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Chapter 22

Toward an Ace- and Aro-Friendly Society: Reconstructing the Sexual Orientation Paradigm

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Abstract:

Adopting the style of the manifesto, this chapter examines how the historical establishment of the concept of sexual orientation needs to be undone in order to move toward what the author describes as a truly ace- and aro-friendly society. Of note, such a society is intersectional and abolitionist in its figuration: it must also be anti-ableist, anti-sanist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist.

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Introduction

A quarter-century has passed since a coherent "asexual/ace community" coalesced online. Asexuality scholarship has moved from questioning *whether asexuality should be regarded as a sexual orientation or a pathology* to exploring various aspects of ace experiences[1] as sexual orientation/identity research[2] (largely with participants from Western, English-speaking countries). Historically, the concept of sexual orientation emerged from efforts to resist pathologizing and criminalizing of what we would now call LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships. Since then, large-scale political campaigns in jurisdictions like Canada and the United States have drawn on sexual orientation-based categories to oppose homophobia (e.g., anti-discrimination legislation, the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights codes, etc.). The Asexual Visibility and Education Network adopted its definition of asexuality strategically, to fit into sexual orientations' legal and discursive framework.[3] Unfortunately, sliding "asexuality" (or grey-asexuality or demisexuality) into the list of recognized sexual orientations (or identities), even in legislation, cannot engender the deeper, more systemic changes we need to build truly ace-friendly societies.

This chapter has two main goals: First, to outline what an ace-friendly society would really mean in terms of deep structural changes from Canadian or American norms (and how it must also be aro-friendly). Given the far-reaching implications especially of compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity, and monogamy, and their interconnectedness with larger structures of violence and oppression, building an ace- and aro-friendly society is an overwhelming, revolutionary agenda. Second, I explore a specific domain in which ace and aro communities are uniquely positioned to enact part of this larger agenda. Drawing on the conceptual origin of "sexual orientation" emerging through resistance, I identify possibilities we might find now in disrupting its contemporary paradigm in the pursuit of

[1] Samantha Guz et al., "A Scoping Review," 2140.
[2] Jessica Hille, "Beyond Sex," 101516.
[3] Andrew Hinderliter, "How is Asexuality Different," 172.

an ace- and aro-friendly society. Ultimately, I present *reconstructing sexual orientation* as a potential form of prefigurative praxis in pursuit of radical social change.

What Is an Ace-Friendly Society?[4]

The ace community, defined broadly as a meta-community of overlapping communities and unaffiliated ace individuals, is tremendously diverse. A truly ace-friendly society would be without any systemic forces or structures of marginalization which a) directly target aceness or b) disproportionately target the ace population, either because of ace population demographics or because of interconnections between forms of marginalization and oppression. The large-scale 2020 Ace Community Survey re-confirmed that ace folks are especially likely to identify with a *non-binary gender* label (42.2%), as *trans* (15.2%), as *bi+* (e.g., bi- or pansexual: 12.5%; bi-, pan- or polyromantic: 34.6%), as *queer* (30.9% as a sexual orientation label and 24.5% as a romantic orientation label) and as *women* (61.2%).[5] There are therefore oppressive structures that target groups of people who are disproportionately well-represented among ace folks (e.g., transphobia, transmisogyny and cissexism, biphobia, homophobia and heterosexism, sexism, other forms of gender-based oppression including intersexism). Eliminating these for a truly ace-friendly society requires massive social and structural reorganization.

Some have suggested the widespread ace community emphasis on public education is *unrelated* to "a wider question of social change."[6] Certain persistent narratives of asexuality do indeed uphold systemic white supremacy, ableism, and hetero/homonormativity, which would all need up-ending in pursuit of what I am calling an ace-friendly society. Building on decades of queer, trans, feminist, and womanist visioning (and more recent Two-Spirit additions), my vision of an ace-friendly society requires changes in all domains of life. To start, we must reconfigure interpersonal relationships, family structures, the division of domestic labor and the workplace; improve access to healthcare and housing; and change society's treatment of unhoused people. These changes are explicitly abolitionist with respect to police, prisons and possibly even the state.

Constructing an ace-friendly society requires deep social changes to eliminate the carceral system. Queer and trans communities, for example, are hyper-policed, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system from arrest to parole, starting with juvenile detention.[7] Defunding police means reallocating funds to non-carceral services and supports for non-violent crisis intervention and to mental health supports. It means sufficiently developing community capacity to handle various crises until communities are consistently more effective than police, allowing complete abolition of police. This encompasses capacity to address various forms of harm and violence, including sexual violence, in non-carceral ways. Since women and queer folks are disproportionately criminalized, in particular, for "poverty-related

[4] This section expands on how I answered this question during the "Asexual Activism Roundtable" at the *Unthinking Sex, Imagining Asexuality* conference, Vancouver, BC, April 26, 2019.
[5] Lea Hermann, et al., "2020 Ace Community Survey," 15–22.
[6] Matt Dawson, Susie Scott, and Liz McDonnell, "'Asexual' Isn't Who I Am," 383.
[7] Alexi Jones, "Unequal Treatment of LGBTQ+ People."

offenses" this also requires either decriminalizing everything associated with poverty (which is anathema to the system) or eliminating poverty itself.

Within white supremacist and colonial states like Canada and the United States, all forms of gender-based violence, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and related forms of oppression are enmeshed in racism, and racialized issues of income, class and poverty, and environmental devastation. This is equally true for violent systems most closely associated with asexuality (i.e., compulsory sexuality, amatonormativity and the institution of monogamy). Eliminating any of these forms of violence will also require eliminating racism, overthrowing white supremacy, ending the ongoing genocidal relationship these states have with Indigenous peoples, and massively redistributing financial resources (should such things even continue to exist in the resulting society). Effecting these changes is a mind-bogglingly massive and far-reaching enterprise, requiring profound restructuring of society and our relationships with the state, each other, non-human life, and the land. Nevertheless, this is what we need in order to build a truly ace-friendly society.

Compulsory Sexuality

In an ace-friendly society, people need freedom to say "yes" or "no" to sex, without pressure or retribution—complete sexual freedom and agency. This means a society where the freedom to say "no" and to opt out of sexuality goes beyond individual situations within individual relationships. Implications are sweeping because compulsory sexuality extends so far beyond a compulsory invocation to have sex.

Compulsory sexuality is a set of social expectations, ideologies, institutions, and practices that demand that everyone have sex—of the "right kind" (typically involving genital penetration) and in the "right contexts" (often between partners who are heterosexual, married, or monogamous, though situationally this may take on various different, possibly conflicting shapes). Compulsory sexuality upholds the pervasive normative expectation that participating in sex (usually narrowly defined) is required as part of any (fulfilling) romantic relationship.[8] Beyond that, compulsory sexuality demands that everyone actively take up the sexual subjectivity (and/or objectivity) "assigned" to them, based on their social location—informed by age, gender, race, dis/ability, and sexual orientation, etc. These expectations hold moral weight and violations therefore incur forms of violence deemed acceptable.

Compulsory sexuality assigns specific sexual subject/object positions to people in racialized, gendered, and ableist ways. These have been, and continue to be, used to justify many forms of white supremacist and colonial violence. Compulsory sexuality dictates who is allowed to say "no" to sex with any legitimacy (and to whom and under what circumstances), and whose "no" matters. It undermines possibilities for consent generally by constructing some people as inherently "unrapeable"—especially Black and Indigenous women across Turtle Island and/or trans and/or disabled people of all genders. While "compulsory sexuality" is a relatively new term, Black feminists have spent decades theorizing and resisting the simultaneously sexist, racist, and classist violence of forced sexualization, and rape specifically targeting Black women (in the United States).[9]

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[8] Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality."
[9] Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement."

Much of the explicit political/moral outrage and condemnation that target asexuality do so for its potential to challenge the gendered norms of reproductive labor that uphold economically productive family/consumer units.[10] This condemnation similarly targets sex work through the framework of "legitimate" ways to engage in sex.[11] The relationship between compulsory sexuality, (paid) sex work, and reproductive labor within the family is complicated, but ace-friendliness cannot coexist with condemnation of sex work as family subversive. The criminalization of sex work must end, along with related ideologies that increase the risk of violence for trans, gender-diverse and/or racialized sex workers. Anyone who would prefer work that is not sex work must have viable, non-exploitative options at a "living wage" or the equivalent. This requires wholescale labor reform and the elimination of employer-specific work visas and healthcare access tied to employment. Ideally, these changes would bring an alternative social organization that is not dependent upon waged labor—something important for reasons unrelated to sex work too! In other words, restructuring society to meet everyone's basic needs would destroy the roots of some anti-asexual hostility. By definition, this includes needs that are different from the norm (e.g., for disability-related reasons), and therefore implies drastic changes in terms of how we collectively approach disability and care needs.

Compulsory sexuality is also more directly a tool of ableism and racism insofar as it structures the idea of "humanness" and "legitimate personhood" tying them to various power relations and stereotypes in their service.[12] For example, people with physical or cognitive disabilities are actively denied personhood or humanness. Sometimes this means denial of a sexual subjectivity (i.e., positioned as non-sexual beings, not entitled to privacy or meaningful sexual expression); sometimes it means objectification as mere fetish objects. Both approaches simultaneously promote and conceal the sexual violence that so frequently results. There are similar processes based on other types of disability and also based on other things like race and body-size. The demonization of fatness—originally rooted in anti-Blackness—has long dictated the "legitimate personhood" of bodies more generally.[13] For racialized people especially, compulsory sexuality's denial of personhood often extends beyond the individual-level.

The notion of "legitimate personhood" extends to (morally and bureaucratically) "legitimate families." It justifies regulatory violence and state intervention imposed on those viewed as *doing family incorrectly*—sometimes through child protection systems and family courts. Compulsory sexuality operates with other forms of repressive social organization like amatonormativity and the institution of monogamy. Even alone, compulsory sexuality functions as a powerful *organizing* force for various intersecting institutions of power, particularly those that uphold white supremacy. Ultimately, this means we cannot dismantle it without dismantling all the structures whose relations it organizes.

Compulsory sexuality operates as a tool of white supremacy when the racist, sexist, and often classist stereotypes of the Black mammy and jezebel are deployed to uphold constructions of race and specifically white women's purity.[14] Similarly, the

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[10] Sherronda J. Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, Chapter 4.
[11] Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, Chapter 5.
[12] Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, Chapter 8.
[13] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*.
[14] Ianna Hawkins Owen, "On the Racialization of Asexuality," 122.

hypersexualization of Black and Latina women, and other race- and gender-specific constructions allow stereotyped subjects to be exploited for their labor (or other people's desires).[15] These include the feminine or "castrated" Asian man, often-fetishized by white women, and the submissive, exotic or hypersexualized Asian woman. [16]

Compulsory sexuality's sexual morality served, and still serves, as a powerful tool for racist state action and violence. The racist trope of "welfare queen" applied to Black "woman-led" families demonized for not conforming to enduring monogamy, still constructs these families as "illegitimate" and shapes social policy. The trope of the predatory hypersexualized Black man constructed as a sexual threat to white women was central to the development of police forces, especially in the United States after the formal abolition of slavery. This moral specter drove the expansion of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex, and still does. Conversely, Canada and the United States invoked the stereotype of the asexual Asian man to justify importing, underpaying, under-housing, and physical endangering Chinese men for their labor building trans-continental railways, while charging a head tax to ensure these men could not bring their wives/families.

Similarly, the colonial violence of residential schools enacted upon Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island by Canada, the United States, and various Christian churches was partly justified through *sexual* morality. Indigenous women were routinely labeled "sexually irresponsible" and/therefore "incompetent mothers," thereby justifying the removal of their children and the agenda of cultural genocide and pervasive, often-deadly abuse. These practices continued for over 100 years and some of their moral authority was eventually transferred to child welfare agencies. Still today, Indigenous children face a massively disproportionate risk of being ripped from their communities and of being placed in foster or residential care, as do Black children.[17] Once there, they are subject to additional forms of abuse and criminalization driving Black and Indigenous youth especially down a pipeline toward prisons.[18]

These practices cannot end as long as the institutions of white supremacy and colonialism persist: we cannot destroy compulsory sexuality while the white supremacist and colonial foundations of nation-states on Turtle Island remain intact. This is a mountainous obstacle but it also grounds roots of real solidarity. Even as a *white* aroace, my own liberation demands white supremacy's annihilation. In pursuit of ace-friendly societies, we must dismantle the white supremacy within our ace (and aro) communities and beyond.

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[15] Aasha B. Foster et al., "Personal Agency Disavowed," 128.
[16] Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Straightjacket Sexualities*, 92, 98.
[17] In Canada, despite attempts to address the Millennial Scoop by creating Indigenous child protection agencies and ending birth alerts, Indigenous children still made up 53.8% of children in foster care in 2021 but only 7.7% of children overall; Indigenous Services Canada, "Reducing Indigenous Children in Care." While race-based data are not systematically collected nationally for children in foster care, Black children in Ontario made up more than twice the percentage of children in foster care than they did for children overall from 2012 to 2015; Ontario Human Rights Commission, "Interrupted Childhoods," 4. In the United States, in 2021 Black and Indigenous children respectively made up 22% and 2% of children in foster care but only 14% and 1% of children overall; Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Black Children in Foster Care."
[18] Juvenile Law Center, "Foster Care-to-Prison Pipeline."

Amatonormativity and Monogamy

Many ace community members also identify on the aromantic spectrum, meaning an ace-friendly society arguably also must be aro-friendly. About 2 in 5 ace-identified respondents of the 2020[19] and 2019[20] Ace Community Survey identified on the aromantic spectrum and another 22–23% were questioning or unsure. By comparison, arospec individuals in the general population are rarer by at least an order of magnitude, with maybe about 1% of adults identifying as aromantic.[21] Aro-ness is an *ace issue* even if most arospec individuals are likely not ace. The ace community was critiquing and opposing the systemic prioritizing of romantic relationships long before amatonormativity was named.[22] Since the beginning, the ace community has been working to build recognition that ace folks engage in diverse forms of personal and intimate relationships that do not necessarily conform to established norms, patterns, or scripts. Ace folks *collectively*—arospec or otherwise—tend to have a non-normative relationship to "sexual attraction" and other sexual feelings and desires.[23] This also implies a non-normative relationship with the "couple" form (whether populated by romantic and/or sexual or other forms of partnerships). An ace-friendly society therefore is necessarily also an aro-friendly one—and necessarily therefore also a society without amatonormativity.

Ace folks tend to structure their lives differently than do people in the general population and are often less likely to participate in intimate *partnerships* of any sort—romantic and otherwise. Ace Community Census data suggest just under half of ace respondents have never had an intimate or partner relationship[24] or a significant relationship[25] of *any* kind. Even if survey respondents skew young and may not be representative of the ace population across the lifespan, a stark contrast remains to the vast majority of adults in the United States and similar contexts who spend significant portions of their adult lives in romantic partnerships.[26] Overall, for a society to be ace-friendly (and aro-friendly), it cannot be based on "couple" units (romantic and/or sexual or otherwise) and the children they produce (in nuclear families or otherwise). By extension, it cannot be organized through monogamy—amatonormativity's scaffolding, especially in social contexts like Canada and the United States.

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[19] Hermann et al., "2020 Ace Community Survey," 16.
[20] Robin Weis et al., "2019 Ace Community Survey," 13.
[21] Emily Lund et al., "Concordant and Discordant Attraction," 17; based on numbers reported in Table 1.
[22] Even in 2002, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network's earliest FAQs asked, "Can asexual people fall in love?" only to side-step the question and instead affirm the validity of non-romantic relationships, concluding, "So some asexual people date, some just form close friends. Most do whatever suits them best." AVEN, "FAQ"; 2002 version.
[23] Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 41, 94.
[24] Hermann et al., "2020 Ace Community Survey," 44.
[25] Weis et al., "2019 Ace Community Survey," 43.
[26] Fewer than 4% of adults in a probability sample from Washington and Idaho reported having *never* participated in a romantic relationship; Robert S. Thompson et al., "Intimate Partner Violence," 449. Three quarters of young adults 18–25 in a large-scale national study across the US reported current involvement in a romantic relationship when surveyed; Mindy Scott et al., "Young Adult Sexual Relationships," 1.

Monogamy is a set of institutions, practices, and social structures centered around privileging sets of dyadic romantic/sexual relationships, placed atop a hierarchy of *value* (and presumed *intimacy*). It establishes a normative prescription of One Important Relationship around which adults are supposed to center their lives and build families. This system invokes various restrictions, obligations, and entitlements governing partners' behavior toward each other and everyone else. The institution of monogamy approaches relationship-mates through a "resource" lens, interpreting their social/emotional resources as each other's "property," wherein they might "owe" each other, or "be entitled to" from each other, certain levels of emotional, physical, or practical support, attention, or resources. Restricting the behavior of relationship-mates toward other people ensures that their "resources" will not be "siphoned away" from their "legitimate owner" (i.e., their partner). This includes the construction of people's bodies as the legitimate "property" of their relationship counterpart such that they might "owe" (or be "entitled to") sexual access to their counterpart's body. Any such entitlements or obligations by their nature undermine possibilities for meaningful consent.

Relationship-mates are limited to having all romantic, sexual, and intimacy needs met strictly by each other. This sets people up to be overly dependent on each other for the fulfillment of basic social needs, sometimes to the point of encouraging people to remain in abusive partnerships.[27] Conversely, relationship-mates are held solely responsible and accountable for meeting each other's needs. On a macro level, this conceptualization also upholds the ideal of the nuclear family as the only or *most legitimate* way of producing and organizing kinship bonds. This continues to justify inflicting social exclusion, surveillance and violence upon communities *presumed* to violate these norms (whether or not they actually do). It also extends to financial resources, and siloes intergenerational wealth concentrated through legal kinship-based property inheritance.

Families are deemed "illegitimate" when created through means other than amatonormative ones, or when they somehow resist commodifying persons or reproducing larger social hierarchies. These families or forms of kindship are subject to social sanctions at the individual levels (e.g., rejection by blood relatives or discrimination from landlords, etc.) or more broadly, including direct interventions from the state or its representatives (e.g., family courts, child protection agencies, and immigration systems). At minimum, building ace-friendly (and aro-friendly) societies requires revising kinship-related immigration and questioning the idea of classifying kinship relationships as "real"/"legitimate" or "other." While this may not discount the idea of borders entirely, it certainly challenges the logic and justifications of how borders and legal citizenship/immigration status often function in practice.

Societies organized through institutional monogamy can be extremely isolating. They create an artificial scarcity of intimacy and cooperation, while also preventing people from seeking intimacy and cooperation elsewhere, such as in friendships. Monogamy also directly devalues non-romantic intimacy, while simultaneously upholding very specific and limited forms of non-romantic, non-sexual intimacy that function to help people survive the normative emotional poverty of coupledom, especially hetero-coupledom. For example, refer to tropes of "the girls" providing each other the emotional support their husbands withhold, or of "the guys" who offer an escape from the "nagging wife." In rendering such marriages/partnerships tolerable or even "happy," these limited "outlets" prevent tensions

[27] bell hooks, *All About Love*, Chapter 8.

from triggering full-scale rebellion against coupledom while keeping romantic-sexual couples squarely centered. In contrast, building more robust and supportive communities where people can connect, build intimacy, and support each other in meaningful ways can displace and de-center couples.

Even most forms of polyamory or "consensual non-monogamy" fit within this system by merely changing *the terms* under which people can "owe" or be "entitled to" emotional support/attention/resources or sexual access to others' bodies, etc. Thus, they retain the deep framework wherein people and their bodies and emotional energy/attention/resources, etc. are "legitimate property" of other people. As such, many forms of "non-monogamy" merely multiply instantiations of monogamy instead of shrinking or eliminating it, and are therefore more accurately described as "multiple-monogamies."[28]

When adult partners are viewed as each other's property, children are subsequently viewed as property too—their parents' property, sequestered in the privacy of the home, which can be disastrous in neglectful, dysfunctional, or abusive homes. This social isolation pre-empts possibilities for positive, visible-to-everyone intergenerational relationships that protect and support children, thus thwarting other kinship possibilities and hindering the development of more interconnected, supportive communities.

Person-as-resource social organization is similarly catastrophic for disabled people with non-normative needs (i.e., needs around which society was not designed and therefore seem "excessive"), who are therefore positioned as burdensome resource-drains. The impact is profound dehumanization of disabled people and people with disabilities, and the consequences of this malignant ableism are systematically deadly through the violence of abuse, neglect, deprivation, and social murder. An ace-friendly (and aro-friendly) society must promote, not hinder, the development of meaningful communities and positive networks of interdependence in order to minimize situations of toxic dependence and the vulnerability and overwhelm that result when people are sick, injured or disabled and require care.

In an ace-friendly society, nobody can be regarded as "useless" (or "useful" for that matter) or anyone's property; nobody's "resources" can be commodified with any kind of access rules. The systematic extraction of emotional and physical labor and care work for little or no compensation is a hallmark of late capitalism, and functions in racialized, gendered, and classist ways. Moreover, much sexual and other gender-based violence is rooted in this system of entitlement, structured by patriarchal and heterosexist gender hierarchies. These things all must end, meaning we must do away with regarding people or their "resources" as "property," with everything that implies.

Revolutionary Pursuits

Others pursuing abolitionist liberatory relating, like Dean Spade, have noted, "gender, sexuality and family formation norms are co-constitutive with colonalism, ableism, racism—the systems we live under."[29] Working to build ace- and aro-friendly societies involves the expansive and overwhelming task of deconstructing all these interconnected oppressive power structures. This is not something we can accomplish simply, easily, or in a single

[28] This phrase was coined by the *side piece / por vida (spv) collective*, New York City.
[29] Dean Spade, "Dismantling the Cycle of Romance," timecode 11mins 47 seconds.

generation: it requires work on every front and at every level, grounded in meaningful solidarity. These pernicious structures offer most of us forms of unearned privileges to give us a stake in maintaining the larger status quo (even as these too are distributed unequally). We must be willing to question and relinquish those privileges. True ace and arospec liberation can only happen collectively and cannot be separate from other forms of liberation—from white supremacy, from colonialism, from ableism, from cisheteropatriarchy, and from capitalism's permeation of all these. Ace and arospec liberation requires a revolution, and it is the same revolution we need for other forms of liberation.

Many have devoted their lives to theorizing, organizing, agitating, and planning for the revolution(s)—I will not try to summarize their work here. Instead, I will explore an often-overlooked domain in which ace and aro communities are uniquely poised to direct our collective power toward radical social change. Asexuality and aromanticism continue to trouble sexual orientation as a coherent categorization system and demand a shift in sexual orientation's construction.[30] The remainder of this chapter discusses the concept of sexual orientation and its shifting function—from the political resistance that spawned it and its recuperation, to its contemporary paradigm—and potential for its reconfiguration. In this critical moment, we have an opportunity to deconstruct and reconfigure the sexual orientation paradigm toward more revolutionary ends and I explore some of those possibilities.

Sexual Orientation as Site of Potential Action?

"Sexual Orientation" Emerging Through Resistance

Contemporary conceptualizations of "sexual orientation" developed in response to shifting European social mores, in the wake of Industrialization and the reactionary criminalization of same-sex sexual behavior and/as gender non-conformity.[31] Michel Foucault described a proliferation of (largely confessional-style) talk about sex through the 18th and 19th centuries directed at practical or imagined moral authorities, even as (and because) procreative sex held the monopoly on legitimacy.[32] "Professional sexologists" like Havelock Ellis (England), Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Magnus Hirschfeld, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Iwan Bloch (Germany), and Károly Mária Benkert/Kertbeny (Hungary/Austria) emerged as secular sexual experts, imbued with authority to explain and account for diverse sexual (and gender) behaviors and feelings. Most did so *explicitly* as part of their work actively opposing the criminalization of non-procreative sex, expressing the previously unnamed norm of heterosexuality in the process. By the mid-20th century, both "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" were constructed as different manifestations of a single construct: sexual orientation, which was clearly distinct from gender.

We now have notions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight *because* these helped people understand and resist forms of homophobic (and transphobic) violence. Specifically, heterosexuality was (recently) invented in the process of attempting to make the world more queer-friendly, and some are already hopeful we will eventually outgrow this conceptual

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[30] CJ D. Chasin, "Asexuality and the Re/construction of Sexual Orientation," 215–216.
[31] Jonathan N. Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*.
[32] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

tool.[33] Within many contemporary queer domains, people already question whether sexual orientation/identity categories would remain in a world without homophobia or transphobia, particularly if the gender binary were no more. We are far from abolishing all of these, but shifting the concept of "sexual orientation" still has more to offer us toward revolutionary ends.

Homonormativity and Sexual Orientation's Recuperation

By the last quarter of the 20th century, *sexual orientation* functioned to *organize sexuality* according to people's relationship with *the prescriptive heterosexual norm*. It therefore served to organize *how* (and to what degree) people could participate in society more broadly. As such, it brought the previous century's most troubling "sexual deviances" into a coherent structure where they could be (re)shaped and regulated by socially pervasive forms of disciplinary power—including self-policing—that were not contingent upon direct criminalization or other legal means.[34]

At Stonewall and similar moments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, all the "rainbow freaks" had thrown punches shoulder to shoulder, collectively defending themselves against police and private perpetrators of homophobic/transphobic violence. Gay activists subsequently worked to incorporate sexual orientation into the liberal framework of civil and human rights and respectability, at the cost of leaving trans and gender-variant folx behind. By the early 1990s, many involved in direct action groups responding to the AIDS crisis and homophobic violence were framing their political agendas in terms of *sexual orientation*, ignoring how these issues impacted trans folks at least as much as cis queers. Moreover, emerging/emergent "homosexual norms" resulted in forms of trans exclusion within organizations like Queer Nation and Act UP, leading trans activists to name "homonormativity" in their attempts to resist it.[35] Within this context, Transgender Nation (an offshoot of Queer Nation) distinguished conceptually between "gender queers" and "orientation queers" according to whether politicized expressions of experience and identity resisted or aligned with emerging "homosexual norms."[36] Ultimately, not fitting well within the increasingly dominant human rights paradigm, the self-consciously disruptive gender queer/genderqueer declined over subsequent decades.[37]

As work toward liberal minority assimilation progressed (e.g., seeking human rights, marriage equality, next-of-kin status under the same legal terms as heterosexual partners, etc.), the ways people thought about transness changed. Specifically, trans was either constructed a) as an additional sexual orientation category to be added alongside gay, lesbian and bi, or b) as a modality that cut across sexual orientation categories, much like race and class.[38] The first functions as a mechanism to "contain gender trouble" (i.e., as a catch-all "other" category for gender-freaks who cannot not fit anywhere else), allowing for a more gender-normative, assimilationist agenda around sexual identities more generally even

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[33] Hanne Blank, *Short History of Heterosexuality*, Chapter 7.
[34] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.
[35] Susan Stryker, "Transgender History," 146.
[36] Stryker, "Transgender History," 147.
[37] Julian Honkasalo, "Genderqueer," 60.
[38] Stryker, "Transgender History," 148.

if/because some people remain punishable as freaks within it.[39] The second, which operates orthogonally to sexual orientation, upholds the complete separation of gender from sexuality (which is part of the fiction necessary to maintain the coherence of sexual orientation in its current formulation). This concealed or relegated to the realm of "illegitimate" or "non-respectable" the various complexities of human experience that might undermine the framework in some way.

Under the logic of neoliberalism, people bear personal moral responsibility for fitting into the structures of state regulation and control, including by inhabiting "proper" reproductive and sexual citizenship. Nuclear family units are prescribed sites of care work and microcosms of the state. Whereas once "homosexuality" was transgressive, there are now homonormative standards that offer "respectable" ways of being gay, lesbian, and bi (and trans), which uphold nuclear family units based around monogamous couples. In return for this inclusion, people are morally responsible for doing everything within their power to live up to the many explicit expectations of hetero/homonormativity. Failure to do so leaves individuals open to "morally justified" sanctions, sometimes in the form of violence. Overall, though sexual orientation emerged through resistance, it eventually became a site of possible recuperation: ongoing resistance now requires a shift.

A Critical Point for the "Sexual Orientation" Paradigm

Common-sense notions of sexual orientation today situate people within the heterosexual matrix. Definitions often refer to sexual and emotional attractions as well as associated relationships and social/community affiliations.[40] Notably, some researcher-defined categories of "sexual orientation" are already fundamentally at odds with how most people understand and approach sexual orientation. The "thing" of "sexual orientation" they are trying to explain is substantively different than the "thing" of "sexual orientation" that structures people's relationships, lives, and communities, in part through (shared) experiences of homophobia and heterosexism. In other words, regardless of their intentions or how they would qualify their activities, many researchers are already actively working to change the meaning, content, and scope of "sexual orientation" in order to allow their work to progress along their nomological agendas. This has been quite successful within certain academic domains. I cannot authoritatively declare them wrong, but I can and do question the value of theorizing a version of "sexual orientation" for which the heterosexual matrix is entirely irrelevant.

Often and increasingly by service providers (in Western contexts at least), *sexual orientation* is used interchangeably with *sexual identity,* which includes one's sense or expression of sexual orientation.[41] Conversely, positivist sexuality scholars frequently distinguish the two, often regarding temporal stability as one defining characteristic of sexual orientation[42] in contrast with sexual identity, which may either fluctuate or remain constant over time. Measurements of temporal stability have been central to assessing whether

[39] Stryker, "Transgender History," 148.
[40] American Psychological Association, "Guidelines for Psychological Practice," 862.
[41] APA Task Force on Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons, "APA Guidelines," 57.
[42] Charles Moser, "Defining Sexual Orientation?" 506.

asexuality *should* be regarded as a "sexual orientation."[43] Nevertheless, while affirming the appropriateness of conceptualizing asexuality as a sexual orientation, Lori Brotto and Sonia Millani called for researchers "to examine and understand the biological correlates of asexuality and directly test asexuality as a sexual orientation."[44] They concluded with an entire section inviting "further research that directly tests asexuality as a sexual orientation," without ever specifying what such evidence could be.[45] This absence is conspicuous.

What evidence—biological or otherwise—would confirm or negate asexuality's status as a sexual orientation? Alyson Spurgas discusses how drawing conclusions from biological correlates of sexuality-related things is not straightforward because experience can and does shape physiological responses in so many ways.[46] Instead, it may be more productive to shift the question from *whether* asexuality is a sexual orientation to *how, under what circumstances,* and to *what degree* asexuality is a sexual orientation. What frameworks of ideology and power are upheld or challenged through this shift? What other possibilities are worth exploring?

With increasing recognition of sexual diversity, incorporating ace and arospec experiences, the theoretical landscape of sexual orientation is dynamic. Some researchers are taking up the concept of romantic orientation developed within the ace community, as a *component* of this broader "sexual orientation" construct, where the romantic and sexual components may or may not align for ace individuals[47] or anyone.[48] The Ace Community Census asks about romantic and sexual identity/orientation labels separately;[49] however, questions about both orientation categories specify "if any" and allow opting out (many respondents do). While the "double-barrel" sexual/romantic model of "sexual orientation" is evidently helpful to many, it simply does not "work" across the board, and "romantic orientation" remains a site of trouble for many. Ace participants in studies may navigate that trouble by writing in responses when asked about romantic orientation[50] or by skipping the questions entirely.[51]

In an effort to expand the domain of orientation, Lisa Diamond theorized separate mechanisms for sexual attractions (related to physiological arousal, and gender-oriented) and for romantic and other affectional bonding (more psychologically rooted, and operating through a gender-neutral attachment system).[52] Purportedly, these mechanisms together can explain sexual fluidity; yet, it remains unclear whether or how well they explain gender-

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[43] Lori Brotto and Morag Yule, "Asexuality: Sexual Orientation"; Stephen Cranney, "Does Asexuality Meet Stability"; Yanchen Su and Lijun Zheng, "Stability and Change in Asexuality."
[44] Lori Brotto and Sonia Milani, "Asexuality: When Sexual Attraction is Lacking," 567.
[45] Brotto and Millani, "Asexuality: When Sexual Attraction is Lacking," 583–584.
[46] Alyson Spurgas, *Diagnosing Desire*, Chapter 2.
[47] Corey F. Doremus, Meredith C. Jones, and D.J. Angelone, "Understanding Attraction."
[48] Lund et al., "Concordant and Discordant Attraction"; Alyssa N. Clark and Corinne Zimmerman, "Concordance between romantic orientations."
[49] Hermann, et al, "2020 Ace Community Census."
[50] Alexandra Brozowski et al., "Investment Model Among Asexuals," 4. Based on reported numbers, almost one fifth of ace participants wrote in *romantic* orientations of "asexual" or "demisexual."
[51] Ana Catarina Carvalho and David L. Rodrigues, "Sexuality and Sexual Behavior," 2161. Almost a third of participants did not provide a romantic orientation when asked.
[52] Lisa M. Diamond, "What Does Sexual Orientation Orient?"

oriented romantic (or other) feelings in the absence of sexual feelings. Meanwhile, more biologically focused researchers privilege measures of physiological arousal as constitutive of sexual orientation, ultimately reclassifying sexual orientation into androphilic and gynophilic categories based on arousal patterns.[53]

The ways we have of understanding sexuality—especially sexual desire and physiological arousal—not only describe and categorize our experiences but also actively (re)shape and direct them in various ways.[54] By provisionally re-shaping the concept of sexual orientation, positivist-empiricists who privilege biology over subjective experience have already tacitly admitted their tools and methods are of limited use in explaining "sexual orientation" in its current form. Instead, they have been working to change their subject matter, restructuring "sexual orientation" into something entirely independent of the societal homophobia and resistance from which the concept originated. Androphilic men (i.e., men who are into other men—gay men) and androphilic women (i.e., women who are into men—straight women) occupy completely different positions within the heterosexual matrix. And, these explanations rarely recognize bisexuality or gender diversity.

On the other hand, there are also newer models of sexuality that incorporate multiple dimensions of variability and claim to move beyond sexual orientation, like Sari van Anders' Sexual Component Theory.[55] Even as this may open space for multiple partnership units, it continues to center *how* and *with whom* people form *sexual/romantic partner units, around which they structure their lives*. Therefore, this model of sexuality remains deeply rooted within the contemporary sexual orientation paradigm. The pursuit of deeper structural changes, such as those required to build an ace-friendly society will require a larger paradigm shift.

Troubling the Sexual Orientation/Identity Paradigm

The sexual orientation paradigm of sexuality resonates metaphorically with the development of European scientists' models of the universe in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Conceptualizations of the universe involved increasingly complex "adjustments" to account for empirical observations that did not otherwise fit within a geocentric model. The model became absurdly complex through a process of adding successive "corrections" until it was abandoned with the recognition that the earth revolved around the sun. Though human connections and social organization are profoundly different in nature from the earth's orbit, there are poignant similarities between processes of building and modifying models.

Our sexual orientation models are becoming increasingly more complex at escalating rates. We have cleaved gender from sexuality entirely and are offering different ways of decomposing "sexuality" into elements of "sexual," "romantic" and "sensual" and other dimensions, offering refinements through an infinitely expanding list of new possibilities. Societal pressures to maintain the status quo around how we understand sexuality are more diffuse, diverse, and lacking internal consistency than a Church threatening Galileo with ex-communication. Still, I think it is time to reflect on the absurdity of what we are doing with

[53] Michael J. Bailey et al, "Sexual Orientation, Controversy, Science," 48–52.
[54] Spurgas, *Diagnosing Desire*, Chapter 2.
[55] Sari M. Van Anders, "Beyond Sexual Orientation."

"sexual orientation" and revisit why we are doing it. We can add as many complicating factors and dimensions as we want to bolster the contemporary sexual orientation paradigm's integrity, but the model will never be complex enough to account for the full diversity of human experience.

I am not suggesting people stop adding "new" identities or labels to the mix, or criticizing the kinds of experiences people want recognized. Nor am I dismissing the importance of being able to articulate romantic and other kinds of feelings or intimate relationships irrespective of, or atypically related to, sexual feelings. The profound contempt and mockery such attempts have engendered and the minimization of the experiences which prompted people to coin new terms in the first place are both part of the regulatory force upholding the status quo of sexual orientation. This regulatory force shields "sexual orientation" (intentionally or otherwise) from the seemingly inevitable fate of crumbling under its own theoretical inadequacy. The sexual orientation paradigm's status quo also places the educational burden of explaining ace and arospec identities squarely upon the shoulders of ace[56] and arospec folks—a form of epistemic injustice that plays out in profoundly gendered and racialized ways.[57] With the inherent diversity of ace and arospec experiences, I doubt there is any amount of public education that could negate this burden or build enough space for all of us without reconfiguring some things from the ground-up. Taken together, the paradigm of "sexual orientation" as an organizing principle for human sexuality is not working well enough and these attempts to adjust it will never fully succeed: *we need a new paradigm.*

We now have language to name the genders of people with whom individuals may be driven to form partnership-type relationships, and also the specific types of feelings, attractions, and desires that are presumed to drive these relationships (e.g., romantic, sexual, platonic, or a host of other types). We also have the language to name how much or under what circumstances individuals may experience these things (e.g., grey- and demi-identities). This language, including labels or descriptors that focus on the absence of any of these feelings/desires/inclinations, presupposes a particular prescriptive norm about *how* people are *expected* and encouraged to do relationships and the shape of the social world upholding these expectations. Partnerships are centered. While there is some variability about how we do them and with whom, the entire social structure is built around them and functions to uphold their primacy. But in a truly ace-friendly (and therefore also aro-friendly) society, none of these prescriptively normative expectations would—or could—exist.

As part of the prefigurative praxis of building this society, it is time to reconstruct sexual orientation to de-center (romantic-sexual) couple units, so these units instead become *only one possibility* in a widespread constellation of human intimacy and relational and material interconnectedness. Instead of a dominant category of terms that describes *with whom*, *how*, and *whether* we participate in normative (romantic-sexual) pairings, we need to broaden our focus to *with whom* and *how* we participate in *any meaningful-to-us relationships*, including accounting for the diversity of what these relationships look like and what is meaningful about and within them. The goal is to change not only *which* relationships come into focus, but in doing so, to change *how* people prioritize and explore their existing and future relationships in ways they previously had not (particularly those relationships

[56] Amanda L. Mollet, "Easier Just to say I'm Queer."
[57] Karen Cuthbert, "Asexuality and Epistemic Injustice."

heretofore lingering in shadows). As long as we remain invested in "sexual orientation" in its current paradigmatic configuration, we are never going to get there.

Re-constructing "Sexual Orientation" as Prefigurative Praxis

I am unsure what to say when faced with a question about my sexual orientation: my answer depends on the context, what I feel is relevant for what purpose, and what information I want to share about myself. I was one of the first openly ace-identified people to publish academically about asexuality and beyond that, I am very open about being asexual. But is my asexuality, my aromanticism, my queerness, or some combination thereof constitutive of my "sexual orientation"? Before I can respond I need to figure out what I am really being asked. If the goal is to slot me into an ideological scaffolding that defines *what is relevant to me* beyond its scope, I may find it more productive to interrupt the question. So often, it is the wrong question if its purpose is to understand more about how I do relationships and configure my life.

The gender of people to whom I experience sexual and/or romantic attraction or with whom I am inclined to form couple relationships (or in my case, my *non-experience* of these things) completely misses the point of what *is* relevant to my life. It says nothing about for whom I may be listed as an emergency contact or, when my cat died, who sat with me on damp concrete steps while I cried. How/where I (fail to) fit into the heterosexual matrix describes the landscape of my intimate relationships only insofar as it offers a template of what I do *not* do and a roadmap of some of the everyday homophobia and heterosexism that shapes my life. In my pursuit of an ace- and aro-friendly society, that is just not enough.

Still today, ace and arospec folks remain "outsiders" to the societies in which we live. We continue to face isolation and erasure that we often cannot dispel even with explicit disclosures of ace or aro-ness, especially when at the intersections of other marginalized identities.[58] In pursuit of ace- and aro-friendly societies, we must carve out non-exceptional space for people who either do not participate in romantic-sexual relationships at all or participate only in non-normative ways. We also need non-exceptional spaces for people who do not structure their lives around one or more (dyadic) social "unit" of intimate partnership(s) of *any* kind—romantic, sexual or otherwise. People who do not "couple" or who structure their lives independently of coupledom must be part of the framework of society, as well as people who forms kindship bonds and families in non-coupled ways. This de-centering of the couple would also open more space for people to exist in other ways, so that even people who do sometimes/somehow "couple" can do so without that being central to their lives or who they are in the world. More broadly, we need non-exceptional spaces for *people to exist* who are not white, able-bodied, and neurotypical cis men with legal status in the jurisdiction in which they reside. We need more than to be able to name our own outsider-ness with terms of ever-increasing specificity.

It is unproductive to question what the "correct" definition of "sexual orientation" is here and now. That will be determined only in retrospect, based on which changes will have ultimately prevailed—or which version is discursively dominant when and where the question is asked. But it is crucial to ask how these meanings will affect us—whom they will help or hinder—and how. The whole concept and system of categorization of "sexual

[58] Mollet, "Easier just to say I'm Queer," 17; Foster et al, "Personal Agency Disavowed."

orientation" is different today than it was 50 and 100 years ago respectively, and different still from where it began about 150 years ago. What is relevant to our lives today—what we fight to resist and overcome, what we theorize, imagine and construct for ourselves and our communities—will eventually determine the future shape (or existence) of "sexual orientation." We can and should be intentional about how we transform "sexual orientation": re-constructing sexual orientation can be prefigurative praxis toward building an ace- and aro-friendly world.

Already, ace and arospec experiences and the people who have them may correspond to a vast array of different positions with respect to the heterosexual matrix, even as none fit neatly within it. Despite persistent homophobia and heterosexism, some ace folks feel safer disclosing merely a "queer" identity in various contexts rather than specifying their asexuality and facing other ace-specific challenges.[59] We cannot re-form "sexual orientation" to accommodate us collectively by carving enough space for *some of* us to fit into the existing social structure shaped by compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity—that very social structure privileges and hinders certain forms of relationships and kinship.

The development of gay and trans respectability politics and the emergence of homonormativity have taught us the limitations of assimilation. At most, assimilationist agendas grant us permission to remain a little bit "deviant" within a strictly regulated window of legitimacy, which will always reject any deviance that threatens the larger status quo. Still, there are assimilationist pressures on ace and arospec folk to structure our lives around long-term partnerships that can be slotted neatly into a framework of "couple" units (even if those partnerships are neither romantic nor sexual in nature). We are offered a place within the existing landscape of "sexual orientation" as long as we eliminate or conceal elements of our ace and arospec selves and lives *that do not fit.* But we can (and must) reject inclusion politics and work to change the framework instead.

The concept of sexual orientation was shaped by what was broadly socially relevant at a particular time and place, but social relevance evolves. "Sexual orientation" in its current shape keeps ace and aro (and especially aroace) folks positioned as outsiders. But the constitutive power of "sexual orientation" is not unidirectional, and changing it will change society. The social relevance of sexual orientation in its current form has reached certain limits. The time has come to shift the focus away from the *gender* of people with whom we do (or do not) form/desire certain kinds of prescribed central (partner) relationships, and instead toward *a diversity of possible types of relationships* around which we may desire and choose to center our lives.

Instead of focusing on *whether* we fit (certain forms of) sexuality and intimacy into our lives and *with what kind/gender of person we do so*, sexual orientation could transform to represent *how*, and *to what degree*, we fit sexuality and intimacy into our lives and *the diversity of possible relational contexts in which these may play a role*. Perhaps in an abbreviated form, "orientation" could come to represent a philosophical orientation toward relationships more generally. This would encompass a broad range of people who personally focus on one-on-one relationships (of any kind), relationships involving groups, or both, and would invite us to variously structure our social lives around such diverse relational possibilities. As the sexual/romantic couple and facsimiles thereof are de-centered, new possibilities appear, vastly unhindered.

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[59] Mollet, "Easier just to say I'm Queer," 18.

These possibilities include more robust and caring communities and deeper recognition of our interdependence, which are in turn necessary for communities to develop their own capacities to address conflict and harm, displacing reliance on police and carceral systems. These possibilities resonate with the anarchism of the self-consciously political manifestations of relationship anarchy. However, this banner does not inoculate anyone from re-enacting colonial white supremacist patterns, often implicitly or in taken-for-granted ways. The genocidal institutions of white supremacy and colonialism deeply structure sexuality, intimacy, family and the organization of the society in which I live. They uphold, and are upheld in turn by, a network of oppressive structures and the ableist, fatphobic, classist, homophobic, transphobic, patriarchal and ecologically devastating violence they enact. Changing the organization of society, sexuality, intimacy and family so that ace and arospec folks are no longer inconvenient "outsiders" or "exceptions" fundamentally means *destroying all of the oppressive structures that maintain the status quo*. We are therefore situated at a multi-faceted nexus of potential solidarity that I hope will soon be realized.

The stakes are high—the aspects of ace and arospec selves we are asked to carve away as a precondition for acceptance and inclusion are not just about our asexuality and aromanticism. Amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality function to uphold massive oppressive structures of white supremacy, colonialism, and ableism. While they are not alone in doing so, their destruction will be part and parcel of larger revolutionary changes. There is radical *potential* in using our collective power to fight for our existence—all of our existences.

The changes we need are radical—as in, from the *roots*. They will affect everyone and everything from the ground-up (and down). Building an ace- and aro-friendly world is a radical enterprise and calls for radical solutions. I imagine these will only take shape as we build them (and our communities), tearing down all the oppressive structural pillars that uphold the violent social institutions and norms in which "sexual orientation" as we understand it today even makes sense. Deconstructing, smashing these to pieces, we are still trying to figure out how best to re-configure "sexual orientation" to support what we are building, or whether we need to annihilate "sexual orientation" entirely. Building a truly ace- and aro-friendly world will involve hacking apart and beyond "sexual orientation" in its current form—reshaping and re-purposing its remains into radical new structures and possibilities: bring on the hatchets and mallets… and the (nutritionally accessible) cake!

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