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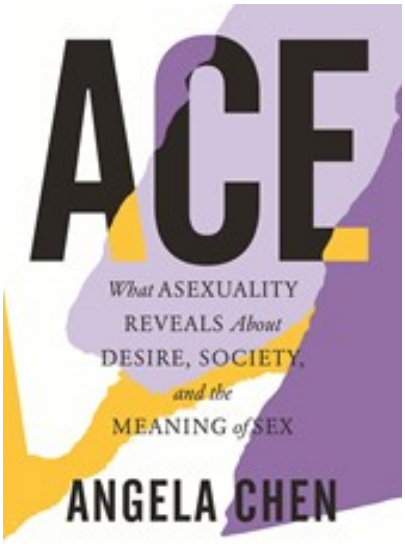
What *Ace* Reveals About Feminism, Ace Liberation, and the "Gold-Star Ace"

Review by Maya Wenzel

Angela Chen. *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex.* Beacon Press, 2020.



The above image depicts the cover of Angela Chen's book, *ACE: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society and the Meaning of Sex.* The main title is written in large black font. The subtitle is below between in smaller, black font. The author's name is at the bottom of the cover in black font. There are paint splatters of the colors light purple, dark purple, and yellow, going across the book cover.

Angela Chen's *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2020) is groundbreaking and influential to contemporary ace theory. Rooted in her standpoint and those of other aces, Chen weaves together research, theory, and storytelling to guide readers through nuanced viewpoints about asexuality. She introduces readers to an "ace lens," which refers to how aces have the "ability to observe the rules of society from an outsider's vantage and with an outsider's insights," and bring attention to norms and expectations about relationships, sex, and feminisms that often go unnoticed (Chen 2020, 6).

In the beginning, Chen discusses her ace journey and how her understanding of relationships and the world differs as an ace. She guides readers through a lesson on ace 101, where she explains key ace terms and dispels myths about what asexuality is and is not. This leads to a discussion of how compulsory sexuality (the idea that every person is and should be sexual and want —socially approved—sex) impacts aces, especially ace men because of hypersexual masculine norms and expectations (35). Chen addresses how some women are considered sexually repressed because of patriarchy and how sex itself has become feminist and a form of liberation, especially in sex-positive feminism, which can alienate ace feminists. Chapters five and six expand on issues of ace exclusion and how racist and ableist stereotypes may erase and invalidate aces of color and aces with disabilities. Chen also challenges the social construction of romance and friendship by discussing queerplatonic relationships, which blur the distinctions between "friend" and "romantic partner" in ace and aro communities, and she discusses how the centrality of romantic love, or amatonormativity, can alienate aros and aces (118-119). Chapter eight describes how feminist conversations lack nuances in consent rhetoric and do not account for compulsory sexuality because of the exclusion of ace perspectives. Building off of this, Chen provides stories from aces who have relationship types that challenge how

many people think about sex and expectations about sexual compatibility in relationships such as open relationships, monogamous relationships, kinky relationships, and others. In the last chapter, Chen calls for the validation of aces, inclusion of marginalized aces, the fight for systemic change, and a world where there is romantic and sexual freedom for everyone.

Chen discusses the reality that asexuality is whitewashed and is influenced by interlocking systems of power (81). Chen's "gold-star ace" refers to the "ideal" ace in a society where asexuality is not ideal to begin with: healthy, young, sex-positive, cisgender, beautiful, not religious, celibate, neurotypical, able-bodied, and white (98). Consequently, many ace figureheads are white, Black aces may be invalidated because of the association between whiteness and purity, and aces with disabilities may be overlooked by the ace community out of fear of misrepresentation due to desexualizing ableist stereotypes (Chen 2020, 69, 81, 94). Ace women, Latinx, Asians, Blacks, people with neurodiversities, and those who have experienced sexual trauma may also struggle with desexualizing and/or hypersexualizing stereotypes (Chen 2020, 56, 71-72, 94). It is hard if one confirms or violates a stereotype and "if you think you're violating the stereotype only because you hate it so much," argues Chen (2020, 77, 83). Thus, internalized oppression and this "gold-star ace" image can make one's ace identity a source of internal conflict and isolation. There are many differences in ace identity, and Chen rightly demonstrates how intersectionality can further complicate one's ace identity.

Chen also brings to light how some feminisms do not account for asexuality and varying attitudes about sex. For example, some feminisms are saturated in sex-positivity and the idea that if a woman is not having sex, she is not liberated, and patriarchy is repressing her sexually (Chen 2020, 55). Chen highlights how this not only invalidates aces and others who are not having sex, as it allows others to pass off asexuality as a product of patriarchy, but it can alienate aces who identify as feminists because sex has become feminist (54). In this way, compulsory sexuality has weaponized types of feminisms (and vice versa) to police and "correct" aces. Chen's argument also links back to issues of the idea that if a white, middle-class woman in the Global North is "sexually liberated," then all women are free. For example, if a "Carrie Bradshaw," who is "sexually liberated," can be reproduced in any context, then all the women in that context must be free (Zakaria 2021, 119-121). Chen challenges this harmful ideology by critiquing the commodification of sex and the equating of sex to feminism. Therefore, these important critiques of feminism and sex that Chen brings forward give this book a vital place in feminist and queer theory.

However, there were parts Chen could have explored further in her intersectional analysis and arguments against generalizations about aces. For example, Chen (2020) mentions the harmful assumption that men who experience sexual attraction but not romantic attraction and identify as aromantic and allosexual, or aro-allo, are "trying to justify bad behavior" (129). To add to her analysis of gender, sexual, and romantic identity, she could have discussed aro-allo women and how patriarchy expects women to prioritize romance, link feelings and romance to sex, and not sexually pursue people the same way men are expected to (Shaw and Lee 2020, 109, 289, 293-294). This would have allowed her to evaluate the intersection of arophobia and sexism and how these messages can lead to the slut-shaming and dehumanization of aro-allo women. Chen (2020) discusses how her asexuality protected her from slut-shaming, and she could have connected the slut-shaming of aro-allo women to her ace experiences to demonstrate her point about the importance of including romantic identity

in intersectionality as ace and aro experiences can be very different (14). This would have made for an interesting analysis of romantic, sexual, and gender identity using her ace lens.

Furthermore, while she intentionally focuses on Western/American society, Chen could have analyzed the Western centrism in asexuality. For example, after a Black ace questioned who chose the ace flag colors, Chen could have used that opportunity to mention how members of AVEN took part in voting on the ace flag (69). These members were predominantly English-speaking, white, middle-class Americans and their voices decided on a flag to represent a transnational sexual identity. There are aces from many parts of the world, and aces identify with various racial identities (Bauer et al. 2018, 10-11). Thus, it is vital the ace community and ace studies do better to listen to and create space for transnational aces and their experiences. Acknowledging which ace voices are louder and why would call attention to transnational power imbalances. This would help ace scholars avoid replicating the "Western gaze" by demonstrating how aces in the Global North are disproportionately centered more than aces in the Global South not because they lack awareness or agency, but because global asymmetrical power systems work to silence their voices and raise those in the Global North (Mohanty 1984, 334-335).

Her ace lens' contributions to feminism, such as expanding the concept of intersectionality with the split model of attraction, the idea that romantic and sexual attraction are separate feelings and identities, must also be acknowledged. As an ace, I have noticed many feminisms miss the influence of asexuality and romantic identity. Similar to Chen's critiques of certain feminisms, much of feminist scholarship addresses compulsory heteronormativity, but misses the influence of compulsory sexuality. Some feminisms may even reinforce and assume compulsory sexuality in their works. Additionally, when discussing intersectionality and sexual identity, many feminists leave out romantic identity, fail to differentiate sexual and romantic attraction, and/or define sexual orientations in a way that does not create space for romantic identities, especially aromanticism. Asexuality and aromanticism must be included in one's feminism, and *Ace* is a vital resource in feminist classrooms addressing gender, sexuality, and race. Furthermore, I found Chen's and other aces' stories to be relatable and insightful, making this book a validating and useful read to many aces and aros. Additionally, *Ace* offers crucial information to those learning about sexual and romantic identity and is essential to LGBTQ2IA+ spaces/centers as it adds an ace lens to queer allo experiences. *Ace* brings readers closer to the goal of ace liberation, "true sexual and romantic freedom for everyone," and succeeds in making readers question their assumptions about themselves, others, and society (Chen 2020, 188). Chen weaves together many important arguments in ace theory while striving for an intersectional feminist lens, earning *Ace* a place in queer and feminist theory. Truly an asexy read.

Works Cited

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