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Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex- Obsessed Culture

Atiya McGhee
Syracuse University, atiya.mcghee@gmail.com

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Brown, S. J. (2022). *Refusing compulsory sexuality: A Black asexual lens on our sex-obsessed culture*. North Atlantic Books. 240 pp. \$17.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781623177102

Sherronda J. Brown's *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* offers an intersectional framework and cultural analysis for how anti-blackness, white hetero cis patriarchy, acephobia, capitalism, and compulsory (hetero)sexuality interlock to inform our understanding of gender, sex, and race and how these systems confine (a)sexuals and other marginalized genders and sexualities. In this review, I will address the different frameworks Brown utilizes, how they are utilized to complicate one's understanding of sex utility in maintaining oppressive systems, and conclude with how this book fits into multiple disciplines and is relevant to the discourse on teaching absence and feminist pedagogy.

Refusing Compulsory Sexuality calls for a queer liberatory futurity—a future that utilizes the past to dream of potential radical futures and that decenters integration and centers on the potential offered by the failure to be seen as “normal” (drawing from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*). Underpinning this book is its commitment to simultaneously deal with the messiness of oppressive violence while creating space for queer futurity filled with hope, abundance, and a sense of freedom from the binds of compulsory sexuality. This book is not written to make asexuality more “palatable” or “legible” to allosexuals (p. 5) nor is it a collection of Black ace narratives (although Brown does offer several Black ace insight narratives at the end of their book). Brown uses Cohen's framework of using “Queer” to signify queerness as a political framework—a tool, not simply a social identity. The intention behind this framework is to show how asexuals and allosexuals are both harmed by compulsory sexuality—that asexuality is queer (pp. 35–41)—while not minimizing asexuals' experiences.

Brown interrogates how compulsory sexuality impacts all lives but especially asexual experiences (p. 5). This includes challenging the critical discourses within the LGBTQIA+ community on ace inclusion (Chapter 2), addressing the ableism and othering done to those who are non-normative or refuse compulsory sexuality (Chapters 5–8), and exploring the utility of an asexuality framework for liberatory possibilities (Chapter 10–12). In their chapter “Compulsory (Hetero)Sexuality,” Brown highlights how asexuals and lesbians “are often similarly put in the position of having to appeal to men, [and] abide by certain expectations of traditional womanhood” (p. 235). Here, Brown demonstrates how identity politics continues to fail in bridging communities together against the oppressive systems governing both asexual and lesbian lives (and by extension all of our lives). This knowledge is important for feminist pedagogues in that it works across groups and challenges us to think about how the maintenance of race, gender, sex, and human/other divisions are maintained.

Brown also tackles how anti-Blackness has always informed formations of the normative. For example, white cisheteropatriarchal notions of chrononormativity always position Black sexuality as misaligned. Adulthood is a process that accelerates time in which Black children are never innocent—never children—but assumed to know more about adult issues, including sexuality, which leads to a projection of hypersexuality onto their bodies (pp. 22, 49–50, 52). Simultaneously, Black folks are infantilized via anti-blackness under the assumption of lesser intelligence and lack of human status. Thus, when discussing asexual experiences, it is important to recognize not everyone has the protection of whiteness—of presumed innocence (pp. 25, 43–44, 51).

Brown draws heavily from Black feminist thought and Black queer theory, which centers a Black asexual lens throughout the text. These various theoretical frameworks recognize that not everyone’s experience under any categorization whether “queer,” “asexual,” “woman,” or otherwise is universal, but that an intersectional lens must be applied, and the interlocking systems of oppression must be named. Those engaged in feminist pedagogy, especially Black queer feminist pedagogy, should remind themselves of this key point.

Important to the framework of Brown's claims are Cohen's conceptualization of "Queer" as a political framework, Ferguson's "Queer of Color critique," Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," and Jackson's critique of the human-animal binary and of gender binaries. For readers newer to asexuality studies, Chen's (2020) *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* and Decker's (2014) *The Invisible Orientation* are recommended to provide foundational language around asexuality. For readers newer to Black queer studies, Ferguson's (2004) *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* and Somerville's (2000) *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* are recommended to further interrogate how our conceptualization of sexuality, queerness, or normativity is constructed through Blackness. Blackness and its associations became understood as deviant, othered, and, therefore, queered. Asexuality is wrapped in colonialism, anti-blackness, and white hetero cis patriarchy. It is not a neutral term. Awareness of how these systems are intertwined will enhance one's understanding of gender, race, and sexuality and Brown's underpinning arguments.

This book spans various disciplines and is highly recommended as a reading for courses within Queer Studies, African American Studies, or Women and Gender Studies. While the language is accessible enough to be taught in introductory courses, each chapter or section will not be sufficient as standalone readings, especially for those unfamiliar with asexuality and/or Black gender and sexuality studies. Each chapter/section should be read in conjunction with outside readings, ideally with those cited in the book's endnotes and/or in addition to texts related to that topical area.

For sex educators and scholars, who may subscribe to the understanding of abstinence only in tandem with celibacy, it is important to make clear to yourself and your students that asexuality is not interchangeable with abstinence or celibacy but rather asexuality is a valid sexual identity. It is a tool—a framework—for interrogating how one is situated in a culture of compulsory sexuality and interlocking systems that subjugate their refusal. Thus, this book is specifically useful for lessons on consent, interrogating one's relationship to sex and power, and how we come to understand something as "normal" or "natural," especially through eugenics and bio essentialism.

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