

An Aromantic Manifesto

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“The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*... Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”

— José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

“I want a world where friendship is appreciated as a form of romance... I want a world where our worth isn’t linked to our desirability, our security to our monogamy, our family to our biology.”

— Alok Vaid-Menon

Our Manifesto

Romance is inherently queerphobic

The organisation of queerness around the celebration and pursuit of romantic desires and pleasures reinforces queer oppression

Queer liberation must abolish romance as its long-term goal

The Freedom to Love

A recent study of the dating preferences of 960 people (942 cis) found that:

- 88% of respondents refused to date trans people
- 89% of gay men refused to date trans men
- 82% of gay women refused to date trans women
- 63% of bisexual/queer people refused to date trans women; 51% refused to date trans men

Despite the queer celebration of the “freedom to love,” most trans people are excluded from romance based on their gender even within the queer community, before other forms of marginalization like race, class, and ability have been considered—let alone the cis-heterosexual notion of romantic fit in terms of “personality.”

Only two respondents indicated a lack of interest in romance.

Most queer people want to date.

Queerness itself, we assume, wants to date.

For many queer people, same-gender intimacies are queer because they are unabashedly romantic in a world that insists on keeping romance between a cis-man and cis-woman.

The modern queer movement has organised itself around the rhetoric of “freedom to love”: particularly the recognition of gay marriage and other queer romances.

But “freedom to love” within a hierarchical structure of desire replicates that very hierarchy. Many are loved only violently, fetishised as objects without complex needs of their own. Many remain unloved and unwanted.

Staunchly defending the idea that people “can’t help who they love” (or not), the queer movement has often inhibited an interrogation of the heteronormative power structures governing *all* desire.

If straight people can’t help who they love, then neither can gay people. Nor, one might suppose, racists and transphobes, and people who find disability and fatness unattractive.

Queer oppression is not just the experience of prohibited desire. It is also the experience of *hierarchical* and *violent desire*. It is also the experience of *undesirability*.

The Privatisation of Love

Although often constructed otherwise, romance is not a “natural” feeling people have for each other. It is first and foremost a political system:

- Romance only gains intelligibility within the (neo)liberal dichotomisation between *public* and *private* life.
- *Public* life concerns the interests of people as *citizens* and is regarded as a legitimate sphere of social intervention.
- *Private* life concerns the interests of people as consumers/individuals and is nobody’s business but those privately involved.

While the domestic sphere fashioned by heterosexual kinship relations has been historically designated as *private* life, queer intimacies have instead been regarded as a matter of *public* concern due to moral panics associating them with predation and perversion throughout history.

In response, the queer movement has fought to privatise of queer intimacies through the normalisation of queer romance. But privatisation in our political system doesn’t mean something is no longer an object of public intervention. Rather, the public-private dichotomy designates what kinds of interventions are permissible and what aren’t.

Romance has an undeniably public character: it wouldn’t be half as exciting if we weren’t constantly bombarded with romantic messaging by mass media and family and friends all around us.

Yet, romance is privatised insofar as nobody should intervene in who others choose as romantic partners, even if these choices betray a pattern of systemic inequality.

The first big ruse of romance is that it is ubiquitous because it is natural, and it is natural because it is ubiquitous.

Romance appears both ubiquitous and natural because of cis-heteronormative power. Within cis-heteronormative society, romance is *publically* constructed as a private cure to any deep unhappiness we may feel:

No matter what obstacles we face, the power of love will make life bearable again. We, in turn, desire to *privately own* this public fantasy for ourselves.

This promise of happiness is NOT privately generated by the romantic parties involved. Rather, it arises from their ability to approximate the *public* fantasy of romance.

That’s why people often feel “romanticised” by their partners, with the effect of obscuring who they really are.

The romanticisation of women is especially violent, because the cis-heterosexual female romantic ideal is expected to put the man's emotional and sexual needs above her own.

The Hierarchisation of Love

The second big ruse of romance is that it is primarily about compatibility.

From the rhetoric that cis-men and cis-women "complete" each other to the saying that everyone will find the right person for them some day, romance hides its hierarchical function under the guise that nobody is undesirable but merely incompatible.

But this cannot explain why clear hierarchies of desirability emerge across every major axis of difference that matters (sexuality, gender, race, class, ability etc.). This is because romance is not fundamentally about "compatibility" but the approximation of a *public* ideal.

Romance does not promise happiness with just anyone, but only those who approximate its ideal enough to sustain the illusion of privately owning the fantasy.

People who regarded as romantically attractive are invariably upward-mobile, white-proximate, gender-appropriate, able-bodied, slender/muscular etc.

Often, calling romantic partners "compatible" just means their placements on the romantic hierarchy are relatively equal in privilege. Calling romantically unattractive people "compatible" with each other, on the other hand, easily sounds condescending.

The queer movement's rhetoric of "freedom to love" has *not* posed any challenge to either of these two ruses. Queer romantic ideals remain incredibly heteronormative, only celebrating the most privileged and "compatible" of queers and condemning more marginalized queer people all the same.

Because the promise of happiness of romance comes from the approximation of a fantastical, hierarchical ideal at the expense of everyone else, romantic partners will perpetually fear that they are not good enough for their partners or their partners are not good enough for them.

Those who cannot approximate the heteronormative ideal of romance, on the other hand, are expected to solve the problem *privately*.

Few treat someone else's undesirability as a public issue that involves them. Instead, we often hear condescending remarks that their "preferences" just do not swing that way or that such people will eventually find the "right" person one day.

Turning Inwards

The third big ruse of romance is that it can be privately reformed.

That no matter how violent the public ideal of romance is, feminists and queer people can aspire to create their own nonviolent private romances with the right partners.

However, by wanting to own the fantasy of romance for oneself, the violence has already been done. Romance is one of the most powerful disciplining mechanisms in our society, because it does not just prohibit desire but also structures it.

Our fervent wish to experience its fantastical promise of happiness, our overwhelming fear of being denied it, constantly pushes our desires back towards conservative and queerphobic norms.

Queer romance does not resist heteronormativity as much as it assimilates queer desire, making us hold on tightly to whichever relative privileges we have and hate ourselves for whichever we don't.

Let us not pretend romance can be salvaged, like we are living the underdog fantasy of some Cinderella-esque movie.

Romance's promise of private reformation is the most dangerous one of all, giving it a false sense of inclusivity.

By peddling the illusion that romance can be made queer, heteronormative capitalism forces queer people to try solve their problems of undesirability and unhappiness *privately* by finding the "right" partner, rather than directing their anger towards *public* action.

It is often the most marginalised groups that need the romantic underdog fantasy the most.

Queer people are desperate to feel some semblance of romantic desirability, some semblance of romance's promise of fantastical happiness, to get by in a queerphobic world. But this assimilationist fantasy ultimately hurts and inhibits queer liberation.

What queerness needs is a *liberationist* publics, not a private promise of liberation serving as a distraction from public queerphobia, structured around the violent fantasy of romance.

Aromanticism as Queer Counterpublic

Nobody has the responsibility to date someone they do not desire. That is also a private solution to a public problem.

The public solution is to abolish romance altogether.

We propose aromanticism as a counterpublic that responds to queerphobic violence by mobilising public resistance instead of escaping inwards. Aromanticism is a principled commitment to finding radically nonviolent ways of relating to others.

Aromanticism is a refusal to allow love to be privatised.

Aromantics aspire to:

- View queer intimacies as web-like counterpublics that reinforce rather than compete with and enervate each other.
- Deny hierarchical exclusivity and romantic privilege any power over happiness.
- Reject the monopoly romance has over physical and emotional intimacy.
- Reject practices of nepotism like marriage that concentrate wealth and perpetuate inequality.
- Transform queer intimacy into political solidarity and action.
- Create new nonviolent pleasures and desires that do not yet exist.

If you already have a romantic partner, we are not asking you to "leave" them, but to aspire to love them in a different, *queerer* way.

We suggest aromanticism can enhance one's experience of intimacy in the following ways:

- Not having to feel one person must be right for you in every way (and not forcing them to try to), because different people can complete different parts of you and that's okay.
- Eliminates a constant fear of inadequacy from falling short of the romantic ideal and being replaced by someone else.
- Enables intimates to be viewed for who they are, and not how well they approximate the romantic ideal.
- Enables better negotiations of consent through the self-definition of intimacy, unaffected by romantic expectations of (in)appropriate behaviour.
- Builds enough trust for one's intimates based on the principle that love is non-competitive, such that "infidelity" does not automatically generate anxiety.
- Sustains intimacies over longer periods of time, even across long distances and absences, due to a lack of insecurity of being replaced. Each new person your intimates bond with is a potential bond for you as well!

Q: How does aromanticism relate to sex?

A: It's up to you to define that relationship! Just be aware that similar hierarchies of desirability exist in sex as in romance.

Vision of a Different Future

Aromanticism is difficult to imagine in our society, so much of our social infrastructure does not support it. However, we should see this as a productive challenge, not a reason to dismiss aromanticism.

After all, queerness has never been about the convenience of normality. Queerness has always been about rejecting normality in favour of justice.

A capitalist model of society based on hetero-nuclear family results in a competitive world, where it is every family (whether biological, organisational, or national) for themselves.

What if we instead designed our infrastructure around an aromantic vision of society: communal housing, spaces, and facilities; communal activities like urban farming and sex-positive education; a sharing economy based on long-term reciprocation, not one-off transactions; shared care for children, the elderly, and the less-abled by the immediate community; pooled insurance based on communal care, not profit-motivated corporate schemes?

The nuclear family is the basic building block of a competitive society, expected to prioritise its interests over those of everyone else. Aromanticism transforms our social narrative from one of competition to cooperation.

Whatever it is, the point of aromanticism as a queer counterpublic is that it cannot be done alone. It must be a social movement, in the way romance is not and could never be.

We don't have all the answers, but we hope to explore them with you.

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