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Intimacy and Desire Through the Lens of an Aro-Ace Woman of Color

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Intimacy and Desire Through the Lens of an Aro-Ace Woman of Color

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Program of Gender and Sexuality Studies
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Christina Lang

Lewiston, Maine
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Abstract

Centering asexuality and aromanticism challenges romantic and sexual norms related to intimacy and desire. In my thesis, I use an autoethnographic approach to examine how my understandings of intimacy and desire shifted when I realized I was aromantic and asexual, or aro-ace for short. Drawing from written conversations, journal entries, and memories, I unravel the effects of amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality as normative structures that shaped my perceptions of intimacy and desire. I consider the ways romantic and sexual norms interact with the institutional power of schools, media, and marriage. I also explore the ways asexual and aromantic, feminist, queer, and anarchist communities challenge and resist these norms. I demonstrate the usefulness of asexuality and aromanticism as analytical lenses. I also argue that asexual and aromantic perspectives reveal the extensive, often oppressive, influences of normative structures and institutions on interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

Every time I realize a new identity, I get this feeling of possibility. It feels inevitable, but it also makes me unsure and anxious. I grieve for both the futures that I expected that will never come to pass, and the decades I spent blaming myself for not being the person I thought I had to be. Possibilities. I felt this for the first time two and a half years ago, when I realized I was on the asexual spectrum.

I read an article about demisexuality that day. The author described her experience of demisexuality, and it felt familiar. To a certain extent, her story validated my experiences of disinterest in sex and uncomfortableness with romantic relationships. I knew that demisexuality didn't quite describe my experiences, but it was close; I began researching the asexual spectrum. I scoured forums on the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), as well as Tumblr advice blogs, trying to find someone whose experience matched mine.

When Julie, my roommate, came home, I had maybe twenty websites open in different tabs on my laptop. As we exchanged ritual pleasantries about our days, I felt sneaky. I was sitting on life-changing information, the kind of information you tell someone about, the kind of information you have to say out loud. I remember waiting for the right moment, waiting for some opening in our conversation that would signal to me that it was time to say all of this. I ended up just blurting it out before I lost my nerve. *I read this article on demisexuality, and it made a lot of sense to me. Pause. Like I think I might be on the asexual spectrum.* I could only take shallow breaths, and I had to keep pausing as I spoke in order to get more oxygen into my lungs. I remember the way I locked my eyes onto my laptop screen because the knot of anxiety beneath my sternum kept me from being brave enough to watch Julie's reaction. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to hear. I don't remember how she responded, but I know I babbled, words bubbling up

to try to explain this thing that I barely understood, trying to justify and validate this orientation that *might* fit me.

Around this time, I also began taking Women and Gender (and Sexuality) Studies classes; I learned about sexism and racism and homophobia, and I began identifying as a woman of color. This exploration of my identity, including my sexuality, informed how I navigated these classes, and their assigned readings. At the same time, the concepts of power, intersectionality, and normative and oppressive structures that I learned about in my classes underpinned this exploration. I'd questioned my sexuality before, and I'd even heard about asexuality before. However, this was the first time I realized I was on the asexual and aromantic spectrums, and I spent a lot of time over the next two years figuring out where exactly I fell on both of the spectrums, and why it took me so long to realize it. The development of my identity as an aro-ace¹ woman of color, and my introduction into Women and Gender (and Sexuality) Studies, occurred simultaneously.

I struggled to ascertain what intimacy and desire meant to me. Once I understood that I was definitely on the aromantic and asexual spectrums, I began to unpack a lot of internalized expectations and assumptions. What expectations of intimacy did I have for romantic relationships? Were they accurate? Exclusive to romantic relationships? I was in a cuddly friendship at the time, so I knew I enjoyed cuddling as long as there weren't sexual or romantic undertones. I went to a high school where we'd have cuddle piles during lunchtime, and I had friends who would platonically hold each other's hands. I knew that physical intimacy didn't need to be exclusive to romantic and sexual relationships. What assumptions did I have about

¹ Aro-ace is short for aromantic and asexual.

desire? The need to always look and feel desirable? To feel desire? What does interpersonal desire mean when you exclude romance and sex? I had a lot of questions, but no answers.

Four Definitions

Intimacy and Desire

The definitions for intimacy and desire that I use were developed by folks who researched romantic and sexual relationships. It may seem awkward or problematic to define intimacy and desire in terms of the very relationships I'm trying to decenter, but there is nothing about these definitions that is intrinsically romantic or sexual.

Intimacy

Barry F. Moss and Andrew I. Schwebel's work contributes to the project of defining romantic intimacy. "Intimacy in enduring romantic relationships is determined by the level of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness on experiences with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship."² They compare romantic intimacy to intimacy in other intimate and non-intimate relationships, and they frame the differences in terms of these levels of these components. They note that "the intimacy exchanged between friends differs from romantic intimacy, primarily in the depth of Physical Intimacy and possibly commitment experienced between partners, as well as in the capacity to tolerate shifts in Mutuality [capitalized in original]."³ Most notably, they do not claim that the intimacy in friendships has different components – just different levels of the same components.

² Barry F. Moss and Andrew I. Schwebel, "Defining Intimacy in Romantic Relationships," *Family Relations* 42, no. 1 (1993): 33.

³ *Ibid*, 34.

Keeping that in mind, I use an understanding of intimacy as commitment, mutuality, and closeness in this thesis.

Desire

Pamela C. Regan and Ellen Berscheid define desire in order to frame their exploration of sexual desire. “In sum, desire is conceptualized as a psychological state that reflects the awareness that one *wants* to be doing or feeling or having something that one is *not* now doing, feeling, or having and whose fulfillment is associated with pleasure.”⁴ Their work is directly influenced by Fritz Heider, a social psychologist from the 1950s. They make no mention of sexual feelings or attraction, and neither Heider, nor Regan and Berscheid, claim that desire must always be sexual or be related to sexual feelings. This definition says that desire is linked to pleasure, and a dissonance between what one wants and what one has.

Asexuality and Aromanticism

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick challenges the ways sexuality is categorized, demonstrating that sexuality is historical, not standard or eternal. She provides alternate ways of categorizing ourselves in terms of sex and sexuality, from the meaning ascribed to sexual acts to the various levels of spontaneity or prescriptiveness in sexual scenes.⁵ As she describes such incredibly specific aspects of sexuality, she points to the narrowness of sexual orientations. Sexual orientations define who folks are attracted to, and that is it; they don’t describe any other aspects of sexuality. Sexual orientations are meticulously defined, and only describe small, distinct parts of our experiences.

⁴ Pamela C. Regan and Ellen Berscheid, *Lust: What We Know About Human Sexual Desire* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 15.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemologies of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1990), 24-26.

Asexuality

I work with the definition of asexuality that is published on the General FAQ page on AVEN, which states that an asexual person is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. It is important to recognize that AVEN doesn't represent all asexual communities – it feels hostile to many people of color, disabled folks, and survivors of abuse and trauma because the site tries to be apolitical, and moderators on the forums don't always shut down racist, sexist, and ableist comments. However, AVEN is also the first website that many folks turn to for information on asexuality because it is also the most publicized asexual community.

Most asexual and aromantic folks recognize that sexual and romantic orientations are fluid. Folks are constantly experiencing new things and learning more about themselves, and their orientations grow and change along with them. The fluidity of sexual and romantic orientations makes the definition for asexuality problematic, because it is predicated on the absolute lack of sexual attraction. The idiom “never say never” encapsulates this problem perfectly – there is always the potential to be wrong, because no one can predict the future. This fragility is weaponized against asexual communities by some folks in incredibly invalidating ways: *It's just a phase. How do you know if you've never had sex? You just haven't met the right person yet.* As such, if asexual folks' orientations change, it seems to prove those folks right. This fragility can become a huge source of self-doubt for asexual folks, particularly those who are still questioning.

Aromanticism

I also work with the definition of aromanticism that is published on the General FAQ page on AVEN, which states that an aromantic person is someone who does not experience romantic attraction. Although AVEN doesn't focus on aromantic folks, and isn't a central

platform for the aromantic community, many folks are introduced to the idea of aromanticism through this website.

It must be noted that it is extremely difficult and frustrating to define yourself by something you don't experience, particularly when that something is romantic attraction. I have spent hours ranting to my friends about the subjective concept of romantic attraction because everyone describes it so differently. Some folks differentiate romantic and platonic attraction based on the sexual attraction they feel toward their romantic partners, but that definition doesn't hold water if you consider romantic asexual folks. The only consistent characteristic of romantic attraction is that folks identify it as romantic.

Situating My Research

It is important to understand that asexual communities were not formed until very recently. Before the 2000s, there wasn't anything that could be described as an asexual community.⁶

The earliest academic theory of sexuality that allowed for the possibility of asexuality, though not by that name, was in Alfred Kinsey's reports published in 1948 and 1953. These texts proposed a model of sexuality that imagined heterosexuality and homosexuality at two ends of a scale, with most people falling somewhere in between. He included an "X" category for people "who do not respond erotically to either heterosexual or homosexual stimuli, and do not have overt physical contacts with individuals of either sex in which there is evidence of any

⁶ Aqua, "An online archaeology expedition: Keeping up with documenting the asexual community's history," *Cake at the Fortress*, Blog, July 7, 2015.

response.”⁷

Two decades later in 1977, Myra T. Johnson published *Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups*. This paper differentiates between asexual and autoerotic women, and describes these women as societally oppressed.⁸ This research was followed by empirical studies that used surveys to gauge incidences of asexuality, the most well-known of which was published by Anthony Bogaert in 2004. His findings indicate that 1.05% of British residents are asexual.⁹

In 1997, Zoe O’Reilly wrote an article titled “My Life as an Amoeba” in which she describes her life as an asexual woman.¹⁰ The comments section of that piece became a place for asexual folks to come together and talk about their experiences. A few blogs through LiveJournal, a social networking platform, also comprised the early online asexual community, along with the Haven for the Human Amoeba, an email group for asexual folks. Two websites about asexuality were created in 2001 out of this email group, including AVEN.¹¹ Five years later, asexuality was propelled into the public eye when AVEN founder David Jay appeared on *The Situation* and *The View* in 2006. Asexual communities moved into the blogosphere in 2007,¹² and in 2011 the documentary *(A)sexual* was released.¹³

⁷ Alfred Kinsey, et al, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953), 472.

⁸ Myra T. Johnson, “Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups,” in *The Sexually Oppressed*, ed. by Harvey L. Gochros and Jean S. Gochros, New York: Associated Press, 1977.

⁹ Anthony F. Bogaert, “Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 279-287.

¹⁰ Zoe O’Reilly, “My life as an amoeba,” *StarNet Dispatches*, May 30, 1997.

¹¹ Aqua, “An online archaeology expedition.”

¹² Elizabeth Leuw, “Blog Rants: The Early Ace Blogosphere,” *Prismatic Entanglements*, Blog, August 1, 2015.

¹³ *(A)sexual*, directed by Angela Tucker (New York: Filmmakers Library, 2012).

In 2011, the internet exploded with hostile and controversial debates over asexuality. In asexual communities, this year is colloquially known as Ace Gate,¹⁴ The Great Ace Hate, or the Ace Tumblr Debacle.¹⁵ Attitudes about sex in asexual communities (both positive and negative) were criticized; inclusion of asexual folks in the LGBTQ community was viciously debated; the use of the reclaimed slur “queer” in asexual communities was condemned; the best way to refer to those outside the asexual community was loudly disputed; and disabled folks and survivors of sexual assault were denounced by rhetoric that aimed to distance asexual folks from pathology. These debates were often based on critiques of the language asexual folks used to describe themselves and create their identities.¹⁶ The questions these debates focused on are perfectly valid questions to ask – they keep asexual communities accountable and aware of the ways their rhetoric affects other marginalized groups. However, these debates became nasty, deliberate conflicts begun by folks who either didn’t understand asexuality or felt threatened by it. Ace positivity tags on Tumblr continue to be filled with death threats, rape threats, and NSFW GIFs.¹⁷

...

Academic research didn’t focus on asexuality until 2008. This research can be categorized into five broader themes. The first theme is the pathologization of and the discrimination against folks on the asexual spectrum. Some research is complicit with this

¹⁴ “2011 in Ace Tumblr History,” *Epocryphal*, Blog, January 20, 2015.

¹⁵ Aqua, “Aftermath of the 2011 Ace Tumblr Debacle,” *Cake at the Fortress*, Blog, January 28, 2015.

¹⁶ Emerald, “Gather around, baby aces, and I shall tell you a tale of ye olde days of 2011,” *A Devious Mind in a Sunshiny Package*, Tumblr, January 18, 2015.

¹⁷ Herefortheace, “Anti-ace/aro shit on this site, an actual problem,” *Ace and aro things*, Tumblr, June 29, 2017.

prejudice,¹⁸ while other research identifies instances of prejudice.¹⁹ There is also research that looks at issues of visibility and representation as they relate to prejudice against asexual folks.²⁰ The second theme is the development of asexual identity.²¹ This research looks at asexuality in relation to identity politics,²² the formation of sexuality,²³ and the idea of coming out.²⁴ The third theme is an analysis of the intimate practices and relationships of asexual folks. This research takes varying stances, including the rejection of specifically asexual practices of intimacy²⁵ as well as the anarchic potential of asexual relationships.²⁶ The fourth theme is the exploration of normative structures that regulate sexuality²⁷ and at the relationships between asexuality,

¹⁸ Morag A. Yule, Lori A. Brotto, and Boris B. Gorzalka, "Biological Markers of Asexuality: Handedness, Birth Order, and Finger Length Ratios in Self-identified Asexual Men and Women," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43 (2014): 299-310.

¹⁹ Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson, "Intergroup bias toward 'Group X': Evidence of prejudice, dehumanization, avoidance, and discrimination against asexuals," *Group Process & Intergroup Relations* 15, no. 6: 725-743.

²⁰ Karli June Cerankowski, "Spectacular Asexuals: Media Visibility and Cultural Fetish," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014): 286-327.

²¹ Mark Carrigan, "There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 462-478.

²² Erica Chu, "Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014): 171-212.

²³ Agata Pacho, "Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary, and the Collective," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 10, no. 1 (2013): 13-35.

²⁴ Nicolette K. Robbins, Kathryn Graff Low, and Anna N. Query, "A Qualitative Exploration of the 'Coming Out' Process for Asexual Individuals," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45 (2016): 751-760.

²⁵ Matt Dawson, Liz McDonnell, and Susie Scott, "Negotiating the boundaries of intimacy: the personal lives of asexual people," *The Sociological Review* 64 (2016): 349-365.

²⁶ Ela Pryzbylo, "Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 444-461.

²⁷ Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," *Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 41, no. 1 (2015): 131-138.

desexualization,²⁸ disability,²⁹ hypersexualization, and race.³⁰ The fifth theme is the evaluation of asexuality as an analytical lens,³¹ with research that conceptualizes asexuality as a field of study,³² and looks at its relevance to feminist,³³ queer,³⁴ and trans scholarship.³⁵ The past decade has been filled with a significant and impressive amount of academic work, and it is important to realize that much of this research is rooted in questions that asexual communities have been asking for about twenty years.

Although the last decade has seen an exponential increase in academic research on asexuality, aromanticism has been almost entirely ignored. It is briefly and occasionally mentioned as a subset of asexuality, but that is an inaccurate assumption that doesn't align with how aromantic communities see themselves. Research on asexuality frames the aromantic spectrum as evidence of the heterogeneity of asexual communities, but doesn't seem to consider the spectrum of romantic orientations as worth researching. The aromantic spectrum isn't a topic to be glossed over. It isn't merely a subset of asexuality – it's a unique set of orientations and

²⁸ Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in disability narratives," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 479-493.

²⁹ Cynthia Barounis, "Compulsory Sexuality and Asexual/Crip Resistance in John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014): 351-392.

³⁰ Ianna Hawkins Owen, "On the Racialization of Asexuality," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York, Routledge, 2014): 251-283.

³¹ CJ DeLuzio Chasin, "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40 (2011): 713-723.

³² Ela Pryzbylo, "Some thoughts on asexuality as an interdisciplinary method," *Psychology & Sexuality* (2013).

³³ Megan Milks, "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014): 213-250.

³⁴ Dominique A. Canning, "Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces," *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015): 55-74.

³⁵ Ela Pryzbylo, "Asexuals against the Cis-tem!" *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (2016): 653-660.

deserves to be addressed as such. My research begins to fill this gap, demonstrating the importance of aromanticism as an analytical lens separate from and alongside asexuality.

...

In my thesis, I ask: How has the development of my identity as an aro-ace woman of color affected my understandings of intimacy and desire? In order to answer that question, I first have to understand how I used to think about intimacy and desire. Why did I assume intimacy and desire were sexual and romantic? I also have to understand the normative structures that decide who is supposed to experience desire. How do these expectations change with race, gender, disability, and age? Who is supposed to experience desire? Who is supposed to be desirable? How do these assumptions interact with our understandings of consent? I must think through the kinds of relationships I used to expect in my life, and how they changed when I realized I was asexual and aromantic. What types of intimacy are desirable? Who is supposed to practice these intimacies? What do these assumptions leave out?

I chose to answer these questions autoethnographically. I place myself in a tradition of women of color and feminist theorists who theorize from their own experiences, who recognize that the personal is political and also academic. The development of my identity as an aro-ace woman of color has been inextricably tied up with my academic training – when I began identifying as asexual, I downloaded about twenty academic articles about asexuality from the library website. The way I understand and experience my aro-ace identity has always been academic, and the way I relate to foundational concepts in Women and Gender (and Sexuality) Studies has always been personal.

Autoethnography as Method

Although autoethnography has many definitions as both a process and a product, I work with Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe's definition of autoethnography as "cultural analysis through personal narrative," in which we "make sense of who we are in the context of our cultural communities."³⁶ It is a form of research in which my experiences are the primary data. By sharing my experiences, I attempt to reduce the distance between myself and my readers. The narratives I share demonstrate how asexuality and aromanticism intersect in ways that current research fails to do. They also allow me to illustrate the extent to which romantic and sexual norms can influence our perceptions of ourselves, and of what we consider possible. My perspective as an aro-ace woman of color motivates my research, and is best understood through the experiences that created me.

Another important component of autoethnography is the constant movement between a gaze directed inward to the self, and a gaze directed outward to the culture and societies in which the self is situated.³⁷ This relationship is the basis of autoethnographic research, the point from which theorizing and analysis occur. My perspective allows me to resist and "question canonical stories—conventional, authoritative, and projective storylines that plot how ideal social selves should live."³⁸ In fact, I practice this resistance to romantic and sexual norms in my everyday life because of my aro-ace identity. The very existence of these orientations challenges these norms.

³⁶ Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, "Introduction: Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice," in *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 17.

³⁷ Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Autoethnography," *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (September 1999): 673.

³⁸ Carolyn Ellis and Aruthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011).

Materials

I use three kinds of written artifacts. First, I work with written conversations, in the form of transcribed Facebook messages and forum posts. They allow me to access the exact words I used at the time, and they help me set up a chronological timeline of moments and experiences. Second, I work with self-produced texts. Throughout high school, I journaled almost every day either in a physical journal or on my computer, and I continued to journal sporadically throughout my time at Bates College. Often, my journal entries centered on internal or interpersonal conflicts; although they are usually written at the time of these conflicts, they are still interpretations, colored by introspection and rumination. Third, I work with reflective material written by other folks. These are mainly Tumblr posts and zine submissions by asexual and aromantic folks that describe their experiences – their frustrations, their joys, their epiphanies.

The central material I use is memory. Sometimes memories helped filled in the blanks when I worked with self-produced texts or written conversations, but memories were most often useful as data in and of themselves. Memories are fragmented, re-constructed moments of time that influenced my perspective, and continue to shape who I am as I relive them. The more I experience, learn, and reflect, the more I rewrite meaning onto my past experiences. “As Kierkegaard (1957) suggested, life must be lived forward but can really only be understood backward.”³⁹ Throughout this project, I have shied away from using the term *journey* to describe my thesis because it implies a beginning and an end, and I can’t imagine my life in such a linear progressive manner. As Carolyn Ellis says, “thoughts and feelings circle around us; flash back,

³⁹ Tessa Muncey, “Doing autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4, no. 1 (2005): 3.

then forward; the topical is interwoven with the chronological; thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, then reappear in another context.”⁴⁰ Moments of experience and reflection illuminate past experiences and stories, changing their meaning in ways that echo in my present.

Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe claim that “Like Muncey... we do not distinguish doing research from living life.”⁴¹ This quote points toward the idea that autoethnographic research continues to occur as you live your life; however, this quote means something a little different to me. My experiences growing up as an aro-ace woman of color taught me about amatonormativity, compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity, and white supremacy before I was ever taught the names and definitions of these normative structures of power. As I began to study these structures in my Women and Gender (and Sexuality) Studies classes, a two-fold process of meaning-making occurred: the naming of these systems changed how I understood my experiences and identities, but at the same time, I wrote onto these systems the informal understandings I held throughout my life. In this thesis, as in my previous academic work, my life is my research, and my research is my life. I’ll always be doing this work because on a fundamental level, it is about my existence, and my survival.

...

The question of ethics in relation to autoethnography is a particularly tricky one with no easy answer. All of my materials include the presence of other people. It has been challenging to avoid implicating others who appear in my research while attempting to maintain the specificity of my experiences. I have varying levels of contact with the people I interact with in my thesis. I assign pseudonyms to folks I can’t contact, or I avoid referring to them specifically. For folks I

⁴⁰ Ellis, “Heartful Autoethnography,” 675.

⁴¹ Boylorn and Orbe, “Introduction,” 15.

was able to contact, I asked if they were okay being named, if they preferred a pseudonym, or if they wanted me to remove any details about them and simply reference them as a friend or relative.

I carefully considered what narratives to include in my thesis. I held nothing back on the basis of my personal comfort in an effort to be honest with both my readers and myself. Maintaining an ethic of deliberate honesty means that many of the narratives I use are charged with my emotions, and I found that I needed to remain conscientious of how I portrayed the people I interacted with. In each narrative that involved specific people, I attempted to find a balance between accurately and truthfully portraying my emotions, while not making it seem like those interactions were the only causes of tension in the relationships.

Vulnerability: Embodied Emotions

Autoethnography is a project of vulnerability. As Ellis writes, “there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret it. It’s hard not to feel like your life is being critiqued as well as your work.”⁴²

That is how I feel about this thesis. Originally, my greatest fear was that I’d be forced to defend my identity rather than my work at the oral defense. My thesis shares deeply personal narratives, things I have never told anyone before. Some of the details in my thesis have been secrets for years, and I chose to reveal them now, in this text. It is terrifying, and it is exhilarating, to write this thesis. I am putting on paper knowledge that I have carried for years,

⁴² Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty, “An Agenda for the Interpretation of Lived Experience,” in *Investing Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 2-3.

contextualizing it with other folks' research, and hoping that you will understand what I am saying.

Although I no longer fear that my identity will be interrogated by the panel, I still struggle with the fear of sharing my research with friends and family. There are many narratives here that my family has never heard. I have always been a private person, an introvert, and I even have a hard time talking about the good things in my life. That means I end up keeping a lot of uncomfortable experiences to myself.

Additionally, for about a year now, I have accepted that I will never come out to all of my family as aro-ace. The concept is too difficult for some of my relatives to grasp due to learning disabilities and non-English first languages, and I fear that in their probable distress or misunderstanding, they would react negatively. I already know that I will show them a non-autoethnographic version of this thesis. It may seem contradictory and unethical to write an autoethnography with the knowledge that I won't be sharing it with a sizeable portion of the people in my life, but I made this decision before I even decided to write about this topic. I didn't make the choice lightly then, and I don't make it lightly now. But beyond my fears about reader reactions to my thesis, the process of doing autoethnography left me more vulnerable than I could have predicted.

The first time I tried to write up a memory for this thesis, I ended up writing three narratives in one sitting, which triggered multiple emotional flashbacks that left me in a brain fog for hours. My explorations of the toxic ace discourse on Tumblr left me anxious, paranoid, and distressed. The academic literature about asexuality and sexual desire was littered with invalidating and ignorant remarks that made me feel invisible and troubled and wrong. "The self-questioning that autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about

yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts—and emotional pain⁴³ For me, one of the biggest obstacles I've run into is self-doubt. Throughout the course of my research, I found it necessary to read and sometimes analyze hateful comments and invalidating research about aromantic and asexual folks. I often began doubting the validity of my identity, the legitimacy of my queer identity and of my place in GSRM⁴⁴ communities, and the rationality of my decision-making in this thesis. My research regularly triggered cycles of self-doubt so intense and debilitating that they interfered with all my responsibilities, from working on this thesis to basic self-care.

I was unprepared for such a visceral reaction to the research I was conducting. It took a therapist and a full semester of practice to find tools to make this process more manageable. I figured out how to bring myself out of emotional flashbacks patiently and compassionately, and I found ways to ground myself in my environment when I needed to write narratives or analyze my experiences. I learned how far I could push myself, and I worked hard. I threw myself into this project. For all the awful things I read, there was so much more good research and literature out there. It gives me hope, and helps to break these cycles of self-doubt, to see that other aro-ace folks and other scholars notice the same structures of power that shaped my perspective for so long – to see the ways that other folks resist that power in their practices of intimacy and desire.

⁴³ Ellis, “*Heartful Autoethnography*,” 672.

⁴⁴ GSRM stands for Gender, Sexual and Romantic Minorities. I use GSRM instead of LGBTQ+ as an umbrella term because it explicitly includes romantic orientations.

Chapter One: Normative Structures

September

How about i take you to homecoming

me at homecoming? that's something nobody's seen...i have literally been to one dance in my life

Well its senior year you should get to see my amazing dance moves

haha maybe

How can i convince you to go

what day is it?

A Saturday in like October

well...my schedule looks open...

i'll have to ask my parents but they'll probably say yes. and if it sucks we leave early.

Sounds like a deal:)

So I'm going to take you homecoming then

i guess so:)

Ok sounds good and i have a quick question

ok

Are we going as friends or like more than Friends

yeah i was gonna ask you that too

Well what would you prefer

how about really really good friends for now? it can always change...

Yeah your right it can always change...

i don't know. i like you a lot, but i don't know if i'm ready for the whole relationship thing. i don't know. what do you think?

I like you a lot so should we like ease into a relationship so there's like no pressure

that would be nice...im up for that

Ok so i won't ask you out just yet then

ok sounds good to me

March

i know your really busy and it didn't really bother me bc i knew you were doing something important to you but like today in stats someone asked me when was the last time we kissed and i was like the day after valentines day and she looked at me all sad face going im sorry and i guess it started to make me wonder if you still wanted to be in a relationship bc its been like a month since we last hung out and i realized that its not really the first time we have gone this long without hanging out. So i was wondering if you were too busy to date and if i was just a distraction to all the things you have to get done

i know it's not fair for me to ask you to understand or be okay with me being super busy and sometimes not talking to you...it's how i've always been with my friends.

i understand why you became concerned, and i feel like im not being fair to you because you've questioned whether i want to be in this relationship twice now.

i'm trying to figure out where my head's at. i'm not sure what i feel... which is basically a non answer but it's the best i can do right now

oh ok well i don't know how to really respond to that but okay i can understand that

i'm sorry i don't know my own feelings well enough to give you a straight answer... everything's all muddled up in my head

it's ok i'll just wait until you figure things out

March (later)

Did we split bc we weren't working out or because your getting too busy for a bf?

it's a little bit of both

Oh ok but you still want to be friends right?

yeah

i gotta go, can i talk to you late or something?

Yeah I'll talk to you later then

March (Three Years Later)

Out of curiosity was I an asshole towards you at the end

Out of curiosity what do you think

I think I was and that I owe you an apology

I would agree with that assessment. There were a lot of things that happened that I wasn't a fan of throughout our relationship. But I had no idea how to be in a relationship, and that probably made things confusing for the both of us.

Yeah...I should of treated you better as well if I could go back I'd do things differently I'm sorry

And I should have treated both of us better. I'm sorry, too.

Thanks

Neither of us were very good with the whole relationship thing, were we.

Haha no we weren't. Out of curiosity how did you feel about it?

I didn't think we were that bad at it though lol

I think I needed to be able to stand up for myself more and call you out when you were being an ass, and I think I went into it hacing no clue what I was doing and I think that was a bad idea.

I'm really sorry

At least we learned important things throughout this experience

We definitely did haha

These are transcripts of Facebook messages between myself and my ex-boyfriend, James;⁴⁵ they sketch an ordinary, messy romantic relationship. *Boy asks me to a dance, and we start dating. We argue, and I break up with him because I can't remember why I decided to date him in the first place.* However, a closer look at the discord preceding our breakup reveals a gap between our behavior and the way we were expected to act. *Boy asks me to a dance, and we start dating. Boy is upset when someone points out that we are not behaving the way couples usually*

⁴⁵ James is a pseudonym.

do. I break up with him when I realize that I don't want to do what everyone is expecting, and that I'm not as emotionally invested as he is.

People bring a lot of expectations to relationships, romantic or otherwise. Nicole Martin describes a set of romantic behavior that is widely assumed.

Specifically, individuals expect their romantic partners' behavior to involve more exclusivity, physical intimacy, social companionship, emotional closeness, and relationship positivity (Buss, 1991; Fuhrman, Flannagan, & Matamoros, 2009; Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Sprecher & Regan, 2002).⁴⁶

In the case of my romantic relationship with James, our expectations about physical intimacy differed. He viewed the frequency with which we engaged in physical intimacy as an indicator of our relationship status, and my disinterest in physical intimacy became a point of conflict between us when it was identified by a third party. Unfortunately for our relationship, this conflict brought to my attention the fact that I had no romantic feelings for James, and I decided to end our relationship.

Romantic Norms: Amatonormativity

There are many norms around romantic relationships. People are expected to behave certain ways in romantic relationships, but people are also assumed to desire romantic relationships, and are expected to form them – romantic relationships are themselves a norm. As Eva Illouz states, romantic relationships have become a “categorical imperative, the experience

⁴⁶ Nicole Martin, “Relationship Expectations of Romantic Partners and Friends” (MA diss., The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2011), 1.

without which we do not feel fully accomplished human beings.”⁴⁷ Elizabeth Brake uses the term *amatonormativity* to describe the

disproportionate focus on marital and amorous love relationships as a special site of value, and...the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types.⁴⁸

Amatonormativity assigns an exclusive, intrinsic value to romantic relationships, implying that other relationships are not as important because they are not romantic. This trivializes friendships, family relationships, and solitude, and pushes us to sacrifice these relationships for romantic relationships. Additionally, amatonormativity encourages us to follow a monogamous and dyadic script that fosters the belief that romantic partners are our other halves, that they complete us, and that they alone will make our lives better. This system of normativity makes it difficult to imagine a happy life without romance, and creates an enormous amount of pressure to find a romantic partner.

...

Two years ago, I met a boy named Chad.⁴⁹ We liked each other almost immediately, started talking daily, and began cuddling within two weeks. I quickly became anxious about whether we were moving toward a romantic relationship, and asked for advice on an AVEN forum.

⁴⁷ Eva Illouz, “Romantic Love,” interview in *Introducing the New Sexualities Studies*, ed. by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks, 194 (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Mortality, and the Law*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. (2012): 88-89.

⁴⁹ Chad is a pseudonym.

I'm freaking out because I'm sitting here trying to figure out why I'm freaking out and I realized I could literally feel myself pushing him away in my head, relegating him to a friend role in my head where I saw him a couple times a week and we would talk about interesting things. But he means more to me than that, and I think I want a romantic relationship with him, but I don't know how to balance that with the fact that I don't know how to handle a romantic relationship, and I don't know how to negotiate between his possible desire for one, my possible desire for one, and my feelings of possible repulsion for romantic relationships. And it's not that I'm repulsed by them really, but it's more like me freaking out because I don't understand them and I just don't get it so I don't know how to handle what feels like an expectation that we'll be in a romantic relationship. I guess I feel a pressure to understand and desire a romantic relationship, but I can't for the life of me figure out what that means for me or what I actually feel?

I received a lot of calming responses telling me to slow down, to not jump into any relationships. That was enough to convince me that a platonic relationship was the best choice, and if my feelings changed I'd cross that bridge when I got to it. But one response really threw me for a loop. I'd explained briefly about a previous romantic relationship, and someone responded, "Since you don't say anything about it, do you even have a crush on him or people you've dated in the past?" Looking back on this post, I remember how unexpected that question was, and how shocked I felt at the answer because I *didn't* have a crush on him, and I *never* had a crush on my ex-boyfriend, James. There I was, freaking out about romantic relationships, when I didn't even want one. Looking back at this post surprised me, because I'd forgotten that I had recognized the

immense pressure to be in a romantic relationship, and the way those norms overcame my actual feelings. When I began writing this thesis, it took me two full days to put this into words again.

...

Friendships are how I build intimacy, support, and care with the people I love, but people constantly underestimate the importance of these relationships. I face prejudice, or, as Brake terms it, “invidious stereotypes attached to adults who are long-term nonparticipants in amorous relationships...In Hollywood romantic comedies, for example, the single heterosexual man is stereotyped as an unkempt and irresponsible man-child, waiting for marriage to make him a responsible adult, whereas the unmarried woman is stereotyped as lonely, desperately seeking love, and filling her empty life with cats.” (Brake 93) The cat lady is just one stereotype for unmarried women; others include the spinster, the old maid, and the workaholic, to name a few more common stereotypes. However, social stigma isn’t the only factor I have to contend with. Single folks as well as folks with either non-romantic partners or multiple partners also face “tangible discrimination” that centers around housing, health insurance, and workplace discrimination, which is the product of amatonormative laws and societal biases.⁵⁰ Although I don’t usually face overt violence or hate as an aromantic and asexual person, I do still have to negotiate the stigma and discrimination attached to being single.

Amatonormativity minimizes the importance of non-romantic relationships. Brake described the negative impact of amatonormativity on friendships:

⁵⁰Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 94

Amatonormativity is oppressive when it privileges members of one form of caring relationship at the expense of nonconformists, whose opportunities are thereby significantly worsened. The opportunities of friends are limited in a number of ways: Not only are they subjected to the stereotyping and tangible costs discussed above, their ability to pursue friendships is diminished. Just as heterosexism undermines strong relationships between women, amatonormativity undermines relationships other than amorous love and marriage by regulating them to cultural invisibility or second best.⁵¹

A hierarchy of relationships is created in which romantic relationships are at the top, and non-romantic relationships exist below that. When people form romantic relationships, they often spend less time with their friends, altering their non-romantic relationships for the well-being of their romantic relationships. To put it bluntly, romantic relationships are considered preferable to staying single.

Additionally, using the term *single* to describe relationship status only makes sense in the context of amatonormativity. *Single* means unmarried, someone outside the (prospective) nuclear family unit, someone who isn't committed to one or more romantic partners – someone who is supposedly unattached. *Single* implies that you're looking to be something other than that, something better than that. It is illogical to define myself by a kind of relationship that I will never want. *Single* no longer makes sense because I'm not unattached. I have families, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances – I'm part of a constantly expanding network of people, and calling me single ignores that.

And yet, as someone who is aro-ace, there is a high likelihood that I will be alone to some extent for my entire life. The kinds of relationships I desire (intimate, committed friendships) are

⁵¹ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 98.

profoundly non-normative, and most people prioritize their romantic relationships over their friendships. This is something I have already experienced – when friends form romantic relationships, there is a sudden decrease in the amount of time we spend together that leaves me alone, with a dwindling support system. Asexual and aromantic folks aren't the only people who have a hard time forming relationships; we aren't even the only ones who struggle with finding people with similar life and relationship goals. However, this struggle with aloneness is a common concern in our communities.

Throughout my life, I have cultivated the ability to enjoy being alone. It made it easy to depend on myself, to rarely need help or care from other people. I thought I should only rely on myself. I questioned that belief as I grew older – I learned to ask for help, and to invest in my relationships. But I find myself needing to continue depending on myself, because my friends are often occupied with their romantic relationships. Enjoying being alone has become a necessity, even as I realize how much I desire the company and care of others.

...

“I Know I’m Not Easy To Love”

Hey, I love you.

I know it’s not the love you want,

but it’s what I have to give.

(how is my everything not enough)

My love is as whole as yours.

It is full and strong and constant.

You ask me to be less, to love less.

To matter less.

My love is no less because it is platonic.

Do you know how hard it is to convince myself of this,

when so many of my friends

have walked away because of this?

Please don't be next.

I think you want *more* than friends,

I think that friends isn't *enough*,

but friends is the *greatest* thing I have to offer.

I will give you everything I have,

why won't you accept my everything?

I am enough.

Sexual Norms: Compulsory Sexuality

My sleeping bag twists around me as I shift onto my stomach, propping myself up on my elbows. I squint in the darkness as I try to see my friends faces.

“What’s your sexual orientation?” I can’t tell who asked the question, but it’s directed at everyone. My body tenses, my lungs working a little faster, my heart beating a little harder.

When it’s my turn, I answer, “As far as I know I’m straight, but I guess I could be pansexual.”

The conversation moves on, and I take a deep breath, relaxing my muscles. I always hate that question. Everyone else seems so sure of their answer, but I've always been so confused by it. Sometimes I think I feel attracted to some of my girl friends, in the same way that I feel toward some of my boy friends. I want to touch them, and be near them; but at the same time, I can't imagine a romantic relationship with my girl friends. So I must be straight.

...

This narrative shows that there were a lot of things I misunderstood about sexuality. First of all, I assumed I was straight. I interpreted my lack of sexual attraction as heterosexuality, because in a heteronormative society, heterosexuality is the default. Second, I didn't understand how big a difference there was between being straight and being pansexual, that I'd probably be able to tell if I was one or the other.

Third, I assumed romantic and sexual feelings, despite the absence of those attractions. I assumed that the strong feelings I had for my friends were romantic or sexual. In a society that insists on and is consumed with romance and sex, it is logical that my strongest feelings would be romantic and sexual.

Thinking (read: assuming) that you're straight for most of your life and then finding out you're not is weird. Mostly because once you realize you're not straight, it dawns on you that you feel the same way about boys that you do about girls and non-binary people.

And then you wonder if you're pansexual because they're attracted to all genders, and you have to be attracted to someone, right? And then that thought is immediately dismissed because you don't feel attraction at all. But that doesn't stop you from

contemplating every other sexuality and romantic orientation, because you've been taught everyone wants sex and romance.⁵²

I let the belief that I should be romantically and sexually attracted to someone take precedence over the knowledge that I felt the same way toward everyone, and that those feelings were not romantic or sexual. I questioned and disbelieved my feelings, and I didn't do this in a vacuum -- norms about romance and sex structured how I interpreted my feelings.

...

The concept of compulsory sexuality builds directly on Adrienne Rich's development of compulsory heterosexuality. She argues that "heterosexuality is produced through sets of belief and practice that both keep women apart and force women, both overtly and covertly, into partnerships with men."⁵³ Additionally, Rich urges us "to acknowledge that for some women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but... be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force".⁵⁴ Rich's skepticism of heterosexuality, and portrayal of it as a commanding, oppressive political institution, provides a basis for the broader conceptualization of compulsory sexuality as a normative system upheld by various kinds of institutional power.

Sexual relationships are expected parts of our lives, much like romantic relationships are. Kristina Gupta uses the term *compulsory sexuality* to describe

⁵² "Being an Aromantic Asexual is Weird," *Shades of Grayro*, Tumblr, August 26, 2015.

⁵³ Deborah Tolman, "In a Different Position: Conceptualizing Female Adolescent Sexuality Development Within Compulsory Heterosexuality," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 112 (2006): 74.

⁵⁴ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 637.

the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity.⁵⁵

This insistence on sex mandates that “the human and the normal is tied to the sexual, but not necessarily any longer to the heterosexual. As a result, those considered ‘normal’ face strong pressures to be sexual, and those who seek access to the normal must establish themselves as sexual subjects.”⁵⁶

...

We’re on our way to a queer-anarchist bar in Amsterdam when the others get a sudden craving for french fries – that’s how I find myself shifting from foot to foot in the back of a McDonald’s restaurant. The black dress, leather jacket, and purple lipstick all feel a bit overdressed for a fast food place, but then again I associate McDonald’s with after-school visits to the mall with my grandparents over a decade ago.

I keep fidgeting as I wait for them to place their orders. It feels like people are staring at me, although I’m pretty sure that’s my imagination. I’ve only been in the Netherlands for a few weeks, and I’m not exactly comfortable yet with big cities or with the other students on my program.

I haven’t been to a bar before, either, mainly because I’m an introvert who doesn’t drink alcohol, so I’m nervous to be pushing myself past my social comfort zone. Suddenly, someone taps me on the shoulder. I’m immediately unsettled because I’ve always been uncomfortable

⁵⁵ Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality,” 132.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 142.

with people grabbing me, or touching my arms and shoulders. I turn around with a smile, trying to shake off the discomfort that I tell myself is an unreasonable reaction to a brief touch. I'd assumed one of the students I was with wanted to get my attention, but I was wrong. I focus on this strange man standing in front of me, asking me where I'm from, asking me if I'm Blasian, asking me if I have a boyfriend, and – *my professor warned us that women of color get harassed near the Red Light District in the evenings, but I'm not even near the district, and what did you just ask me, and what does it matter if I have a boyfriend, and* – all I can do is say “No thank you” all rushed together because I can't breathe as I spin around and walk away.

The Intricacies of Sexual Norms: Race and Disability

Street harassment is an experience that most women have in common. My experience in Amsterdam is a quotidian experience for about half of the world's population. The fact that I experienced street harassment is not unique; however, the racialized content of the harassment reveals ties between sexuality and race that can't be set aside or ignored. Although the notion of compulsory sexuality provides a very useful framework to understand the marginalization of asexual folks, it is necessary to recognize that the concept is limited. In this section, I demonstrate the ways misinterpretations of asexuality are mobilized alongside other sexual norms to police certain bodies. Eunjung Kim states that “normative sexual desire and personhood have been historically centered on heterosexuality, maleness, whiteness, and able bodiedness.”⁵⁷ We must be critical when we employ the concept of compulsory sexuality, and ensure that we

⁵⁷ Eunjung Kim, “Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 484.

understand the ways that misinterpretations of asexuality – asexuality-as-ideal and assumed asexuality – contribute to oppressive normative structures.

Ianna Hawkins Owens demonstrates how asexuality became useful to whiteness and the project of white supremacy as an antithesis to hypersexuality. She defines asexuality-as-ideal as “the misinterpretation of asexuality as the honorable achievement or performance of sexual restraint.”⁵⁸ Her research focuses on two stereotypes about Black women – the jezebel and the mammy – to show how racialized hypersexuality constructs them as opposite white, moral asexuality in order to justify slavery. “The image of the jezebel, a stereotype of the black female as erotically deviant, insatiable, and sexually savage, required the disciplining structures of slavery.”⁵⁹ This image of the hypersexual jezebel was contrasted with the asexual mammy, who “is not constructed as desirable”.⁶⁰ Both stereotypes were used to justify slavery as a necessary disciplining structure, and the mammy was used as an example of the benefits of slavery. Owen’s research argues that “the white practitioner [of asexuality] is considered pure and deserving of reverence, while the black asexual figure is considered less threatening than her hypersexual counterpart.”⁶¹ In other words, asexuality was constructed as an admirable quality in white folks, while it was something to be disparaged in Black folks.

Owens argues that whiteness misinterprets asexuality “in order to recruit the orientation’s symbolic possibilities to further the project of racial domination.”⁶² In other words, the misinterpretation of asexuality becomes a tool of white supremacy. Asexuality is constructed as a choice, as a property of whiteness, used “as shorthand for the attributes of chastity, celibacy,

⁵⁸ Owen, “On the Racialization of Asexuality,” 255-256.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 257.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 258.

⁶¹ Ibid, 256.

⁶² Ibid, 263.

respectability, morality, restraint, and self-sacrifice”.⁶³ Owens argues that these historical ties to whiteness continue to affect asexuality today.

It is my claim that, because asexuality is initially racialized as white through associations with innocence, purity, and abstinence, it is recognized by the popular discourse as not deviant, but as deserving of grief, care support, and rehabilitation. Were asexuality not racialized as white, the public attitude toward it might be markedly different...⁶⁴

Asexuality as a concept benefits from white privilege, and it is necessary to recognize that. It is also important to pay attention to the fact that this benefit comes in the dubious form of pathologization, and the almost complete absence of violent hostility directed toward many other sexual minorities.

The pathologization of asexuality frames the identity in terms of something that deserves to be fixed, but sexual orientations don't need to be fixed. Asexual communities push back on this pathologization in an almost knee-jerk reaction – they don't need to be fixed, they are perfectly “normal,” and there is nothing wrong with them. The asexual community uses the Unassailable Asexual and the Gold Star Asexual, from the idea of the Gold Star Lesbian, in order to describe and critique this imperative to be “normal.”

The unassailable asexual is completely neurotypical and has never had any health issues, physical or mental. They are cis, indifferent, between the ages of twenty and forty, and sex-positive. They do not masturbate but have no history of any kinds of sexual problems. They have never been abused in any way.⁶⁵

⁶³ Owen, “On the Racialization of Asexuality,” 259.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 264.

⁶⁵ Sciatrix, “The Construct of the Unassailable Asexual,” *Knights of the Shaded Triangle*, Forum, October 22, 2010.

The asexual community performs this discursive distancing from disability in an attempt to validate asexuality as a sexual orientation.

Eunjung Kim explores the tense relationship between asexuality and disability. In addition to the way pathologization has been used against asexual communities, the concept of asexuality has been used against disabled folks. Kim describes assumed asexuality, or the ways asexuality has been assumed in disabled people as a way of denying them their sexual and reproductive rights. As a result, there are disabled communities that reject asexuality out of hand as a product of oppression and/or repression. Kim intervenes by recognizing asexuality as a valid identity and by introducing the concept of desexualization.

Desexualization is a process that separates sexuality from disabled bodies, making it irrelevant to and incompatible with them because disabled people are supposedly undesirable in society and because disability is believed to lead to sexual incapacity. In addition, desexualization refers to the ongoing process of creating distance between sexuality and people with disabilities through the fear of disability reproduction and contamination. Moreover, desexualization occurs when sexual assistance and access to social setting and communication are prohibited.⁶⁶

By recognizing the process of desexualization, Kim rejects assumed connections between asexuality and disability.

It is absolutely necessary to understand the ways different groups of people relate to a/sexualities. It fundamentally affects the ways we think about normative systems like compulsory sexuality, and it reveals the limitations of such conceptions. Additionally, it is

⁶⁶ Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in disability narratives," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 483.

imperative that asexual communities understand and recognize these histories. We need to understand the complex relationship other marginalized communities have with asexuality.

Complicating Consent

My first week at Bates College, during orientation, I attended at least two workshops in which we discussed sexual consent. I remember learning to define consent as an enthusiastic *yes*, rather than the lack of a *no*, but the discussions we had were rather basic and unengaging. Fortunately, conversations about consent are becoming more complex, considering the relationship between race and consent, and even considering consent outside of sexual contexts.

The Cambridge for Consent campaign describes the effects of racial stereotypes on consent.⁶⁷ For instance, the stereotype of Asian women as docile and obedient shifts onto sexual norms that construct Asian women as passive and submissive in bed. These impressions can cause folks to assume consent where it doesn't exist, or even cause folks to believe that Asian women can't or don't need to consent. Although these conversations are beginning to point to the idea that sexual norms are inextricably linked to issues of consent, they don't adequately flesh out the ways norms affect consent.

The experiences of many asexual and aromantic folks reveal the ways many conversations about consent fail to take into account the pressures of romantic and sexual norms. Romantic and sexual norms cause us to make assumptions about what we should want, and influence our expectations about the ways we should behave. These assumptions and expectations can cause us to pressure ourselves, or the folks around us, to comply with these

⁶⁷ "People of Colour," *Cambridge for Consent*.

norms. Queenie, a Tumblr blogger, writes about her frustrations with current conversations about consent.

I want to talk about consenting to something not because you want it but because you want to want it. I want to talk about consenting because you can't think of a good reason to say no. I want to talk about consenting because you don't realize that saying no indefinitely is an option. I want to talk about whether we can really call that consent. I want to talk about coercion. I want to talk about 'social expectations.'⁶⁸

...

(At the beginning of the night)

"You're cute," a woman says, standing in front of the table with her friend. *That's right, her name's Carly.* I'd handed her the badge she's wearing around her neck a few minutes ago.⁶⁹

"Thank you," I automatically replied as I searched for her friends' badge.

"Will you go out with me?" she asked. My head snapped up, and – *I'm so embarrassed! I'm working, and there is a line of people behind you that I need to help, and what is even going on? I've got to shut this down.*

"I appreciate the thought, but I'm actually asexual." I stumbled, deciding at the last minute not to say *aromantic* because folks always ask me to repeat myself when I say that.

(A few hours later)

"Hey, I was hoping we'd get the chance to talk tonight. Will you be at the brunch tomorrow?" Carly asks. We'd exchanged pleasantries a few times during the event, and she'd mentioned wanting to get to know me better.

⁶⁸ Queenie, "Mapping the grey area of sexual experience: consent, compulsory sexuality, and sex normativity," *Concept Awesome*, Tumblr, January 11, 2015.

⁶⁹ Carly is a pseudonym.

“Yeah, I will. I’m also working again tomorrow, too,” I volunteered. *It’ll be nice to know someone here besides my bosses.*

“Great! Can we hang out then? I’d love to learn more about you.”

“Sure. See you tomorrow!”

(At brunch the next morning)

“Wait, you’re still an undergrad? How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-one, actually.”

“Oh my god, I’m almost a decade older than you!”

I really hope that means you won’t hit on me anymore. It would be awesome to have a friend here.

(At the after-party that evening)

“So, my friend told me that being asexual doesn’t mean you can’t be in a relationship.”

Carly pointed out. *Crap. I knew I should have told her I was aromantic, too. It was just too many syllables to say all at once.*

“That’s true. But, I’m also aromantic, so I don’t actually want to be in a relationship.”

“Oh, okay.”

(An hour later)

“Do you want to dance with me? Do you mind if I put my hand on your waist?”

“Will it make you uncomfortable if I tell you that you’re the first person I’ve been attracted to in a really long time?”

“Do you find things erotic?” What excites you?”

(Later)

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“No, I’m not.”

“It’s just, you look like you’re uncomfortable, which is why I’m asking. I can stop asking questions if you want.”

“No, it’s fine, I promise I’ll let you know if I’m uncomfortable.”

(At the end of the night)

“Can I get your number?”

...

At the time, I was adamant to both Carly and myself that these encounters didn’t upset me. I was determined to push myself out of my comfort zone, to be social and make friends, and I was determined not to give in to my discomfort. I didn’t realize how distressed I’d been by the whole situation until days later, when the host of the after-party came up to me and asked if I was okay. I am still coming to terms with the fact that I didn’t stop Carly from asking me so many personal questions, with the fact that I encouraged her to continue even when she gave me an opening to stop our interaction.

I have begun to noticed that I habitually ignore my discomfort in situations that involve sex and romance. I don’t give myself space to be uncomfortable; I skip past the process of recognizing my feelings and my boundaries, and instead jump directly into whatever the situation is. For instance, when I began a romantic relationship with James, I didn’t make the decisions based on my feelings, I made it because I thought I had to be straight. I thought, eventually, I’d have to have a boyfriend, I’d have to kiss someone, and I’d have to have sex – and I might as well learn to deal with that now. I thought I had to want romantic and sexual relationships. Realizing that I was aromantic meant recognizing that I was uncomfortable for the entirety of a six-month relationship; that I began it, and stayed in it, because I didn’t have a good

reason not to (my discomfort didn't count). I never had a conversation about consent that addressed any of these issues.

Asexual and aromantic communities are beginning to tackle the relationship between norms and consent because so many of us have had these kinds of experiences. We find ourselves crossing our own boundaries. Sometimes, it's because we don't have a good reason not to do something, because romantic and sexual norms are so ingrained in our minds that our feelings of discomfort stop being a good reason. Sometimes, it's because we aren't even aware that these boundaries exist until days or years after we've crossed them. I still have a hard time setting boundaries because denying my feelings is such an ingrained habit at this point that it happens any time I'm uncomfortable. Conversations about consent need to recognize that consent doesn't happen in a vacuum, that issues of consent are heavily informed by romantic and sexual norms. Consent is so much more complicated than a simple *yes* or *no*, and the impact of romantic and sexual norms is an important piece to consider in future explorations about consent.

Chapter Two: Institutional Power

I identify three institutions that help forge assumptions about romance and sex. First, I examine the ways romantic and sexual norms are taught within the structure of schools. Second, I explore the ways popular media reflected these norms; and third, I look at the ways these norms become privileged through marriage.

Schools

The romantic and sexual narratives portrayed in media are repeated within the microcosms of primary and secondary schools. Public education in the U.S. makes it possible for most people to attend primary and secondary school, making schools influential institutions that structure approximately the first eighteen years of everyone's lives. As such, schools are important sites of socialization for romantic and sexual norms. I identify the phenomenon of "girl talk" – or girls talking romantically about boys – as one of the ways romantic and sexual norms are produced within the social fabric of schools. I also examine the ways school dances structure social interactions in schools and reflect a culture of romantic love. Within the classroom, I explore how sex education and health classes, as well as gendered dress codes, contribute to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Throughout this section, I consider the ways schools can resist or reject heteronormativity, amatonormativity, and compulsory sexuality.

"Girl Talk"

There is this thing that I call "girl talk." It is fundamentally a misnomer – and a fallible one at that – but it is the phrase I use. Although the concept of "girl talk" has been used radically

in queer communities, it can also be used in incredibly sexist and heteronormative ways. For me, “girl talk” happens when I talk to other girls/women. It can include talking about sexual relationships, but mostly it means talking about boys and romance, particularly in relation to school. It infantilizes women of all ages by including them in the category of “girl,” while also implying that “girls” only ever talk about “boys” and that “girls” always (and only) want romantic relationships with “boys” – all of which is patently untrue. I understand these implications, but I continue to use this phrase because it describes these interactions. Female friends that I’ve met through school ask for support regarding their romantic endeavors with men and boys that often go to the same school; the phrase “girl talk” is an accurate description.

...

“I can’t believe you had a crush on Greg!”⁷⁰

“Wait, really? How did I not know about this?”

“I mean, you can be pretty oblivious. Remember when that other kid had a crush on you for like a year and you had no idea?”

“We used to have such stupid crushes, oh my god.”

“Wait, Christina, who did you have a crush on?”

“I’ve actually never had a crush on anyone, so...”

“Never? Are you sure?”

“I totally don’t believe you.

“I bet you’re just too embarrassed to tell us!”

⁷⁰ Greg is a pseudonym.

...

For most of my life, “girl talk” has been a source of shame, bitterness, confusion, panic, insecurity, and isolation. By fifth grade, many of my female friends began talking about boys, crushes, and romance-related gossip. They didn’t stop talking about science class, or Nancy Drew books, or the school play, but boys and crushes were mixed in with all the other things we talked about. They stopped seeing boys as annoying and gross, and saw them as cool or something. And I didn’t understand it. I didn’t think about anyone like that. But I started to, even though I didn’t have the feelings to back up those thoughts.

I began to wonder what it would be like to have a crush. I wondered whether boys had crushes on me. I wanted boys to have crushes on me, even though I didn’t want a relationship. I was constantly aware of how I looked and behaved around boys; I performed an out-of-your-league kind of desirability. I wanted to be the super-cool, super-smart, super-nice, super-kind, super-sassy girl that all the boys wanted and none could have. It was juvenile, but it was a way of coping with this sudden pressure to think romantically about boys.

...

“Come on, Christina, just pick someone already!”

“You can choose anyone. Don’t think so hard”

“If you could go out with anyone in our year, who would you go out with?”

“I mean I wouldn’t... like, I really, really wouldn’t... but since you’re making me choose someone, I’d go out with Kyle.”⁷¹

“Really?!!”

⁷¹ Kyle is a pseudonym.

“Oh my god.”

“Why? He’s not even cute!”

“He makes me laugh. And he has a nice smile.”

“He is nice, I’ll give you that.”

“Oh my god, I can’t believe you chose Kyle out of everyone! He’s such a dork!”

...

It was not easy to opt out of “girl talk.” Friendships are built on sharing, honesty, and support, and “girl talk” is one of the most obvious ways of having that kind of intimacy. Talking about romantic feelings can be an incredibly vulnerable thing to do. And I didn’t know how to support my friends in something that I didn’t understand or experience. I never knew what to say, and I couldn’t share any similar experiences because I didn’t have any. The few times we did talk, they made fun of me, or refused to believe me. I stopped sharing things with them for fear of their reaction, and that decision eventually resulted in the loss of their friendship. “Girl talk” is a way to build friendship and intimacy among women, and my failure to do “girl talk” resulted in my isolation.

...

“So...James asked me to homecoming and I said yes.”

“Wait, what? You’re going out with James?”

“I didn’t even know you had a crush on him. I didn’t know you liked anybody.”

“Why don’t you ever tell us these things?”

...

Although I have a twin sister, and it might seem like I'd have ample opportunities to do "girl talk" with her, it just wasn't something either of us were ever comfortable talking about together. By my second year at Bates, I still had no idea how to do "girl talk." But, as it turned out, my new roommate, Julie, talked about everything, including her ex and current romantic prospects, and I realized pretty early on that I needed to learn how to do "girl talk." I began observing her conversations with her friends, identifying patterns in the kinds of things they'd say to each other, how her friends reacted to her "boy" problems. I watched, I learned, and I started doing it. Beyond simple, unconditional support, I eventually, I found a few genuine pieces of advice I could give. There are still limits to my "girl talk" – I can't go for longer than twenty minutes without repeating myself or running out of things to say – but it is no longer an obstacle to building and maintaining friendships.

Dances

I love telling the story of my senior prom. Alyssa (my sister) and I went to our senior prom alone, together. We laughed as we took typical prom-style photos with our friends, my sister standing behind me as my "date." We hitched a ride to prom with a group of friends – when they stopped in Sausalito for their fancy sit-down dinner reservation, we poked around the waterfront to find dinner and amuse ourselves. I like to imagine how we looked in our formal dresses, perusing the aisles of a sock shop (my socks were covered in calculus equations, and Alyssa's had the Golden Gate Bridge on the ankles). I like to imagine us as we savored french fries, sitting at a small sidewalk table right next to the main street, and as we shared a cup of praline pecan ice cream on a bench by the ocean, watching the sun dip low on the horizon. The

rest of the night was spent dancing with my friends in San Francisco City Hall, running around the balcony with someone when the music was terrible (which was most of the time).

I like to remember my senior prom this way. I like to remember that Alyssa and I went *sock shopping* an hour before prom began. That we made plans at the last minute. That we ate french fries and ice cream for dinner. We bucked so many prom traditions that night, and I loved every minute of it.

...

C.J. Pascoe argues that schools are sexualized and gendered institutions that construct sexuality “at the level of the institution through disciplinary practices...and school events.”⁷² School dances are minefields of social norms. I remember being flat-out scared to go to middle school dances because I heard explicit stories of students grinding on each other and making out. I only went to homecoming once, because someone asked me. I wasn’t opposed to going with a group of friends, but I couldn’t think of a good reason to attend a mediocre school dance when I was busy with Advanced Placement and Honors classes, Varsity and Junior Varsity sports, and club sports.

Although I only attended one middle school dance, two regular high school dances, and four “Big Band” dances held by a variety of music departments at my high school, dances were still a large part of social life. The entire school gossiped about who asked who to the dance, and who was seen making out on the dance floor. Boys asked girls to homecoming and prom at lunch with colorful posters, after school with big demonstrations at their cars, and even after public musical performances with each other. Even though my friends never pressured me to date or

⁷² C.J. Pascoe, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2012): 26-27.

attend dances with people in high school, the fabric of social life at the school was interwoven with school dances.

...

My first year at Bates, I stick like glue to one of my roommates at the 80's dance in October. I stare at the ceiling of the Arcade, trying to block out the many drunk people making out around me, trying to lose myself in the music. I learn how much I love dancing in the middle of a crowd, surrounded by music and movement. I also learn how anxious it makes me to have to constantly rebuff the maybe-sexual-advances of college boys. Particularly when they are too drunk to get the message. Every time I feel a hand on my hip, my stomach drops. I reach back, gently remove the hand, and step to the side. I get really good at that move, but my chest hurts every time I have to do it.

...

I follow my other roommate to a pregame in the Village before the 90's dance in January, and stand awkwardly in the corner as I try to acclimate to the pervasive smell of beer. I've never had a sip of alcohol, and the goal of a pregame is to get drunk before attending the dance. It was a pretty awkward night.

...

I attend Gala in March by myself. I get ready by myself, show up by myself, dance by myself, and leave by myself. I discover that, while going to a dance by myself is preferable to suffering awkwardly through a pregame, I prefer dancing with one or two friends to dancing by myself.

...

The next year, I begin getting ready for the 90s dance about an hour after my roommate, Julie, leaves to go to a pregame. There is no way I'm going to another pregame – they are uncomfortable and boring, and I usually end up leaving early because I feel so awkward and socially inept. I have the time to go all out with my costume and makeup. I pat on foundation, draw my eyeliner with perfect wings, and I even put on red lipstick. My hair is done, and I'm all dressed, but it's still too early to go to the dance. I decide to lie down and wait. At 2AM, Julie walks in talking about the guy she hooked up with, only to find me passed out in my bed with the lights on. I make up some excuse about how I was just so tired, and she seems to believe me – she has no reason to think otherwise. We laugh about it.

In reality? I was too anxious to go. I laid in bed and let my insecurities paralyze me, until I forced myself to fall asleep. My roommate was looking for a boy to dance with, and I knew that when she did, I'd probably end up finding somewhere else to be in order to give them space. While I enjoy being a wingwoman much more than I enjoy being a third wheel, I also love dancing with my friends, and it can feel isolating to always end up alone on the dance floor when they find people to make out with.

...

This year, an infection and a wedding have kept me from attending the 80s and 90s dances. I spend my Friday and Saturday nights eating cheesy popcorn and binge-watching boring TV shows on Netflix as my friends party it up. I don't exactly *want* to spend my weekends alone in my room, but there's only so much a girl can do when she doesn't drink, can't drive, and all her friends are going out or have standing plans with other people.

I *want* to play board games until 3AM. I *want* to sit in the common room of my house with a group of friends, piles of blankets, and a refined selection of junk food, as we watch the drama of college parties and hook ups unfold before us. I *want* to watch a movie with a long-distance friend so that we can throw popcorn at the screen together during bad scenes, even though we are thousands of miles apart. I *want* to cook a really good dinner with a group of friends and go to bed early. I *want* to camp out in a bookstore and get really excited about all the new books until they kick us out at closing time.

...

Now, I only attend Gala – mainly because I’m an officer of the Bates Ballroom Team and we *perform* at Gala.

I don’t have to worry about boys trying to dance with me anymore. Julie thinks I give off a vibe –my apparently intimidating facial expressions scare off most people.

I can’t tell if this is a compliment. Either way, I’m pretty sure I prefer an off-putting vibe to harassment.

...

I have another story to tell about my senior prom. I broke up with my boyfriend about a month before prom, right after our six-month anniversary, partly because I was relieved he hadn’t asked me to prom yet. I realized that I didn’t want to have to interact with him or even think about him at prom – all I wanted to do was have a fun night with my friends. Needless to say, that revelation didn’t bode well for the duration of our relationship.

We promised we would stay friends after we broke up, but I broke that promise. I began ignoring him because I was afraid he would still ask me to go to prom with him. As everyone around me received increasingly creative promposals from their friends and romantic partners, I

crossed my fingers that no one would ask me. I sighed in relief after every day I successfully avoided a promposal.

When I remember this, I remember how suffocated I felt by romantic norms that dictated that I should attend prom with my boyfriend, and that I had to spend a significant amount of time at prom with him. I remember a friendship I discarded because of the looming shadow of prom. This narrative of my prom defies tradition just as much as the previous one, but it also reminds me of how hard I fought to break away from romantic norms and expectations about prom and about my romantic relationship. I'm ashamed that this fight included ending a friendship, but I rejoice in the knowledge that I took myself back from all of these expectations in time to have fun at prom.

Sex Education

“Everyone should be raising their hand right now! I know you all masturbate. It's perfectly healthy. Don't lie about it,” my teacher laughed.

My face burns as I sit there, both hands on my desk. I can feel myself starting to withdraw into my mind, the teacher's voice blurring out as I try to process her accusation. *But I DON'T. I don't even know how to masturbate. Why does she think I'm lying??*

Her words shame me. I feel foolishly naïve for my ignorance, and I feel defective for not masturbating, for not even wanting or needing to masturbate. This moment stays with me, even as the bell rings and I automatically pack up for my next class. *I know you all masturbate. Don't lie about it.*

...

As far as sex education classes go, this teacher did a good job. She tried to work through social stigmas against talking about sex, she taught us how to have safe sex (beyond just

advocating abstinence), and she was sex-positive. Unfortunately, she was sex-positive to the extent that she assumed we already knew about, thought extensively about, and acted upon sexual feelings. And she's not alone; there is a societal assumption that teenagers think about sex a lot. That when teenagers hit puberty, all they can think about is sex – and that, as a result, they must be taught to not have sex, or to at least have sex safely. The sexualization of teenagers is also used to justify gendered dress code policies that imply boys will be distracted if girls wear shirts that show their shoulders).⁷³

These assumptions are heteronormative and sexist; many schools only emphasize or teach abstinence in their sex education and health classes. Those that do teach about safe sex teach teenagers how to have safe heterosexual sex, completely leaving out queer sex. There is some heteronormative curricular pressure from state and federal standards and legislation, and there is some pressure from school boards and school administration, or from the teachers themselves. But a lot of this compulsory heterosexuality comes from parents too.

Recently, I spoke with a parent of two children. She's a liberal Californian and totally accepting of GSRM folks, but she pushed back *hard* against the possibility of teaching kids about GSRM identities in sex education. I don't remember her reasoning – at the time, I was shocked by the strength of her reaction. Inclusive sex education is such a personal issue for me, and she just dismissed it. I believe that kids should know what is possible, that they should know that they don't have to fit themselves into the norms in which they're socialized, and about which they're taught. If I'd been taught that aromanticism and asexuality existed, I wouldn't have tried so hard to be straight. But I was taught that if I was not gay, or bisexual, or pansexual, then I had to be straight. So I forced myself to believe that. When my feelings didn't make sense

⁷³ Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*, 29.

in the context of heterosexuality, I either denied my feelings or shamed myself for being a bad straight person. Heteronormativity can do so much damage that can be precluded by better sex education.

Media

I used to read all the time. In elementary school, I checked out the maximum number of books from the school library. In middle school, I read over two hundred school library books in one year – and that doesn't count the books I checked out from the public library or the ones I read at home. I read beneath the covers at night, sweating from the heat of my flashlight as I tried to turn the pages silently. In fifth grade, I read a book that I saw on a college reading list eight years later. I hid books in my nightstand, under my covers, beneath my bed, and in the pockets of my bathrobe. I read as I walked through the halls at school. It took me two weeks to read *Gone With the Wind* because my parents grounded me from reading -- they emailed my teachers and told my friends, so that I could only read during the mandated ten-minute silent reading period every day. I read at lunch, hunched over my book so that the shadow of my body fell over the page, protecting my eyes from the bright sunlight. In class, I kept books in my lap and used my hands as bookmarks so that I could read a couple sentences any time my teachers paused in their lessons. When I realized I could illegally download books on the internet, I read a fifteen-book series in a week. I can consistently read a hundred-pages of fiction, fantasy, or sci-fi in an hour, tops. At home, books line three bookcases, my dresser, my desk, my nightstand, and my floor – and those are the books that I own, not the books my family owns.

Suffice it to say, my childhood was spent consuming books at an incredibly fast rate. I can't remember them all, but there were a few that influenced my expectations about romantic

and sexual relationships. I have a vivid memory of paging through the Merriam-Webster dictionary on my parents' desk in fifth grade, in order to find out what condoms were. They were mentioned off-hand in a series I was reading, in order to set the scene. Since then, I can count the number of times that I've seen (or at least recognized) condoms on one hand. There was another book I read in middle school, one that had a nonconsensual sexual scene. It was the first book I read in which characters did more than kiss. I know I was around other people when I read it, because I remember self-consciously wondering if I was blushing or making a face. I remember checking out a public library book with a female protagonist who gave blowjobs to gain popularity, but ended up losing her female friends in the process. At the time, I was confused about why she lost her friends, and I know I didn't understand what a blowjob was until a couple years later. I can count the number of books I've read with explicitly asexual characters on both hands, and one of those asexual characters turned out to be an alien. I can't remember the last time I read a book with teenage or adult main characters that didn't include the formation or confirmation of a romantic relationship during the resolution of the plot.

In high school, I discovered the joys of afternoon television shows. In the spring of my sophomore year, I had the run of the house in the afternoons for the first time, with full access to the television. Books had become predictable, so I welcomed the influx of new stories. However, I was a little shocked by how many romantic story arcs and sexy scenes were in the fictional crime shows that populated daytime television. I had no issues with watching romantic or sexy scenes, but it was confusing. Character development largely occurred around romantic or sexual relationships, which seemed to play a huge part in their lives. Instead of questioning these representations, I just ignored the dissonance between my feelings and the actions of the characters on television.

I encountered the wonders of YouTube in high school when a group of friends made me watch the music video for “You Belong With Me” by Taylor Swift. I listened to music obsessively, memorizing songs instead of doing my homework. I sing while I pack, while I do my homework, while I walk, while I do chores, while I shower, and when I’m upset. I don’t sing well, by any stretch of the imagination, and I don’t sing for an audience – I sing for myself. Song lyrics tell stories that I relate to my life, and I only memorize songs that are meaningful to me. For instance, I cry when I sing “Wake Me Up When September Ends” by Green Day because I memorized it as I grieved my grandmother’s death; anything by Lady Gaga reminds me of my childhood best friends, who blasted her music on the radio; and I still find parallels between Taylor Swift’s “Love Story” and my first romantic relationship. Songs can soothe me when I’m angry, calm me down when I’m anxious or upset; songs can make me brave, and they can make me sad. Songs can also make me uncomfortable.

I was still in high school when I stopped listening to songs that explicitly mentioned sexy behavior. At the time, I thought that the ache in my chest and the way I cringed when I listened to explicit songs was because I was naïve, inexperienced, shy, or even a prude. I only recognized those feelings as intense anxiety and discomfort two years ago, once I was comfortable identifying as asexual. Romantic songs didn’t elicit that kind of reaction in me until I realized I was aromantic, and they remain more irritating than anything else. The constant barrage of romance and sex in music, in the songs that I sang to comfort myself, became exhausting. I was tired of constantly confronting those norms, so I decided to make myself an aro-ace playlist. It took a number of Google searches, and I listened to a lot of bad songs, but I ended up with a decent playlist. It’s full of songs that celebrate friendship, being alone, and being yourself, as well as a handful of songs that are refreshingly dismissive of romantic and sexy things. Now, I

can sing songs that reflect the relationships that I want to have, rather than songs that insist on romantic or sexual behavior and make me feel invisible.

...

I have consumed a lot of media in my life, and the most prominent, consistent themes are romance and sex. Romantic relationships are presented as simultaneously unremarkable and stunningly important; as something that everyone has because they're necessary for a happy life. Sexual relationships are presented as the most intimate, amazing experience. Both types of relationships are represented as inevitable, foregone conclusions of everybody's lives. Regan and Berscheid explore the romantic and sexual norms that media conveys.

Popular music, television, and film provide countless depictions of sexually passionate relationships, alternately glorifying and vilifying the desires of the flesh. On a daily basis, talk show hosts and their invited guests tell us how to behave in a sexually desirable manner, what to say to communicate sexual desire to an attractive other, and what clothes to wear to ignite sexual desire in our current flames. Should this advice fail, we can always turn to the countless self-help books that promise to teach us in 10 easy steps how to rekindle the sexual ashes of our fading romances, once-torrid love affairs, or weatherbeaten marriages. All of these events conspire to teach us that sexual desire is a necessary ingredient in our romantic relationships and that sexual desirability is something we each should strive to attain.⁷⁴

Media is not just entertainment that insists romance and sex are important parts of people's lives; books, television shows, and music are full of representations of people and relationships. Richard Dyer states, "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat

⁷⁴ Regan and Berscheid, *Lust*, viii.

others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.” (Dyer 1) Media shows us what is possible, what is acceptable, and what is taboo, and these representations impact how we see the world around us.

A lot of media represents, and is representative of, a culture of romantic love. Eva Illouz introduces this concept as “a culture whereby the definition of the good life includes finding a person able to generate long-lasting and yet exciting feelings, and being able to extend the experience of love throughout one’s life.” (196) Illouz uses the term *romantic utopia* to describe “how self-fulfillment, authenticity, meaning, and happiness are reached in the experience of heterosexual love.” (197) It is no wonder that so much media depicts these idealized relationships. With this logic, a life without romantic love is selfish, dull, and lonely.

However, media is consumed critically. R. Danielle Egan argues that “ignoring the vast amount of demographic and ethnographic data on girls’ sexuality, media consumption, and meaning making obscures the complex ways in which girls negotiate popular culture and, equally importantly, actually behave.” (Egan 134) Audiences view media through the lens of their positionality and life experiences. They can be critical of what they see or hear, they can reject it outright, and they can accept it.

Unfortunately, consuming media and the representations they render still has an effect. Even though I knew that I didn’t experience the romantic feelings I saw in books, movies, television shows, and music, I assumed I still felt romantic attraction. I just thought I experienced it differently. If I thought someone was cute and enjoyed spending time with them, I figured that must be romantic attraction. If I liked cuddling or touching someone, I assumed that was sexual attraction. I encountered hundreds of characters in fictional and fantastical worlds, and while there were some that didn’t experience sexual attraction, all of them felt romantic attraction. No

character – no author, director, or songwriter – showed me that it was possible to be any other way. I interpreted my feelings to fit the narrative represented by media, because I didn't realize that there was any other option.

Marriage

I remember pretending to get married when I was younger. I have this memory of an afternoon in my cotton-candy pink bedroom, with the sun warm outside the window. The Sound of Music soundtrack spilled from the silver CD player on my bed, but it was drowned out by my off-tune singing. I remember acting out the songs as they played. When the orchestral procession and “Maria” Reprise came on, from the wedding scene, I walked slowly from my nightstand to the door, carrying my pink and black dance bag from ballet class – pretending to be Maria, carrying a guitar case down the aisle at the wedding.

I didn't pretend to be Maria because she was getting married; I pretended to be Maria because she was the main character, a wonderful, talented woman who sang beautifully. I admired a lot of female characters in books and movies, imagining myself as them, looking to them as role models. But getting married *was* part of her story; it seemed like it was part of everyone's story, the perfect happy ending. In the Disney movies I watched as a child, princesses' stories always ended happily with marriage (or the implication of marriage, in the case of *Mulan*). Happiness was the point of these stories, the end goal, and happiness came with marriage.

...

Marriage is a major part of many people's lives, and regardless of individual opinions about the institution, marriage is assumed to be something everyone wants, something everyone

works toward. “Marriage is so widespread as to be invisible. Many of us accept it as we find it, including the central role it plays in our imaginations...”⁷⁵ Young girls are supposed to imagine what their wedding will be like – after all, it’s the most important day of their lives. We are taught that “the proper trajectory of a life is into such a romantic love relationship, and that romantic love is a universal goal, which those not in such relationships are seeking.”⁷⁶ We are told that we’ll all grow up, get married, and have kids, as if that is the only way to live. Grow up, get married, and have kids. We are taught that getting married means you’re grown up; it’s a rite of passage that marks maturity. A life-long romantic partnership, particularly marriage, “is considered a significant social marker, denoting full adulthood.”⁷⁷ Supposedly, romantic love is something everyone experiences; it can’t be controlled by norms or social pressures, and is instead a unifying force. This theoretically gives romantic love the transgressive potential to overcome difference. As Illouz says, “for a prince to fall in love with a poor shepherdess means to relinquish a great source of power.”⁷⁸ The institution of marriage pervades not only our collective imagination, but also our very sense of what an ideal life should include.

I argue that the institution of marriage is privileged in the United States. Married couples have over one thousand more federal civil rights than single people, or folks with relationships that the federal government doesn’t recognize.⁷⁹ Amatonormativity privileges the marital relationship and trivializes other kinds of relationships. It is “meant to reward and legitimize

⁷⁵ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 94.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 100.

⁷⁸ Illouz, “Romantic Love,” 199.

⁷⁹ Kristin S. Scherrer, “What Asexuality Contributed to the Same-Sex Marriage Discussion,” *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 22, no. 1 (2010): 1.

certain relationships and sexual behaviors.”⁸⁰ As Scherrer argues, from the way access to civil rights is controlled, “it is clear that marriage is inherently a political institution.”⁸¹

It is important to recognize that marriage doesn’t actually affect everyone the same way. Historically, anti-miscegenation laws weren’t declared illegal until the U.S. Supreme Court Case *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, and same-sex marriage wasn’t federally recognized until the U.S. Supreme Court Case *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. Even with the passage of these legal decisions, marriage influences the lives of people of color and queer folks differently. In 2004, Marlon M. Bailey critiqued the uncritical push to legalize same-sex marriage.

We should not assume, in a racist, sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic society, that all people will have access to the so-called rights and privileges that marriage purports to offer. Black people, especially Black queers, have never been able to rely on the state to see us as equal citizens entitled to the rights and privileges granted to our white counterparts.⁸²

He argues that the legalization of same-sex marriage won’t actually bring equal rights to Black queer folks because access to the rights and privileges of marriage is racialized. State and federal governments don’t support the rights of all people equally, regardless of legislation.

Additionally, marriage and the nuclear family have been raised up as an ideal in opposition to traditional Black extended kinship networks.

In the last two years, I’ve had a few very similar conversations about marriage – specifically, about the inviolable commitment of marriage. I distinctly remember a conversation

⁸⁰ M. LaSala, “Too many eggs in the wrong basket: A queer critique of the same-sex marriage movement,” *Social Work* 52, no. 2 (2007): 182.

⁸¹ Scherrer, “What Asexuality Contributed,” 2.

⁸² Marlon M. Bailey, “Is Gay Marriage Racist? A Conversation with Marlon M. Bailey, Priya Kandaswamy, and Mattie Udora Richardson,” 2004, 89.

that began when I heard someone talking about how upset they were that their friends were divorcing, how their friends should have tried harder to make things work. When I asked them to explain their opinion, they said that marriage means you stay together and work out your differences, no matter what.

Another conversation with a different person began when I questioned why marriage was considered such an important form of commitment compared to committed friendships, for example. Basically, I proposed that non-marital commitments were just as real and strong as the commitment of marriage. The person I was speaking with completely dismissed the idea. I was told that marriage was a completely different level of commitment that includes sharing resources and living together, and that it was much more difficult to break up a marriage than a friendship because divorce was a difficult and extensive process.

...

I've stumbled into many conversations with people who believe marriage should be a privileged institution. When pressed, people tend to fall back on the logic of commitment. As Brake says, "One of the most pervasive and defining social expectations regarding marriage (despite statistics) is its bindingness...if one leaves a marriage, one is still marked by it, as a divorcé(e). It is life-defining."⁸³ Brake later argues that "commitment is not only expressed through marriage, and marriage is not necessary to develop committedness...A commitment is no less a commitment because it coexists with other commitments."⁸⁴ In other words, marriage doesn't have a monopoly on commitment, and marriage itself doesn't always actualize life-long

⁸³ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 23.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 62.

commitment. She and I agree that friendships can include the same level of commitment as marriages.⁸⁵

Brake offers a solution to this dynamic in which marriage is privilege and all other forms of relationships are stigmatized and discriminated against. She proposes the reform of the institution, advocating for minimal marriage in which

individuals can have legal marital relationships with more than one person, reciprocally or asymmetrically, themselves determining the sex and number of parties, the type of relationships involved, and which rights and responsibilities to exchange with each.⁸⁶

Minimal marriage extends the institution to include any kind of relationship, making it easier to obtain the civil rights associated with marriage. Other critiques, particularly queer critiques in response to the push for same-sex marriage, argue that these civil rights should be completely separated from the institution of marriage. For instance, universal healthcare makes the ability to share health insurance a non-issue. Take the rights given to married folks and apply them to everyone, regardless of their relationships status. The types of relationships you want to have and are able to have should not define your rights.

⁸⁵ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 157.

Chapter Three: Disrupting Norms

Romantic and sexual norms are pervasive in part because the language we have to describe intimacy and desire is very restrictive. Most folks describe their relationships as platonic, romantic, and/or sexual, which limits the kinds of relationships they're able to imagine. "That's another thing: words shape our thoughts. If no word exists in a language to describe a thing, it's almost impossible to discuss that concept, at least not without convoluted circumlocutions."⁸⁷ GSRM folks have long been involved in critiquing relationship norms, and asexual and aromantic communities have participated in this tradition since their conception.

Challenging Norms in Asexual and Aromantic Communities

Asexual and aromantic communities have always been invested in expanding the language we use to describe identities, types of attraction, and relationships. "People get jargony when their existence is denied and excluded by society, when there aren't even words to describe our experiences so we have to make them up."⁸⁸ Asexual and aromantic folks have been coming up with words to describe their experiences for years – recently, I found a comprehensive list of over forty romantic orientations.⁸⁹ Creating words helps us describe our experiences and build communities that stem from a shared identity, and it's a huge part of why we have these communities in the first place.

⁸⁷ Sciatrix, "My Thoughts on the Word 'Zucchini,'" *Writing From Factor X*, Posted July 11, 2011.

⁸⁸ Meloukhia, comment on Kaz, "A/romanticism," *Kaz's Scribblings*, Posted December 24, 2010.

⁸⁹ Amy Ghost, "A list of romantic orientations," in Romantic and Aromantic Orientations, *The Asexual Visibility and Education Network*, Posted May 24, 2015.

Identities

Two and a half years ago, I began trying to determine where I fit on the asexual and aromantic spectrums. At first, I rejected the idea that I might be asexual or aromantic; *never* was such an absolute word, and it scared me. It also took me a long time to shake off the norms I'd been internalizing my entire life. I posted to an AVEN forum asking for advice, and the overwhelming suggestion I received was to figure out my romantic orientation first. AVEN didn't have much information about romantic orientations, though, so I dove into Tumblr advice websites filled with aromantic spectrum folks sharing their experiences and asking moderators for their opinions.

I sifted through dozens of romantic orientations as I tried to find one that resonated with me. At first, I thought I might be demiromantic, which describes people who can only be romantically attracted to folks with which they've already formed a strong emotional bond. Then I came across the label quoiromantic, also known as WTFromantic, which describes people who can't tell the difference between platonic and romantic attraction. For a while, I thought I might be quoiromantic because of the frustration and confusion I felt about how subjective romantic attraction is. After trying on a few more orientations, I stopped feeling the urgent need to label myself with an orientation that perfectly fit my experience. Eventually, I settled on aromantic because I'm slightly romance-averse and I don't think I've ever experienced romantic attraction.

Attractions

Asexuality and aromanticism are built on the idea that romantic and sexual attraction can occur separately. Although this idea began outside asexual and aromantic communities, asexual and aromantic folks developed the language of the split model of attraction, which distinguishes

between multiple kinds of attraction. I've seen seven different kinds of attraction defined across various online asexual and aromantic communities:

1. Sexual attraction: the desire to do sexy things with someone.
2. Romantic attraction: the desire to be in a romantic relationship with someone.
3. Platonic attraction: the desire to be friends with someone.
4. Sensual attraction: the desire to touch or be in physical contact with someone in ways you define as nonsexual.
5. Emotional/Alterous attraction: the desire to form a close emotional bond with someone.
6. Intellectual attraction: the desire to intellectually or mentally interact with someone; enjoying or appreciating someone's brain.
7. Aesthetic attraction: enjoying or appreciating someone's appearance, style, or looks.

The split model of attraction was a very useful tool when I was trying to figure out where I fit on the asexual and aromantic spectrums because it helped me parse out my feelings. I realized that I notice when certain people are near me – they draw my attention, regardless of whether I know them or have even spoken to them. I made a game out of figuring out why I noticed some people at not others; at Bates, I'd sit in Commons, look at the people I noticed, and I'd try to ascertain how *exactly* I was attracted to them. Spoiler: I realized I wasn't sexually or romantically attracted to anyone.

The split model of attraction isn't used by everyone in asexual and aromantic communities, in part because the idea of separating romantic and sexual attraction has some very complicated politics. Gender norms suggest that men are inherently sexual, while women supposedly can't have sex without a romantic or emotional connection. Ela Pryzbylo explores how "asexuality is discursively elaborated as an identity that is unsustainable, uninhabitable, and

damaging for men and their ‘manhood.’”⁹⁰ Asexual men have to navigate constructions of masculinity that are based on sex, and are often mocked and discriminated against because of their asexuality. On the other hand, women who are aromantic are often stereotyped as cold, uncaring, and heartless. Romantic love is considered one of the things that makes us human, and women who don’t experience it are often reproached. That is a stereotype that I’ve had to navigate before, and it is one I have to resist on a constant basis because I’ve internalized it.

There’s also a lot of pushback against this model from online GSRM communities. Some folks argue that the split model of attraction is inherently homophobic because separating romantic and sexual attraction plays into the hypersexualization of LGBTQ folks. The argument is that LGBTQ folks already deal with hypersexualization as a product of homophobia, and separating romantic and sexual attraction sexualizes their identities even further.⁹¹ It also allows LGBTQ folks to say they only experience same-sex sexual desire, which supposedly further contributes to the sexualization of LGBTQ identities. There’s also an argument that the split model of attraction facilitates internalized homophobia, because separating romantic and sexual attraction allows LGBTQ folks to say they experience same-sex romantic attraction while also stigmatizing same-sex sexual attraction.⁹²

I’m not sure if the split model of attraction does more harm than good. I know how easy it can be to internalize harmful romantic and sexual norms, because that’s what happened to me. I know that the split model of attraction is one of the only reasons I was able to work through

⁹⁰ Ela Pryzbylo, “Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)Sexualities,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 443.

⁹¹ Lovethatdiscourse, “But really tho, the split attraction model is literally homophobic,” *Jessie Ware Saved My Life*, Tumblr, November 8, 2015.

⁹² Knownaphobe, “Anonymous asked: what’s wrong with the split attraction model?” *Knownaphobe*, Tumblr, March 26, 2017.

internalized romantic and sexual norms to realize I'm asexual and aromantic. I also know that the folks who argue that the split model of attraction is inherently homophobic often also claim that heteroromantic and aromantic asexual folks are just confused straight people and don't belong in GSRM communities.⁹³ However, regardless of the value of the split model of attraction, it has played a large part in the development of asexual and aromantic communities, and, as such, needs to be recognized.

Relationships

Asexual and aromantic communities are also coming up with new ways of imagining relationships – some folks are doing so by challenging conventional norms around what counts as romantic and/or sexual behavior. Lorca Jolene Sloan interviewed asexual folks who build nonsexual, intimate connections with others through the formation of BDSM relationships. “They accomplish this by defining ‘sexual’ and ‘nonsexual’ behaviors based not upon what physical acts individuals engage in, but rather upon whether an individual’s main motivation is to generate sexual desire or initiate sex.”⁹⁴ In other words, these asexual folks access BDSM tools and practices by framing their participation as nonsexual, because they aren't trying to get anything sexual out of these behaviors. Additionally, BDSM negotiation facilitates space for asexual participants to set nonsexual goals and communicate their boundaries. Asexual folks can frame sex and sexual behavior as just another kink, “an activity that practitioners should respect for its potential to generate pleasure and intimacy, but not assume to be ubiquitously desired.”⁹⁵ BDSM is just one way asexual folks challenge romantic and sexual norms. Many aromantic and

⁹³ “Challenging Asexual Definitions of Asexuality,” *The Thinking Aro*, Blog, June 11, 2016.

⁹⁴ Lorca Jolene Sloan, “Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building sexual relationships through BDSM practice,” *Sexualities* 18, no. 5-6 (2015): 556.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 555.

asexual folks also resist the ideas that hand holding, cuddling, and even kissing are exclusively romantic and/or sexual behaviors.

Folks in asexual and aromantic communities also came up with *queerplatonic* as a kind of attraction and relationship,⁹⁶ and *zucchini* to describe the person with whom you are in a queerplatonic relationship. These words were coined by Meloukhia in the comments section of a post by Kaz about blurry romantic orientations and the lack of language available to describe relationships that live between or straddle the boundaries of romantic and platonic relationships.⁹⁷

Ok, I am now referring to these kinds of relationships as zucchini. This is official, and so it shall be... I kind of like queerplatonic as a definer for the attraction I feel to my zucchini; it neatly avoids discussing the gender of either party involved, while emphasizing the idea that it is a deep (almost symbiotic in some ways) emotional connection that transcends what I think of as a friendship.⁹⁸

Zucchini was first used jokingly to describe queerplatonic relationships, as rhetorical surrender to the absurdity of the limits of language, but it was quickly picked up and popularized by aromantic and asexual communities. As Sciatrix explains, “words like ‘zucchini’ and ‘squash’⁹⁹ have given me vocabulary to talk about my dreams and my hopes and my current relationships so much more effectively than I could otherwise.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Also known as quasiplatonic or quirkyplatonic, due to concerns both inside and outside aromantic and asexual communities regarding the appropriateness of using *queer* in this context.

⁹⁷ Kaz, “A/romanticism,” *Kaz’s Scribblings*, Blog, December 24, 2010.

⁹⁸ Meloukhia, comment on Kaz, “A/romanticism,” *Kaz’s Scribblings*, Blog, December 25, 2010.

⁹⁹ A squash is like a romantic crush, but for people with which you desire a queerplatonic relationship.

¹⁰⁰ Sciatrix, “My Thoughts on the Word ‘Zucchini.’”

Asexual and aromantic folks do a lot of work redefining words and creating new language in order to adequately explain their experiences. It is important to note that a lot of this work is done in the English language, despite the fact that asexual and aromantic communities are international and transnational spaces. For instance, Kaz is German, and has written about the difficulties of being unable to describe *zer*¹⁰¹ sexual and romantic orientations in German because the concepts don't translate easily.¹⁰² Asexuality as a concept is not exclusively Anglo-American, as the centrality of the English language in these communities might suggest, but a lot of language- and community-building has been done in English in part because of the hegemony of the English language that makes it the language most folks have in common.

Situating These Challenges in Queer, Feminist, and Anarchist Traditions

Asexual and aromantic folks are not the first to push the boundaries of our language and imagination around relationships. In fact, they are inspired by traditions of feminist, queer, and anarchist work that challenge relationship norms. First, I identify a feminist trend from the 1960s and 1970s in which women chose asexuality as a political statement. Second, I identify the queer and feminist legacies of Boston marriages and romantic friendships. Last, I identify relationship anarchy as an alternate model of relationships.

Choosing Asexuality: 20th Century Feminists

Breanne Fahs, Ela Pryzbylo, and Danielle Cooper all consider the impact of asexuality as a feminist political choice in their work. Pryzbylo and Cooper explore the possibilities of expanding our conceptions of queerness and asexuality. They argue that “blurring the distinction

¹⁰¹ Kaz uses the pronouns *ze*, *eir*, *zer*, *eirs*, and *zerself*.

¹⁰² Kaz, “Muttersprache,” *Kaz’s Scribblings*, Blog, May 31, 2011.

between celibacy and asexuality may be integral to expanding notions of what and who might ‘count’ as asexual, dismantling the definitional parameters of asexuality, and effectively queering the asexual archive.”¹⁰³ Dominant conceptions of asexuality often maintain a hard distinction between asexuality as an intrinsic disposition and celibacy as a behavioral choice, but Pryzbylo and Cooper complicate that separation. Fahs examines the radical potential of asexuality as a political choice that “limits the social control aspects of sexuality, particularly because it picks off the pro-reproduction, pro-family, pro-pleasure discourses in favor of women’s autonomy and sexual agency to *withhold* sex.”¹⁰⁴ She critiques the centrality of sex in feminist movements, citing the erasure of radical asexual (by choice) feminists from the 1960s and 1970s as evidence of the threat asexuality poses to normative structures of gender and sexuality that attempt to subordinate women. Even before asexuality was constructed as a sexual orientation, feminists were choosing asexuality as a political statement against the state.

Boston Marriages

Boston marriages are another kind of relationships based on the idea of asexuality-as-choice. Esther D. Rothblum and Kathleen A. Brehony study contemporary asexual lesbian relationships, characterized by the closeness and commitment of romantic relationships combined with a lack of sexual activity.¹⁰⁵ The women in these relationships create intimacy outside sexual activity, although all the women Rothblum and Brehony interviewed “were still sexually attracted to their partners...most of the respondents also had a number of previous

¹⁰³ Ela Pryzbylo and Danielle Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 308.

¹⁰⁴ Breanne Fahs, “Radical refusals: On the anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 4 (2010): 455.

¹⁰⁵ Esther D. Rothblum and Kathleen A. Brehony, *Boston Marriages: Romantic but asexual relationships among contemporary lesbians*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1993), 5.

lesbian relationships that were sexual.”¹⁰⁶ Their work demonstrates that even when people experience sexual attraction, they don’t always feel the desire to act on it. As such, they represent a separation between attraction and behavior that complicates conventional romantic-sexual norms.

Romantic Friendships

Romantic friendships exist in the grey area between friendship and romance, and are a kind of relationship that is part of both a project of reclaiming queer history, as well as a feminist movement that recognizes the importance of friendship. Lillian Faderman examines romantic friendship in the context of queer history, providing an account of women loving women for hundreds of years before the 20th century. She characterizes romantic friendship as an “all-consuming emotional relationship in which two women are devoted to each other above anyone else.”¹⁰⁷ Although Faderman successfully distinguishes between romantic and sexual feelings, and pushes at the boundary between friendship and romantic relationships, she doesn’t allow for the full complexity and strength of friendships. She reinterprets close female friendships as lesbian romantic relationships that were unable to be sealed by marriage. Although I understand and support the need to reclaim queer history, Faderman’s work was difficult for me to read. She relies on and contributes to the amatonormative assumption that romance is the sole space for intimacy, passion, closeness, and commitment; this implies that friendship alone can’t be these things, and is therefore less than romantic relationships.

¹⁰⁶ Rothblum and Brehony, *Boston Marriages*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. (1981), 19.

Jessie Pocock writes about romantic relationships from a feminist perspective, discussing the potential of romantic friendships to challenge normative ideas that relate emotional and physical intimacy to romantic-sexual feelings. “With all this friendship love, it’s not surprising that romantic friendships don’t fit well inside patriarchy. People are suspicious of close ties between friends, quick to define them as sexual.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, romantic friendships can be interpreted as threats to romantic and sexual relationships under the logic of amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality.

Relationship Anarchy

The term *relationship anarchy* refers to the application of anarchist principles to relationships. The term was first explained in 2006, when Andie Nordgren wrote “The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy.”¹⁰⁹ The title of the text suggests that relationship anarchy had been practiced for a while, if not under that exact name. Since then, folks in particularly polyamorous, aromantic, and asexual communities have used the concept of relationship anarchy to structure their challenges to and critiques of romantic and sexual norms. Although the concept has been twisted and adapted by some folks to to justify uncritical, apolitical open relationships based on neoliberal ideas of freedom, some folks in aromantic and asexual communities have followed the concept back to its original source in anarchist values and principles.

Rotten Zuchinnis writes a Tumblr blog that focuses on aromantic and asexual topics. They published a five-post series in 2016 about relationship anarchy, explaining that it means “challenging (structural) coercion in interpersonal relationships.” Practicing relationship anarchy

¹⁰⁸ Jessie Pocock, “Reimagining Love – Romantic Friendships,” *Medium*, September 6, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Andie Nordgren, “The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy,” *The Anarchist Library*, Retrieved July 14, 2012.

means “approaching all relationships authentically...without imposing on them any predetermined structures/expectations/obligations” as well as “valuing all love equally and therefore challenging relationship hierarchies.”¹¹⁰ Essentially, relationship anarchy asks us to throw out the expectations and assumptions we have about what relationships should look like, which relationships should be prioritized, and which behaviors should be exclusively tied to certain relationships.

Queeranarchism writes about the connection between relationship anarchism and commitment on their Tumblr blog.

Relationship anarchism then, to me, means community. A community of two or of many. A community that rejects the ‘rules’ of relationships, of enforced heterosexuality, enforced monogamy, of partners being entitled to sex, of marriage, of childcare being a two-person job and of the idea that we need romantic or sexual relationships to be complete. A community that instead chooses care, cooperation, equality, acknowledgement that we are more than our relationship and that we all have different needs.¹¹¹

Queeranarchism’s analysis of relationship anarchy as focused on community rejects the neoliberal interpretation that privileges individual desires. From this perspective, relationship anarchy provides a way of building community that is based on open communication and unlimited possibilities.

¹¹⁰ “Of relationship anarchy, accessibility and sitting shiva – Part 1: The anarchism of ‘relationship anarchy,’” *Rotten Zucchini*, Tumblr, April 7, 2016.

¹¹¹ “Relationship anarchy could be about so much more than the freedom to fuck,” *Queer Anarchisms*, Tumblr, February 6, 2016.

Negotiating Norms as an Aro-Ace Woman of Color

I find myself in an odd position, where I often want to disrupt romantic and sexual norms, but I'm not always able to do so. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, there are so many grey areas and areas of possibility, and negotiating norms is fundamentally about discovering those possibilities. In this section, I discuss how I negotiate romantic and sexual norms in dance and in the process of coming out.

Dancing

At Bates, ballroom dance is a large part of my life. I'm the vice-president, co-secretary, and community liaison of the Bates Ballroom Team, I co-teach the Ballroom Dance P.E. Class, and I'm a competing team member. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that ballroom dance *is* my life.

Ballroom dance is also a very gendered and heteronormative style of dance, particularly at a competitive level. Traditionally, a male leader and a female follower constitute the ideal couple on the dance floor, which means that same-sex couples often don't do as well at competitions. Although I'm ambidancetrous – I know how to lead and follow every dance – I prefer following. I think it's more fun. But it puts me in a bit of an odd position for some of my dances, because leaders mainly just need to look confident, while followers need to perform romantic and sexual aesthetics.

Those expectations come into play in how I perform at competitions. Just considering my costumes, I wear two-and-a-half inch heels in all of my dances. My competition dress for the rhythm dances is basically a sparkly bra top connected to a leotard bottom by red fringe. The dress that I wear for my smooth dances has a long, flowing skirt reminiscent of Ginger Rogers. Although it doesn't bother me to wear dresses that are objectively sexy and romantic, it does

show that these norms are embedded in the very clothing I'm expected to wear. Unfortunately, it does make me uncomfortable to be asked to perform sexy and romantic feelings.

When my coach first asked me to act sexy, I'm pretty sure my face was just blank. I remember being distressed to be expected to act sexy because I didn't even know what sexy meant – I fundamentally don't understand the concept of feeling sexy, let alone acting sexy. Additionally, for some of the dances, we're supposed to look lovingly into our partner's eyes, but if I try to make a "loving" face, either I laugh or my partner does. I just can't get my face to form the proper expression. The best I can do is affection, or fondness. I find myself having to reframe the aesthetics I'm expected to perform with language that I actually feel.

At ballroom dance competitions, it's hard to resist gendered and heteronormative norms. If you do, it makes it hard to make it to the finals. It's a little easier to resist romantic and sexual norms because there are other feelings you can perform that give you a similar aesthetic, but overall, it's hard to negotiate norms in the framework of ballroom dance.

...

I go social dancing because it makes me feel free in ways that ballroom dance is unable to do. Ballroom dance is restrictive because it's about competition and performance; I can't reject the norms and traditions if I want to do well at competitions. That is not to say that social dancing is perfect, because it can be a bit of a minefield itself. Some people go dancing to hook up with folks, and some people can be creepy. But I have found a few social dance spaces where I'm comfortable and happy – I can dance with other people without feeling pressured by romantic and sexual norms.

I can take up space and dance and reimagine the ways I can be. I can have fun, and be loud, and be so obviously there, when being invisible is such a daily part of my life. I can carve

out space to dance, to be touching other people, in ways that are entirely platonic, intimate, radical, and mine.

Coming Out

I had a hard time deciding to come out to my parents. I had four threads of thought running through my head about coming out. First, I hated the politics of coming out. Part of me wanted to never come out as an act of rebellion against the rampant heteronormativity in our society that makes coming out necessary; either that, or straight people should have to come out, too. I disliked the Foucauldian idea of having to confess my “true identity” to folks *because* they incorrectly assume certain things about who I am, and then they benefit from this process because they feel good that I trust them enough to share my orientations with them. The idea of coming out just *bothered* me.

Second, I knew that I needed to come out. I needed to be able to joke about being asexual and aromantic. I needed to be able to buy pride shirts and wear them freely. I needed to be able to rant about the prevalence of romantic and sexual norms. I needed to be able to be all of myself around my family, and that meant coming out.

Third, I wanted to be confident in my identity before I came out to them. If I was sure about myself, it would be easier to respond to questions and defend myself if need be. If I was sure about myself, it would be easier to remember that it may be as hard for them to accept my identities as it was for me. I was also afraid that if my identity changed soon after I came out to my parents, it would invalidate my sexual and romantic identities in their eyes.

Fourth, I knew that if I was going to come out, I’d need to be able to understand and describe asexuality and aromanticism. Omnes et Nihil writes, “You can’t usually come out as asexual in a moment or a single conversation. You come out over the course of years – that’s

how long it takes for non-asexual people who already believe your asexuality to start understanding what you mean, what asexuality means.”¹¹² Coming out is a lifelong process for most GSRM folks, but for asexual and aromantic folks, it can take years for people to even be able to grasp the concepts of not experiencing romantic and sexual attraction. Because asexuality and aromanticism are so marginalized and erased, I knew my parents would have no idea what it means for me to be asexual and aromantic.

Vocabulary Lessons

“Are you queer?” Daisy’s¹¹³ question caught me off guard, and I found myself scrambling for an answer that made sense. We’d only been in the Netherlands for a day, and I knew that she was one of the students in my study abroad program, but I couldn’t remember her name.

“Umm...I’m not sure? Why do you ask?”

“Everyone else on the program is, so I was just curious. You don’t have to tell me though if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just, I’m not sure if I count as queer...I’m asexual and aromantic,” I offered, thinking that she’d be able to decide on her own whether I was queer, and would tell the rest of the students.

“Oh, okay.”

“Yeah, so since queer’s used as an umbrella term for the whole LGBTQ community, it seems like it would include me,” I jumped in, because she was looking a little confused. “But at the same time, it’s historically been used as a slur against people who experience same-sex

¹¹² Omnes et Nihil, *Asexuality: Coming to Terms*, compiled by Ennis and Kelley, An Ace Toronto Zine Issue 1, October 2014, 20.

¹¹³ Daisy is a pseudonym.

attraction, so I'm still on the fence about whether it's appropriate to call myself queer...so I'm still trying to answer that question myself."

"Wait, so you're asexual? What does that mean?"

...

I ended up coming out separately to all eight people in my study abroad program. Even if they knew the basic definition of asexuality or aromanticism, they had a hard time imagining it, and asked me to explain what it felt like. I was surprised, and a little disappointed – I'd had this idealistic notion that all queer folks would know about most sexual and romantic orientations. Obviously, that is a really problematic and inaccurate assumption, which I quickly discovered. But coming out eight separate times was really good practice, and I ended up coming out to my parents that winter.

Out at Home

I just came out to my parents. We were driving along in the car after dinner, and I just pulled myself together, and came out to them. It was so easy. It's hard to believe how scared I could be of those words, but I did it anyways. I told them who I was, and then I just talked to them, and answered their questions. I held Mom when she cried.

It was hard to explain sexual and romantic attraction well, and they kept asking me who else knew, which was kind of funny. Nothing went wrong, but nothing went perfectly, either. I'm tired, and a little sad, but I feel more me in this house than I have in a while, and that was my goal. I want to live true to myself as much as possible. No matter where I am, or who I'm around, I want to be wholly me. And I'm one step closer now than I was before, and that makes me feel happy and warm and centered. And although I stumbled over my words a few times, and got worked up about society, I did well. I was me. And it was so, so worth it.

...

Rereading this journal entry now makes me laugh a little. It is kind of endearing how hopeful and happy I was. I do still agree with my decision to come out to my parents, but I also ended up deciding not to come out to the rest family.¹¹⁴ I'm not explicitly explaining my sexual and romantic orientations in terms that would confuse them, but I'm also not hiding the fact that I don't want to be in a romantic relationship, and that I don't want to marry. In other words, I'm trying to come out to them without actually *coming out* to them.

...

“Love Yourself (who else will?)”

don't leave

the worship

of your body

to anyone else.

be in awe

of yourself,

of the

lightning

spliced across

your hips.

refuse

¹¹⁴ I came out to my sister, Alyssa, almost a year before I came out to my parents.

to stop admiring
your rising belly,
heavy
as the summer sun.

oh, my dear,
treasure
the way your body
moves
through this world

and
wonder
at your brilliance.

Conclusion: Imagining Possibilities

I spent my entire life ignoring the fact that I didn't experience romantic or sexual attraction. I convinced myself I was straight and I pressured myself to be in romantic relationships because everything around me told me that everyone's lives included romantic relationships. I didn't know that I could choose to never be in a romantic relationship, and I didn't know I could be happy without one. When I realized that I was someone who didn't experience romantic or sexual attraction, it shattered me. It felt like I had built myself around these expectations and assumptions about who I was, what I felt, and what my life should look like. There was so much about me that was pretend, and when I realized that, it changed everything.

Using aromanticism and asexuality as analytical lenses forces us to challenge the normative structures that try to define how and why we should desire intimacy with folks. It reveals the extensive, often oppressive, influences of normative structures and institutions on interpersonal relationships. Amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality structure our assumptions and expectations about romantic and sexual relationships. Although romantic and sexual norms are affected by race, disability, and other identities, the value placed on romantic and sexual relationships does not change. Additionally, because these norms are present in and perpetuated through various institutions, they are incredibly pervasive.

These norms of intimacy and desire have been challenged to some extent by feminist, queer, and anarchist communities. Romantic friendships challenge the binary opposition of friendship and romance, but they also perpetuate normative ideas that privilege romantic feelings. Both feminists who choose asexuality and lesbians in Boston marriages challenge the connection between romance and sex, as well as the distinction between asexuality and celibacy.

Relationship anarchy provides a framework for resisting normative structures, but it is often practiced in ways that support neoliberal ideas of intimacy and desire.

Aromantic and asexual communities continue to challenge these norms by creating and repurposing language in order to describe their existence and experiences. There are also aro-ace folks like myself who are still figuring things out. I don't have an ideal kind of relationship. I know that I need care networks, that physical affection is important to me, and that emotional support and intimacy are necessary for my survival. I draw inspiration from the non-normative relationships other folks build because they remind me that existence and happiness are possible outside of romantic and sexual norms.

I've found that it can be easy, even automatic, to yield to the pressures of these norms. I didn't begin challenging those pressures myself until I learned about asexuality and aromanticism, which prompted me to reassess my past. I am continually unnerved by how insidious these norms are. They are woven into almost every aspect of my life. In this thesis, I use my experiences to reveal some of the effects of these romantic and sexual norms, but those effects aren't limited to me. I've found that when I share these epiphanies with folks, they start examining their relationships. They begin to consider how romantic and sexual norms have impacted their lives, and they analyze the effects that their expectations and assumptions have had on other people. I've watched folks pick up this tradition of resistance and continue to do this work beside me, and it gives me hope.

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