

# queering heterosexuality

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in this piece i will be considering the impact that taking on queer politics has had in my life, thinking through ways that queering anarchism might happen in the lives of anarchists and anti-authoritarians who society may identify as heterosexual due to the sex and/ or gender of the object of their desire, but who ourselves disidentify with all things straight, perhaps even with the subject-position of heterosexual. what does this mean? this means that we are working on queering straight-seeming spaces, that we are straight-ish allies of queer struggles, challenging heteronormativity in the anarchist movement, as well as in the mainstream spaces we inhabit, from workplaces to families, from classrooms to cultural productions. this piece itself is one intervention that attempts to queer the space of narrative and theory, through non-capitalization<sup>1</sup>, on the one hand, and on the other hand, through mobilizing a personal narrative to think through or theorize the queering of heterosexuality and the de-heteronormativizing of ‘straight-acting’ spaces. through an examination of the queering of hetero-space from an anarchist perspective, a liberatory politics of sexualities and genders emerges that intersects with anarchoqueer liberation<sup>2</sup> in challenging dominant forms of social organization including the state, marriage, capitalism, parenting, love relationships, friendships, families, and other important sites of anarchist politics and struggle.

through a meeting of anarchist and queer politics, we have found alternative positions, actions and relationships that are more profoundly meaningful to us. this is not to stake a claim in queer theory or queer politics for “straight” people—that would be exactly not the point. rather it is to acknowledge an indebtedness to these spaces, places, people and movements, while at the same time acknowledging that, as people who might have partnerships that appear “straight,” we can pass as heterosexual, and accrue the privilege that our society accords this category. nonetheless as non-straight-identified heteros, we take on anarchoqueer issues by living as queerly as possible. in other words, queer practices and theories are important for the liberation of heterosexuals from normative standards of intimate relationships from friendships to sexualities. moreover, queering heterosexuality reveals that the categories homosexual and heterosexual are wholly inadequate to describing the vast array of sexualities available to us once we start exploring beyond the heteronormative.

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<sup>1</sup>challenging standard orthography (writing systems) by not using capital letters, by using ‘improper’ grammar such as sentence fragments and the like, has a long history and a complex set of motivations. most importantly, it challenges the phallogocentric domination of textual representation i.e. the presumed superiority of phallic (masculine) logos (use of words, acts of speech) that underlies western traditions of philosophy, theory, literary studies and other logocentric disciplines, and that can lead to semiotic subjugation (Guattari, Felix. *Soft Subversions*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.)—the feeling that we are subjugated to language rather than subjects that can speak through language. second, it challenges the privileging of the written word over oral traditions. third, it challenges pedagogical norms that are imposed upon school children from a young age, norms called into question by anarchist educational approaches such as free schools. fourth, it disrupts the presumed relationship of the author being dominant over the reader, a binary ‘other,’ and instead allows the reader to intervene in the text she reads, to be an equal with the writer. fifth, through this deconstruction of the binary relationships between masculine/feminine, written/oral, correct/incorrect, writer/reader, etc., non-subjugated orthographies that refuse the use of capital letters and traditional grammar make space for the privileging of the collective, and co-operation in the construction of meaning, decentering the primacy of the individual writer, the supposed (rich straight white male) sublime genius who produces texts. this is therefore a radical, feminist, queer and anarchist strategy that disrupts the way texts are produced, valued, legitimated and circulated. bell hooks drew attention to these debates, for example, by changing her name, disavowing her ‘slave name,’ and writing her name without capital letters.

<sup>2</sup>Queerwind. London: self-published, 2004. <http://www.queeruption.org>

where did this all start for me? i've never been "normal" as far as sexuality goes. but thinking of queerness as relevant to my own life started at a particular identifiable moment for me when i was volunteering at who's emma<sup>3</sup>, the anarchist punk infoshop in toronto. a (white gay male) friend took me aside one day and said that, while he admired my anarchafeminist, anti-capitalist politics, could i consider the possibility of including gay or queer issues in my conception of anarchism. of course, was my immediate response. i think i must have blushed as well, as i was a bit embarrassed, to be honest, to have to be asked something so obvious. but he didn't criticize me for something i wasn't doing, rather he opened up a space for something new—to move beyond heteronormative conceptions of anarchist politics. this was an incredibly important moment for me, though i did not know it at the time.

i am relating this as a series of narratives about conversations that i have had with many different people over the years, or experiences that i and my friends have had and talked about. as queer and/ or anti-heteronormative anarchists i think we value personal experience and interpersonal exchanges as an important site of political knowledge production. in other words, we learn a lot about a wide range of political ideas, about the oppressiveness of language, and about our own position in the world we live in through conversations. through sharing narratives and stories. i want to value and give credit to the people, experiences and collective spaces that have helped me to learn about queer politics. i also want to put together some of these stories in a kind of collection of narratives here, to preserve, at least to some extent, the form in which i encountered them. of course they are filtered through my own perspective, and the lessons i've learned from them. moreover, the things they made me think about may be very different than the things they might bring up for readers, and i want to acknowledge this. my knowledge and my perspective will of course have their limits. at the same time, i did not want to theorize these experiences, putting a kind of intellectual distance between myself and the ideas because that is not how i encountered them. nonetheless i will be engaging many concepts, ideas and theories. our education system teaches us to understand stories one way and ideas another (for example, we study literature or stories differently than we study philosophy or ideas). it is my hope that these narratives will be understood not as cute little stories about my life, but rather as a source of important ideas about sexualities that might be useful to straight people in becoming antiheterosexist straight allies. and one last hope i have is that many more people will tell their own stories, which will be taken seriously by anarchist and other readers in our struggles toward radical social and political transformation.

## **friendship, sexuality, polyamory and other intimacies<sup>4</sup>**

anarchaqueer theories and practices start with the basics. how do we relate to people emotionally and sexually? how have these types of relationships largely been determined by oppressive systems such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, families, culture, and the state, systems that we do not believe in, and which we are constantly rethinking and struggling to dismantle? while i had been a promiscuous feminist who, from a very young age, rejected gendered roles and stereotypes, up to the point when i was volunteering at who's emma, my personal experience of non-monogamy had been pretty rocky. during my undergraduate degree, i struggled

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<sup>3</sup>O'Connor, Alan. *Who's Emma? Autonomous Zone and Social Anarchism*. Toronto: Confused Editions, 2002.

<sup>4</sup>Berlant, Lauren, ed. *Intimacy*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2000.

against the sexual double standard where women were not supposed to want sex, engaging in casual sex or short-term serial monogamous relationships, and taking a lot of flak for it. i then had a few nonmonogamous relationships in the punk scene. in one case, when the relationship became long distance, one of us was poly and one was not. we had bad communication in terms of disclosure and trust. eventually we broke up over it. in another, we both had other partners, and we communicated better at times, but not consistently so. we didn't know anyone else who was having this kind of relationship. eventually we broke up for other reasons.

when i encountered the anarchist scene in toronto, largely at who's emma and the free skool, it seemed like everyone was into polyamory, and people did not really distinguish among partners based on sex, gender, age, or anything else. i had many friends who were having non-monogamous (or non-mono as we called it) relationships at the time, so we were all talking about these things. it was a bit of a free-for-all in terms of hook-ups, which was really fun, and there were also many longer term relationships that were both fun and serious. we started to think about how the word nonmonogamy was a reification of the centrality or supposed "normalcy" of monogamy, and we wanted to have a different starting place, a multiplicity of amorous possibilities, so we started to use the word polyamory instead. poly for short. there was an important resource book at the time that we were all reading called *The Ethical Slut*<sup>5</sup>.

also at that time, people said "treat your lovers like friends and your friends like lovers." we have a lot more expectations of lovers, we do a lot more processing about where the relationship is going, negotiating space, articulating needs, setting boundaries, expressing disappointment, etc. and sometimes we forget to have fun and just really enjoy the time we have together. we can be really harsh toward lovers, perhaps because we feel so vulnerable. that's where we need to be better friends to our lovers. with friends we're more likely to cut them some slack, to let things be a little more fluid. no big deal if they're late, or miss a hang-out once in a while, for example. on the positive side, with lovers, we tend to do lots of special little things for them, like cooking their favorite food, making DIY zines or bringing them some little thing when we meet, something that says, i was thinking of you, something that shows we love them. along these lines, we need to be more loving to our friends, do more special things for them, go out on dates with them, make little heartfelt presents for them expressing how much we care. be more attentive to their needs, be supportive in day-to-day ways. treat them more like lovers.

i think around this time, to take one example, a friend and i were both not in any sexual relationship, so for valentine's day, almost satirically, one year she invited me over for a dinner date. she ran me a bath, handed me a glass of wine, and cooked dinner while i relaxed in the tub. the following year i did something similar for her. they were oddly romantic non-romantic, very caring friend-dates.

at this time in toronto there were a few long-term polyamorous "super-couples" who were held up as an example of the potential of polyamory to work. if they can do it, so can we, we all thought. they had good communication, and some interesting strategies that we learned from. one couple, when they were going out to a party, would decide ahead of time if it was a date or not. if not, they were free to hook up with other people. another poly couple i knew lived together, and had the guideline that they couldn't hook up with someone else at their shared apartment. regardless of what the rules were, what was interesting to me was that any two people could make their own rules. you could say what you wanted, and listen to what the other person

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<sup>5</sup>Easton, Dossie. *The Ethical Slut: a Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*. San Francisco: Greenery P, 1997.

wanted, and then try it out, and check in with each other afterward and see how they felt about how it went. this for me was super different than heterosexual monogamy which had a bunch of rules, none of which made any sense to me, like the rule about how if you show how jealous you are, it means you really care about the other person. or if you hook up with one person, and then a second person, it means you don't like the first person anymore, whereas in my experience, feelings for one person tended to have little bearing on, or perhaps even augmented, my feelings for another person. being able to incorporate this emotional experience into openly negotiated multiple relationships was awesome.

for me, this openness to building relationships from scratch, not entirely without rules, but negotiating guidelines as needed, makes an appearance in queer theory, in eve sedgwick's first axiom, "people are all different."<sup>6</sup> we all have different bodies, different body parts, different desires; we all want different things from relationships, whether they are intimate, sexual or otherwise. so why shouldn't we negotiate our relationships ourselves instead of following a heteronormative set of scripts. this was also different for me than my previous open relationships in the punk scene where people sometimes practiced dishonesty or coercion and called it non-monogamy. i didn't learn tools for negotiating toward meeting each other's needs in the punk scene. it was more like, i can't be monogamous, so you can either be non-monogamous with me or we can break up. there was no way to say, hey, what you just did hurt me—is there some way we can deal with this by communicating in ways that rebuild trust?

at some point i was lucky to participate in a class at the toronto anarchist free university<sup>7</sup> about polyamory. one of the best things the facilitator said was that, no matter how often or for what reason you have sex with a person, you still need to be honest and respectful with them. even if their motivations are different than yours (e.g. a party night hook-up or one-night-stand might be one person's motivation, whereas an active polyamorous practice committed to alternative sexual, intimate, and community-based relationships might be the other's). honesty and respect, appropriate establishing of consent among all concerned parties (including sometimes those who are not present i.e. the other person's other partner/s), setting boundaries, and following through on what you've said are all critical elements of the encounter. to me this seems so far away from what heterosexual relationships are normally like, that it is actually something else. even if your partnerships are "straight."

for me, the polyamory scene and the radical queer scene were connected. we would get all glammed up to go to vazaleen, will munro's radical queer punk anarchist dance party in toronto. people who hung out at vazaleen included trans people, drag queens and kings, and queers of all kinds. some "straight" people went as well, but we were the kind of straight people who disidentified with being straight. we didn't identify with our birth sex/gender, we avoided norms or stereotypes of heterosexuality, we were critical of the objectification of women, we denounced predetermined gender scripts and sexuality scripts which we saw as connected to capitalism and patriarchy. perhaps we identified with queerness, for example, being attracted to people of a particular subculture, such as bears or femmie boys or butch dykes or trannies or whatever. it was a place where lots of gender and sex subversion and play happened. a queer space full of queers of course, some of whom were anarchists, some of whom were non-straight-acting heteros. i loved vazaleen because there was no sense, for me at least, of a normative sexuality. certainly it was

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<sup>6</sup>Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U California P, 1990.

<sup>7</sup>Toronto Anarchist Free University. <http://www.anarchistu.org/>

not heteronormative. but it was not homonormative either. it did not echo mainstream representations of “gay couples” such as we might see on *The L Word*, or *Queer Eye*, with assimilationist, consumerist norms. instead it felt like a space of many sexual resistances.

## non-normative sexualities

non-normative sexuality means, among other things, that people ditch sexual norms, and just hook up with and have long-term relationships with whoever inspires them, doing whatever they are into sexually. for me, sometimes this is women, sometimes it is men. often it is with people who are not my age. when i was younger i dated older people and now that i’m a bit older i seem to date younger people. these are more or less the people i seem to find myself hanging out with. i don’t really see age as an interesting way of dividing people. my friendships have always been across ages and even generations. my current partner is more than ten years younger than me. when we got together we were polyamorous and, although we communicated well and had great sex, we weren’t taking the relationship too seriously. it was lots of fun. we both had other partners, but soon that kind of went away, and we made more of an explicit commitment to each other, first to be primary partners, and then to be monogamous. i’ve always felt a little ambivalent about this decision. recently i moved to another town, and we decided to be poly, although neither of us have acted on it yet.

this relationship is really amazing for me. he’s super sexy and we have a red hot sex life in which we do a lot of non-heteronormative things (whatever that means—i’m not telling you). i feel like this is particular to my own sexuality but also to the way i develop trust and caring or intimacy with a partner. he has the kind of emotional intelligence and empathy that is stereotypically not associated with men, and which is very important in keeping our relationship strong, perhaps because i do not, and so i am learning these things from him. today when someone called they said his voice sounds androgynous, and maybe that is part of the attraction, too. he doesn’t fit the gender scripts<sup>8</sup> any more than i do. for both of us, the non-normativity of the relationship is at least one of the things that keeps it alive and interesting.

on the other hand, i worry that our age difference means that there is a power imbalance, which we have acknowledged, and we work together to try to compensate and make sure it is more equalized. another thing that concerns me is that maybe in being attracted to younger people, i am somehow replicating ageism—both the ageism in the anarchist scene which is really a youth-oriented scene, and a kind of internalized ageism that mainstream society offers where youth is valued and age is something we are supposed to fight or disavow, rather than accept or even respect (as some cultures do). sometimes i think it is unfortunate that there is not a lot of age diversity in the anarchist “scene.” one thing that happens a lot is that when i tell people my age they say i look a lot younger. this is supposed to be a compliment and i don’t find it insulting. but at the same time, it sometimes makes me feel like there is something wrong with me being the age that i am. that somehow i would be better if i were younger. or conversely, that i am doing something age-inappropriate that makes people think i am younger. i wonder if this internalized ageism plays a role in partner choice as well, in terms of who i might find attractive. what is considered attractive in older men in mainstream representations makes me

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<sup>8</sup>Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

a bit nauseous. i think who i am attracted to is more connected, however, to my punk roots and that particular aesthetic.

## queer parenting and community

i think another way that anarchism has allowed me to have a more non-heteronormative life is the acceptance of not reproducing children, in a community in which people's choices are accepted. when i chose to be polyamorous, it was accepted. i find being monogamous is also generally accepted because there is the notion of radical monogamy, which interrupts gender and sexuality scripts. some people i know have expressed a hesitation to admit that they have chosen to be monogamous, because there is now, ironically perhaps, an expectation of polyamory among anarchists. not having children is also accepted, whereas mainstream society tends to look askance at women who choose not to have children, or who choose politics over children. for example, when ulriche meinhof, who was part of the red army faction in germany, decided to leave her children behind and become an active urban guerrilla, living underground and working to overthrow the german state, there were many newspaper reports that demonized her for this (not for her political actions in and of themselves), and said she was not just a bad mother, but somehow actually insane for leaving her children with their father.[9] for anarchists, though, there seems to be no presumption about anyone's life pattern or direction, in terms of getting married, settling down, having kids, doing political actions, etc. there is a sense that you can do things the way you choose, and people try as much as possible to create new paths for themselves, with the support of other people in our communities.

instead of following a prescriptive path—marriage, kids, house in the suburbs—a long time ago i decided i would rather follow the path of collective living. this was a conscious decision, because i felt that i was unlikely to find, and did not want to succumb to, a happily married suburban life. in fact, that terrified me. it was such a relief to read a book called *soft subversions* by felix guattari where he talks about growing up in the suburbs and how alienating that was for him, how it made him feel kind of “schizo around the edges.”<sup>9</sup> i love that book. so i gave up on that whole dream, it was more of a nightmare for me anyway, growing up in the suburbs among the children of bureaucrats, people who were afraid of an active, gritty life in the city, so they moved to an area of carefully coifed lawns and polite conversation. dead time, as the situationists say.<sup>10</sup>

when i first wrote this piece, i was living in a crowded four-bedroom apartment in downtown montreal with three other people, one of whom happens to be my partner. it is a queer space and we tend to have queer room-mates by intention. our broader community includes the st. henri anarchist punks, student and academic anarchists, the radical queer and trans scene, anti-racist activists, and lots of different feminists. these loose groupings extend across canada, into the united states, and to places like korea, france and germany. our community also includes a lot of people who don't fit into any of these identities, who are nomadic geographically and categorically.

some people in our community have kids, some don't. some people think the current geo-political situation is too unstable to have kids, but some are brave enough to do it anyway. eight

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<sup>9</sup>Guattari, Felix. *Soft Subversions*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996

<sup>10</sup>Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. Detroit: Black and Red, 1983.



years ago, i was living in a collective house in toronto with five other people. three of us wanted to have kids at that point, me and two other women. one of them was part of a super-couple who had been together in a polyamorous relationship for several years, about four years i think. in addition to her cis-gender male partner, the woman was starting to see a person who was a “non-bio-boy” (a term no longer used as it is rooted in biological determinism), a gender queer guy or trans man (in fact, all of these labels are fraught with complex histories and uses, and may also, like non-bio-boy, fall out of use as we invent new terms that work better). they all three moved together into a big collective house with several other people, and started planning how they would conceive and raise a child together. in the end, though, she broke up with the cis-gender guy, and conceived a baby with a sperm donation from an ex-partner of her trans partner. they are monogamous now and raising the baby together. we had a funny conversation a few years ago when we both confessed to being in monogamous relationships, like it was a dirty secret.

the other woman was strictly monogamous. she started dating a woman and they decided to have a baby together and live together as a couple. interestingly both women decided to have babies with sperm donors whom they knew and had long-term friendships with. the larger community living space becomes smaller when you have a baby, and more intensified. community works itself into your life in other ways.

in my case, on the baby project, i met several times with an expartner who has a current partner and two children, living in new york city. we were considering the possibility of having a baby together, and talked about how the future might be, with his current partner and their children. but then he mentioned that he thought it might be better if she didn't know about it. i didn't think that was a very good idea. it seemed like a non-consensual decision, in which all parties' consent would not be obtained. i didn't go through with it. i decided not to have a baby after all.

people make choices about having children in different ways, even people who may be in what appear to be heterosexual relationships. considering the consent of all parties, working around or against the legal sperm donor clinic method of conception (very expensive and medicalized), or even deciding to abstain from breeding. interestingly, for me, this decision has meant that i am trying to make deeper connections to people aside from my partner. i feel the need to have closer friendships, and to be more loving to more people, not in a sexual way, but in an intimate friendship way, developing creative collaborative partnerships, finding mutually supportive ways of interacting with people, and in fact spending more time, as i grow older, with nieces and nephews who are scattered all over the country, who are unrelated to the anarchist scene, but who are nonetheless of course an important part of my community.

## **liberation, responsibility and intimacy**

in this context, liberation becomes a kind of odd concept. i still like spontaneous walks down by the train tracks, dérives, and nomadic urban wanderings as much as the next anarchist. taking off freighthopping across the country, or traveling wherever, no apartment, no money, but always finding places to stay, people who will take you places or take you in. this was always liberating for me, on the fringe of capitalism, against the way middle-class people travel, or live generally speaking, tied to house and job.

but then a year or two ago i was at an anarchist workshop where the facilitator had a very interesting take on the notion of responsibility. i feel like mainstream society has inculcated in

us the value of irresponsibility, and in anarchism we seem to link this to freedom, to nomadology, to spontaneity, and liberation. whereas really it is a kind of trapping capitalist individualism that seems unsustainable.

for example, i had a conversation with a friend once who had broken up with a partner because he was going traveling. i asked if that was a bit selfish, in that he wasn't really considering her needs or feelings. he countered that he had to put himself first. to me, this is a sentiment that i think a lot of people might agree with, anarchists or not, though by anarchists it might be couched in terms of a liberatory politics. but it seems more like a failure to be responsible to those people with whom we are engaged in intimate relationships.

at the workshop, the facilitator, who was an older indigenous-identified male, said that responsibility tells us where we belong in our lives. i have always been troubled by this notion of belonging, yearning for it in some ways, and yet unable to find it because i was charmed by the notion of spontaneity, freedom, the nomad life, new friendships and relationships everywhere with everyone who came along. at the same time, i was also perplexed by how i loved people who were always roaming, and that made it impossible to have a long-term relationship because we would break up or not see each other for long periods of time, and re-connections were difficult. i think i dreamed of finding a nomadic partner who would travel with me and we could be spontaneous together, and that this would be a sort of traveling set of roots that i could take with me.

now i think of responsibility differently, i think of it as a deep connection to another person, related to intimacy. it means that we think of their feelings and needs as equal to our own, and quite often, more important than our own. we can also think of our responsibility to self as, rather than being in conflict with responsibility to others, being profoundly connected with a responsibility to others, in the very anarchist sense that the liberation of one person is predicated upon the liberation of those around them. to take one example of how this works in everyday practice, this means that a person can ask people in their community for help when they have a health need, because there is an implicit understanding that we each need to take care of ourselves and be taken care of, and that when other people have health needs we will in turn be there for them. so taking care of other people is nurturing ourselves, our community, and the reverse is also true—asking for care is in a way nurturing other people, and developing in our community the capacity for nurturance. this feeds the fostering of intimacies in community with others beyond heteronormative coupled partnerships.

to tie this back to the notion of queering anarchism, what i think queer practices offer to anarchism is a language of intimacy. this language and its concomitant practice of intimacy is crucial for a revolutionary politics. radical queer politics and practices offer to non-normative heterosexual relationships a range of possibilities, including polyamory, intimate friendships, expressive communities, mental and physical and emotional mutual aid health care, and sexualities that are predicated on intimacy, respect and consent. of course it doesn't always work out as perfectly as this all sounds. but that too is a lesson of queering anarchism. relationships are a lifelong process of negotiation and sharing, of putting mutual aid into practice in layers of more intimate and less intimate relationships. what i think anarchism offers to radical queer spaces, groups, networks and communities, is a way of putting consent, respect, nonhierarchical love, emotional nurturance, and collective living into relationships so that those communities can grow and sustain themselves/ourselves, with an anti-statist and anti-capitalist perspective, and bringing in anti-racism, anti-colonialism and other related or intersectional movements and ideas. so in addition

to queering anarchist movements, we are anarchizing queer movements. what emerges is a vision of queer and anarchism not as two separate things that are starting to come together (certainly the history of the anarchist movement is full of queers and the history of the queer movement is full of anarchists!) but rather a mutual aid relationship in which the boundaries between the two bleed into one another and they become inextricable.

queering heterosexuality from an anarchist perspective takes place in this context, where relationships are no longer heteronormative, where we are also moving away from homonormativity (the capitalist, state-run, white-dominated “gay pride” model, for example), and indeed open up into non-normative sexualities, where the labels homo and hetero are challenged at a basic level. sexuality like gender is thus a narrative, as my room-mate said the other day, a fluid series of experiences that we can write and rewrite as we live through them, things we can invent or get rid of, as we see fit, in a kind of multiplicitous, inter-connected, non-linear, rhizomatic diversity of sexualities and genders that we engage throughout our lifetimes.

## **non-heteronormative desires**

i had a conversation with a friend of mine last week about our nonheteronormative heterosexual relationships. he is dating someone new, and was having an odd experience, or at least he thought it was odd until he started talking to friends about it. and then it turns out that there are many people having a similar experience. among anarchist hetero couples, if i may generalize for a moment, it seems that the guys are doing a really good job of being soft and sensitive, of taking direction from women when it comes to intimacy, to sexuality, and friendship. there is a new kind of language where men have had to find ways of expressing desire without being direct or aggressive. a tentative language, a conditional language, a language of questions rather than demands: would it be okay if? what if i told you?

for feminists, for women who want to be respected in friendships, in intimate relationships, and in sexualities, this is sweet. it makes relationships wonderful and warm and open and caring and loving. it’s fabulous. so where is the odd experience in all of this, you may be wondering?

sometimes, as women, we want to feel passionately desired. we might want to be swept away with passion and desire. we might even want things to get a bit rough, you know, a bite on the neck, an uncomfortable position. sex on the floor under a table, or going at it so hard we almost fall off the bed before we even notice. (and this isn’t news to anyone into bdsm or other fetish sex that explores intentional power exchanges in sex). i could go on, but i’ll get to the point, which is this—we seem to be creating new norms, and in those norms, there are built-in things like respect and communication, gentleness and sensitivity, and these are all of course great things, and should be a key component in every relationship, from sexual ones to intimacies to friendships to parenting to teaching to work relationships and family. but, as with any set of norms, including polyamory and other forms of anti-heteronormative relationships, the risk is that we become fixed in a certain set of behaviors, and forget that we have the power and agency to say what we want, to negotiate through active listening and honest disclosure, and to achieve very fluid and lively relationships that do not stagnate or conform to previous expectations, or someone else’s idea of what is right or wrong for us.

dylan vade is a trans lawyer who has written about the gender galaxy, which is the idea that gender and sex are not configured as a binary (male/female or masculine/feminine) but rather

there are thousands of different ways of living out our sex/genders, in a galaxy, where some genders may cluster together into constellations, and sometimes these constellations are perceptible, but sometimes they are not.<sup>11</sup> i'd like to think that sexualities are like this too. rather than the binary homosexual/heterosexual, there are thousands of different ways of living out our sexualities.

this leads me to one last thing that i have recently started having conversations about. we had a houseguest a few weeks ago, a woman who took advantage of the same-sex marriage rights in canada and got married a few years back. as her partner started female-to-male transitioning, their same-sex status became a bit more fluid. she said that now that he has fully transitioned, they are read by others as a heterosexual couple. she enjoys high-femme camp performance in everyday life, particularly when it is queer, and is now unsure how this will be interpreted by others, which is most often as straight. when a queer gender performance is misread as heterosexual, the risk is that the play with signifiers—the feminine dresses, the 1950s style and behavior, etc.—will be misunderstood by both queers and heteros as reinforcing gender role stereotypes rather than subverting them. it is also odd, she said, to suddenly be experiencing heterosexual privilege in her public<sup>12</sup> life, whereas her private relationship is still very queer and does not feel privileged. to put it another way, her narrative of sexuality is not one of privilege, and yet this is how strangers now engage with her and her partner. the narrative thus is becoming uncertain, or what bobby noble calls incoherent.[14 ]this is another way in which queering heterosexuality may take place in radical queer milieus and lives.

another FTM trans person has told me how he now struggles to be accepted as queer or trans, since people read him as a straight man, though he lived for nearly forty years as a woman and a lesbian. he almost feels like he can no longer be part of the queer community, unless he is among friends who have known him a long time. for example, he told me that he recently went out to a bar that had a reduced cover charge for trans men, and he had to really insist that he was trans. the door person wouldn't believe him. he repeatedly thanked the person, because they were reaffirming his sex/gender of choice, but in the end, he had to show the dreaded ID that still listed his gender as "F" in order to be accepted as a trans man. oh, the irony. this is not an experience that any trans person wants to go through. it demonstrates how heteronormativity, which causes people to assume everyone is gender-straight and non-queer, seems to permeate even queer scenes that are attempting to privilege trans people. furthermore, it reveals how even in spaces committed to radical queer and trans politics and subjectivities, the notion that someone's own self-identification should be accepted at face value, without having to provide coherent identification, is not always put into practice very well.

this is yet another one of the risks of queering heterosexuality. heterosexuality of course needs to be challenged, to be queered, to be wrested from its place of privilege. at the same time, we need to be very careful not to heterosexualize or heteronormativize queer spaces, subjectivities, identities, ideas, theories, and the like. there is a role here for heterosexual queer allies, even those of us who cringe at the word heterosexual and strongly disidentify with it. i believe and hope that we can queer our practices, without claiming queer as our own, or appropriating it. in other words, the idea is to support queer struggles, to integrate queer ideas into our practices, to

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<sup>11</sup>Vade, Dylan. "Expanding Gender and Expanding the Law: Toward a Social and Legal Conceptualization of Gender that Is More Inclusive of Transgender People." *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*, V. 11 (2004–2005) 253–316.

<sup>12</sup>Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.

be as queer as possible, in order to work as allies to end queer oppression. the idea certainly is not—and this is another risk—to perform queer identities when it is convenient and then return to our heterosexual privilege unchanged or unchallenged by the experience.

liberation means this. it means we keep writing the narrative of our lives, our desires, our genders, our sexualities. it means that, rather than having the kind of freedom janis joplin sang about (you know, freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose) when my parents were exploring their open relationship (that is another story in itself!) we have liberatory experiences and relationships that are grounded in communities and long-term commitments to exploring what these relationships mean and how they can best be fulfilling to all involved. for me, to get to this openness, the queer and/or anarchist communities that i have encountered over the years have been crucial. crucial to who i am as a person, but more than that— crucial to revolutionary politics. the entire capitalist patriarchal white supremacy that structures our world unequally, and indeed preys on unequal relations of power, requires heteronormative relationships. break down those kinds of relationships, and we are also starting to break down patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. as jamie heckert argues, breaking down micro-fascisms at the level of identities and intimate relationships is at the root of resistance to macro-fascisms at the level of institutions and structures of power.<sup>13</sup> queer practices, relationships, communities, scenes, and intimacies thus are making important contributions toward profoundly liberatory modes of being, doing, thinking, feeling and acting in the world that are intensely political. even for heteros.

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<sup>13</sup>Heckert, Jamie. "Sexuality/Identity/Politics." In *Changing Anarchism*. Ed. Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004.

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