

Andy Carolin

Department of English Studies
University of South Africa
carolas@unisa.ac.za

Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, eds. 2014. *Asexualities: Feminist and queer perspectives*. New York: Routledge. 395 pp. ISBN: 978-1-315-88267-3 (ebk); 978-0-415-71442-6 (hbk). The book is available from Taylor & Francis.

‘What is so radical about not having sex?’ This is the opening question posed by the editors in their introduction to this collection of essays. *Asexualities* explores the political, personal, social and cultural discourses that circulate around persons who have little or no desire for sex. Significantly, the contributors argue, this is different from those persons who choose to remain celibate (despite their desire) for moral, religious or other reasons. The book resists the pervasive pathologisation of such persons and instead tends to mobilise asexuality as a sexual orientation and collective political identity. This is similar, in many respects, to the advances made by same-sex activists over the past four decades. The contributors are similarly sceptical of arguments that locate non-normative (a) sexualities as disorders in need of psychiatric intervention.

Located at the intersection of social sciences and cultural studies scholarship, the collection foregrounds the interdisciplinary potential of an emergent Asexuality Studies. What makes these essays particularly remarkable is the way in which they not only map the various intersections of asexuality, desire and identity, but also use asexuality as a conceptual frame to critique the very feminist and queer perspectives suggested in the book’s subtitle. Resistant to the normative assumptions that everyone is sexual, the essays interrogate the ways in which these feminist and queer political and intellectual hegemonies are complicit in the production of these new normativities. Referred to as ‘erotonormativity’ by one writer and ‘compulsory eroticism’ by another, these cultural constructions of the normal are perpetuated by queer political formations. This happens as a result of the fact that one’s right to have sex with one’s partner of choice has been strongly articulated, but one’s right *not* to have sexual desires at all, has not.

A number of contributors discuss the production of these erotic normativities and argue that same-sex activists and intellectuals – many under the rubric of queer theory – have predicated calls for equality and/or sexual autonomy on this assumed eroticism. Similarly, asexuality is used by a contributor to reframe the feminist sex wars as an exercise in normative eroticism. A number of essays in the collection, then, trace how eroticism has been an unacknowledged norm in the dialectical relationship between both queer theory and heteronormativity on the one hand, and between the sex-positive and anti-porn feminists on the other. A theory of asexuality is therefore not only potentially transgressive because it challenges heteronormativity – and defines notions of love, intimacy and relationships – but also because it highlights the normative erotic assumptions underpinning both queer and feminist theory. The collection of essays argues further that these

normativities of the erotic influence other cultural discourses and identities, such as those relating to race, disability, masculinity, mental health and Otherness, more generally. Similarly, the book also resists the typical coding of asexuality as either a moralist ideal or a response to trauma that can be repaired.

Two contributions in the collection stand out as particularly insightful. In a chapter entitled 'Mismeasures of asexual desire', Jacinthe Flore traces the pathologising history of asexuality in recent medical science and criticises suggestions that sexual desire is universal, in its form or even its very existence. Flore examines the ways in which psychiatry regulates 'normal' levels of sexual desire and defines lack, or indeed excess, as a disorder. In a different vein, Karli June Cerankowski offers a cultural studies reading of how asexuality is represented in American popular television. In a chapter entitled 'Spectacular asexuals: Media visibility and cultural fetish', Cerankowski argues that the media construct asexuals through misinformation and Othering, in a way which sees asexuality packaged as an unimaginable spectacle. This is done not only for media consumption but for the reproduction of erotic normativities. By focusing on a number of popular television talk shows as well as the marketing material for a documentary film, Cerankowski maps the erasure of complex asexual subjectivities through a reductionist repositioning of the erotic as the norm.

One chapter, however, reads as an anomaly in the collection and seems to be in unproductive tension with the rest of the scholarship in the book. In a chapter entitled 'Inhibition, lack of excitation or suppression: fMRI Pilot of Asexuality', Nicole Prause and Carla Harenski use neuroimaging to determine the psychophysiological 'causes' of asexuality. Inevitably, attempts to determine the neurological basis for non-normative sexual desire (or lack of desire) are reminiscent of similarly conservative projects in the past which sought to determine the 'causes' of homosexuality. In other words, Prause and Harenski's analysis of the observations of neurological functioning of asexual persons reproduces not only their pathologisation, but also an erotic normativity that the book otherwise resists.

While the collection of essays explores a number of important configurations of identity and political potential, there is a troubling silence throughout most of the text that should be addressed in future scholarship. That is, the book fails to explore transgendered experiences of asexuality. This includes individually negotiated identities as well as a consideration of how broader trans-identity politics might co-circulate with asexuality education and advocacy. For the most part, the text's analysis of asexuality tends to inadvertently perpetuate a cisgender normativity.

That being said, the book does not claim to offer an authoritative account of all social, political and cultural dimensions of asexuality. Rather, the editors suggest that this collection should merely be a point of departure for interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic. Richly theorised and well argued, the book is an important contribution to this emerging and significant field of study.