

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Angela Chen

JVN Hey, curious people, I'm Jonathan Van Ness and welcome to Getting Curious. It's our first Getting Curious of Pride. Obviously we did Pretty Curious on Monday, but it is our first official Getting Curious of Pride. And I'm very excited because we are journeying into a place that we've never been before. On Getting Curious, which is Asexuality, Asexuality, Asexuality, Asexuality A is often the overlooked letter in LGBTQIA+. You know, a few years ago we learned about intersex with Alicia Roth Weigel. But lately in the last, like, you know, a couple of years, I have met a few friends of mine who are Asexual. And then I realized that I didn't really know anything about Asexuality. And actually, some of the things that I did think that I knew were shocker, problematic. So to talk to us more about this, we're bringing in an expert and author and journalist, Angela Chen. Angela Chen is a journalist, editor, and author. She's worked as a senior editor at wired, a staff reporter at The Wall Street Journal, Vox Media's The Verge, and MIT Technology Review. Her reporting and essays have also appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Guardian, Paris Review, Chronicle of Higher Education, Latham's Quarterly, National Geographic, and more. She is also the author of Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex. Today we're asking: what does it mean to be Asexual for you? And don't forget any new format alert. If you've been listening for a few months and it's not a new format for you, but this is different than what we used to do. Make sure to stick around to the end of the episode where we're going to reflect, and break down what I learned. And, if we answered our question. So let's get to our conversation. Angela, welcome to the show, how are you?

ANGELA CHEN Thank you so much for having me. I'm celebratory. I'm a little bit tired. So many things all at once.

JVN Honey. It's giving duality. And I love that because everything can be true at once. Angela. So let's start off very basic. What is Asexuality?

ANGELA CHEN So the definition, the kind of textbook thing is Asexuality is when you don't experience sexual attraction or you experience very little sexual attraction. So the tricky thing is I think people hear that they're like, I think I know what that means. But then when you kind of describe the experience to them, they're like, wait, that's that's not what I thought it is. So let me tell you about what my experience of being Ace is like. Imagine you're on the subway. You know, I'm in New York or you're on the bus or something, and then you're surrounded by strangers and you're looking around and you're like, oh, you know, these are strangers. They're interesting. Some people are, you know, more stylish. In others, there's nobody that makes you go, boo. I just I can't fathom the thought of sleeping with them. There's also nobody that makes you go, oh, like, I really like, want to be, you know, I'm really attracted to them. You're just, like, kind of indifferent to people. So, you know, imagine that feeling now. Think that that's like all the time. And I think that's what Asexuality is for a lot of people, not everyone, you know, it's a spectrum. It's a wide variety of experiences. But a lot of people, when they think about what Asexuality is, they're like, oh, you you hate sex. Oh, the thought of sex is disgusting to you. Oh, you can't fathom it. And that's not the case. I think you're not experiencing sexual attraction, but that doesn't necessarily mean that things that are sexual or other people are repulsive to you, if that makes sense.

JVN Totally. So it's like the assumption is that there's like huge reactions to the idea of sex, where in reality it's kind of like there's a myriad of reactions or feelings that someone who identifies as Asexual could have, ranging from just literally at not registering. And then there probably are some people who are like, oh, but then most people are just like kind of just like just not registering.

ANGELA CHEN It's just like, yeah, exactly. And I think a lot of people, for a lot of people, they don't realize that it's because to them it's always been it's just how they are. Other people, they grow up in these different environments and everyone around them is like, oh, that person is hot. Oh, that person, you know, I do them. So then they start asking, okay, am I different somehow? Is this good? Is this bad? So for a lot of people getting into understand what Asexuality is and how you come to that really is dependent on the kind of environment that you grow up in. You know how your friends talk, how open you are about sexuality, the language you use. So the process can be so individual for so many people.

JVN Is there anything else that we commonly get wrong or misunderstand about Asexuality?

ANGELA CHEN Oh my God, there's so much. So I'm going to give you a greatest hits like the first one is that a lot of people think Asexuality is same as celibacy, that if you're Asexual, that means you don't have sex at all. That's not true. There's a lot of people who are also sexual. That's a term for people who are not Asexual and they don't have sex. Like a lot of monks, I'm assuming, or priests, they don't have sex, so they shouldn't. But they still feel, you know, that sexual attraction to another. The people. So that's a huge one. You can be ace and have sex.

JVN So Alosexual... So like Alosexual is like the like spectrum. Like the Asexual spectrum term for someone who like feel sexual attraction but they like live a lifestyle of like celibacy or like not engaging in that. In those.

ANGELA CHEN All of sexual just means people who are not Asexual, people who experience sexual attraction or sexual.

JVN Oh, so I'm Alosexual?

ANGELA CHEN Yes, exactly.

JVN I learning so much, Angela, I can't stand it. Okay keep going.

ANGELA CHEN So a lot of people think Ace is celibate. It's not the same. A lot of people think that Ace is because, you know, there's something medically wrong with you, or, you know, there was some kind of trauma in your life. And, you know, for everyone, a lot of your sexual experiences and behaviors are affected by things that happen in your life. It's not just an ace thing, like you said yourself. You know, your experiences came from trauma, too. But Asexuality does not necessarily have to be related to any sort of medical issue, any sort of trauma. And a lot of people think that people who are Asexual don't want relationships or want romantic relationships either. But that's not true. There are Asexual people who are interested in all kinds of romantic relationships, whether that's monogamous or poly. So that

being ace doesn't have anything to do with how you think about, romance and what kind of relationships you want.

JVN So I this friend who's like on the Asexual spectrum. Right? And this is kind of like how I was like, started to like, learn more about it. And then when they were talking about it, I was like, oh, it's giving. Like, is there some sort of like it's like it's like rejection trauma or like afraid. It's like it's like. And then they were like, it sounds like you're like, not like validating my lived experience and like. And I was like, oh, shit. Like, I totally see what you're saying. Like, I am like, which isn't cool. Like, I was one of those people who was like, oh, it's like, this must be some sort of like trauma response, like, because we all must have sexual feelings. Like, what does that really mean if we're. And then I realized that my line of thinking was like, next, across the street, next door to the line of thinking, it's like, oh, you're gay because you were traumatized, or you were this or you were that, like, it wasn't an inherently born trait or like, take this like thing that's like not functioning correctly. And then I was like, that's scary. That I was like, really not validating, not seeing, not acknowledging, not like celebrating the existence, the presence of like experiences of people who, like, are Asexual. And I just was like, damn, that was a spot where I was really not understanding.

ANGELA CHEN And it's common, and I feel like some parts of it are understandable. You know, I think people don't know a lot about Asexuality because there's this long history, first of all, of sex being repressed. You know, there's so much shame and secrecy around sex. And so it takes a lot of time and effort for people to be like, actually, you know, consensual, pleasurable sex is good. And so then when someone is saying, like, my experience is different in my relationship with sex is different, sometimes it can feel, you know, it can remind us of of oppression, even when that's not what people are saying. And the other thing is, you know, look, life is complicated. There definitely are people out there. Let's say there are women who are not Asexual. And over time, they've learned to, you know, be more in touch with their sexuality because of unlearning that shame. Right. So when you've had that experience, you can say, oh, I thought that I didn't, you know, enjoy sex or whatnot. But it turned out to be this other thing that must be the case for you, too. Like, it's very, very well-meaning. You can totally see someone's like, I bought this, but my life is better now, let me help you. But there's just so many different types of people, right? Like there's a lot of people who are it spends a lot of sexual attraction, a lot of people who experience little sexual attraction. There's so many reasons for everything. Just because something was true for you doesn't mean it's the same for other people. It's understandable, but it's limited. You know.

JVN The A and LGBTQia is often overlooked. Why do you think that is?

ANGELA CHEN It goes back to what I was saying earlier. You know, I think that a lot of people associate anything to do with Asexuality with, you know, stuff that's infantile or, you know, they think these people are not mature or they're repressive or they just are politically, you know, conservative. I think that a lot of, you know, you know, queerness has been about breaking through the shame that we talked about. And so when you hear about Asexuality, you hear people saying, oh, there's this thing called compulsory sexuality. Oh, we shouldn't, you know, assume that every healthy person always a sexual feelings. Some of those it just sounds almost like a dog whistle. So I think that's one reason.

JVN Asexuality has like as gigantic of an inner spectrum as, like any group of like, sexual orientation in and of itself. Right? Because there's all sorts of different like bisexual assignments. There's all sorts like, and there's also, you know, like there's all these kind of different ways that you can be all these different things that it's like Asexuality is like a really broad spectrum with like literally infinite ways to express it and experience it.

ANGELA CHEN Right? It is. And let me tell you, I feel so conflicted about that because sometimes I'm, I think, does the word ace even mean anything? You know, if I tell you I'm ace, that doesn't actually tell you like my students, because there are aces who are sex repulsed. They, you know, never want to have sex, that, you know, it's horrible to them. And then there are aces who are, you know, poorly in their into kink, and they have a lot of sex and they enjoy a lot of sex, and they all have the all of them like share, you know, they don't experience sexual attraction, but they have such different experiences. So they if I tell you I'm ace, you might think like, well, what kind of ace is she? So yeah, I feel conflicted about it. I mean, I personally like, you know, I'm ace, but I have a partner, I have sex, so I sometimes don't, even for myself, use the word bisexual. It feels weird to say that I'm Asexual if I'm having sex. You know what I mean? So much of it is about labels, and so much of it is about categories and language and how we use all of that.

JVN So there are some Asexual people who like kink. What, because that broke my basic Midwestern brain. Tell me more about this, please.

ANGELA CHEN Yeah, I actually think there are a lot of people who like kink. So basically what it shows you is that there are so many things that you think people enjoy because of the sexual element that people might enjoy for another reason. So let's do a lot of people enjoy it because like, sensation can feel good even if it's not sexual sensation, for example. But let's also just let's just talk about ace people who enjoy sex. Because, you know, I always want to be really clear, there definitely are sex repulsed ace people. I don't want to make it sound like, you know, so circles ace people don't exist. I mean, they're important, but a lot of people have this misconception that all ace people are sex repulsed. So a lot of folks, for them, they enjoy sex. And it's like, let's say like there's a food that you really crave, like cheesecake or whatever. And then there's a food that you really hate, like broccoli. And then there's this food that like, you're kind of maybe indifferent to it on its own, but then it reminds you of your mom, reminds you of Christmas or reminds you of, you know, berries, warm and fuzzy things, and you genuinely enjoy it for that reason. I think what I'm saying is that for everyone, there are so many reasons to have sex that aren't sexual attraction. You know, you might have sex because you're bored. You might have sex because you know you are having a bad body image day and you want to feel better. You might have sex because, I mean, there's just so many reasons for everyone, but, like, we don't realize it because we just kind of assume, like, the only reason you have sex with someone is because of, like, direct sexual attraction. So that's one thing. And just one more thing I'll add is that for a lot of people, like even if ace sex feels good just because you're ace and you don't feel sexual attraction toward a person, does it mean that, like touch and all of that doesn't feel good, you know?

JVN Interest. Angela, I am curious if you are open to talking more about your experience. So like what? What was your experience of realizing you were a. It's like you were just like minding your own business and then like, were you young or is it more like, when was it like,

what was that like spilling any tea on your bucket or like spoiler alerting, but like, what was your experience?

ANGELA CHEN Yeah. So I learned the word pretty early. I think I was in high school at some point. I read about it online. I was like, okay, means, you know, you know, soon sexual attraction. Good. I just didn't think about it again. And then in my 20s, my mid-twenties, after I'd had two serious relationships, I started kind of thinking about whether I was ace. And this had nothing to do with sex in the relationship. You know, there was like, we had problems in these relationships, but they were not sexual problems. You didn't break up due to, you know, libido stuff. But, you know, I had this partner who basically pushed for an open relationship. And at that point I was just not equipped for it. I was not okay with it. And my insecurity meant that we broke up. And then I was just obsessed with figuring out what had happened, you know, like I wanted, you know, sometimes just get that feeling like there's something here. It's not just I'm sad about the breakup. It's like something doesn't make sense. And I remember talking to a friend and talking about, you know, how much the open relationship freaked me out. And this friend said something like, yeah, but, you know, like, it's just sex. Like, we're all, like, attracted to strangers sometimes, and we all manage it. And I thought, wait a minute. You know, we're all sexually attracted to strangers sometimes. You mean you go through the world, you're on the bus, you're on the subway, and you just want to sleep with strangers? Because that's never been my experience. You know? I never want to sleep with anyone. Unless, you know, I feel really deeply for them. And I don't say this in a, you know, I'm so pure and good kind of way. Like, that's just my experience, you know? And so once I realized that other people were kind of going through the world with this experience of being sexually attracted, strange. And all the time I had to be like, oh, that's that's not me. And that's what made me realize all these nuances we've been talking about that is sexuality isn't just you don't want to have sex or you're not interested in sex. But it's this extremely broad term for so many experiences.

JVN So you're going through this breakup and, well, it gets the breakups over and you become like a non murderous version of Uma Thurman in Kill Bill, where you're just like, I got to figure out what happened. I got to figure out the story here. And in so doing, your friends talking to you about this attraction, that was like the first time you're like, wait, everyone is experiencing this, like kind of desire to, like, potentially hook up with strangers or like have this, like, sexual feeling towards strangers. I never really had this. Then you're like ace. I remember in high school I learned about it. And then my question was like, did you have like other memories kind of start to crop up, but you just didn't have the language to describe what you were feeling when even like before you learned about what being ace was.

ANGELA CHEN Yeah. So a lot of people, when they talk about being ace, they say things like, I always go different. You know, middle school, I felt different. That's not the case for me. You know, I have a type. My friends know what kinds of people I find attractive. So in high school, people would say, oh, this classmate is hot, that celebrity's hot. And I would say, oh yeah, or oh no. So it didn't feel different at all. I think I just didn't realize that when they said, this person is hot, they were describing actual sensations. You know, they were basically describing like desire. And I was just thinking they're attractive or that's the wrong word. But like, you know, they're good looking, like a painting.

JVN It's like the way that I would say, like a lady is like I'm like, oh, she's stunning, but like, I don't want to have sex with her.

ANGELA CHEN Exactly. But we don't have those nuances. But there is one memory that really sticks out, which is that, when I was in high school, one of my classmates got pregnant. And then I remember thinking very vividly, like how? Like, how did that happen? Not like how mechanically did it happen, but just it's very easy to not have sex. And, you know, we are always being told blah, blah, blah, pregnancy, etc.. There was a sense of like, how did like how could this have happened? And it wasn't in a shaming way, was in a genuinely like, like, like, why would you take that risk? And then later, you know, a decade later, I would be thinking, oh, because, you know, she was experiencing this kind of attraction that I wasn't experiencing at the time. But, yeah, those kinds of memories would resurface for me. But when I was growing up, it never occurred to me.

JVN Like, okay, stick with me. Because, like, I don't want to, like, venture into something that's, like, problematic, but, like, you know, how, like when people. Cause I just did this video on Instagram about abortion, like a week or two ago and just people because I learned that, like, abortion really just refers to like any, any pregnancy that doesn't result in birth, like medically. That's what I learned from our friend Doctor Karen Tang a couple weeks ago, and I and I didn't know. So I did this video about it, and there was so many women in these comments that were just, like, shaming the fuck out of other women as far as like, you know, if you don't want a kid, take responsibility, don't have sex, don't, you know, do that? And it's like just completely leaving out like any times of like, you know, birth control, failure, assault, you know, intimate partner violence or the myriad of reasons why someone may be, like, forced into having sex that they may not want to. So just taking all that, which is like way more frequent than one things. But then as far as, like if you're lucky enough to like, you know, not be assaulted or like really be able to like, you know, be in control of your own sexual destiny. It may be because like, I'm kind of a slut, like, in a good way. Like, I like, I like it and there's no bad way of being. It's like we had to edit that out. But like, I mean, it's like I enjoy fucking having sex. And if I was a woman, I would and was, like, able to have babies like I would. I probably had 35 by now. Like from like literally probably like 30 dads, unless I had twins in my family and I didn't know and I had a bunch of sets of twins. And so which is my business, not anybody else's business. But what if what you're naming like for some of those people who are like, it's not that hard, and then it, it, it, maybe some of them are like a tiny bit Asexual and don't even know. And so maybe they're like shaming these other ladies that are not Asexual and like, maybe like just want to do that and then like how it's like, you know, your body, your fucking choice. And if you don't want to fucking have the baby, like get out here with your morality bitch. You know what I mean?

ANGELA CHEN I, I think people don't really know what other people's experiences of sexuality is. So my partner, my boyfriend is not Asexual. He's our sexual. And, you know, I've had these conversations with him where I'll ask him like, okay, so when you have like when you feel sexually attracted to strangers, like, what is that like, like how long does it last? Does it end when the person is like, not in front of you, or are you thinking about it? And you know, these. And the thing is, you know, he's just one person. Of course, many people's answers might be different. I'm just convinced through thinking about these things and writing the book, we don't have these kinds of questions. I think we all kind of assume whatever our experience of experiencing sexual attraction or experiencing not experiencing it, we just assume that's kind of everyone's experience. No.

JVN Keep going.

ANGELA CHEN Yeah. And it's just so interesting. Like, have you ever thought about, like, what? It's like, how long does sexual attraction last for you and under what circumstances? And you know, how different might it be for someone else? Because it's not about ace or not. It's you could talk to another friend who's alone. They can have a completely different experience. Like there's we're just generalizing way too much.

JVN What do you think kinship for people when they think about the ace lens?

ANGELA CHEN I think so much of it is really breaking down our experiences and why we do things, you know? So for, for example, I, we were just talking about how ace people can enjoy sex. It's people can be into kink. And that perspective might make people think like, why do I enjoy x, Y, and Z? Is it because of the sex? Because of other motivations? What even exactly is sexual? What is erotic like? What motivates me? What is desire like? These are big questions. You know, we also talked about, you know, what is the difference between romantic attraction and platonic attraction, all of that stuff. But I think a big one is, you know, we talked about, this idea that, you know, everyone naturally has sexual feelings and sexual urges, you know, compulsory sexuality. Once you can name that, like ace, you spend so much time naming that, you start seeing it everywhere you see it in therapy, you see it in television shows, you see it in, you know, popular culture. And once you start naming it, you can realize that you can. Then whether you're ace or not, no matter where you are, you can experience compulsory sexuality. And once you know that, you can start to be free of it. You know, there's so many people I know who are not ace at all. And they're always like, am I having enough sex? Should I be having more sex? Is there like, what's going on in this relationship? Or am I a bad feminist if I'm not hooking up? And then once you can kind of name compulsory sexuality, you can start to start to push back against those questions that are not serving you.

JVN That is so fucking fascinating, Angela. So let's talk more about the compulsory sexuality or the - compulsory sexuality. So how does that affect different people depending on who you are and like where you are?

ANGELA CHEN There's so many ways, you know, let's just take gender. You know, men feel a lot of compulsory sexuality too, because part of being masculine, the idea is you want sex, you're just always pursuing sex. And there were some people I talked to for the book who said once they realized they were ace, they thought, oh, and is it possible? And trans? And then thought, you know, later, like, I'm not trans, that's that's not going on. But that just shows how deeply there is this idea that like, to be male is to be experiencing a lot of sexual attraction, always pursuing it. You know, I've talked to disabled people. So one thing I want to talk about is that there's a big difference between being Asexual and being sexualized. So Asexual is, you know, this experience we're talking about de-sexualized is something that's done to you. It's when people look at you and they're like, oh, like old people don't have sex. Oh, disabled people don't have sex. Like only young hot people should be having sex. So a lot of disabled people, the world already thinks they're Asexual, whether they want to or not. So then it can be harder for disabled people to realize, like, am I, am I Ace? Am I truly ace because of that's my experience? Or am I just absorbing all of these messages about like, the

world is sexualizing me? And then same with people of color. You know, people of color can be oversexualized hypersexualized or they can be sexualized. And so there's a lot of effort put into and what is my true experience? You know, we know so much again of our behavior. Desires are shaped by the culture, the messages we get. So how do we figure out what we actually want and what's pleasurable and feels good for us and wants just, you know, cultural conditioning? And then what's us kind of pushing against cultural conditioning? You know, you can go in circles for a long time.

JVN I mean, I think I see this in the gay community, in the gay community, gay men so much because that's how I was like, I mean, I identify as non-binary, I am non-binary, but like, I was really brought up in like a gay male culture. I was seeking acceptance, approval and sexual connection from other men, you know, specifically gay men. But there was this idea, I think, especially when I was experiencing the effects of sexual compulsivity. It's like it's like you there's like masculinity wrapped into that. There was like risk wrapped into that. There was like, you know, self-destructive behaviors, like wrapped into that because it's like I had a lot of sex that I regretted that, like while the libido maybe thought that I wanted to, I was putting myself in so many, like, high risk situations that I didn't want to. But culturally, being gay, it really fucked me up. And it took me a long time to learn how to, like, kind of tease some of these ideas apart and just kind of like settle down. But the culture that we live in and when I say settle down, I don't even mean like sleeping with less people. Settle down. I just mean like, settle down in, like my comfort and like confidence in who I am and understanding what sexuality meant and understanding, like, I'm going to do this because I want to, or this because it feels good. Not because I felt like if I didn't have sex with enough people, I wasn't desirable, or if I wasn't, you know, like because that's where I got so much of my validation from, because I just didn't know how to get it from myself. And I write a lot about that in my book, but I just don't think we're like, there's so much of that learning that I wish I could have done earlier. And I think that Asexual or I just think that human sexuality and our different experiences of human sexuality, it takes really anyone to be out of their house. At most people in America, be like, you have to be out of your house and like out of high school before you can really start to explore those things, because it's like we're not taught to talk about these things with our family or like even in school or like, you know, sex ed or like health class. It's like we don't talk about any of the things that could actually, like, give us a better quality of life and actually protect us.

ANGELA CHEN Yeah, I totally agree on sex ed. You know, it shouldn't be just, you know, here's with the vast differences, here's what the uterus does. It should be about emotions and -

JVN And really crazy you just a reference, a vast difference. I was literally just referencing the vast difference, just a few days ago with someone just, like completely sidebar, but I it's just really weird that the vast difference came up like twice in one week. And I will have to let that person know.

ANGELA CHEN The other thing I wanted to say about compulsory sexuality is I had so much to do with consent, because I think that, you know, if you believe that every human, you know, naturally, you know, wants to have sex sometimes and you're in a relationship and there's nothing wrong with the relationship and your partner doesn't want to have sex, I think people would think like, why? You know, what's wrong with them? Like, if I'm being a good

partner, they're not sick, then like, why are they refusing? And that's that creates a lot of situations in which there's can be coerced consent because of a lack of understanding. But if you understand that some people just have this, people have a wide range of sexual desires and experiences and some people. You know, extreme sexual attraction that can help you understand your partner more and also understand, you know, how can you work together in a relationship without anything being anyone's fault? It's not the higher desire partners fault. It's not the lower desire partners fault. Once you understand compulsory sexuality makes consent and good sex or, you know, good relationships possible.

JVN Did we get, like, kind of like, definition of compulsory sexuality or did I interrupt you so many times that we didn't get there?

ANGELA CHEN I think the best definition, is this belief that all, you know, adult, normal, quote unquote healthy adults, humans experience sexual attraction, have sexual urges.

JVN And then can you name like, I mean, it may be obvious, but can you like, name some like more like cover compulsory or, compulsory sexuality, things that we may experience like through, you know, culture, media, music just like our landscape that you may not. That we may not label as such or that you talk about in the book.

ANGELA CHEN I think a lot of it, you know, like, you know, therapy is one, you know, you try to like, talk, but people are always like, oh, are you just depressed? You know, is it just because you had a bad relationship with your dad? The medical. You know, the medical industry, like, a lot of times thinking this is actually some kind of disorder. In school, you know, in demographics, like, there's not really places to check off a sexuality, even, as, you know, kind of like identifier on various forms. There's so much in pop culture, though. There's so much and so many portrayals of people who don't want sex or who don't. A sexual attraction, you often see them as sociopaths or murderers or, you know, unable to have emotional relationships with people. There's and there's a lot of yeah. One covered example is that there's a lot of coming of age stories in which the moment in which you come of age is the moment you have sex. You know, like the whole story is about like, I'm trying to get laid, and once I get laid, I will be a full adult human who has access to all the things the grown ups are doing. And I think we can come of age in many different ways. I think sex is one way. I think there's many other ways to come of age, but if you keep hearing that you come of age when you pursue sex, then people who don't pursue sex actually kind of seem like kids to you. And nobody, you know, no adult wants to be evangelized like that, right?

JVN So how is Asexuality connected to true sexual liberation for all people? Sorry, my dogs are really excited to learn about that. And they're also scared because they love humping everyone.

ANGELA CHEN There's just no there is no sexual liberation without Asexuality. And I'm not saying there's no sexual liberation for Ace people with out Asexual. I'm saying there's no sexual liberation for anyone without a sexuality. Because sexual liberation, there's a there's a bunch of things. One is you are free to make the choices that you want to make as long as they're consensual and, you know, safe and everything. And that can look like anything that can look like choosing never to have sex. That can choose - that can look like having a lot of sex with a lot of partners. But the point is that you get to see all of these visions and

possibilities, and you get to choose them without shame. And if you only see the vision of, you know, heterosexual, monogamous sex, or if you only see you have to have eight partners and you don't have sex three times a day, that's not liberation, because different things will be good for different people, right? But the other part is, I really think true sexual liberation means you get to change your mind. You know, we have different needs at different times, like maybe in your 20s, you want in one kind of a sexual life, and in your 40s you want a different kind of a sexual life. And so that's why I think fluidity and then see, you know, people who have a lot of sexual experience, a lot of sexual attraction and people who are is like really, really internalizing all those options. That's true sexual liberation. I enjoy those options. And also, you know, working to make sure that other people can access them too and see them and feel them. And and it's not just like, oh, in theory, I know that that's okay, but I don't actually want to want to do that because I would feel shame.

JVN Yes. And it's interesting because the LGBTQIA+ community is a very diverse one, but it kind of reminds me a little bit of gender in the sense that, like, we have all of these laws now that are like targeting Trans youth and like labeling, like any gender affirming care is it's really scary, permanent thing. And we hear about this really small amount of detransition or like so often and it's like such a loud thing that we hear about in the press a lot. But I know several young people who, thought they were non-binary or thought they were trans were allowed to, you know, do physical changes like whether that be haircuts, you know, wearing different clothes, maybe even name changes, different pronouns, going to therapy and then later realized, oh, I'm not non-binary, I think I actually am, you know, more cis like I think I am. I think I actually am more aligning. And it was the freedom to explore that, that actually allowed them to find who they thought they were most like. And I think all of this outside intervention and like, stigmatization of people is really what makes it so hard for people to find who they are, because it's just like so much outside messaging about, like, what this looks like, what that looks like, how you need to be, how society needs to function. And I think that just creates so much more confusion. If we could just like love people where they are and take people at their word, that would be so great.

ANGELA CHEN Yeah, especially taking people at their word. That's something I've thought about so much when, you know, writing, reporting on these topics. And, you know, I'm a progressive person and I'm a feminist, but I really often tend to call out, you know, people, you know, progressive feminist people because, you know, oftentimes people say, you know, disabled people get to speak for disabled people and, you know, people of color get to speak for people of color. But when it comes to Ace stuff like, you see, people often say like, oh, but actually like. Maybe you need medical treatment. Oh, but actually, is it because that last relationship just didn't work for you? You know, like, take Ace people at their word, too. And there's really this. It's so true what you said, because these people can oftentimes feel afraid to, you know, be fluid, explore because so many people are saying it's not real. It's not real. So of course you feel pressure to be like it's real. So, you know, I have to be 100% Ace 100% of the time. But, you know, people change. So it's walking that line between take people out the word and let people grow and change if they want to. And if they don't grow and change, that's totally fine too, you know? Yeah. Meet them where they are.

JVN There is so much gatekeeping, though, that happens in the queer community at large. Are there any specific gatekeeping dynamics in the Ace community or like, is there anything

that as someone who is Ace, you want us to know, like the people who aren't Ace or just anyone to know about your work and Asexuality?

ANGELA CHEN Yeah, with gatekeeping, I think, you know, especially kind of in the earlier years of when, you know, Asexuality, as this concept was developing, there was gatekeeping within the community about who was Ace. And so because so many people already think, you know, you're ace because you're, you know, it's a medical problem where you're traumatized. There was also within ace people this same impulse to be like, oh, if you're disabled, you're not really ace. And see how it's like replicating the same problems. There was all this pressure to be what's called a gold star Ace, like the perfect ace in the perfect ace, you know, is, like, doesn't have any mental health problems. And they definitely have tried sex before, so you can't say, like, you just have to try. And they've had relationships before and they're perfectly healthy. So there is gatekeeping because because of all of this kind of pushback, people want to present the perfect Ace person, be like, see, there's literally no other reason they could be safe. Like they are perfect imaginary person. And I don't think there's as much of that anymore. But that impulse was there as a reaction to so much-

JVN Like Log Cabin Republican, but like in the Ace community, like at the time?

ANGELA CHEN Yeah, at the time. And now I think what's so important is just what, you know, if someone you know is Ace, like, what is their specific experience? Because it could be completely different from what you think and what you think it is. That's the main thing. You know, I kind of complain. I feel like the term has been important to me and in terms of so many people find these ideas, but sometimes it's sometimes I talk to people and they'll say, you know, every time I see an Ace, I have to do a whole 101 spiel. So maybe if other people can ask ace people like, what is it like for you? Instead of them having to represent all Aces? That would be nice.

JVN Oh, so what I hear you saying is like, what was it like for you not explaining it like for everyone. Like when you're asking someone, it's like make it like to their experience as opposed to like this. Can you say this whole entire umbrella term to me?

ANGELA CHEN I think a lot of people kind of assume what Ace-ness is, is so just like asking, make sure you don't have the assumptions. But a lot of ace people like you heard me doing this where I'm like, my experience is this and I'm not celibate, but all of these other Aces are like this and this. Other Aces like, you know, are sex repulsed. So yeah, I think ask for their specific like, experience. And I think the rest of the stuff you can probably find online, you know, I think a lot of Ace people, have a lot of these conversations, and I'm used to it because I wrote a book about it, and so I'm excited to talk about it. But, you know, a lot of people in their day to day lives do not want to be doing one-on-oneing.

JVN So we got to talk about the book. So when the book come out, what's it been like since the book came out, and how was it interviewing so many folks about their experience? Like, what was your what was your book writing process?

ANGELA CHEN The book, it came out, I think, about three years ago. And I think a lot of change has been a lot more Asexual representation since then. The book was in the Netflix show Heartstopper, and then a bunch of people texted me about that, and that was cool.

And then actually, just last week, I was doing a directory Q&A. There was this Lithuanian film about Asexuality that was at Sundance. So that's really cool. I do think the book changed how I saw Asexuality, because it just exposed me to a lot of different kinds of Ace people, and I don't just mean their experiences were different. You know, how they relate sexuality, just different types of people. You know, I met Ace people who are so, loud and flamboyant and, and bold, and I met people who were really nerdy and cerebral. And I know this sounds so silly, but when you don't know that many Ace people and the ones you know maybe are geographically close to you, and I kind of think of myself like, just as I think I just was amazed by the whole range of possibilities that these people could be like. Like I felt like I was, suffering under the stereotypes that, like, Ace people were all quiet and shine and x, y, z. Just seeing that wasn't true. I mean, that was powerful for me.

JVN So, Angela, how many people did you end up interviewing? And for the book.

ANGELA CHEN I oh, I don't really remember a lot of people.

JVN Giving like dozens or like hundreds.

ANGELA CHEN Closer to hundreds. I don't think it was. I don't think it was 100. But I interviewed a lot of people, including a lot of people that didn't make it into the book just for, you know, book writing reasons. And then a lot of academics and people who study, you know, sex and sexuality.

JVN Yeah, I was really shocked at the veracity of my internal reaction to. One of my friends telling me about their experience of being Ace, like, really just like. And the story is saying at the beginning when they were like, it sounds like you're really not. It sounds like you're like not validating what my lived experiences has been and saying that there must be something medically wrong with me for having this, these feelings. And I was like, oh fuck, it really does. That's bad. Like I just really reminded myself of, like my grandma from Raleigh, North Carolina, which like, you know, she was sweet and made good frozen cinnamon rolls and was very loving, loyal lady, but also had like a lot of internalized racism that she, you know, was a product of which, you know, I was hard to come to terms with, but it was true. And then I was like, I just so that just was really illuminating to me because I was like, I think people who are Ace like must just be tired of these sorts of reactions and categorizations from Alo people that it just it and then just very eye opening. And so thanks for your work first of all, or just also thank you for your work because and sorry that we live in such a sexually fucking compulsory goddamn world. So since you wrote the book like or like, is there is your curiosity, like, veering to take you somewhere else? Do you want to go do something on Asexuality and, like, somewhere else, or is that no spoilers? You're, like, working on it. Like don't ask about your future vibes. Or like what? Like what's next for you? Like, what do you want to study? Are you still, like, super like voraciously curious about Asexuality?

ANGELA CHEN You know, I remain curious about Asexuality, but my secret is that this whole book I really do with Asexuality is actually my secret life. Because in my day job, I've always been a science and tech journalist. So in my career, you know, at all jobs, people would suddenly realize that I had written this book and they never knew about it before because I didn't talk about it at work just because I think it's fun to have, you know, this part

of my life. And, and a lot of people know me to the book and then I'm, you know, writing about AI and a lot of people know me through that. So I, I think I'm a person who likes having a lot of different kinds of projects. So I think my next project will probably be more on the science and tech philosophy AI side of things. But, you know, TBD.

JVN Love a multifaceted queen. Angela. We also really like AI and tech in this house. Like we've gotten to learn a lot about it. Do you know Meredith Broussard?

ANGELA CHEN I do, I in fact, I think I interviewed her a few years ago.

JVN We are obsessed with her. Do you want me to, like, in this interview on like, me blowing your mind with, like, a piece of AI, like, terminology that Meredith taught me just because then you'll be like, well, you probably already know this, but I more just want to, like, impress you with being like, oh, they do. Are you ready?

ANGELA CHEN Yes. I'm ready.

JVN My automatic blinds are very, like, techno chauvinist.

ANGELA CHEN Very nice, very nice.

JVN Angela, thank you so much for giving us your time and your work. We are such fans. We can't wait to see what you do next. And thank you so much for sharing your beautiful brain with us on Getting Curious.

ANGELA CHEN Thank you so much for having me. Thank you so much for being curious about Asexuality. This was just so fun.

JVN Did we learn what Asexuality is and what it means? Honey, yes, we learned that it is a gorgeous spectrum that is so many different ways that someone could express or experience being Asexual. Also obsessed with Asexual versus Alosexual. I'm one of those Anglo sexual queens. But that was such a gorgeous journey. I took so many interesting things away from this convo. I almost can't narrow it down, but that, like romantic desire and sexual desire are not the same things. Also that this whole debate around Asexuality or like how people, the compulsory sexuality and the way that that treats people who are Asexual reminds me a lot of like nature versus nurture debate about queer people and trans people. And it really to me. Just really drove home that part about when we were talking that we need to take people at their word and stop questioning and diagnosing and trying to categorize people so much based off of what they share with, share with us, and really just like allow people to be who they are and take them at their word. And honestly, I think one thing that makes me really curious about now is the way that, like Christian, the ways that Christian religion and missionary work and like, you know, relates back to civilization or like, you know, civilizing people and, and why we are always trying to fix people because it's like the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but it's like we are always trying to fix people. When do we start trying to fix people so fucking much? And it really I mean, my guess is my hypothesis is that it really is religion. And a lot of it is specifically the Christian religion, because other religions aren't set on the principle of like converting people so much to my

knowledge. Okay. Getting Curious people. You're so cute. You're so cute. We're so fun. We'll see you next time on Getting Curious.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description and follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN You can catch us here every Wednesday and make sure to tune in every Monday for episodes of Pretty Curious which we love. It's our pod pass on all things beauty. Get into it. Still can't get enough and you want to get a little spicy with us. You can subscribe to extra curious on Apple podcasts for commercial free listening and our subscription only show, Ask JVN where we're talking sex relationships are really just whatever is on my mind. That week, our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our editor and engineer is Nathaniel McClure. Getting Curious is produced by me, Chris McClure and Julia Melfi with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Currie and Chad Hall.