within critical discourse about asexuality, as well as within the website itself (Scherrer, 2008; Cerankowski and Milks, 2010; Chasin, 2011). Yet, AVEN does not align itself

explicitly with the LGBTQ community. Rather, it suggests that some members of the asexual community may identify as queer while others may not. This is particularly significant when considering the larger cultural, social and economic implications of asexual visibility. Whereas members of the LGBTQ community are often aligned together for the purposes of social awareness and public visibility (via marches, protests, etc.), asexuals are often considered in a separate category. In fact, by separating itself from the LGBTQ community rather than creating a space for itself as the A in the LGBTQ(A) community, AVEN may limit its possibilities for worldwide asexual awareness and social action.

At the same time, however, though AVEN does not explicitly align itself with queer identities, AVEN does create a space for asexual identity to be understood as queer. In its overview on asexual identity, AVEN posits, “There is no litmus test to determine if someone is asexual. Asexuality is like any other identity- at its core, it’s just a word that people use to help figure themselves out. If at any point someone finds the word asexual useful to describe themselves, we encourage them to use it for as long as it makes sense to do so” (AVEN, 2008). In the Frequently Asked Questions section of AVEN, the site also focuses on the ways in which asexuals experience relationships, attraction and arousal. Here, AVEN draws attention to the multiple ways in which asexuals experience their own sexualities, pointing out that “each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently” (AVEN, 2008). At the same time, AVEN acknowledges the fluidity of asexual identity by encouraging members of its community to choose to self-identify as asexual as long as they see fit. These statements underscore the ability of asexuals both to self-identify as queer and to create their own

identities. By fostering an inclusive and fluid definition of asexuality that acknowledges the complexities of defining any identity category, AVEN creates a space for queerly imagining asexuality via all of its complexities and variations. As Annamarie Jagose writes, “Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming” (1996, p.131). In this context, the definition of asexuality and asexual identity is one that is also constantly changing and open to being redefined as queer.

At the same time, the presence of AVEN online and the construction of asexual identity via cyberspace also have implications for the ways in which identity and sexuality are constructed within cultural and popular discourse. Alexander and Losh write that in cyberspace, there is “the potential to create fluid and challenging representations of queerness—representations that, like cyberspace itself, figure sexuality as complex, changing and dynamic” (2010, p. 46). AVEN both acknowledges and discounts this fluidity of asexuality as a category and an identity. On the one hand, it opens up asexuality to numerous definitions and experiences (as accounted for in the “Asexual Perspectives” and forum sections of the site). On the other hand, it draws distinct and limited relationships to queer sexuality, race and gender via its Survey, Frequently Asked Questions and video links. The remainder of this paper will address these complexities via analyses of these pages.

### Theorizing Intersectionality: Race, Gender and Sexuality on the Internet

As many critics have argued, beginning with the Combahee River Collective (1982) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), theories of intersectionality recognize the need to acknowledge the intersections between racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and

capitalism. As Crenshaw notes, race, class and gender are a “trilogy of oppression and discrimination” (1991). Using feminism and critical race theory, intersectional analyses study these major systems of oppression and the multiplicity of their interconnections. More recently, Leslie McCall (2005) and Gundrun-Axeli Knapp (2005) have investigated these theories of intersectionality and the challenges to these theories in relation to both travelling theories and feminist methodologies. Pointing out the ways in which cultural practices are also embedded in struggles for power, identity, and visibility (Knapp, 2005, p. 250), intersectional theories also stress the interdependence of these categories within their social, historical, and economic contexts.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be paying special attention to the interrelationships between race, gender and sexuality, particularly in terms of how they are informed by cultural norms about heterosexuality and whiteness. In his famous book, *White*, Richard Dyer notes that whiteness is often invisible within dominant cultural discourse (1997). Yet, at the same time, whiteness is a position of privilege within Western society. He writes, “white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of difference except as a means of knowing the white self” (1997, p.13). Though it may be seen as invisible, whiteness is “always already predicated on racial difference, interaction, and domination” (13). On AVEN, as will be discussed later in this paper, racial representation is elided, omitted, and erased. However, this does not mean that race is entirely invisible on AVEN, rather AVEN codes asexuality via images and representations of whiteness.

In her analysis of the representation of race online, Lisa Nakamura examines the ways in which users of the internet participate in racial and gender identity formation (2008). She writes, “Digital race formation can trace the ways that race is formed online using visual images as part of the currency of communication and dialogue between users” (2008, p. 11). In this context, the construction of race on AVEN also has larger implications for the ways in which asexuality is tied with gender, sexuality and nationality as well.

Gender, race, class and sexuality are tied up with the body through the ways in which they are constructed socially, culturally, and discursively. Michele White argues in *The Body and The Screen*, “internet sites and computer interfaces address the individual, depict the kinds of bodies that are expected to engage, and render and regulate the spectator” (White, 2006, p. 1). Seeing AVEN through the lens of intersectionality enables us to see the connections between asexuality, race, class, and gender. In this context, the visibility of AVEN and how it represents the asexual community in a public forum maps whiteness onto both asexual identity and the asexual body.

#### Whiteness, Heteronormativity and (In)Visibility on AVEN

In 2008, AVEN conducted a survey linked to its Announcements forum. Receiving 300 respondents, the survey reveals the demographics of the AVEN and asexual communities. The survey included the following demographics: year of birth, education, birth gender, sexual orientation, romantic orientation, genderedness, religion, and country of origin (AVEN, 2008). For the purposes of this survey, whereas birth gender refers to which gender the respondent was assigned at birth, genderedness refers to the

respondent's current gender identification. However, the survey questions are not included on the survey page, rather the survey is limited only to its results.

The results of the survey are as follows (and based on 300 respondents of which 12 were unusable): most AVEN users are relatively young (age 21-31), in high school, in college or with a bachelor's degree, female and asexual. Of the self-identified asexuals, most of the respondents were female, hetero-romantic (romantically attracted to the opposite of their currently identified gender), identified with the gender they were assigned at birth, non-religious, and from the US (AVEN Survey, 2008).

This survey comments on the visibility of asexuals within our cultural imaginary. Though none of these respondents are "visible" online, one might imagine the average AVEN asexual user based on this survey criteria. As Bailey notes, "We need to explore what it means to construct identity without the aid of racial and cultural markers like physical appearance, accent and so on" (2001, p. 336). At the same time, the classification of asexuals as primarily straight-identified women also links to concerns about asexuality as a form of sexual repression, trauma or sexual dysfunction. Within many earlier studies of asexuality, asexuality was not understood as a sexual identity but as a sexual dysfunction often characterized by sexual frigidity, childhood trauma or abuse, repressed homosexuality, etc. (Bogaert, 2004). However, as Poston and Blaume have addressed in their study on asexual demographics, asexuality must be understood not only in relation to sexual behavior (and pathology), but, also as an identity, self-identification and sexual preference (2010).

Within the AVEN Survey, numerous identities are made invisible. In the section of the survey reserved solely for those who identify as asexual, those respondents who identify

as “queer” or “label-free” were omitted. Though it is noted on AVEN that this is “problematic,” this division between asexuals and those who self-identify as “queer” or “label-free” also recreates a division between the queer and asexual community (AVEN, 2008). Additionally, though both users of AVEN and self-identified asexuals were asked their birth gender, romantic orientation and genderedness only referred to the respondents who self-identified as asexual. Thus, it could be argued that the romantic orientation referred to in the second half of the survey might also be included in the part of the survey referring to all respondents since this is a question both sexual and asexual people must grapple with. This distinction is certainly one of the ways in which AVEN defines asexuality as a sexual orientation, yet it deservedly could use further explanation. Though the AVEN survey seems to address the questions of self-identification and create a space for understanding asexuality as a sexual preference, AVEN also limits these identifications by positing a distinction between romantic and sexual orientation. In this way, AVEN redraws the boundaries between sex and romance, positing asexuality as a means of understanding romantic attraction without sexual attraction (but without defining romantic attraction itself).

Race and ethnicity are also omitted from the survey, both in relation to the users of AVEN in general, as well as those self-identified asexuals using the site. This is certainly problematic as well. As Bailey writes in his study of race online, there are intimate connections between the body, race, and cyberspace, saying, “The discourse of race is, by history and by design, rooted in the body. Cybersubjectivity promises the fantasy of disembodied communication, but it remains firmly connected to bodies through the imaginative act required to project into cyberspace” (2001, p. 343). Though no bodies are

made visible within the survey results, whiteness is seen as the invisible category by which asexuality is defined.

In their book, *Whiteness*, Thomas Nakayama and Judith Martin map out a theory of whiteness as it is used as a strategic rhetoric (1998). Pointing out the ties between whiteness and power, Nakayama and Martin argue that whiteness is often understood as a) lack or default, b) a scientific definition, c) confused with nationality, or d) in relation to European ancestry (1998). On AVEN, whiteness is mapped onto asexual bodies via these constructions of white identity.

In another section of AVEN entitled “Asexual Perspectives,” various asexuals discuss their responses to being asexual, including everything from feeling like an alien, to sharing ideas on how to come out, to deciding whether AVEN has started an asexual “movement.” However, in this section of the site, there is little to no reference to the intersections between race and asexuality. Though many posts explicitly address asexuality’s relationship to gender and the queer, the intersections with other forms of identity are not underscored. Age, nationality and religion are addressed in these posts, but race, ethnicity, class, etc. are not present in this section of the site.

In The “Videos” section of the website, AVEN includes five videos from YouTube as part of its promotion and public exposure of asexual visibility in the media and on television. All of these television appearances were broadcast in 2006. Included among these videos are David Jay’s appearance on *20/20*, *The View*, and MSNBC, a short piece on CNN entitled “Asexuality in America,” and an interview with an asexual couple on Fox News. In these television interviews, the networks (ABC, Fox, CNN, MSNBC) frame asexuality as an abnormality, asking such questions as “Is there anything wrong

with abstinence forever?”, “What about the idea that people ‘need’ sex?” and “Are you just lazy?” Often, the networks also frame asexuality as an illness or pathology, asking if it could be curable by a pill, expressing a concern that people who have had sexual traumas, hormonal imbalances, or problems with intimacy will now identify themselves as asexual. But, David Jay and the asexual couple, Paul and “Winter,” insist that asexuality is a sexual orientation, not a choice.

In one interview, David Jay places himself on the Kinsey scale saying he’s mostly straight. And, “asexual couple”, Jill and Paul, are also framed as a heterosexual couple. The images on the B roll of these interviews include images of people of all ages, but not all races and sexualities. All but one asexual couple is coded as white, and all couples are coded as straight. Thus, this representation of asexual visibility is limited to primarily white, straight couples. Additionally, many of the couples are shown holding hands as a sign of their romantic attraction (physical intimacy stands in for sexual intimacy here). In these interviews, romance, and the relationship between love and sex, are often referred to as one of the primary means of differentiating asexuals from non-asexuals/sexuals. Additionally, the representation of the asexual couple (not as individuals but as a couple) also promotes the idea that asexuals are monogamous and that asexuality does not equate with being single. At the same time, focusing on couples in “sex-free” relationships also eradicates much concern over the fear that asexuals will experience loneliness and lack romance in their lives, especially after “coming out.”

The appearances of asexuals on these shows represent a form of “coming out.” While David Jay is seemingly comfortable in his asexuality, many of the other asexuals interviewed on these shows are still “trying on” their new identities. At the same time, the

space for “coming out” also seems to exist in a position of privilege, as all the people shown onscreen are white, heterosexual adults. In this context, these videos’ lack of representation of queer, transgendered, and racially and ethnically diverse identities also posits a lack of space for those identities within the asexual and AVEN communities.

## Conclusion

As a creator of community and a definer of asexuality, AVEN certainly works to create a safe and educational space for asexuals to define themselves, share their experiences, and support each other in “coming out” as asexuals. Creating a space for virtual community and a forum for discussion of asexuality as well as many other forms of sexual experiences, AVEN encourages asexuals to self-identify as asexual and share their diverse perspectives on their own asexual lives.

However, as Chasin argues, “There is no reason to believe that, without encountering asexual discourse, non-self-identified asexuals would frame their experiences in the terms that self-identified asexuals have spent years developing with each other, through their conversations and interactions (2011, p. 1720). As Scherrer writes in her study of AVEN users online,

it was only after encountering the language of asexuality and an asexual community that these participants took on the identity....For many asexual individuals the internet has facilitated the discovery, not only of a language by which to describe themselves as a community that offers support and acceptance, but also a way of thinking about their asexuality as an essential characteristic of themselves (2008, p. 631).

AVEN creates a space for asexuals to imagine themselves and their experiences and share them with the AVEN community. Yet, on AVEN, asexuality is often constructed through racial and heteronormative privilege. Erasing race, ethnicity and queerness as part of the asexual experience also erases the forms of oppression that make up that experience. At the same time, AVEN's refusal to explicitly ally with the LGBTQ community also limits its possibilities as a social movement and a network of public visibility. Thus, I argue that it is necessary for AVEN to revisit its representation of asexuality and incorporate an understanding of race, class, gender, and sexuality that acknowledges its intersections. Reimagining asexualities together with all of their pluralities and intersections enables us to rethink the ways in which asexuality is constructed in relation to whiteness, class, race, and ethnicity and create a safer space for asexual "coming out."

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