

Ace Gaze: Asexuality on TikTok
Presented at NWSA 2022 by Ela Przybyło and Erika M. Sparby

In her groundbreaking and educational popular non-fiction book *ACE: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex*, Angela Chen (2020) reflects on the importance of creating asexual representations and stories for asexual (ace) people by ace people. While on the one hand, she acknowledges the importance of educating allosexual (or non-asexual) people on asexuality, on the other, she anticipates the day when that will no longer be necessary, and when as aces “we will move closer to not feeling that any explanation is necessary” and “when aces reject the gaze that evaluates our identities so narrowly” (p. 84).

One site where this is already taking place is on TikTok, where ace users are creating content for other ace folks while “reject[ing] the gaze” (Chen) that finds them perplexing, unfathomable, and invisible. In this coauthored paper we draw on theories of the gaze to think about how Ace TikTok (or AceTok) hones as “ace gaze” as a site of pleasure, joy, and affirmation for other aces. We come to this paper as one ace spectrum queer and nonbinary person and one allo-identified queer and nonbinary person. Erika does work on the rhetoric of memes and I do work on asexuality.

Theories of the gaze have long provided strategies for thinking about how oppressed groups are viewed by those in power and how they can challenge the hegemonic viewing relations that disempower them. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 theorization of the male gaze famously identified screen-based viewing relations that represented white cisgender women as objects to be gazed upon and devoured in their “to-be-looked-at-ness” by an assumed subject position of a white cisgender male viewer. bell hooks in 1992 theorized an “oppositional gaze” as an act of resistance Black women hone when they view an overwhelmingly white set of characters and stories on screen. She wrote that “all attempts to repress our/black peoples’ right to gaze had

produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (116). More recent gaze theory has also identified other subversive ways to look and navigate screen representations, such as Jack Halberstam’s 2001 “transgender gaze” looking at the film *Boys Don’t Cry* from 1999 and Andi Schwartz’s (2020) “femme gaze” that involves femme authored social media images that cultivate, in her words, “an aesthetic sensibility derived from contemporary femme politics,” for example through the technology of the selfie (7).

Similarly to post-Mulveyian gaze theory, our understanding of an ace gaze involves the envisioning of the gaze as a potentially subversive mode of looking, “a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” in hooks’ words. Our understanding and stipulation of the ace gaze is that it is the honing of aesthetic modes and ways of looking that speak from a minoritarian content creator’s position to other minoritarian subjects. In this sense, our theory of the ace gaze most resonates with Schwartz’s understanding of the femme gaze as created by and for a minoritarian group: in our case, aces. Tiktok, as a recentish technology fast embraced and developed by minoritarian groups and especially queer and trans folks, provides an ideal site for thinking through what an ace gaze consists of because so many ace creators, activists, and everyday ace-identified folks have turned to TikTok to explore their identities, relationships, and the ideas people project on to them. AceTok has thus become a fast-moving dialogue that both reflects and shapes contemporary asexual identities, creating pleasure, joy, and affirmation for ace creators and viewers.

In my forthcoming book *Memetic Rhetorics* (2023), I spend some time looking at queer TikToks and how users create collective identities in an unbounded space. That is, platforms like Facebook or Reddit enable users to join like-minded collectives through groups or subreddits, effectively creating safer and braver spaces for like-minded users while filtering out outsiders.

Even Twitter allows you some capability to control whose content you see in your feed. But TikTok is almost entirely algorithmic. That is, while content from people you follow will occasionally show up in your For You Page, or FYP, the feed is largely driven by what TikTok thinks you want to see based on your previous likes and interactions. As such, minoritarian users have developed ways to signal community belonging to one another through using verbal and visual cues. We have identified the ace gaze as a collection of these cues that ace folks use to signal community belonging to each other. Importantly, while many ace folks make TikToks for the purpose of educating allo folks on ace terms and culture—that “necessary explanation” Chen refers to, the ace gaze is made by aces *for* aces and hones counternarrative and worldmaking tendencies. Aces are talking to each other, if sometimes around, through, and in spite of allo TikTok users.

Over the course of the last two months, we have collected TikToks that feature users engaging the ace gaze. Importantly, however, I do not identify as ace, so this is not content that I found organically. Ela on the other hand is bad at TikTok and does not have an account. Although we consulted with a couple of ace friends on their favorite TikTokers, we also used keyword searches for “asexual,” “ace,” and “acetok” and selected top-viewed videos that met some key criteria: 1) they are created by ace folks, 2) their intended audience is primarily other ace folks, and 3) they have at least 15,000 likes, indicating high viewership and engagement. Although, as we’ll talk about later, we were flexible with the third rule because many aces of color had lower engagements than white creators due to racism both within ace communities and due to TikTok algorithms. Our initial corpus for this presentation is 26 representative videos; that is, they meet the criteria above and cover similar themes to those with lower engagements.

As such, through our initial analysis, we have found that the ace gaze is cultivated on TikTok through at least three categories of videos:

1. Feigned fear of or naivety about sex as a punchline
2. Metaphorical explanations of asexuality, but for other aces
3. Overrepresentation of whiteness, to the exclusion of people of color

First, the ace gaze consists of TikToks that feign fear of or naivety about sex, with the goal being a laughable punchline. One example of this is a video by milachxn. The caption “jumping into a relationship as an asexual” appears over the entire five second video, which features jump cuts to show that the creator is acting as two separate people and audio from an episode of *Family Guy*. The video moves fast, opening with one white person yelling as they walk through a threshold. The second white person is sitting at a table and responds, startled, by yelling back “oh! What the hell! What’s wrong with you?” Person one yells back “Sex!” Person two responds “What?” Person one shouts again, sex!” Person two shouts fearfully in response before the video cuts out mid yell. Milachxn’s video serves as a call to fellow aces and invites them to laugh together about the lived experience of wanting to be in a relationship but not wanting to have sex with a partner. Further, the comments indicate that this video has struck a relatable nerve, with some responding “I know this too well” and “me” while also sharing brief experiences. In this video and others that fall under this category, the ace gaze is cultivated by speaking to aspects of the embodied experience of asexuality. In the case of milachxn’s AceTok analyzed above, the ace gaze manifests as a knowingness about the difficulty of wanting to date and form romantic relationships in the context of sexsociety (Przybyło) where sex is (falsely) assumed to be the bread and butter of a meaningful relationship.

The second instantiation of AceToks we located includes TikToks that provide metaphorical explanations of asexuality, but that are clearly intended for other aces to relate to and laugh at. As mentioned by Chen and asexuality studies more broadly, ace folks have to do the overwhelmingly ongoing work of explaining themselves to others, of justifying their existence in a context of acephobia that seeks to undermine their “realness” and authenticity. This category of TikToks cultivates an ace gaze that exists parallel to and underneath content that on the surface appears to be for “educating” allos. One example of this comes from creator therealcodywebb, who created a TikTok last month explaining that “asexual people can still have a sex drive” and what it’s like when asexuals have an urge to have sex. In the video, he cuts between scenes of himself wearing different colored clothing to indicate a distinction between his body in brown, which initiates the sexual urges, and his brain in purple, which responds to them. In the video, his body suddenly decides that it wants to “play tennis,” an obvious metaphor for sex, and his brain responds, “what the hell man, we don’t like tennis... We don’t have any of the equipment to play tennis. We’d have to find at least one other person to play tennis with, and... that’s a whole process!” The body replies, “at least hit your balls against a wall until my tennis urges go away,” an obvious metaphor for masturbation. Given the highly metaphorical explanation of this particular aspect of asexuality, it is clear that this is not purely education material for the average allo, who may need more details to understand what Cody is saying. Once again, as user comments like “this is what it’s like for me being a gray asexual,” “I’ve never felt more heard,” and various others indicate, Cody’s TikTok creates a relatable space for other aces to commiserate and laugh at their own metaphors for their body’s urges. In this sense, an ace gaze is honed to create a space of humor and relatability, a space of “release” if you will, for other aces.

Finally, ace TikTokers also alert aces to the overwhelming whiteness of asexual representation across mediums. As Angela Chen writes, “a lot of aces are white” (p. 68) and asexual spaces “feel white” (p. 68). For example, in a 2018 survey, 75.8% of respondents identified as white only (Weis et al., 2020, p. 23). One of the reasons asexuality might be “whitewashed” (Chen, 2020, p. 68) is, as Ianna Hawkins Owen has argued, because of white supremacist discourses that conflate sexual purity with whiteness and that hypersexualize racialized people, including Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous people (Gupta, 2015; Owen, 2014). One central issue with the whitewashing of asexuality is tied to how asexual people are represented in the media, with a majority of both fictional and nonfictional asexual representations being white-presenting, cisgender men, such as Sherlock Holmes, Todd Chavez on *BoJack Horseman*, and Dexter with some important exceptions such as most recently Elijah on *Big Mouth*. Similarly, many of the symbols used to represent asexuality are implicitly white, such as the layered purple cake, as discussed by Theresa Kenney, which is implicitly attached to Western styles of cake (Chen, 2020; Kenney, 2020). As Chen (2020) argues, “many early figureheads were white, so a white culture with white artifacts developed. White people feel most comfortable in this community” (p. 69). Importantly, however, there is nothing innately white about asexuality, and asexuality as white continues to be challenged by Of Color aces such as by Chen, Sherrona J. Brown, the model Yasmin Benoit who created the hashtag #ThisIsWhatAsexualLooksLike, spec fic author Darcie Little Badger and many others.

On TikTok, the ace gaze is also overly white, often excluding people of color. When conducting the keyword search to find TikToks, we had to scroll and do direct searches before finding Black, Indigenous, and Latinx ace creators. Also, creators of color had significantly fewer followers, views, likes, and comments. For instance, Asexual Memes is a popular white

ace creator, with 104K followers and 3.2M likes, making her one of the most visible aces on the app. But Yasmin Benoit, a well-known Black aroace creator, model, and activist, has 6315 followers and 41.4K likes. During this preliminary research, we only found one Black ace creator with a high follow and engagement count: peacock.kid with 1.4M followers and 49M likes, but they create a range of content, not only ace-related, so they are bolstered by multiple communities. A video by laylallaluna further demonstrates BIPOC exclusion. They explain the hurt that comes from dealing with acephobia outside of and inside of the queer community while also experiencing racism inside of their own ace community. They end their video with a call to white ace creators to make a plan “to do better” on including Black and other POC voices in the ace community. In this sense, laylallaluna brings to light that the ace gaze might be a gaze that is tied to whiteness even while they refuse this move, arguing for viewing relations that not only include all aces but that also demand that white aces review their gazing practices.

These three themes of AceToks represent our initial exploration into how the ace gaze can manifest and be honed by aces on TikTok. By honing ace joy and pleasure through negotiating the difficulties of ace dating in a context of sexsociety (Przybylo 2011), cultivating humor alongside education, and calling out of the persistent whiteness of ace spaces, these ace TikTokers get close to what Chen describes as an ace space of being where explanation is no longer necessary because content is created by and for ace users. In this sense, not only do these content creators “reject the gaze that evaluates our identities so narrowly,” in Chen’s words, but also cultivate a whole other way to gaze, a loving asexual gaze (p. 84).