

## “White-Centrism, Racism & Colonialism” Panel

Panelists: Ashley, Jean, Kyo & Iris Robin / Sebastian Grace

- **White-centrism, racism & colonialism panel**

- This panel will explore the connections between white-centrism, racism, and colonialism, and will especially consider some of the ways that legacies of racism and colonialism influence ace and/or arospec racialized people’s experiences and identities. Please note that, in this panel, whiteness is not considered to be a racialized identity.
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### Prepared Questions:

**Note:** these prepared answers are incomplete and panelists elaborated on their responses and responded to questions to which they did not prepare answers. This document is therefore an incomplete record of the panel session.

- **What is your subject positioning / how do you identify?**

**Ashley:** I prefer she/her pronouns, am asexual and grey-demi-pan-romantic, and am a mixed race person of colour, Filipino and British. I am a settler. I grew up and lived in the United States for 18 years in Seattle on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples, lived in British Columbia in Vancouver on unceded Coast Salish Territory for 7 years, and have been here in Toronto on the traditional lands of the Huron-Wendat and Petun, the Seneca, and the Mississauga nations now for 1.5 years.

**Iris/Sebastian:** I use they/them pronouns and I’m a romantic asexual. I’m Chinese and a dual citizen of Britain and Canada. I live as an occupier on the traditional land of the Huron, Haudenosaunee, and the Mississauga peoples on colonised Turtle Island.

**Jean:** I identified as heterosexual for most of my adult life. I assumed I was fantastic at being a repressed Indian daughter. Now I identify as heteroromantic ace. I have recently moved to Toronto on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

**Kyo:** I use They/them pronouns and identify, broadly as asexual and aromantic. I am a first generation canadian from a Jamaican diaspora, generally meaning my both of my blood parents (and the majority of their family) are Jamacian but I don’t have much connection or access to a jamaican culture So i have lots of complicated feelings about that. I’ve lived in canada my whole life but have spent the majority of that time living in Mississauga, on colonized land.

- **Colonialism is, of course, a complex and multi-layered system that would take a very long time to adequately define -- but, for those of us who may be unfamiliar with the concept of colonialism, what is a broad/general definition of colonialism?**

**Ashley:** In the most basic sense, colonialism is the act of a political power taking over another space (land, nation, country, territory, etc) by force, violence, and oppression. This taking over of space is not merely geographical, it also includes the imposition of worldviews, knowledge systems, cultural and religious beliefs, etc. and the normalizing and privileging of these systems over the original systems of that landscape. Canada is a settler colonial country; this land (North America) -- what the Indigenous peoples call Turtle Island -- was taken by European powers by force and violence from its original inhabitants, the Indigenous peoples, and the colonial power that came to be known as Canada settled here permanently rather than leaving.

- **What are some of the legacies of colonialism that influence racialized peoples and how Western society imagines/perceives racialized identities?**

**Ashley:** Colonialism has created an “us” versus “them” dichotomy that presents the white cis-gender heterosexual subject, and particularly the male, as the ideal, the rational, the normal, the superior, the “us”, while the “them” are those who do not fit into colonialism’s image of superiority and normativity. This “them” includes those who are not white. Racialized peoples, such as Filipinos, were labelled by colonialism as Other, as to be feared, as strange, savage, inferior, and as in need of the “civilizing powers” of Europe, as people who needed to be destroyed, removed, and/or assimilated into the white European body politic.

**Jean:** The effects of colonialism imagining the coloured body as “other” (distinct from the dominant white norm) is still evident in Western popular culture and media. Disney has always been my go-to for watching the progress of minority narratives in mass media. I think Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan are all interesting characters to study in depth—but I’m especially fascinated by Jasmine.. And to preface, the producers, directors, and writers are all white men (for the most part American-born). Jasmine’s iconic dress is beautiful and exotic, and she always seems to be in a state of undress with her shoulder straps at the sides of her arms and the material of her clothes suggestively sheer. The exoticism of the film’s setting may be the reason why Jasmine is the first Disney princess to be depicted not only sexually, but self-aware of an outside gaze seeing her as sexual. In the scene where Jafar finally becomes sultan and has literally enslaved Jasmine, she seduces Jafar as a distraction for Aladdin to hopefully rescue her. The film somehow normalizes viewing a non-white person as exotic and clearly sexual, and also within the context of servitude.

- **What are some of the legacies of colonialism that influence how Western society imagines/perceives sexuality, sexual identities, and/or sex?**

**Ashley:** The contributors to the anthology *Queer Indigenous Studies* argue, very eloquently, that heteronormativity is a product of colonialism, that is, that heteronormativity is a perception that was asserted and normalized when the colonizers came to this land. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the only natural or normal sexual orientation, and that there are two genders -- male and female -- that have particular described and natural roles. Despite the fact that Western society is very hypersexual, with sex being advertised to us in music, movies, advertisements, and beyond, colonialism has also asserted the idea that sex is taboo and something to be hush hush or ashamed about, especially if it is done outside of marriage.

**Jean:** To build off of Ashley's point that heteronormativity is a product of colonialism and is oversaturated in our media, I was thinking about how we've recognized (as producers and consumers) that "sex sells," but what *type* of sex sells? I'm more and more convinced that when corporations employ a "sex sells" model, they're doing more than just "everyone likes sex." What they're really selling us is objects to "help us" visibly identify as heterosexual—which also means that the viewer needs to first of all identify as their biological or born gender and then ascribe to the normative sexuality. Corporations have found that *heterosexual sex* sells. Consider your favorite Ford commercial. Hold the image in your head of that heavy pickup truck, beautiful white exterior, bold FORD logo across the side, reeling through a dirt road promising some hardcore adventure, then cut to multiple car-porn shots when the voiceover starts. The man has a deep, husky, guttural voice telling you many things, especially that he is THE MAN, but ultimately that you need to buy the truck. Why? Because he's the manliest man you'll ever hear speak in your life and he owns a truck. If you think you're a man and want to showcase how man-ish you are, buy this truck. Combine this Ford commercial with images you have of motorcycles (advertisements, films, calendars etc.)— and we take a step in the direction of selling both gender and sex in advertisements. And most of our other car commercials, if they're not about being a man or getting a girl, they're about happy husbands and wives with their happy children living a happy life.

- **What are some of the legacies of colonialism that influence how Western society imagines/perceives love and romance?**

**Jean:** The boundaries of acceptable exploration/identification love and romance within a Western context seems to be fully controlled (dominated) by white narrators (in terms of books/films with the biggest audiences). In popular media, these narrators invest a lot of energy defining normal sexuality and sex as monogamous, heterosexual partners, coupled with clear gender markers or gender stereotypes. These standard narratives include a man and a woman falling in love, they face some troubles, but ultimately they will be exclusively together. Any other outcome ends in death or some other terrible unknown. This is an impossibly large generalization, but I think the patterns still exist. If you take a look at the top 25 or 50 or 250 romance films on any mainstream film website, you are actually looking at a list of men falling in love with women over and over again—equally problematic is that their relationship always has a sexual undercurrent, and when sex is absent, the narrative has to address this absence: does she suffer from trauma? Is he ill and doesn't want to involve her in a serious relationship? Or maybe it's a one sided love? The relationships between children are probably the only type of romantic narratives that does not incorporate sex (and usually sexuality), because of the taboo for children x sex.

- **From your own experience and viewpoint, in what ways do you find racism and ace- and aro-phobia to converge?**

**Ashley:** From my own viewpoint, people of colour often have stereotypes of over-sexualization and sexual openness violently placed onto us, and stereotypes like this can influence how individuals respond when a person of colour identifies as ace. These stereotypes of the overly sexual person of colour can cause individuals to deny a person of colour's asexuality. Some common stereotypes surrounding Filipino women and sexuality more specifically include that we are sexually "easy". Tied to this idea of being easy, there is the stereotype that we are gold-diggers who want to find a man who will provide us with all kinds of high-end material goods and, if we voice sexual and/or romantic attraction for a non-Filipino man, then there is the stereotype that we are sexually driven by the desire to get foreign citizenship (to a "Western" "first-world" country, say, to the United States, Britain, or Canada), that this is our incentive for and motivation behind being so sexually open.

**Iris/Sebastian:** From my experience, westerners stereotype East Asian people. Women are assumed to be submissive and eager to please and men are assumed to be impotent and therefore emasculated. I've had people come up to me, assume I'm a woman and assume that I have no sexuality of my own, and that I exist only to please them. And that made it difficult for me to claim asexuality as an identity on my own terms, because the asexuality of East Asian women and female-perceived people is so often assumed in the context of another person's sexual pleasure.

**Jean:** Generally, the Indian community that I have been a part of have a "if we don't talk about it, it doesn't exist" mentality about sex and sexuality (to the point where sexual violence, even when the victim openly points out a perpetrator, would not be addressed). Because of cultural taboos regarding both sex and sexuality, it is very difficult to explore and understand what a non-heteronormative relationship looks like. Most of my workplaces have been fairly white-dominant, so I am usually registered immediately as a girl who will be married very quickly—my co-workers usually want to know how soon. I usually laugh along not recognizing how I'm actually helping my white coworkers perpetuate misunderstandings of both sexuality and race. I was most aware of "ace-phobia" while working in Korea. In Korean popular media—Korean dramas actually have characters that self-declare as ace, but their asexuality is realized as a neurosis that will be cured with a little bit of time with the opposite sex (It's Ok It's Love 2014; Jealousy Incarnate 2016). I really hope not, but there is a possibility that if I had identified as ace while I worked in Korea—people may have related back to ways dramas have portrayed aces and think "I know about this...we'll find a boy for you. All will be well and you will be fixed".

**Kyo:** Coming from the experience of someone who is black and perceived gender has greatly changed the reactions people express. Particularly in the context of speaking about how black bodies are generally read by society. It's actually quite strange how the Hyper-sexualization and/or fetishization and desexualization of bodies sort of play out, but I'm speaking about how people have read me personally; sometimes as being male and sometimes as being female, sometimes by multiple people in the same instance despite the fact that I don't identify as either. Black men are often read as being sexually aggressive, innately sexual beings, and while black women are often also coded as sexually aggressive it plays out in very different ways because of misogyny, misogynoir (the overlap of misogyny and racism) and patriarchy. Black bodies, particularly black women are also often marked as being undesirable, even within black communities. I think that the way society has built up these expectations around sexuality and how sexuality is to be performed really doesn't give room for racialized bodies to take up identities like asexual or aromantic. I have very particular memories of hearing things like how homosexuality or bisexuality were "white" things, Personally I don't think these facts made coming to an ace identity particularly difficult for me, I suppose I was and still am occasionally living in a bubble but when I joined the ace community is when I started seeing more of the convergences.

- **There is often a privileging of white voices in feminist and queer spaces. Speaking from your own experience, what about in ace and aro spaces specifically? What can we do to deconstruct this white privileging and to ensure that aces and aros of colour can help to shape the space and have their voices recognized, respected, and heard?**

**Ashley:** A space that is dominantly white is a space that I, as a queer woman of colour, find myself uncomfortable in because I feel excluded and find myself questioning the lack of people of colour in the space. Representation matters. Speaking from my own experiences and reflections, the process of coming out as asexual can be even harder than it already is if we don't see someone like us in the Ace Pride community and the Pride parade, for instance. It's important that ace spaces represent people of colour. But there is a fine line between representation and tokenism. I also don't want to be the token

person of colour in ace spaces, and thus there is a responsibility to those who provide ace spaces to ensure that it is not a dominantly white space but also that it is not a space where racialized peoples are provided room for the purposes of tokenism.

**Iris/Sebastian:** in ace spaces, I can't really speak to the aro experience, it's always white people being interviewed in the media and always white aces at Pride, if we're included in Pride at all. I remember when I was researching asexuality and figuring out whether I might want to use it as a label, that I only saw white aces holding up signs that said "this is what an asexual person looks like." I understand why they would want to do that, it can be very affirming to challenge stereotypes and show that not all ace people look the same way. The problem with that is that when people of colour see these signs and we realise that we don't look like the white people holding them, the message we receive is that asexuality is a white orientation and that's not okay. It makes it harder for us to claim it as an identity.

**Jean:** My experience is super limited, but I think what is happening now at the conference is empowering--as in allowing racialized aces to meet one another, share their unique experience, not feel alone, build solidarity, and feel more welcome to participate in events or committees. I recently heard my friend encourage people at a group event who are normally privileged to allow room for voices that are not (she worded it so much more beautifully than I could, but this was the jist). And the open acknowledgement of privileged voices vs non-privileged I think is a powerful reminder of the invisible barriers and limitations we can actively work against.

**Kyo:** I've been a part of many queer spaces. Luckily for me I think, many of those spaces have been made by or for queer people of colour, however in my experience of accessing ace spaces, which was pretty much just AVEN (Asexual Outreach and Education Network) online, a site which I no longer use, there had been a lot of push back against spaces for aces of colour, and when people tried to form these spaces, like threads in the forums, non racialized people would enter the threads and demand access to the conversations and try to take away from their...our space. I also remember watching the film (A)sexual ('a' in brackets) where the film meets with several ace people and not one of the ace people in the film was a person of colour. As Sebastian said having visibility for ace people can be really great but we need to also recognize the kinds of representation that are most prevalent.

- **What words of inspiration do you have for other ace and/or aro people of colour as we continue to navigate and fight against white-centric, racist, and colonial spaces?**

**Ashley:** Keep doing things -- even seemingly little things -- every single day to speak up against and challenge colonial power and to celebrate your identities. Even little things can have great power. Go to that rally downtown. Write that poem! Sew an ace pride or racial pride patch onto your backpack if you want -- it will be noticed, if not by everyone, by some people. Post insightful articles on social media -- they can be educational for those who follow you on your social media outlets. Even touching one person and causing them to reconsider prominent societal ideas is impactful. Ask someone their pronoun rather than assuming you know their pronoun. Fill ace meetups and communities with your beautiful selves and your voices, experiences, wisdoms, and insights. Your presence and your existence -- our presence and our existence -- is activism.

**Jean:** "If they can't make it, we'll make it for them—10x better too" was the (probably super not helpful) advice I gave my first year student who explained their disappointment with a particular director's treatment of violence against women in his films. But however ridiculous, this ended up being my own personal mantra. I kind of always had a dream to write comics and this year I'm actually launching comics with my artist sister and we both have high hopes for breaking down so many

stereotypes—and also pushing narratives that have otherwise been ignored or butchered by white writers. It's all very exciting, but the part that's the most exciting is actively taking a stance against the “your voice is not important” and “your presence is not needed”. No actually—without me and my artist sister, you would not be getting a chance to read this amazingly awesome story. If you are creative or ambitious and want to pursue your interest—go for it—cause they don't know it yet, but these white-centric spaces need you SO badly.

**Kyo:** I was never one to enjoy school much but i'm so glad that i was able to learn about the ways that colonialism and capitalism has so greatly affected not here, but all over the world. I think that even being present here today is a positive movement towards

- **Speaking from your own experience, how can we work to make ace and aro spaces de-colonial/anti-colonial?**
- **Audience Q&A / discussion**