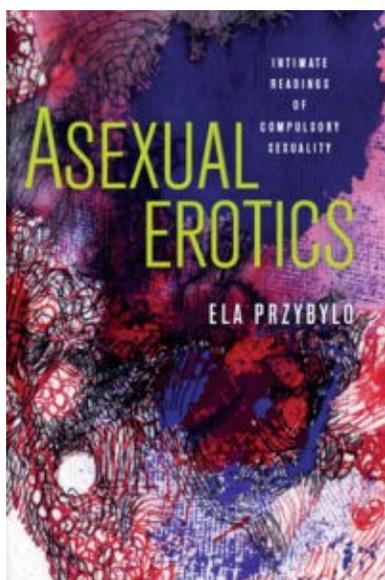




## *Asexual Erotics* by Ela Przybylo

Review by Steve Dee

Ela Przybylo. *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. Ohio State University Press, 2019.



The above image depicts the cover of Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics*. The cover features the title in a lime green font in capital letters, and the subtitle in white font in capital letters. The text is over artwork by Bracha Ettinger that is a mixture of reds, blues, and purples.

The perception of asexuality as an orientation has largely become more prominent since the late 1990s with the launching of AVEN (the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network) in 2001 and the rapid increase of awareness and activism that it spawned in questioning assumptions regarding compulsory sexuality. While landmark researcher Alfred Kinsey, in creating a scale for sexual orientation had previously contrasted with an “X” those people for whom sexual attraction was either very low or absent, asexual bloggers and activists were at the vanguard of identifying asexuality as a discreet orientation that was typified as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN 2012).

While not wanting to challenge or dismiss those people for whom the self-identification as asexual or ace has been central to their process of self-understanding and definition, Ela Przybylo, in her book *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* invites us to be curious about the way in which we apply the boundaries around sexual orientations and identities. While consciously embracing a label or self-description may provide important support for an individual in helping them find community or in galvanizing collective political activity, we also need to retain an awareness of the limits of language and not lose sight of our individual stories. Her work is a decidedly queer project in which

she challenges us to loosen the fixed absolute and instead tune into the subtler nuances of what she describes as “asexual resonances.” These resonances are often shyer narratives present in the history of resistance and freedom and often defy the clear boundaries of celibacy, abstinence, and asexuality.

In digging into the phenomena of asexual lives, Przybylo highlights the paradox of having a sexual orientation defined by the *absence* of sexual activity and the acknowledgement that (as with other orientations), people may use a label because it captures a vital dimension of their experience without necessarily conveying the complex terrain of peoples’ actual lives. While asexual advocates might be drawn to the legitimacy offered by the concrete



categorisation of sexological science, a queered reading might follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in advocating “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances” (Sedgwick 1993, 8).

Central to this work are Przybylo’s creative use of Audre Lorde’s conception of an expanded eroticism and the challenge this provides to the messages many of us have received. In our post-Freudian era, many have viewed the erotic as being synonymous with sexual activity (especially heterosexual intercourse), but both Lorde and Przybylo ask us to explore a much broader pallet of sensuality that moves beyond genitally focused reductionism. While thorough and academic in tone, this book also contains a profound call to a rediscovered sensuality that, in taking inspiration from Lorde<sup>1</sup>, seeks “the knowledge of being capable of joy, through the knowledge of the self and a life lived with an attunement to an inner knowledge” (Lorde 1978, 23). What follows in her work is an exploration of how asexual resonances and tendencies can be read into some vital chapters of recent history from the mid-twentieth century onward. I really enjoyed her exploration of how various groups and movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s sought to explore elective celibacy as a means of personal and collective liberation. Radical manifestations of second wave feminism such as Cell 16 and the Young Lords collectives along with Valerie Solanas’ SCUM manifesto are viewed through the lens of erotic asexuality and are seen as valuing a similar impulse with regards to the reclamation of both space and selfhood. Przybylo sees such asexual tendencies as being key to a liberation in which both white women and women of color were able to free themselves from expectations regarding the need for partnered relationships, compulsory reproduction, and home building.

In an age where sex positivity is thankfully becoming increasingly the norm, Przybylo is highly aware that a superficial reading of asexuality may view it as a dysfunction, a repression, or as a form of avoidance. In a culture of medicalized categorization, it might be easy to view asexual resonances as being pathological in nature. Przybylo works with this idea of “failure” and challenges us to adopt a queer reading in which the refusal to engage in compulsory sexual activity can be seen as both freeing and a position of conscious radicalism.

In her creative reading of the concepts of both “Lesbian Bed Death” and Spinsterhood, she explores the way in which such “queer failure” seeks to reject those forms of liberal capitalism that see old age as synonymous with disposability and that frame compulsory coupledness and sustained sexual activity as the only path to erotic fulfilment. For Przybylo, the ambiguity and subtlety of asexual erotics provide an alternate path in which the quality of the connection is valued above external markers of success. Such asexual erotics contrast markedly with forms of suppression or denial that don’t have their origins in consent. In the closing chapter of the book Przybylo spends time considering the murders that occurred in Toronto in 2018 that were committed by an involuntary celibate or “incel”. The killer, Alek Minassian, was a self-declared incel who, in adopting this worldview, operated from the misogynist assumption that they, as cisgender, predominantly white men are entitled to sex from women and are willing to resort to violence in obtaining it. Unlike conscious asexuality that has its origins in a self-recognition regarding a lower degree of sexual attraction, the Incel movement comes from a profoundly unerotic place.

In short, I really enjoyed this book and felt that it was breaking helpful new ground in its reading of recent history and the way in which asexual resonances are present within feminist, queer, and Black forms of liberation. The concepts of expanded eroticisms and queered



conceptions of identity that Przybylo explores are complex and require commitment from the reader, but her writing is lucid and engaging. Highly recommend.

#### Works Cited

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