

COMPOSING  
AROMANTICISM

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A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at the  
University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree Master of Arts

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate  
School, have examined the thesis entitled

COMPOSING  
AROMANTICISM

presented by C. Bougie,  
a candidate for the degree of master of arts,  
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Rebecca Hayes

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Professor Jaquetta Shade-Johnson

## DEDICATION

To all the people on Grindr who listened to me try to describe this project via messages of unnecessary length, the aromantic community, and the first person who speaks the word “aromantic” to millions of people at once, to whom I offer a reward of \$20 and a happy kiss on the hand if accomplished within the next five years.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone who helped me compose this thesis (although perhaps I ought to extend a long list of apologies for tardiness, instead). I'm still practicing asking for help, but, surprisingly, it turns out that doing so often proves immensely—helpful? Who would've thought? (Thanks to graduate school and the past two years for starting to drill this and many other life lessons into me.)

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## ABSTRACT

The term “aromantic” describes those who experience little to no romantic attraction to other people, marking a queer identity hardly referenced in either scholarship or popular conversation. Aromanticism’s obscurity doesn’t only render it difficult for aromantic people to communicate to those who don’t identify or aren’t familiar with the term—it also often leaves aromantics themselves uncertain as to how they might put their perspectives and experiences to words (much less music, visual art, and so on). In this thesis, I suggest that both the aromantic community and composition studies might benefit from some manner of allyship or collaboration with each other. While scholars of queer composition have been publishing exciting work for the past several decades on queering form and genre, writing pedagogy, even how success or failure in composing can be imagined as a whole, their scholarship has yet to either acknowledge the aromantic community’s presence or incorporate some of its viewpoints.

Following such scholars as Jonathan Alexander, Jacqueline Rhodes, and Stacey Waite, I wonder how queering composition might look different if aromanticism were incorporated into it. To do so, I share from my own aromantic experiences and compositions as well as offer overviews on the contemporary aromantic community and composition studies’ queer table. The resulting project is a collage of research and something like prose poetry (not to mention drama and visual art), itself a text that takes a hopeful stab at queering form, queerly content as to whether it might succeed or fail in its genre.



## INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjective and noun “aromantic” as follows:

A. *adj.* 1. *Literary Theory.* Of writing: not in the romantic literary tradition or genre. *rare.*

2. Characterized by or involving no romantic feelings; (of a person) experiencing or expressing no feelings of romantic attraction or attachment towards others. B. *n.* A person who does not experience or express feelings of romantic attraction or attachment. (“Aromantic”) Is the *OED* correct?

Does it need to be?



I attempt to define the term myself, writing a poem called “Desire.” It goes,

Sometimes I want a man  
just to trot him out  
at parties.  
A free dinner once a month,  
a kiss on new year’s, and someone to listen  
with his eyes. Soft sweaters and a hard,  
flat chest: someone somewhere between  
real and symbolic, which might just mean *symbolic*.  
Today a nice man with aging hair sold me a fern—  
I don’t know if I have any right  
to name him, but I call him  
*him*, anyway—maybe, I consider now,  
because I, too, want a roommate.  
I, too, desire house plants.



A few weeks ago, I was interviewed by Queerious Minds, a blog whose goals include “sharing stories, art and information” in hopes of “inspir[ing],

inform[ing] and shin[ing] a light on the diverse voices” of the queer community (“About”). They’d first approached me at the end of 2020, seeking out discussions with aromantic people that they could transcribe and publish during 2021’s Aromantic-spectrum Awareness Week (ASAW), a mostly-digital post Valentine’s day event dedicated to celebrating the aromantic community. The Queerious Minds representative with whom I spoke and emailed was immensely kind, even encouraging me to edit the transcript of our conversation as I desired so I could “tell my story” how I wished to. Once our hour-long conversation over Zoom came to a close, though, I was struck by how unsatisfied I felt in its aftermath. An hour hadn’t been nearly enough to summarize even my own aromanticism, and I’d rushed through the last two interview questions, trying to pack as much content into my answers as possible. When I edited the transcript later, I added and reworded lines in an attempt to gesture at my dissatisfaction: I wrote, for instance, “It’s hard to describe as a whole what ‘aro’ is and is like. It’s definitely something we/I feel and identify with, but it’s hard to put it into words, especially if you don’t have the space for thousands of them” (“Our Final”). “I’d love to see a full-length film about aromanticism,” I added—“just two hours of someone exploring their aromanticism with some real character development. I want to see it emphasised that aromanticism is a really great experience, not a lack or a loss. Maybe not even two hours would be enough for that” (“Our Final”). (Those words sound ugly to me when I reread them now, pasting them from one word document into another.) (I wish they were more evocative or concise, just a fraction more pleasant on the ears.) (Or I wish I had more time. Is

a thesis-length project enough space to lay out enough of my aromanticism for others to peruse that I might feel satisfied? As if I'd finally at least somewhat captured it? I don't know. Maybe.) (I tie off a paragraph—finally, potentially headed somewhere— and I've already used up 300 words. My grandmothers would call the mess “creativity.” I blame, at least in part, my ADHD.) (The more students I teach, the more writers I meet to whom I almost eerily relate. They skip from idea to idea when planning out projects, and their paragraphs struggle, like Odysseus, to travel home in a straight line. I waffle while I grade them, thinking, the Odyssey probably wouldn't be so epic if its protagonist traveled more concisely.) (Reading Homer's Odyssey in high school, I felt a similar frustration, maybe, to my aromantic one: Odysseus is annoyingly over-confident, a hubris he doesn't even back up with the intelligence for which he's famous. In retrospect, he's immensely relatable. And maybe, if he doesn't travel straight, he travels queer, a thought that entices me closer. I lean in its direction while I warn myself not to. I could end this paragraph any time I wanted to, if I did want to. But it's a metaphor, or something like that. It says, with both content and form, that content and form are the problem. Alphabetic text is the problem, not nearly stereographic enough to depict something as queer as aromanticism. 500 words. How to define “aromantic”? It's the sinking feeling I had in my chest upon realizing I wanted to break up with my first and only girlfriend (or the relief I felt afterwards). It's like how I have friends that I love, but I'm not in love with them, except I feel like that around everyone. I never really think about it. I write about it constantly. Maybe, when I've finally described it, I'll take up a new hobby. Or

maybe aromanticism is too queer for boxes. Nobody puts aromanticism in a corner. Or it's already in one. Ideally, I'd go on like this forever. Or maybe I wouldn't.)



“I just have to ask you to trust me when I tell you that none of these explanations is really it” (Daniel).

## 1

This project has been many things: among other forms, it's been two unwritten journal articles on asexual animals in the poetry of Marianne Moore and D. H. Lawrence, a comparison between Andy Warhol and Steven Patrick Morrissey's art and asexualities, and, most recently, forty loosely connected pages that mused on the most rhetorically effective manner with which aromanticism could be defined. Could the key to that last question, I've been wondering for the past few months, be composing in multiple modes, working collaboratively, or writing more intentionally with one's entire body/mind? I looked outwards and inwards, examining my own work as well as that of other aromantic composers. What worked? What didn't? What succeeded? Then, soon after: was success necessary? How could I have the most fun writing with the knowledge that I'd inevitably fail—in one sense or another—to compose the ideal, aromanticism-defining text I so desired to pull into existence (or onto a word document)?



*Fig. 1. Digital sketch of a long-haired (cat)boy. In the words of a popular meme:*

*“[t]his is the ideal [male] body. You may not like it, but this is what peak performance looks like” (“This is the Ideal”). (Could I, equally jokingly, name this project the ideal aromantic rhet/comp thesis? I don’t think I’m aiming for “ideal” so much as “finished,” though. Drawing by the author.*

It’s somehow all too easy to lose track of reality while drafting, researching, analyzing texts. I find my aromanticism not when I read about it, though, but when I look at a pretty boy with long hair tied up at the top of his head (see, for instance, fig. 1). Writing about my aromanticism, I get caught up in language, connecting ideas, and I forget what it actually feels like, why I desire to compose academic work about it in the first place. I look at the pretty boy. Is it romance, I wonder, if I think his hair looks soft, if I could see myself seeing a movie with him? People talk of experiences like being “in love”—is this it? Have I

simply not found (romantic) love yet, in twenty-four years? Will I want to, in two or twenty? Do I only wonder that because *Society* compels me to, heteronormative as it is (or can be)? Do I think too much? By the time I arrive at that thought, the moment has passed; the boy has moved on. Friends, family, strangers, and teachers encourage me, occasionally, to dwell less on labels or lack, to “go with the flow,” simply do whatever interests me less on labels or lack, to simply do whatever interests me and circumvent whatever doesn’t. It’s fair advice. I’m interested, though, in my lack of romantic attraction towards others. (Perhaps I’m attracted to it?) I worked on a puzzle for fifteen minutes, once, then looked up to find that nearly two hours had passed. My aromanticism—aromanticism in general, in fact—tugs me in with a similar draw. I don’t know if I’d rather live in a *Society* that put less stock in romance: I enjoy the experience, sometimes, of occasionally realizing how bewildering the spaces in which I live can be. It’s a difference in feeling that brings with it external difficulties and internal confusion, but I wouldn’t give it up if I could. I’m proud of it, most of the time, maybe to the point of being a bit pretentious about it. My aromanticism, I decide, is too queer for phrases like “love is love,” words whose potential has yet to be recognized in its entirety: romantic love is romantic love, straight or queer (or maybe not, actually—more on that later). Queer love, however, can be sexual, familial, platonic, sensual, aesthetic, intellectual, and alterous as well as romantic (or romantic/sexual wrapped up and perceived as one experience).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This list could go keep going, for the record—I only stop here for brevity and because no other words come to mind as I write this page.

What if I don't want to use the word "love"? The imperative that I desire others romantically is pervasive enough that I want to find a new word to use in its place, even one with the same ostensible definition or most of the same letters, the "womyn" to my "woman" (or "boi" to my "boy"). Maybe I could spell it with a zero, recall tennis scoring and roboticism and usernames. Love is love is l0ve is l0ve is l0ve. Maybe if I say it enough times, it will come to mean nothing (as it does in tennis).



It's also all too easy to lose myself in a paragraph, but I'm embracing that here. If I point it out and explicate it, it can work (a lesson I've learned in grad school). TL;DR: this isn't the case for every aromantic, but I like looking closely at my aromanticism. It's kind of like looking closely at a window, maybe, and noting all the smudges and dust on the glass. Aromanticism, for me, is a smudge worthy of studies much lengthier than this one.

## 2

This thesis project—the ostensibly grand culmination of my quest for a master's degree—is made up of four small-ish chapters (or three, excluding this introduction). In it, I make my awkward way into a Burkean parlor filled with scholars of rhetoric and composition studies. (In a time of social distancing, I can attend metaphorical parties, at least.) I'm terrible at talking to others, or I feel like it, anyway, but I edge my way towards what looks like the queerest circle, asking if I might listen in on their conversation. I fall in l0ve at first glance with Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander's assertion that "queer" is an

“impossible subject for composition,” blush to hear Stacy Waite advocate for and instruct us on “writing queer.” When the third or fourth seven-minute lull comes around, I mumble a vague attempt at scholarly engagement, note that “aromantic” (which I’m not sure works so well as a noun as “queer”) feels impossible in its own way, one “queer” as an umbrella term potentially doesn’t cover. My father, for instance, finds it much easier to tell me aloud that he loves me, his bisexual daughter than me, his labelled-up aromantic and asexual and nonbinary adult/child, haver of depression and social anxiety and general anxiety and predominately inattentive ADHD (not to mention cat allergies).

I then apologize for mentioning sexual and romantic attraction, or lack thereof, at a business-casual gathering (in addition, of course, to mental health, gender, and my probable deep-seeded parental issues). I’ve found my people, though: they’re all about refusing to “compose themselves” even as they compose work on being queer, trans, Black, disabled, autistic (or, on at least some occasions, when they publish that work) (“Queer”). Excited and embarrassed, I take a stab at articulating my argument: rhet/comp—queer rhet/comp in particular—could benefit as a field of study, I think, from getting a dash aromantic (or, somewhat conversely, by starting to unlearn the many romantic imperatives under which we move about—more on them in the chapter that follows this one). Alexander and Rhodes, for instance, wonder in one essay, “What is the place of the sexual selves, the somatic bodies, in rhetoric and composition?” (“Queer” 92) What, I speculate, is the place of aromantic (not to mention asexual) bodies and selves in rhet/comp? Or is the point that we’re



still looking for such a place?



In the chapter that follows, I offer an overlook on the contemporary aromantic community. (I call it “brief” in my first draft of this chapter, but most people haven’t read more than a few sentences, if any at all, about aro people—so maybe it’s quite lengthy?) I offer both messy, personal descriptions and more well-worded definitions for the term, then a quick lecture on the aro community’s short, twenty-first century history. From there, I move into overviewing the current state of aromantic scholarship, noting that, nearly every time aromanticism is mentioned in academic texts, it is only alongside (and usually after) asexuality, a clumping-together that unhelpfully echoes the popular tendency to regard the two identity terms as equivalent in meaning. I then share the results of a 2019 survey that asked participants to articulate the needs and goals of the aromantic community as a whole as well as smaller identity communities within it. Lastly, I introduce Elizabeth Brake’s term “amatonormativity” as a useful framework with which to approach the remaining chapters of this project.

In my third chapter, I tie my work to theory from the field of queer composition, speaking of and back at a parlor circle of scholars that includes Jonathan Alexander, Jacqueline Rhodes, and Stacey Waite, among others. Faced with the idea that “queer is [or might be] an impossible subject” for composition, they look to remedies like writing in “queertext,” embracing failure as a methodology, and composing in multiple modes. I propose a

marriage between their scholarship and aromanticism, noting the manners in which the “queer” in “queer composition” does and doesn’t speak for aromantic creators.

Inspired by Courtney S. Danforth, Kyle D. Stedman, and Michael J. Faris’s etude-littered audio introduction to their 2018 edited collection *Soundwriting Pedagogies*, I share a series of short etudes thinking on composing and aromanticism in my fourth chapter, brief studies I hope might inspire future aromanticism-focused or amatonormativity-minded work in rhet/comp studies as well as other fields. At the very least, composing them has helped me to think my own aromanticism through further, something I’ve been wanting to do for a few years now—there are so many more spaces where my asexuality or transness feel relevant, where I can find others to dialogue with about them. Intentionally or not, I talk about my asexuality much more when with friends. Maybe because it feels easier to communicate to others? More than anything, I hope this project will push me in another direction.

Perhaps it’ll do the same for you.

## AROMANTICISM

I'm not sure how many people I know who'd feel confident or even comfortable offering a definition of the word "aromantic." I made a Facebook post last fall asking both asexual and non-asexual friends how they would define or explain asexuality, and I was surprised by the comments my friends offered (whether I should have been or not): they referred to nuances that went beyond simple definitions, not only noting that the asexual community is made up of people who feel little to no sexual attraction to others but also adding smaller caveats: some aces are into sex acts while some aren't, for instance. Some are into romance; others aren't. Being asexual, they clarified, isn't the same thing as being aromantic.<sup>2</sup>

The two terms, in fact, can quite tidily separated via the short (perhaps too simplified) explanation that asexuals experience little to no sexual attraction while aromantics experience little to no romantic attraction. If I'm explaining it to straight people who aren't into queer theory: ace people, generally, don't look at other people and... get sexy about it? Feel all their blood rushing between their legs, as fanfics often describe it? That thing (although ace people can and often do have what you'd call a libido—definitely read up on it, if you're confused, so that I don't have to go off on a tangent here). Aro people often describe themselves as uninterested in dating or incapable of falling in love, bewildered by marriage and romantic comedies. (Usually, this is followed up with the somewhat

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<sup>2</sup> A quick and dirty definition for "asexual," if needed (also mentioned above): someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction towards other people. See [asexuality.org](http://asexuality.org) (home to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network) or just Google "asexual" for more info.

defensive note that aro people can and do experience many kinds of love aside from the romantic sort, a move that's somewhat of a pet peeve for me: see my diatribe on "love" in the introduction preceding this chapter.)

I wonder how my Facebook friends would describe aromanticism. I wonder in part because I don't think I've ever spoken with an aro person who felt they could summarize their aromanticism in full. It's an uncertainty that's often led me to doubt my own aromanticism, whether aro is a "real identity" at all. My asexuality feels more solid: quite evidently, I'm generally not sexually attracted to others—a difference in feeling, apparently, from most people, if claims of sexual attraction's existence haven't been exaggerated. I've had sex—multiple kinds, even—but I hesitate to even call it "sex" given my lack of interest in it: I've moved others to orgasm, or relatively close to it, but the actions involved didn't feel mystical (or anything, really, more than moderately interesting and occasionally an un-fun brand of painful). My body feels affected by other things: caramel covered in chocolate, the thrill of settling into a run, last episodes of TV series and podcasts. I can't offer any reason for why this is the case for me, but it all feels very provable. An experiment involving a heart rate monitor and someone relatively attractive, maybe, might do the trick. (And then again, maybe not: if sex feels boring for me, flirting seems more fun, curious, like it'd have an intellectual thrill to it that might spur my heart rate and, subsequently, its data. Or maybe my heart would simply beat fast, as it often does, from social anxiety. Or general anxiety.)

My aromanticism, in comparison, feels significantly less provable. My lack

of romantic attraction for others blurs into my introversion, my general love for living alone, my asexuality, maybe even my ADHD. (Romance often sounds to me a little like a lecture in which I'm frowned on for doodling all over my notes instead of raising my hand to answer questions.) I don't know if I can firmly say I'm incapable of falling in love, that I'm not interested in ever having a romantic relationship. (I've had one or two, maybe three? They were alright—a word I can't dream up a replacement for at the moment.)

I might have been in love with a few people in middle school. In undergrad, I thought I might be in love with three or four different people, although those interests lasted at most a month and, in shortest iteration, a memorable hour and a half (in which an epiphany came to me during a first-year art class, felt absolutely sparkling for an hour, then died as I impatiently tried to multitask warming up a can of soup in my dorm room microwave and talking on the phone with my father). Was what I felt romance or just a sudden desire to see an old friend much more often? Was it romance if it only lasted 90 minutes?<sup>3</sup>



I include the above potential-TMI in order to begin to illustrate the extent to which describing my aromanticism can feel like chasing smoke. It's a heavy thing that drifts into my face and leaves me coughing. *Certainly*, I'm left insisting, *it*

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<sup>3</sup> I feel incapable of saying "I don't know if I can firmly say I'm incapable of falling in love" and so on without compulsively following up with an addendum: forget that statement, actually. The thought of even possibly being in love kind of repulses me. It's very much not possible, anyway. (If I add an "or, maybe..." here, is it because I genuinely want to? Or am I waffling in a subconscious attempt to better suit myself to the romantic spaces in which I so often move?)

*exists*. I can smell it, and I'm finding it more difficult to breathe. I couldn't trace its shape, though, or follow it with my eyes further than a few yards. It makes contact with me, but I can't really reach out and touch it, not like I could cold grass, hot wood, sticky thighs. It's tangible, visible, recognizable, but, after only a few seconds, it's too dispersed to be any of those things.

This metaphor isn't perfect—does aromanticism drift into almost nothing like that, floating up towards the sky as it fades? Not really. Trying to describe my aromanticism, I occasionally feel like I'm onto something—the ideal metaphor— but I inevitably veer off-track, or feel like I have, at least. The friend I'm near raving at furrows their brow, smiles with what might be uncomfortable, awkward confusion. Smoke feels more accurate a theoretical metaphor than one that might offer any genuine indication of what it *really feels like* to be aromantic.

Maybe aromanticism, I ramble on, is more like fog.



The Aromantic-spectrum Union for Education and Advocacy (AUREA) provides a definition for aromanticism that's at least a tad less harried than my own (and vastly superior to the one the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers), although it, too, needs more than one measly sentence to get the job done (or try to, at least).

As it's described it on AUREA's home base of [aromanticism.org](http://aromanticism.org):

Aromanticism is a romantic [orientation] which describes people whose experience of romance is disconnected from normative societal expectations, commonly due to experiencing little to no romantic

attraction, but also due to feeling repulsed by romance, or being uninterested in romantic relationships (see our glossary). Most aromantic people don't fall in love. They may or may not enjoy activities that are often seen as romantic (e.g. kissing), be uncomfortable with romance, be single, have one or more partners, or be married – those are individual characteristics that vary between aromantic people.

(“FAQ”)

By mentioning that AUREA's definition might not be accomplishing the task it sets out to complete, I don't mean to imply that it's inaccurate, simplified, or even too vague (although maybe it is, just a little). It works as a base, an introduction to aromanticism, and, indeed, it's the first answer of several dozen on an FAQ page that goes on to offer much more information. It doesn't need to do much more than what it's already doing, perhaps. Definitions, as a genre, are short, barely sketching out the subjects to which they refer.

Still, like the interview I did for Queerious Minds, AUREA's small-ish paragraph leaves me dissatisfied: I'm not sure it gets at shaping out my aromanticism as much as I want it to. If I'd viewed these lines as a teenager, I'm not sure I would have seen myself in it. And then again: my aro identity and experiences are unique enough to me that maybe no definition could offer the comfort of explaining exactly how I feel and have felt solely via alphabetic text.

Even if AUREA's definition of aromanticism has no obligation to so precisely service me, though, it drives me to insistently wonder what kind of text *could* spell out my aromanticism, for my own viewing or that of others. What

kind of text could explain to my father that I'm happier single than partnered, that my not being in a romantic relationship is enjoyable, healthy, even beautiful for me? If such a text exists, I haven't shared it with him yet.

### 3

On a webpage dedicated to the topic of aromantic history, AUREA posits that the aro community's history is still in its beginning stages. They preface themselves with the note that “[t]he current record of our events is rough, and compared to other queer communities, rather short”—“a mix of personal community achievements, like flags and organizations, external recognition, like the *Oxford English Dictionary* adding the definition of aromantic, and the coining of amatonormativity [as a term]” (“Aromantic History”). One of the page's central references is a timeline of aro history compiled by multiple users on the web forum *Arocalypse* in a thread first begun in March of 2019. The final timeline, posted by blogger Coyote, is brief enough that I have no reason not to share it in its entirety:

- 200[?] — the word “aromantic” used on Haven for the Human Amoeba
- 2006 — the word “aromantic” used on the AVEN forums
- 2011? — National Coalition for Aromantic Visibility founded, now defunct
  - First flag proposal (green/yellow/orange/black )
- 2012 — “amatonormativity” coined by professor Elizabeth Brake
- 2014 — Aromantic Awareness Week suggested on Tumblr (since renamed Aromantic Spectrum Awareness Week)
- 2014 — Second flag proposal (green/green/yellow/gray/black) and Third



flag proposal (green/green/white/gray/black)

- 2016-ish? — Arocalypse created (@Blue Phoenix Ace can you confirm?)
- 2017 — Aromantics Wiki was created
- 2018 — aromantic and other romantic orientations added to the Oxford English Dictionary
- 2019 — Aromantic-Spectrum Union for Recognition, Education, and Advocacy was created

What Coyote's (actually quite comprehensive) timeline does and doesn't offer readers can serve as confirmation of AUREA's note that aro history has proved short and rough thus far, drawing attention as it does to the fact that "aromantic" as used in the context discussed here has been in use for less than twenty years. Question marks and brackets emphasize the uncertainty of what history the aro community does have, and every bullet point of the timeline contains at least one hyperlink, evidence of the extent to which the community is grounded in digital communication. (Held together by hyperlinks, the aro community begins to cohere on forums and takes shape on social media websites like Tumblr. In time, websites devoted wholly to offering information on aromanticism pop up. Aro focused organizations rise and fall—small empires, if they rule over anything at all—and the online spaces that aros occupy expand and proliferate, moving in and on to their surroundings. In some cases, they become inaccessible as links are altered, pages deleted.)

(A better word than "empire" might be "virus." The good kind, probably.)

Coyote's timeline also draws attention to the fact that "aromantic" as an

identity term is recorded as first being used on forums dedicated to discussions on asexuality, an association that continues to this day whether aros, aces, or those who use both terms would prefer it to or not. The aro community is, more often than not, named in reference to or as an addendum to the ace community rather than heralded on its own. For both better and worse, the two groups are often clumped even in queer-specific spaces: of the two universities I've attended, for instance, both have had LGBT+ centers run weekly or bi-monthly ace/aro social groups, but neither have hosted regular meet-ups for solely ace or solely aro people.<sup>4</sup>

The aro and ace communities are also commonly crowded under umbrella terms like “a-spec,” which refer (or attempt to refer) to all identities on the aromantic and asexual spectrums (for instance, “demisexual,” “gray-romantic,” and “quoiromantic”).<sup>5</sup> Such crowding for cover under one small umbrella isn't inherently detrimental to either community—there's power, after all, in numbers— but I, for one, wish the aro community its own rain gear. As many spaces as I've ventured into, online and offline, I still hardly know any other aromantics.



The tendency for aro to be regarded as a sub-category of ace is mirrored

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<sup>4</sup> No bad feelings for either center: it's difficult as hell to sustain any university organization or group, and aromanticism and asexuality aren't quite popular, yet. (We're still waiting for an A-list celebrity to come out and make headlines.) Most people, I'm guessing, haven't considered using either term for themselves, although either might very well describe their identity or experiences within the worlds of sex and romance.

<sup>5</sup> More exciting terms to Google, if you'd like.

in its lack of representation in academic literature. Scholars Ela Przybylo and Kristina Gupta note as much in their introduction to the most recent issue of *Feminist Formations* (published at the close of 2020), which took as its theme the Audre Lorde-inspired concept of asexual erotics that Przybylo writes about in her 2019 book *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. Arguing that queer and feminist studies both have shown a notable lack of engagement with existing asexuality scholarship, Przybylo and Gupta note that aromanticism hasn't even been written on enough to be neglected, commenting that "very little scholarly work has thus far explored aromanticism: except for one article (Antonsen et al. 2020), several theses (Elgie 2020; Lang 2018; Stucki 2018), at least two zines (Mulder 2018; yingchen and yingtong 2018), and many online articles (e.g., Borresen 2018; Neal 2016), scant research focuses on aromanticism" (xiii-xiv).

Of the thirteen texts that follow Przybylo and Gupta's introduction, in fact, two are noted for going so far as to "touch and draw on aromanticism" (xiii). None take on "aromantic perspectives, identities, or communities" as a center of focus (xiv). Przybylo and Gupta posit that "[t]his limitation results directly from our call for papers (CFP) framing, which did not explicitly call for an engagement with aromanticism" (xiv). I'm not sure what to make of their not explicitly referring to aromanticism in their CFP: given how intertwined the ace and aro communities are, to leave one entirely out of a call for papers on asexuality's intersections with a variety of topics seems odd. On the other hand, I don't question the call not referring explicitly to communities focused around other queer identities

(lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and so on). If ace and aro are as different as I and others so often argue—enough that they ought to merit the creation and support of at least some ace- or aro-focused spaces—then I maybe have cause not to insist that any academic journal issue focused on asexuality also at least mention aromanticism in its CFP. Still, so little scholarship even referring to aro perspectives, identities, or communities has been published that it's perhaps at least somewhat reasonable that I'd glom, desperate, onto the field of study that's shown the most potential thus far.



AUREA's webpage on aromantic research is the most extensive resource list of its kind, as far as I've found. It serves well to shed some light on how, while little work on aromanticism has been published in peer-reviewed publications, the aro community has already begun conducting its own research on itself.

AUREA's page links to surveys like "Mental Health and Suicide Tendencies within the Aromantic-spectrum" and "The Experiences of Allosexual Aromantic People," which have been disseminated online from 2018 on and subsequently summarized in blog posts and shared Google Docs. Tumblr user aroacepagans, for instance, conducted a survey in 2019 on the topic of aromantic community needs that garnered 30 responses in total to open-ended questions like "What are the community needs of alloaros?" and "What are the community needs of greyro/ aro-spec folks?" Needs listed by participants included "[i]ncreased visibility, spaces free from amatonormativity, safe and unbiased shared spaces for all members of the aro/aro-spec community, separation and distinction from

alloaces [alloromantic asexuals], more in-person spaces, and a building of understanding and acceptance between the different community subgroups” (aroacepagans).

In sum (although not really): we desire a visibility we don’t often have outside of (or even inside) queer-specific spaces. We’d like to keep in contact with each other, both in person and in more digital manners. We’d like spaces in which we aren’t saturated by the norms of romance and aren’t the minority among a predominantly asexual number of others.

(It’d be nice to dismantle amatonormativity, as well, if feasible.)

#### 4

The term “amatonormativity,” as Coyote notes in the timeline copied above, was coined by scholar Elizabeth Brake in 2012. As she explains it, it aims “to describe the widespread assumption that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship, and that everyone is seeking such a relationship.” More specifically, it “describes assumptions embedded in statements like ‘She hasn’t found the one... yet’ or ‘aren’t you lonely/immature/irresponsible because you are not married/partnered?’” (Brake) Such ideology doesn’t merely take the form of tiring comments: it also “prompts the sacrifice of other relationships to romantic love and marriage and relegates friendship and solitudinousness to cultural invisibility” (Brake). Amatonormativity is both cultural and legal in that it “encourages structuring law and society on the assumption that amorous relationships are the norm,” a flow of power that “discriminates against, and at worst creates barriers to making other kinds of

relationships—friendships, asexual romances, some kinds of polyamory— central to one’s life” (Brake). In addition, it can “pressure people to enter and remain in exclusive sexual dyadic relationships—even when such relationships are bad for them, or costly, or simply not what that individual needs” (Brake).

Amatonormativity, Brake notes, plays on the term “heteronormativity,” a word that gestures to the normalization of heterosexuality in societies. (Heteroromanticism is so normalized, I think, that it’s assumed without thought to make up a part of heterosexuality.) Amatonormativity and heteronormativity, in fact, often work in tandem—Brake describes them as overlapping “[t]o the extent that exclusive, dyadic relationships are a heterosexual ideal” *as well as* an alloromantic one, writing:

Like heteronormativity, [amatonormativity] can be found throughout social life, and it can be understood in relation to other systems of oppression, for example in its relation to gender roles (e.g., the stereotype of the single male differs from that of the single female, and men and women are understood as needing marriage for different reasons). Heteronormativity can be understood through considering what counts as violating it: the subversion of gender roles or displays of same-sex sexuality. Violations of amatonormativity would include dining alone by choice, putting friendship above romance, bringing a friend to a formal event or attending alone, cohabiting with friends, or not searching for romance.

As Brake gestures here, amatonormativity doesn’t only negatively impact aromantics. It’s a monolith rarely regarded despite its overwhelming height and

despite the fact that it casts a shadow over an impossible number of people. How many people could read its definition and not think of one—if not many—moments in which it has haunted them?

Aro activist and community efforts to discuss issues like amatonormativity, then, are evidently important on a global scale. A majority of (if not all) aromantic composers and compositions wind up shaped by its presence(s). In an amatonormative world, the term “aromantic” becomes *both necessary and impossible*. On one hand, it’s an immensely helpful term that some people *need* to take on in order to ground themselves in their own experiences of that world. On the other hand, aromanticism is made difficult to even articulate by amatonormativity’s omnipresence: it’s hard to imagine life without it, a necessary first step to moving on to actually pursue such a life. Rhetors and composers, mostly aromantic themselves, have begun this work, referencing and defining and expressing aromanticism in poetry, fiction, YouTube videos, zines, visual art, and podcasts, among other genres. It’s imperative that we—and here I mean the rhet/comp community—not only encourage and support aromantic creators but also start to rethink the manners in which we speak of and think on rhetoric and composition. What might regularly acknowledging the existence of both aromanticism and amatonormativity change about how we write about love, view others, read texts, or look on our own kinships with other beings, human or nonhuman?

## QUEERTEXT

Introducing their 2016 edited collection *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Identities, Publics*, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes speak of “the saturation of public discourses with sexual appeals”: because the rhetorical is “always already sexualized... imbued with the persuasive forces of bodies, intimacies, affects, erotics, and varied partnerings,” rhetors are advised that “any understanding of rhetorical action is necessarily hampered, if not indeed damaged, without robust attention to the sexual” (“Introduction” 12). I always pounce on lines like these, focused on the sexual as they ostensibly are. Am I, an asexual rhetor, spoken for here? I could be, I think: “sexual” here could include both the sexual and the asexual, anything to do with either. Asexual bodies, intimacies, affects, erotics, and partnerings certainly exist, whether or not Alexander and Rhodes recognize them, as do aromantic bodies, intimacies, affects, erotics, partnerings, and so on. Still, in not overtly noting such possibilities, *Sexual Rhetorics* doesn’t only miss out on an entirely new level from which it could work—it also might unintentionally reiterate for readers the non existence of asexuality, or the assumption that all people are allosexual (not asexual). The ace community (among others) uses the term “allonormativity” to describe that frequently unquestioned paradigm.

How much differently would a collection of work on (a)sexual or a/sexual rhetorics function? It seems sensible that, if we owe robust attention to the sexual, whatever that entitles, we owe the same to the asexual, which floats, unseen, through all these lines. In a similar manner, studies in both rhetoric



and composition might benefit from a healthy dollop of aromanticism. Conversely, rhet/comp studies likely has much to offer the aromantic community as it continues to come into its own—the process of drafting poems like the one I share in my introduction, for instance, has helped me make new sense of my aromantic body and its workings. In this chapter, I'll focus on the composition half of rhet/comp, determining the extent to which I might aromanticize it. Maybe, it occurs to me, Kenneth Burke's parlor of discourse is more of a potluck, on occasion. For my part, I've brought a side of aromanticism, one I hope will complement the main courses and appetizers nicely.

## 5

If I don't find my way into the rhet/comp club via the sexual, I do so via the queer, which, in comparison, mixes surprisingly well with the aromanticism I bring to it. If queerness were less queer, I could number it, maybe, then note how high aromanticism fell on its scale. That'd be a bit hipster of me—claiming aromanticism is queerer than other experiences—but I'll argue, at least, that aromanticism *is* queer. And the way that queerness is described by scholars of composition studies especially rings with aromantic potential for me. Rhodes and Alexander write, for instance, that “[q]ueerness pushes hard at composition. It insists that we look at what is not composed—but more importantly, it insists that we heed what refuses to be composed” (“Queer” 183). Theirs is a sentiment that my own experiences quite instantly affirm: before I found terms like “aromantic” and “asexual” to describe myself, I spent most of high school trying to figure out

what words or images *could* perform that function for me (and so I spent an hour a day in the bathtub wondering if I was more gay, bi, lesbian, trans, or utter mess). Even having those terms now to affirm my own reality (and connect me to other aros and aces), trying to explain what those words mean to people who don't use them is at best a fun intellectual puzzle and at worst a source of much frustration for me. Sara Ahmed describes a similar kind of loss of direction in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*:

We can[...] lose our direction in the sense that we lose our aim or purpose: disorientation is a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are. Such losses can be converted into the joy of a future that has been opened up. "Life itself" is often imagined in terms of "having a direction," which decides from the present what the future should be. After all, to acquire a direction takes time, even if it feels as if we have always followed one line or another, or as if we "began" and "ended" in the same place. Indeed, it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we are. The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the "toward" marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present. (20)

Aros and aces, I think, might be susceptible to this loss of direction in a more direct manner than others: if others' orientations direct them towards others via feelings like attraction, we can't say as much. Scholars and laypeople both have questioned whether or not aromanticism and asexuality can be called

sexual or romantic orientations if they're technically "not oriented," a phrase that might be drawn out to mean not romantically or sexually oriented towards other human beings. (Lori Brotto and Morag Yule's 2017 paper "Asexuality: Sexual Orientation, Paraphilia, Sexual Dysfunction, or None of the Above?" looks into the question at length.)



I've tried diagramming my aromantic maybe-orientation, drawing arrows to posit where they might point (fig. 2). Maybe an arrow shoots out from my chest only to boomerang back to its original source. Maybe I'm already taken, in a romantic relationship with myself. Is my self-love, if I have it, a self-romance? Or are we better off calling ourselves friends? My drawings are a little ridiculous, but they're meant to be: they make fun of experiences that aren't always so amusing for me. If I can't define aromanticism, I can meme the word to the point of meaninglessness, throwing it around without explanation when I assert that such-and-such an actor has "aromantic vibes" or that Nikola Tesla building an earthquake machine was "aromantic culture." Such assertions aren't, of course, meaningless in the end: I could probably write a few pages about my experiences reading biographies of Tesla after seeing his name pop up on more than one online forum about historical figures that could potentially be called aromantic or asexual. Maybe I could bring in gender a bit, delve into my desire to have or exhibit the gender "mad scientist." (I suppose I've gotten close by now, if "scientist" is a term that could apply to my grad student scholarship or lifestyle.)

It's a mess, is the long and short of it—trying to compose my

aromanticism so that I might compose *about* it. It's a mess I'll continue to explore, anyway, in the next chapter, when I offer a few etudes and exercises that perform (or could perform) similar work. I'll probably be exploring it for the rest of my life.

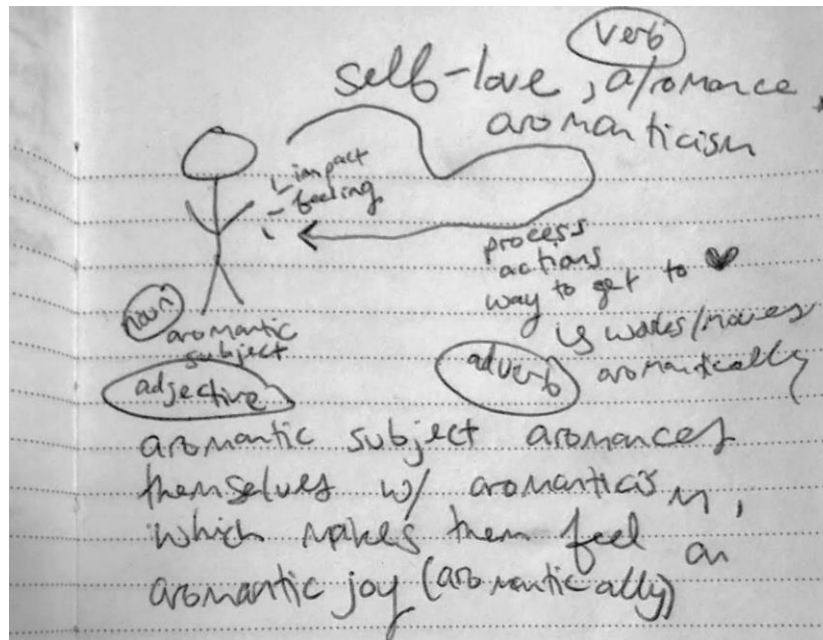


Fig. 2. The aromantic stick individual aromances themselves with aromanticism, which (aromantically) gives them an aromantic kind of pleasure. Drawing by the author.



Several scholars writing on queer composing have noted how paradoxical both their writing and the queer composing to which it refers can be. Rhodes and Alexander posit that “if queerness is the excess of sexual identities, the part that exceeds easy and knowable encapsulation in identity, then it is also the excess of composition, of stories, narratives, arguments, and texts that are easily, knowingly ‘composed’” (“Queer” 183). The act of composing a text requires us to

compose ourselves in a different sense of the word—sitting up straight, speaking more clearly—or we imagine it does so, at any rate. We're drawn to compose, regardless: if queerness is impossible, as Alexander and Rhodes claim, it still pushes, attempting, insistent we continue to work with it. Stacey Waite acknowledges as much in "How (and Why) to Write Queer: A Failing, Impossible, Contradictory Instruction Manual for Scholars of Writing Studies," at once offering readers "a kind of instruction manual, a list of demands, questions, and narratives that suggest some possibilities for writing queer" and noting that such a manual "is also a failure before it begins" (43). "There is no queer writing," Waite concedes, but this is "because writing itself is institutional—our language and its regulations always already constituted by dominant narratives and disciplinary conventions. [But] this does not mean we cannot *write queer(er)*. This does not mean we cannot relish the failure of doing so" (43, emphasis in original). According to Waite, we might even regard failure as "a queer methodology itself" (43).

And so we look elsewhere to compose ourselves, "deliberately courting paradox" in that, as we create, we fantasize about refusing to compose ourselves, embracing the "pre-" in *Pretty Woman* (Rhodes). The un-composed results of such efforts are often multimodal or otherwise queer in form: the Waite text I quote above, for instance, queers its status of academic book chapter in that it's written in the form of a list. "How (and Why) to Write Queer: A Failing, Impossible, Contradictory Instruction Manual for Scholars of Writing Studies" lives up to its name: "I'd tell you what to do if I could," Waite writes at

one point, “but I don’t have any queer authority” (49). With such witticisms, Waite gestures to the paradox of “How (and Why)”’s ostensible aim to instruct its audience on writing queer. “How (and Why)” is a peer-reviewed text that most composers wouldn’t have the avenues to publish, one inspired by queer scholarship most easily accessed (or even shared in the first place) via institutions of higher education. It’s a text, in other words, that a majority of queer people will not only not read but, more significantly, not know to search for. Its status of academic book chapter dictates that it educate its audience on some small, well researched topic in which its composer holds a great deal of expertise, but that composer>audience hierarchy is also a decidedly ill-fitting framework with which to build a work of queer theory, against binaries and hierarchies as such theory often is, or tries—or claims—to be. Waite represents this frustrating truth by at least attempting to push away from a culture of knowledge based on hierarchies: “[c]ertainty is only queer,” the second bullet point of Waite’s list tells us, “when you are certain your knowledge is partial, failed, and fragmented” (49). The seventh suggests its audience “[i]magine [their] writing outside the bounds of binary understandings: critical and creative, academic and personal, theoretical and practical. All of these all at once, or none of these all at once, which is a binary so nevermind” (53).



Waite goes on proves a frustrating rhetor in another manner as I attempt to do a quick Google search for the pronouns Waite uses: every bio I’ve found, including a multi-paragraphed description on [staceywaite.com](http://staceywaite.com), eludes “they”s

and “she”s and “xie”s in favor of repeating Waite’s last name to a point that might irk the ears of some readers. I’ve written and rewritten some lines in this paragraph in attempts to stay true to this usage while not sounding too repetitive. It’s a good example, I think, of gender trouble, clumsy as it renders me. It’s a clumsiness that inspires me to both compose my thesis and—maybe one of these days—reject using pronouns altogether for myself, something I’ve considered in the past but dismissed: I’ve preemptively given up on the possibility that others might refer to me as such without painful levels of awkwardness for both speaker and referent.



“Maybe in graduate school, someone told me a dissertation had to have a lit review. And so I quoted a bunch of books but didn’t ‘review’ anything” (Waite 50).

## 6

While Waite advocates for “writing queer,” others look elsewhere for methods by which they might compose what feels impossible to compose. Hillery Glasby, for instance, looks to multimodal composition, or manners of composing that utilize multiple modes of communication. In “Making It Queer, Not Clear: Embracing Ambivalence and Failure as Queer Methodologies,” she tells us:

As a queer rhetor, I often feel as though my identity is limited on the academic page. When I compose zines and multimodal/digital texts, and invoke narrative and queer rhetorics, I come through in the text in

ways I cannot on standard, MLA-formatted 8.5 x 11 sheets of paper (whether tangible or digital). My thoughts—and the meaning I make—are often contained by these parameters. (24)

Her thoughts here remind me of the composition students I teach: some prefer to generate ideas for projects via word documents while others are excited to be able to submit audio or video files for some assignments, to express the things they want to communicate via voices and hand gestures. I suppose this very project speaks of my own tendency towards the composition methodology Glasby describes here: I couldn't outline or finish this text until I'd formatted it as something like a zine or chapbook. Once I'd made those changes in font and text size and so on, I could finally see the end (an immense relief to feel mid-April, weeks from the end of my last semester as a master's student).



Maybe chapbook theses are queertexts.



33. The Word cannot laugh.

Queertexts laugh all the time. (Rhodes 389)



Jacqueline Rhodes introduced the term “queertext” in 2004 in an article published in *Computers and Composition*. (It's the source of the quote just above this paragraph, in fact.) Rhodes' “Homo Origo: The Queertext Manifesto” is indeed a manifesto; like Waite's “How (and Why) to Write Queer,” it takes the form of a list. In fifty-six bullet points, Rhodes describes the ongoing relationship



between queertext and what she refers to as the Word. Of the latter, she tells us:

14. In the Beginning was the Word.

15. The Word predates text, and its dominance informs the structural possibilities of text. The Word is the first, most basic form of textual domination.

16. The Word extends its discipline through not only English onlyism, but also academicism, heterosexism, racism, capitalism, colonialism, sexism, classism, and so on.

17. Words dominate our texts; a few Words dominate other words.

They enact this dominance through grammar. (Rhodes 388)

“We have used Words,” Rhodes argues, “to keep the possibility of queertext at bay; we use Words to keep queertext in an inferior position,” and the Word benefits from that positioning (389). In response, we compose queertexts, a term Rhodes pointedly doesn’t divide into pieces, writing, We do not accept the adjectival marginalization, the separation of those two words which are one” (388). Like Waite’s chapter on writing queer, Rhodes’ paper offers suggestions on how some writing might be produced (although both are a bit vague as far as concrete tips on getting started go). Among these is the following sequence of bullet points centered around the body’s role in composition:

26. We regard our bodily experience with language, and our feelings about that experience, as another component of language, albeit an often unspoken part.

27. The Word cannot speak the body; queertext, however, can.

28. The Word does not use the language of queertexts, although it can mimic queertext's voice.

29. We must ever struggle with the built-in restrictions of Word based, body-negating language. We must base our queering of language on the material, erotic realities of our bodies. (Rhodes 389)

While I'm very much for thinking of composition as an immensely embodied process—I've drafted a fair number of pages on bitten-down fingernails, masturbation, and ADHD that didn't make this project's current draft, if that says anything—I do struggle to imagine how I might follow Rhodes' lead as an aromantic. Is my body aromantic? Which parts? If I flinch when a boy puts their hand on my back as we're crossing the street, is that the kind of embodied aromanticism from which queertext might be born? I mention how unprovable my aromanticism can feel in the previous chapter—do I feel that way because my aromanticism doesn't feel as embodied, as physical as my asexuality? I doubt my transness in a similar manner, I suppose: I watched a nonbinary friend nearly throw up, once, during a bout of gender dysphoria, a symptom I can't say my own dysphoria has ever given me. Instead, I change clothes several times a day, usually starting with bottoms: I ask myself if today is a day for shorts, a skirt, a dress, pants, then work from there. Sometimes nothing feels satisfying, and I wander around my apartment in my underwear until the feeling subsides. Perhaps I'm thinking too literally here—perhaps embodiment isn't only in the limbs, chest, lungs. Or maybe embodiment isn't always about what a person feels: my whole schtick in this project and in others, after all, is arguing for the

importance of what might be thought of as *not feeling*. My lack of romantic attraction towards others is somewhere between the two, I think. It's feelings about feelings I don't experience, or it's the feeling of not feeling something. Somehow, it's here, whether I can describe it and its significance to me or not.

Waite tells us: “[s]how up in your writing as a body, an embodied force in the text, all the while keeping your reader aware that even the body is a contradiction: both an idea constructed and a real material thing that impacts the world” (44).



I led a small aro caucus earlier this week over Zoom—there were just four of us, but we'd all come to meet other aro people. We wondered at one point how many of us were out in the world—I was joking when I commented, “There are at least four,” but that line comes back to me now. Is it more difficult to feel embodied as an aromantic if one only meets other aros online, over video chat, through text? For all we actually felt in that moment, perhaps there really just four of us.



If all else fails: Rhodes reminds us at the close of her manifesto that “[q]ueertext happens [...] Queertext is never singular, never democratic, never collective, never solo” (390). It's not something solid, a book of poems I might intentionally compose and then publish, completed: the way Rhodes describes it, queertext sounds like a broader goal or ideal I might attempt to emulate when

composing rather than a genre of text I might definitively create on my own. It's not a poem or a novel so much as... maybe a concept?

I close this chapter with a few fragments from its earlier drafts, which approach the scholarship I reference above less coherently. Is that queertext?

## 7

This chapter is a fragmented thing, perhaps an example of the kind of queer composing of which it speaks. It works, and it doesn't: it's more craft essay, I think, than literature review. Do I change it up in the next draft to better suit its genre norms? Would that be more academic, involve more or higher quality engagement with others' work? Or do I run with it once I've graduated or not graduated, try to publish it as a chapbook or abnormally collegiate-looking zine?

Regardless: I can't hand my committee or my institution a half dozen words scrawled down on a napkin and expect to receive a master's degree in return (although both are, funnily enough, single sheets of paper). And I would like that piece of paper: in a little more than five years, it along with some dissertation project or another will allow me to transcend the gendered monikers "Ms." and "Mr." and "Mx." My graduation ceremony will be gender-affirmation, role-reassignment surgery. FTX, or FTMTX, or FTMTFTMTXTMTXTFTM. FTD? ("DTF, but backwards" certainly describes me.)

In which case: maybe this text is top surgery. In which case, I suppose, I

am both patient and surgeon, operating on myself. I'm sure there's an episode of *Grey's Anatomy* where that happens.



It's odd to write a queer thesis, queer anything at all. I don't think a more organized, template-born project would feel queer to me as I composed or revised it. Now that I consider it—I don't think I could finish a longer text that didn't feel queer to me in some way. It's been a few years since I last wrote an academic paper that didn't play around with form/ating somehow. In the ones where I stuck closest to genre expectations, I included images: a collage, a meme, a diagram of Yeats's gyre, and a map locating ocean gyres among them—maybe some subconscious effort to keep myself stimulated? (Maybe they're born with it.) (Maybe it's ADHD.)

I haven't just allowed myself to loiter in these paragraphs, anyway, for fun: I'm pretty sure they're at least beginning to tap the point of the literature review whose form I meant this section to take on. Let's call them an experiment. And if it helps, the scholarly texts that most inspire this project—the ones I mean, or meant, anyway, to review here—are littered with potential permission slips for such loitering.



Weeks after I've composed the above pittance of paragraphs, it's April. The redbuds have bloomed—more magenta than red, I was thinking today—and I've spent five of the hours in which I procrastinated writing this section listening to a self-help book lengthily titled *Get Your Sh\*t Together: How to Stop Worrying*

*About What You Should Do So You Can Finish What You Need to Do and Start Doing What You Want to Do (A No F\*cks Given Guide)*. When I tell a colleague that I've been procrastinating, she suggests I tell my committee I'm simply composing in a nonlinear language: it's everyone else's fault if they can't read a text I haven't yet typed. *Maybe, I think, this is queer composition—doing anything but what I should be doing*. Or maybe “should” isn't the invitation for play I'm tempted to take it as.



I keep asking questions as if they're adding up into something more definitive. I'm not sure that they are. Maybe that's the brave, queer, foolish part. Maybe this project's potential to turn out like utter crap is one of its merits. It tries to boldly go, but maybe it won't. When is uncertainty good?

Am I not supposed to enjoy writing in this way—in one big rush, in incorrect formatting, with memes that leave me laughing as I draft? Or are projects like this like sex? I'm told that it's supposed to hurt, but queer compositionists whisper at me from their secret moon-bases, reminding me that there are more ways to have sex than one. I'm averse to both penis-in-vagina sex and writing literature reviews. If a done thesis is a good thesis, can I write whatever, compose the equivalent of self-bondage or solo sex and call it good? (Sex norms almost sound easier to deal with than academic ones here: I find no difficulty accepting that I'd much rather do the former by myself. If others hierarchize partnered sex above its alternatives, I evade that trap only to fall into it here, writing. Theses, if nothing else, can be good or bad, passed or

failed. I think I'm aiming for all of those things, whether such an outcome is possible or not.)

I'm enjoying writing this playful, quasi-poetic and potentially-bullshit second or third chapter. It might even be enjoyable to read. But is this the easy way out, for me or for anyone who reads this text? Where's my literature review? Is this text a true thesis, or is it a "creative project"? Is one less rigorous? Does that matter?

This very meta breakdown is either a tangent or this chapter's central point.

Is that queertext?

## ETUDES

This final chapter is somewhat of an appendix, made up of both exercises and example texts—ideas for how you and I both might compose on aromanticism, or compose with amatonormativity’s influence in mind (not to mention the existence of the aro community itself). I’ve mixed instructions and suggestions with “compositions” in somewhat random order—I like the idea of presenting them as a mixed bag. It feels right, somehow.

If you try an exercise out, do share it with me, if you’d like! (Yes, I’m writing this as though more than five people will ever read this.) (You can Google my name to find my website and contact me there, or follow me on Twitter, where I go by @5tephendeadalu5.) (LOL.)

The last one, I think, is my favorite.



“Certainly, some will argue that it is perhaps impossible to construct writing assignments based on what is impossible to know—on incommensurability, or unknowability. We maintain, however, that unknowability is the proper subject of writing itself.

(Alexander and Rhodes; “Flattening Effects” 451)

### **8 (“Quickly Typing...”)<sup>6</sup>**

Quickly typing in the half hour before I have to teach. Aromanticism is listening to my favorite music without worrying about the other person not liking

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<sup>6</sup> One of many attempts I’ve made at defining aromanticism in the last year—this one, typed on February 1, 2021. A Monday, 8:30am.



it.

Relative freedom from romantic abuse. It's being incomprehensible to my family. Being able to at once be summed up with lines like "he doesn't date" or "he's not interested in dating," but those aren't quite it, because I have dated people, although it wasn't really my thing. Maybe "he doesn't enjoy dating." He doesn't enjoy the date-like attributes of dating. He doesn't desire the date-like attributes of dating. Curious but eh.

He's a player, but only in theory. In reality, he's dated two people, or three, or one and a half, or one and two halves. He's asked out three people. He's trans and wears dresses anyway. He's an intellectual; he's too busy studying. He's too in love with his work. He's married to his work, to science. See: Newt Geiszler, Nikola Tesla, Isaac Newton, Alan Turing. Although Turing was what we'd now call gay, and maybe the others are/were, too.

He's the villain to someone else's protagonist, so he doesn't love anyone romantically. It fits his archetype. Why didn't Voldemort ever date? They said he was too evil, I think, to care about anyone. He didn't even sleep with anyone, though. Not that he has to. But maybe he's aromantic and/or asexual, in addition to a wizard fascist or whatever.

In his case, he's two-dimensional. Paradoxically, I'm aromantic and asexual and three-dimensional; it's difficult to explain. Maybe I'd make sense in the corner of the viewer's eye, as a protagonist's colleague, classmate, best friend, aunt, mortal enemy. Or I'd make sense temporarily, on film: everyone doesn't act obviously allo/romantic all the time, so some films can skip it over. TV

shows usually don't; in time, everyone gets there. How long would my memoir have to be before my readers asked why I wasn't into romance? Would they not even realize? Would they, unthinkingly, assume me nonsexual by way of androgyny or ADHD or (potential) erudition? Would their minds just skip over the thought? Would it not even occur to them? And, if so, is that because I read as really quite normal, or because I'm a glitch that they haven't discovered yet, a small bug they don't mind?

Aromanticism is a feature, not a bug. Sometimes it feels like a bug, for aromantic people and for those who date them. Aromanticism is the newest update on the new iPhone, less sappy, more digital. Its yearbook quote: "facts don't care about your feelings." It's logical, sensible, Vulcan. Unless combined with ADHD. Then, it gets more artistic

### **9 (For Filmmakers)**

Write an (a)romantic comedy.

### **10 (Aromanticism-as-method)**

In the afterword to an issue of *Psychology & Sexuality* published in 2013, Ela Przybylo proposes three descriptors of existing asexuality research: it's largely asexual-positive (in contrast with "a broader socio-cultural context that tends towards disbelieving, discrediting and undermining asexuality"); it aims to depathologize asexuality; and it pushes forward a broader, more diverse perspective on sexuality, referred to in Przybylo's afterword as "(a)sexual diversification" (193-194). Przybylo also offers a list of potential characteristics of a more multidisciplinary "asexuality-as-method," which:

(1) questions dominant norms of relating, loving, kinship and intimacy, (2) diversifies sexual options, experiences and lifestyles, (3) challenges, in some capacity, schemes of the medicalisation and pathologisation of sexual lack, (4) exposes the constraining force of the sexual imperative and sex liberation rhetoric and crucially (5) insists on the legitimacy, viability, positivity and possibility of absence or low levels of sexual attraction, desire, arousal or pleasure. (“Afterword” 194)

Could “aromantic” and “aromanticism” be subbed in for “asexual” and “asexuality” here? How might aromanticism-as-method be used in academic and/or creative compositions, in the arts or the sciences?

Spend a day, if you’d like, with aromanticism-as-method. Write those words on your arm in permanent marker. What things might you aromanticize on any given day?

### **11 (“Where Can I Find a Romanticism?”)<sup>7</sup>**

A composition while I eat lunch today on a busy day. I wonder if all type or handwrite any of them or do something other than writing for these like I'm not limited to voice typing I guess if mostly just stressed Etc so this is like the easy version my toilet and need to fix that leak because the sound still happening for like 5 days a week now and that's okay okay anyway eating lunch. did he come from stereo. A busy conference day. a Romanticism is what is a romanticism where can I find one where can I find a romanticism do I have a romanticism

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<sup>7</sup> Another definition attempt, this one composed via Google Docs’ voice typing feature on January 28th, 2021—so the spelling’s a bit wild, in part because few speech-to-text programs recognize the words “aromantic” and “aromanticism.”

where can I find someone who has a romanticism can anyone have a

<sup>7</sup> Another definition attempt, this one composed via Google Docs' voice typing feature on January 28th, 2021—so the spelling's a bit wild, in part because few speech-to-text programs recognize the words "aromantic" and "aromanticism." romanticism? and Romanticism is wordplay. a romanticism is groups of activists and organizers crying for years trying for years to get big conferences like forgetting Shane you let them do an all-day aromantic asexual Institute oh it's called creating change for I'm now calling it forgetting Shane. Anyway I had to Quick post that typo Discord. A paragraph

A Romanticism is a thought exercise for me this week anyway. Describe it to the senses maybe I can describe it through the senses. There's smell What does a romantic smell like? it's hard not to fall on stereotypes roses are the opposite of roses what is the opposite of roses and chocolates? But that's not necessarily the smell of you romanticism do I think sometimes I've been by myself and happy and aromantic or times when I've been with other people and felt very romantic in comparison? Close my eyes like this if I do that aromanticism is the smile of a home that you're used to. It's also the smell of being in a new home that's unfamiliar and not being entirely comfortable with a net and then coming home afterwards and not smelling anything because you're used to it. It's how many it's your own smell. it's on me. Homie sure. I have bad allergies or decent allergies anyway so I don't smell my home in the mall so used to my apartment but what would it smell like the other people? At? Incense occasionally cat litter box captain cat food nail polish occasionally sinor

occasionally Opa Romanticism is just like another color of water the smell of everything you're used to I don't know is for me anyway.

is there a way to talk about it without using metaphor? They talked literally about it? That's a good question actually you can kind of talk more literally about asexuality and just say I don't experience sexual attraction you can say I don't experience romantic attraction but often romantic attraction is described with metaphors rather than more literally which kind of comes back to the biological question whether or not there's a literal or a bodily feeling to it that all aromantics experience which I would say no I mean that's not true really with anyone not with a sexuality. We're kind of bound up in discourse here

Is it possible though to take a Romanticism outside of language and two scores discourse? I mean the term even exist I mean it wouldn't I suppose without so many other terms and I mean maybe the same is true of a lot of words or terms even identities I mean we wouldn't have nationalities Without Borders not that we should have them. I suppose it's as real or as found up in discourse as sexual or romantic identity. Are we stuck there though? maybe other people see us like that and that's why we aren't super popular or recognized? Because we are seeing as theoretical rather than practical. aromantic is a theory and a practice I don't entirely know what Praxis means but if it is both then aromantic is Praxis I'm living it out right now anyway so I am one big a romantic experiment and I am enacting aromantic Praxis.

## **12 (Make a List of Aromantic Stereotypes)**

Is it a long list or a short list?

Why?

### 13 (CTRL+F)

Pull lines that reference aromanticism, love, relationships, and other related topics from texts you've composed in the past (or pull up photos of visual art you've done, and so on). To do this, you might search through your computer or Google Drive for specific terms (or use the search function CTRL+F to browse a single file or webpage).

A few terms and phrases you might try out: aromantic; romantic; romance; love; platonic; sensual; heart; date; kiss; (not) interested; (a)sexual; orientation; gay; lesbian; queer; straight; marry; affair; lover; partner; court; flirt; woo; loveless; destined; unromantic; intimate; close; significant other; loved one; attraction; attracted; infatuated; relationship; passionless; unfeeling; heartless; unresponsive; icy; frigid; non-/not romantic; player; lonely; alone; single; bachelor; commitment; cold-hearted; cold; robotic; love is... ; red-blooded/warm blooded; in love; soul mates; hopeless romantic; true love; passionate; love story.

Once you've got something, make something out of what you've found— perhaps a remix, an observation, a collection, or a chart illustrating your data. How many times does “love” pop up in your search results? What adjectives do you use to describe it? What happens when you replace “romantic” with “aromantic” or “platonic” or “Shakespearean”? Put together into a found poem, what do the lines you've gathered say about attraction and lack of attraction? What assumptions do they make? What kinds of words come up

alongside the terms you search for?

As an example—a few lines from a play I wrote last year:

JULIUS

You didn't do anything. I didn't realize you two were... coupled.

AUBREY

I'm in love with him. He ties me up sometimes.

JULIUS

Right.

Here's an edited version of those lines—I wanted to see what kind of story I could make by replacing a few words and phrases with their opposites:

JULIUS

This was your fault. I didn't realize you two weren't... coupled.

AUBREY

I despise him. He cuts me loose from bondage on occasion.

JULIUS

Right.

#### **14 (Q and A: A Monologue)**

(The monologue is spoken by a narrator who is both researcher and subject. They speak flatly, reading aloud observations and stereotypes from a screen without discrimination between the two. They might feel alien or robotic in aesthetic or tone—god knows why.)

NARRATOR

This composition is an aromantic scrapbook. It seeks to answer the question "What is aromanticism?" It is an A that follows a Q. Queer is the question. It's possible that aromanticism is the answer, but we aren't sure yet—we're still running tests. They keep coming up inconclusive. Our computers can't recognize the data. It's like trying to hardwire a brain into a CPU, or vice versa. Alien technology. Queer is an impossible subject. We're trying, regardless, to describe it. The following is a collection of fragments translated from the original Aromantic. They seek to answer the question "What is aromanticism?", and they do not succeed.

(Transition—maybe the sound of a triangle.)

NARRATOR

Exhibit A: a temporary exhibit we're hosting until August, when it moves somewhere else—maybe the Metropolitan.

(Fig. 1 is projected behind the NARRATOR, or shown on a screen.)



Fig. 3. fig. 1. Drawing by the author.

NARRATOR

This piece is 300 square feet in size. When displayed, it is hung up on the floor and then pressed flat by a layer of glass. Viewers walk into the room housing the exhibit, then come to the realization that they are standing on it. Instructional plates on the wall invite them to stand inside one of its circles and consider their relationships with the shapes and lines around them. The middle circle represents the titular aromantic, according to the artist. Viewers are invited to agree or disagree with the piece by tweeting at the artist, whose Twitter handle is offered in lieu of the name on their birth certificate.

(Transition.)

NARRATOR

Another fragment draws attention to the fact that “aro” is one letter different from “art.”

What's the difference between “aromantic” (one word) and “a romantic” (two words) and “aromatic” (something sweet)? Aromanticism is a word we can't pronounce. The aromantic insists, “I am whole; I am natural; I am ubiquitous.” They occasionally feel like an android. This, of course, is impossible, as androids



do not feel. The aromantic, paradoxically, feels that they do not feel. Androids, on the other hand, feel that they do. I would say I felt like a machine, but a machine, by definition, works.

That's what one of our subjects said, anyway.

(Transition.)

#### NARRATOR

Asked how they might describe the term in question to a friend or coworker, one of our subjects argued that aromanticism was a visual phenomenon that could only be viewed out of the corner of one's eye. Representations of aromanticism in popular media include distant friends, colleagues, aunts, serial killers, geniuses, and young men. If allowed to remain out of focus, these figures remain aromantic. If not, their aromanticism disappears, and romanticism takes its place. With enough time, all television characters undergo this transformation. This is *la vie en rose*.

(Transition.)

#### NARRATOR

Aromanticism might also be described by simply talking around the subject at length, drawing closer with each pass in a kind of inwards spiral. Unfortunately, this spiral is circular, so it's very possible that, until we can calculate pi in its entirety, we cannot reach its center. Still, there is, arguably, a joy to the attempt, even in its futility.

(Transition.)

#### NARRATOR

We have a few transcripts of Zoom calls with self-identified aromantics, but our computer's speech-to-text recognition is only 65% accurate, so these transcripts are riddled with misspellings and wrong words. They insert punctuation haphazardly at best. One sentence, for instance, reads as follows:

I'm just really loving living alone Certainly not all a romantic people like living alone or being alone or are introverts want to be single so I can't really be a definition for a romanticism but I don't know maybe that's what it is for me maybe it was the log is this project is is a series of domestic objects objects around for my home in the bedroom that are a romantic for me and I just explain why and maybe if I share enough we're not sure why notebooks or nightstands no someone else could be able to build a room it's interesting idea I'm just thinking about it in terms of objects like at all so I suppose think about it in terms of body I can look at specific body parts I can think about specific physical reactions and feelings specific lines dialogue things I've written interaction with responses to romcoms to try to make all of this more concrete I guess I will just keep going so it works

they were masks and it's fine I'm asleep listening to the beautiful voice voices speaking my favorite podcasts and then dreaming that we speak and they think my jokes are funny and they hugged me and it's almost romantic but the best part about it is but it's one-sided and it's really just south Florida.

The last two words should read "self-love" (and not "south Florida").

(Transition.)

#### NARRATOR

Before we conclude—for a moment—it's also worth noting that, if we ever found the right words to describe aromanticism in all of its self-contradiction, we wouldn't necessarily know it. It's quite possible that we've already found them. To paraphrase Plato's Republic: it's a strange image we speak of, and strange prisoners. When we do (speak), angels sing from above, and everyday words seem to turn into—not love songs, but something else. Something we might call "wordless."

(Transition.)

#### NARRATOR

(Quoting)

"I thought that love was just a word they sang about in songs I heard. It took your kisses to reveal that I was wrong, and love is real."

(Citing)

Édith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose," translated into English.

(Conclude, despite the impossibility of doing so—maybe, for fun, with a few more rings of the triangle.)

#### END OF PLAY

### 15 (As Desiring)

I forget that I find you something—  
will, some days, categorize to the bone your clothes  
and see the silhouette of your hair  
and how I would draw it  
However today I was forgetting  
and only writing the good things you said  
You had me laughing extended and  
I was taken by nothing romantic at all

### 16 (I Send My Father a Link to an Article on Aromanticism in a

## Botched Attempt to “Come Out,” as the Kids Say)



Fig. 4. Untitled screenshot taken by the author.

### 17 (Voice Typing, Jan. 25)

aromanticism is like how my dad thinks it's great that I am bisexual or a lesbian because I can find someone and be happy and even if I'm asexual I can still find someone and be happy maybe someone who is also a sexual and aromanticism is the point at which he stops understanding the point at which I don't necessarily Focus my life on the teleology or partnership or whatever the word is where there are more than two people. On one hand it seems kind of

AZ easy I'm just not interested. I'm also not interested really in that many Sports at all or being a Republican or hunting or wearing the clothes I don't like to wear I can't think of any at the moment I'm not really interested in learning every language or listening to clarinet music specifically or reading about the Civil War I mean there's a lot of stuff and infinite number so on one hand and I'm also just tired right now it's ambivalence aromanticism is ambivalence and pleasure and contentment and dysphoria and euphoria and a mode of being or a state of being like peace as opposed to war Maybe and it's an identity and a marker and a way of thinking that can piss off girlfriends who want you to tell them that you love them, that doesn't feel like the thing they're looking for. Its unease and discomfort and free and not and I'm going to come back to this later but I can't make them I can sing anything else imagine seeing anything else anything else staying anything else and I've come to some thoughts that I haven't come to before in the past our how about you find it or have I expressed it? I don't think so I think maybe I need more examples maybe that's what I'll do next time or I'll try something different every time I guess I'm just going to keep hacking at it until eventually the tree falls down or I give up or I can realize that it isn't the tree or that I'm not holding an axe or that I don't need to cut a tree down or that I can't touch the tree because I'm on a different plane I'm a ghost and I just move through the tree. I'll keep carving at it, peeling its skin like I would carrots or potatoes trying to chop it into slices like an apple trying to make it into applesauce or pie or some other form or this is a terrible metaphor and it's not saying anything at all

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