

FOR LOVERS AND FIGHTERS

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In the past five years or so, increasing numbers of people I know have started talking about and practicing polyamory. Queer and trans people in the communities I participate in have been spending more time discussing this idea and generating analyses about it.¹ Many people still recite the common judgment: "That can't work," but as many of us live consistently with identities and practices that we've been told our whole lives cannot work, I see people resisting the "common sense" of monogamy just as we resist the "common sense" we inherit about race, class, gender, and sexuality in our culture.

I do not find it a stretch to see how interrogating the limits of monogamy fits into the queer, trans, feminist, anticapitalist, anti-oppression politics that most of my personal and political practice is focused on. When I think about this topic, I often start with feminism, where so many of my first political inquiries came up during my teens. I'm always heartened to think about the antiromantic propaganda of the 1970s feminist movement. One piece that comes to mind is a poster—a photo of a man and a woman walking hand in hand through a park on a beautiful fall day with pies smashed on both their faces—with text underneath saying something about killing the romance myth. I have several very pulpy, flexible, strong, romantic bones in my body, but I've always been delighted by this antiromance politics (especially in light of recent claims to heteronormative family structure and traditional symbols and ceremonies of heterosexual “love” by gay-marriage proponents).²

It was a relief to me to find out in my teens that there were feminists mounting a critique of romance. I saw how the myth of heteromonogamous romance lined up to fuck women over—to create a cultural incentive to enter the property arrangements of marriage, to place women in a subordinated position in the romantic dyad, to define women's worth solely in terms of success at finding and keeping a romance, to brainwash women into spending all their time measuring themselves against this norm and working to change their bodies, behaviors, and activities to meet the requirements of being attractive to men and suitable for romance. I see this myth as both personally damaging to people—in that it creates unrealistic expectations about ourselves and each other and causes us to constantly experience insecurity—and also politically damaging, because it's a giant distraction from our resistance, and it divides us (especially based on

the fucked-up self-fulfilling stereotypes about how women compete with each other). Sadly, although the usual tropes are focused on heterosexual romance, much of this gets carried into queer communities as well and surrounds our approaches to sex, love, and romance to varying degrees. It's important to have a critique of the myth of romance that looks at how damaging it is to us in our personal lives, and how it is designed to fuel social arrangements, codified in law, that were invented to subordinate women and make them the property of men.

I also think about this in terms of capitalism in the sense that capitalism is always pushing us toward perfection, manufacturing ideas of the right way to be a man or a woman—or a mother or a date or whatever—that people cannot fulfill. The goal is that we'll constantly strive—usually by buying things—to fill this giant gap of insecurity that is created. You can never be too rich or too thin (greed) or rich enough or thin enough (insecurity). Capitalism is fundamentally invested in notions of scarcity, encouraging people to feel that we never have enough so that we will act out of greed and hoarding instincts and focus on accumulation. Indeed, the romance myth is focused on scarcity: There is only one person out there for you! You need to find someone to marry before you get too old! The sexual exclusivity rule is focused on scarcity, too: Each person has only a certain amount of attention or attraction or love or interest, and if any of it goes to someone besides his or her partner, partner must lose out. We don't generally apply this rule to other relationships—we don't assume that having two kids means loving the first one less or not at all, or having more than one friend means being a bad or fake or less-interested friend to our other friends. We apply this particular understanding of scarcity to romance and love, and most of us internalize that feeling of scarcity pretty deeply.

This gets to another central point for me. One of the things I see in thinking about this stuff is how lots of people I know are really awesome, but then show their worst sides, their worst behaviors, to the persons they date. To that person, they will be overly needy or dependent, or dominating, or possessive, or jealous, or mean, or disrespectful, or thoughtless. I have seen that tendency in myself as well. It makes sense. So much insecurity surrounds the romance myth and the world of shame in which sexuality is couched in our culture that we can become our monstrous selves in those relationships. I also see people prioritizing romantic relationships over all else—ditching their friends, putting all their emotional eggs in one basket, and creating unhealthy dynamics with the people they date because of it. It becomes simultaneously the most important relationship and the one in which people give free rein to their most insecure selves.

One of my goals in thinking about redefining the way we view relationships is to try to treat the people I date more like I treat my friends—to be respectful and thoughtful and have boundaries and reasonable expectations—and to try to treat my friends more like my dates—to give them special attention, honor my commitments to them, be consistent, and invest deeply in our futures together. In the queer communities I'm in, valuing friendship is a really big deal, often coming out of the fact that lots of us don't have family support and thus build deep supportive structures with other queers. We are interested in resisting the heteronormative family structure in which people are expected to form a dyad, marry, have kids, and get all their needs met within that family structure. A lot of us see that as unhealthy, as a technology of postindustrial late capitalism that is connected to alienating people from community and training them to think in terms of individuality, to value the smaller unit of the nuclear

family rather than the extended family.³ Thus, questioning how the status and accompanying behavior norms are different for how we treat our friends versus our dates, and trying to bring those into balance, starts to support our work of creating chosen families and resisting the annihilation of community that capitalism seeks.

In recent years, polyamory has become an increasingly important topic of discussion and analysis in trans communities that I am a part of. In many ways, it makes sense that this would be an area of emergent resistant practices in communities resisting gender norms and breaking gender rules. In loosening our ties to the gender binary, our ideas about being proper men and women often loosen, too. As our previously strict ideas about our own genders fall away, at the same time, we can become more experimental with gender and sexual orientation. So people who've always seen themselves in a very particular role—like, say, butch lesbian—and are now questioning that gender association and starting to disconnect biology from gender and think about gender expression more fluidly, might find themselves interested in sexual experimentation with people of different genders as well. I've seen a lot of people who transitioned from lesbian identity to trans man, or trans masculine identities wanting to experiment with fag identity, or to screw other trans people or non-trans men. A part of this is about beginning to feel new resistant threads of queer sex in new ways—seeing your body in new ways and feeling like you can do more things with it and then decide what those things mean to you. This is certainly not true for all trans people, but I have often seen it happen.

For people living on the outskirts of traditional gender, being perceived as different genders at different times—and coming to find out how subjective gender assignment is and how fleeting membership in

any gender role can be—can generate new feelings of experimentation and increased independence and pleasure. Suddenly, this thing that has always been a given in our culture—that all people are either male or female their whole lives, and that this difference is inscribed by “nature” in our very genes—falls away when some people perceive you as a woman and others as a man and when gender starts to come apart in pieces: hair, chest, clothing, walk, voice, gesture, etc. Even for trans people who eventually arrive at a stable male or female identity that fits certain traditional gender norms, many still have their image of gender’s stability strongly disrupted by the experience of changing gender and navigating the world from a new standpoint. Others, like myself, who occupy a gender position that defies traditional expectations of either gender and, therefore, get interpreted different ways for different reasons, constantly experience the instability of gender and usually have a lot of funny and scary stories to tell about the fluidity of perception.

For some people, sex is a place where gender roles get confirmed, and having sex with people and having them perceive you and treat you according to the gender roles you are expressing can be a really wonderful and affirming feeling. When I was first coming out as trans, it meant the world to me to be able to explore my gender by having sex with people who wanted to engage in gender play and who respectfully saw me as I saw myself. For people who are experimenting with how they think about or express their own gender, wanting to have different kinds of sex with different kinds of people can be a significant part of that learning process.

In the communities I’m in, this has resulted in lots of interesting discussions. For couples with one person beginning to identify as trans, it can

mean recognizing that the two members of the couple can have sexual-orientation identifications that don't necessarily depend on the gender of the other partner—like a couple with the non-trans woman identifying as a lesbian and a femme and her trans boyfriend identifying as a fag. For some people, too, this has encouraged them to open their relationships so that both members can get the experimentation they want, allowing them to keep being together in ways that work for them and that they really love. For other people I know, who don't have a primary partner, polyamory means getting to be pervy and dirty with all the people who appeal to them without having to be judged or considered a player or a liar. For people socialized as female, this can be incredibly important. We are raised to think that sexual pleasure is not for us, that to seek out pleasure is to be a slut, that we should be less sexual than men, that sex is a service you give to attain commitment and family structure from men. Moving past that, owning sexual pleasure and being allowed to seek it out is a radical act for everyone in our shame-filled culture, but particularly for people raised as women who are told to be sexy (for others to consume) but not pleasure-seeking. Radical pro-sex feminists carved out these ideas in the 1980s, and I see them echoed in the desire of the communities I'm in to embrace sexual freedom and experimentation.

This issue of experimentation and different kinds of affirmation that come from sex also gets to our politics about identity. Shitty liberal culture tells us to be blind to differences among people, and stupid romance myths tell us love is blind. But for folks who have radical politics and recognize that identity is a major vector of privilege and oppression, we know that love and sex and culture are not blind to difference but rather that difference plays a major role in sex and romance and family structure.

We also understand that experiencing and acknowledging the identities we live in and are perceived in is important, and finding community with other people who are like us can be empowering and healing. For that reason, a lot of us may want to experiment in those ways, too. For instance, we may be in a relationship we think is great, but then want to have an experience outside that relationship with someone who shares a characteristic with us that our partner doesn't, whether that be race, language, age, class, background, ability, trans identity, or something else. Our radical politics tell us we don't have to pretend that those things don't matter, and that we can honor the different connections we get to have with people based on shared or different identities. If we love our partners and friends, it makes sense that we would want them to have experiences that are affirming or important for them in those ways, and not let rules of sexual exclusivity make us into barriers for each other's personal development.

A lot of the things I'm writing here get to the basic notion of what we think loving other people is about. Is it about possessing them, finding security in them, having all our needs met by them, being able to treat them however we want and still have them stick around? I hope not. What I hope love is—whether platonic, romantic, familial, or communal—is the sincere wish that another person have what they need to be whole and develop themselves to their best capacity for joy or whatever fulfillment they're seeking.

As a jealous person, I'm interested in building love and trust with people that does not hinge on sexual exclusivity, because part of my jealousy, and maybe part of the jealousy implied in the cultural drama repeatedly portrayed on TV of "the other woman," "the affair," and the heart-crushing trust-violating meaning placed on sex outside a relationship,

comes out of the fact that desire always exceeds any container—and we all know that from experiencing our own desire. No matter how much we love and want and adore and are hot for our partners, we also experience desire outside that dyad, and the myth of romance (there's one person out there for each of us—find them, love them, buy things with them, and you'll be happy forever), which is drilled into all of us from birth till death, makes this knowledge terribly threatening. So the point, for me, becomes recognizing that commitment and love and interest in someone else's well-being does not necessarily include a deadening of all sexual desire for other people, or trying to unlearn the belief that it does. The point for me is to create relationships based on deeper and more real notions of trust. So that love becomes defined not by sexual exclusivity, but by actual respect, concern, commitment to act with kind intentions, accountability for our actions, and desire for mutual growth.

And yet, despite everything I've expressed here, I also have serious concerns about the push for polyamory among my friends. Sometimes I see it emerging as a new sexual norm and a new basis for judgment and coercion. In some circles I'm in, it has become the only "radical" way to be sexual. Those who partner monogamously, or who just don't get it on a lot, are judged. I also see, perhaps more frequently, the poly norm causing people to judge themselves harshly when feelings of jealousy come up. Having any feelings at all, and especially admitting them, is discouraged in our culture. We are encouraged to be alienated from ourselves and others, to cure ourselves of bad feelings through medication and "retail therapy"; and we are made to expect that perfection and total happiness are the norm while anything other than that is either some kind of personal failure or chemical imbalance. This results in a lot of

repressed feelings. Many people in the communities I'm in, especially people who have lived through sexual violence and people raised as women in our rape culture, have a hard enough time identifying for ourselves what is okay with us when it comes to sex—what we want, what is a violation, what our real feelings are—and feeling entitled to express them. We certainly don't need more messages that tell us that our feelings related to sex and safety are wrong.

I've been disturbed to see dynamics emerge in which people create the new poly norm and then hate themselves if they cannot live up to it. If they are not perfect at being nonjealous, nonthreatened, and totally delighted by their partners' exploits immediately, then they have somehow failed. I have felt this way myself. Frustrated at how my intellect can embrace this approach to sex and yet my emotional reaction is sometimes enormous and undeniably negative. At times, this has become a new unachievable perfection I use to torture myself, and I'm embarrassed even to admit to friends how awful I feel when overcome by jealousy. I've also become increasingly distant from partners as I've tried to hide these shameful and overwhelming feelings.

This doesn't seem like the radical and revolutionary practice I had hoped for. In fact, it feels all too familiar, like the other traumas of growing up under capitalism: alienation from myself and others, constant insecurity and distrust and fear, self-hatred and doubt and inadequacy. I do not have a resolution for this dilemma. I only have hopes, for myself and others, and lots of questions. How do I recognize the inadequacy of the romance myth while acknowledging its deep roots in my emotional life? How do I balance my intellectual understanding with my deep-seated emotional habits/expectations? It seems like the best answer to all of this is to move

forward as we do in the rest of our activism, carefully and slowly, based on our clearest principles, with trust and a willingness to make mistakes. The difficulty of having open relationships should not be a reason not to try it, but it should be a reason not to create new punishing norms in our communities or in our own minds. We've done difficult things before. We've struggled with internalized oppressions, we've chosen to live our lives in ways that our families often tell us are impossible, idealistic, or dangerous, and we get joy from creatively resisting the limits of our culture and political system—which are both external and part of our own minds.

One thing I have figured out for myself in the past few years is that this is a pretty slow process for me. Whenever I've tried to dive into polyamory with various partners, I've felt terrible and often ended up losing my ability to be with them because of how awful I've felt about my own jealousy. I hate the feeling of having a double standard and being a monster. So now I'm trying to figure out how to have relationships that are not based on sexual exclusivity, but also in which I can be comfortable admitting what is going on for me and not pushing myself to be somewhere I'm not—going slow enough to figure out what works and what doesn't. It's not easy and it's still pretty mysterious to me.

Sometimes while riding the subway I try to look at each person and imagine what they look like to someone who is in love with them. I think everyone has had someone look at them that way, whether it was a lover, or a parent, or a friend, whether they know it or not. It's a wonderful thing, to look at someone to whom I would never be attracted and think about what looking at him or her would feel like to someone who is devouring every part of his or her image, who has invisible strings that connect to every part of his or her body. I think this fun pastime is a way of cultivating compas-

sion. It feels good to think about people that way and to use a part of my mind that is traditionally reserved for a tiny portion of people I'll meet in my life to appreciate the general public. I wish I could think about people like this more often. I think it's the opposite of what our culture teaches us to do. We prefer to pick people apart to find their flaws. Cultivating these feelings of love or appreciation for random people, and even for people I don't like, makes me a more forgiving and appreciative person toward myself and people I love. Also, it's just a really excellent pastime.

I do not have a prescription for successful relationships, and I don't think anyone should. The goal of most of my work is to remove coercive mechanisms that force people to comply with heteronormative gender and family norms. People often get confused and think that I and other trans activists are trying to erase gender and make everyone androgynous. In fact, that sounds a little boring to me. What I want to see is a world in which people do not have to be criminalized, or cast out of their family, or cut off welfare, or sexually harassed at school, or subjected to involuntary mental healthcare, or prevented from getting housing because they organize their gender, desire, or family structure in a way that offends a norm. I hope we can build that vision by practicing it in our own queer and activist communities and in our approaches to ourselves. Let's be gentle with ourselves and each other, and fierce as we fight oppression.