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Non-monogamies and queer kinship: personal-political reflections



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Mercedes Pöll would generally rather sit in the corner and read. Sometimes, they go for a swim. Sometimes, they teach on relationships and sexualities. It's nice.

So here we are. Four authors, one article.

Actually, when we started writing this, we started writing it from different perspectives and with different goals in mind.

When Mercedes wrote an introductory section that Boka disagreed with, Boka felt angry, for some reason.

The reason was that Mercedes had infringed on Boka's property. Boka had started this project – so, clearly, it was Boka's prerogative to say where it was supposed to go. Only they hadn't said anything, hadn't known much, really.

And then Mercedes came in and trespassed.

Because we wanted to *share* this contribution.

'Property is theft!', David shouted from the sidelines.

'Don't start that argument again!', Michael shouted back.

And thus, we non-monogamously ruminated about the meanings and potentials of non-monogamies for this elusive spectre called 'queer kinship'.

We are not of one opinion. None of us are, for we are many. Each of us is more than the sum of their parts (Foucault, 1998). This article itself is non-monogamous. Its cohesion (or lack thereof) is communally achieved, not given (or perhaps, it is given, but not by some supernatural entity). It is no one's individual property. Is this what non-monogamies can mean for understanding and developing queer kinship?

We have tried to pay tribute to the non-monogamy of writing this text by actively trying to speak with multiple voices – voices that may sometimes disagree with each other. Our apologies to Julian Anslinger, who will have had the dubious pleasure of layouting this.

Context

When one reads the term 'queer kinship', or perhaps 'queer relationships', it's not unlikely that one jumps right to understanding 'queer' as 'gay' or 'lesbian' (or 'bi', if one is really trying). That's not surprising (**but it is!**); after all, equating 'queer' with 'homosexual' is a broad stroke with which many people paint. However, this is not the kind of queer relationships that we want to highlight here. Our 'queer' is more strongly about disrupting the status quo and dismantling existing social orders to make space for alternatives.

Our 'relationships' can be anything from the (alleged) classic love-lust-trust or hate-dis-trust-disgust between (don't expect us to write 'two') people to all modes of relating to an/the other/Other in the world. You don't need to identify as objectumsexual to have a relationship with a stone ... a book, a text, a song, a person you've never met in person, your dog, your neighbour's cats, yourself, yourselves. We cannot not relate; that -ship has sailed. If we think of and listen to 'queer as in gay' voices, we hear them call for 'same-sex marriage' or 'gays and lesbians in the military'. From a differently (truly? – Nothing can be 'truly' queer!) queer perspective, though, we'd rather get rid of both these institutions that end lives in oh so many different yet all violent ways (Conrad, 2010).

But isn't all this talk about disrupting the status quo just empty words? What's this 'status quo' supposed to be that everything 'queer', including queer kinship, is said to go against? Think of what we read in *Days of War, Nights of Love*:

'The bourgeois man depends upon the existence of a mythical mainstream to justify his way of life. He needs this mainstream because his social instincts are skewed in the same way his conception of democracy is: he thinks that whatever the majority is, wants, does, must be right. Nothing could be more terrifying to him than this new development, which he is beginning to sense today: that there no longer is a majority, if there ever was.'

In the last analysis, the so-called 'mainstream' audience most of them imagine they are dressing up for at their demonstrations and political events is probably just the spectre of their bourgeois parents, engraved deep in their collective sub-conscious as a symbol of the adolescent insecurity and guilt they never got over.' (CrimethInc. Workers' Collective, 2001, pp. 50–51)

So maybe we really shouldn't make up this supposedly singular straight mainstream against which we define ourselves. Even – dare we use the word? – 'straight' realities can be more complex (than assumed, imagined, from a queer point of view), can't they? But they're fundamentally oppressive. Are they? Yes! I don't know ...

But let's back up a bit first. Before we talk about queer, non-monogamous relationships themselves, or indeed any relationships, it serves well to consider the contexts in which they are embedded and that shape our perception as well as our practice(s) – our practicing? – of relationships. We do not relate to others in the oft-invoked political, social, etc. vacuum, but always in reference to social structures and customs that we have come to understand as 'normal' or 'the done thing' or 'just the way things are' over the course of our lives. And, by doing so, we contribute to their very re-/production. All statements, including statements of relationship style, have a performative aspect. This is not to say, as is often assumed, that they are simply a 'performance', that we could easily switch to a different role in the play of our lives if we so desired, but that they

enact what they're about, that they create the very things they supposedly 'merely' represent (Butler, 2006, 2011; Barad, 2007). In this sense, a 'mainstream' could be said to exist that has little to do with what the 'majority' 'actually' does or thinks or feels or is – instead, it lies rooted in our performatively, continuously, and imperfectly reproduced ideas of what we *should* do or think or feel or be. It is an imagined, unattainable ideal.

The institution of marriage may generally be viewed as something to strive for, something that provides the foundation for forming a nuclear family, which in turn can become the oft-cited smallest building block that allegedly makes up the very structure of our so very well-structured societies. If we marry because 'that's the way it goes', then by doing so, we pave this very way that 'it goes', and so many of us follow, then, in the first place.

Wrapped up in this example of marriage are many more concrete assumptions and implications: Even with the more widespread legalisation of so-called 'gay marriage', heterosexuality remains the expected mode (c.f. Fessenden, 2015, no pagination) for doing 'partner relationships' – which is further entangled with the expectation that marriage is supposed to lead to so-called 'family', which implies having children (c.f. Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990, p. 708), most preferably acquired through one's own sexual reproduction, which in turn is a very hetero thing, culturally and symbolically, if not always materially.

Coupled with an expectation of children as well as with pronatalism more generally (c.f. Morison et al., 2016, pp. 185–186) comes the 'understanding' that people who are married will have sex (with one another, that is, and also with nobody else) to fulfil this aim, and that they will generally want to, since sex within marriage is seen as (read: constructed as, made as) universally desirable and desired by 'all' (yes, even you, as you might be painfully aware). (Although it is worth noting that this may not hold true for the elderly, as they may very much be expected to *not* be sexual (c.f. Sandberg, 2013). But do the elderly even feature in 'mainstream' imagination? Who is 'everyone' that makes up this 'all' we think about? Similarly, the extent to which women are allowed to desire sex, even within marriages, is heavily policed.)

In order to ensure parentage and child-rearing responsibilities, monogamy is enacted as a feature to allegedly 'secure' the relationship and its outcomes. And in more recent history, the increased focus on marrying 'for love' (often even for the elusive, constantly sung about 'true love'; see Coontz, 2006) has introduced expectations of romantic affection for one's other, 'better' half in the marriage relationship, which has arguably added to the supposed primacy of 'the family' in people's lives. Marriage in general is very much tangled up with property rights and hierarchies: from 'owning' another person (e.g., the father who 'gives away' his daughter to the fiancé who declares to 'make you mine', or questions such as 'Is the child yours?'), to ownership of material property against 'the outside world' (I don't mind what you do in your bedroom, but that bedroom

better be in a single-family house, and that house better have a cute little fence around it.), to valuing one's family members more highly than that outside world (after all, 'We are family!', and 'I'm your father.').

What looking at the example of marriage emphasises is that there are a range of tenets for relationships – and we could never discuss or even list them all! These tenets have frequently been described under the helm of compulsoriness, such as 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980), 'compulsory monogamy' (Emens, 2004), or 'compulsory sexuality' (c.f. Gupta, 2015) – all driving at the idea that being 'normal' in relationships means adhering to certain, often very implicit but nevertheless extremely powerful standards, such as being in a heterosexual, monogamous, sexual-romantic relationship.

Adhering to these standards yields rewards such as social and legal recognition as well as certain perks that come with this kind of sanctioning (from inheritance rights to tax breaks to the simple fact that one can freely and openly talk about one's relationship in most social settings without having to fear odd looks or even hateful reactions). Such are some of the normativities that form the conditions for doing relationships in our social environments.

So why non-monogamies?

One point of entry:

Where queer relationships grate against the status quo of relating is on the level of normativities that are being rejected or not followed through with, out of circumstance, preference, or necessity. These areas of friction are also where we may see transformative potential – potential that sparks a process of becoming more conscious and aware of the structures that tend to guide and/or constrain our most intimate behaviours or desires. It is no coincidence that it takes encountering an exception to make a rule intelligible where before, we might not even have suspected a rule existed.

Another point of entry:

As indicated by the quote from *Days of War* above, while 'the mainstream' exists as an imagined ideal that we may un-/consciously aspire to, it does not exist, in its pure form, in actual practice. Much rather, we are surrounded by and enmeshed in smaller and larger infractions to the imagined norms of 'the mainstream' as well as smaller and larger ways of reproducing these norms. One cannot easily be disentangled from the other, just like one (person) cannot easily become disentangled from all of them.

There are a whole range of practices that one could apply the 'non-monogamies' label to: from what some might otherwise call cheating; to having three- and moresomes with someone whom you consider *your partner*; to polyamorous relationships where people are involved romantically with more than one person; to parents that are neither biologically related not romantically involved co-rearing ('their') children.

We could talk about each of these concrete forms of non-monogamy in great depth, and we could emphasise that all of these concrete non-monogamous practices have the potential to reproduce patriarchal, heterosexist, classist, racist, natalist etc. norms. But we won't be able to do that within the confines of this article ([or our lives](#)), and luckily, many others have discussed this already. For a few overviews and different perspectives, we'd like to direct your attention to, e.g., the following: Barker (2013); Barker and Langdrige (2010); Cardoso et al. (forthcoming); Easton and Hardy (1997); Griffiths et al. (forthcoming); Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse (2006); Nordgren (2006); Sheff (2015); Taormino (2013); The Thinking Aro (2013a, 2013b); Veaux (2010); Veaux and Rickert (2014).

Unencumbered by the complexities of lived reality, we can now proceed to lay out what we believe non-monogamies can bring to an ideal of 'queer kinship'.

But first, a diversion: In a paper on video games and their queer potential, Chess (2016) argues that while the 'traditional' (ideal, heterosexist) narrative is not complete unless it has 'an inciting event, rising action, leading towards a climax, and then ultimately a falling action' (p. 86), the queer narrative revels in the middle. The queer narrative may have no climax, or it may have many of them. It indulges in the pleasure of process and delay.

Transferring this train of thought to relationships, we can say that not only are our relationships an embodiment of the narratives we tell about ourselves, but the structure of the idealised relationships of our societies mirrors that of an ideal narrative ([in which we are imagined to live happily ever after](#)). Queer kinship could then be networks that indulge in relational middle spaces. They are not reproductive, they have no clear, singular climax and no epilogue. They have no end goal beyond their own process. Such kinship may find its most obvious expression in communities of equals (complex, shifting and public networks of interdependence, without fixed centre, and with no goal but the network itself), as opposed to hetero (sexual/-sexist) kinship which is typified by the family (stratified, hierarchical and private, and oriented towards personal and institutional reproduction).

Put in the simpler (but no less complex) language of everyday life, let's think about some examples of what it could mean to live in such a 'relational middle space' without a singular climax or epilogue, focused only – [or primarily](#) – on the process. There is always also a relationship between writer and reader (or, text and reader), and what kind of relationship would this one happening right here be if we only offered abstract concepts and forgot to fill our text with love (Cooke, 2011)? Therefore, an example:

If you meet the cute person you've been talking to online, and you chat and have sex and watch a film together, before one of you goes home to their partner(s), and you keep doing this without feeling the need to talk about 'where this is going' or what you

should call yourselves, you might be in a relationship with no clear climax. Maybe there wasn't even a build-up to anything similar, because you simply were honest from the very beginning and didn't feel the need to 'impress' one another. There is no marriage proposal looming, there can never be a scene where one is found out to 'have cheated' on the other. There is no 'family' to start as the teleological – climactic – goal of your relationship. And while there is definitely something there in this blossoming relationship, there isn't anything to 'break up', let alone any need to do so. Accordingly, there's no epilogue in the sense that instead of 'stopping seeing one another', you might simply start seeing one another less, or differently.

This – as one of many, many examples that might differ in basically everything but their potential to break free – is what we believe to be a possible understanding of queer kinship.

Interlude: Fear

More often than even I – *that is, one or more of us* – would think, when I read someone else's writing on relationships (and sometimes even my own), I find myself reacting with degrees of rejection. Not usually the disgusted kind, but the kind that says: *This is all well and good in theory, or if other people do it, but FOR ME? Ahahahahaaa ... nope, kthxbye!* And I find that this happens mostly in cases where someone argues for a way of doing things from a perspective that does not take into account my existing accumulation of anxieties, worries, or other triggers. To be fair, it's a tall order to ask this from a random person I've never met who's not writing with me, personally, in mind. But it can still put me off getting more closely acquainted with new ideas.

If you, therefore, have made it this far into the text and tripped over a few things, that's ok. Reading the above paragraphs, I trip over a few things. I trip over the *possible* implication that having an (even preliminary) end goal in a relationship (like many people do when they are, for example, looking to build a long-term home and shared life with someone) could be seen as an undesirable idea in a queer utopia because goals often reflect a desire for eventual stability. I trip over the idea of having no 'fixed centre' in a network (like the one 'the couple' frequently provides) because it feels disorienting. I trip over the idea of 'public networks' because many of my conceptions of intimacy are intricately tied to experiencing shared closeness in heightened states of privacy, which elevates their specialness.

What I want to get at is that embracing non-monogamy, in whatever form, for one's own life, or even as a strategy for re-thinking/-feeling our social (or *sociomaterial*) worlds, does not come easy for a lot of people – sometimes even those who agree strongly with its principles. Queer (as in anti-heteronormative, anti-racist, anti-ableist, etc.) non-monogamy is not only a practical, but an ideological – *and emotional* – commitment,

and since most of us have been socialised into thinking about relationships and community in unqueer ways, this involves a reworking of, or change in, our own desires and preferences, previously unquestioned ideals, and ways of approaching and conducting relationships. Why do we so often yearn for stability? **Why do we believe fluidity to be antithetical to stability?** What is it that makes us feel safe if not situations in which we ‘voluntarily’ constrain ourselves – and what could alternative safety look like? Bringing dimensions of private and public closer together requires a lot of trust in people – is this trust warranted? Hurt is part and parcel of this process, but how far can we stretch ourselves, and how can we assess when we need protection?

These things are scary, at least for me. They are also painstaking work, often cumbersome, and they test one’s flexibility. Queer ideas often promote incompleteness over utopian perfection, or emphasise the incoherent aspects of human experience. In this way, queer non-monogamies can be seen as the journey that supersedes its destination, where contradictory feelings, desires, and actions can coexist – and shift over time. But if we are allowed to be content with partiality, can we ever achieve a queer utopia? **And does this thinking itself submit to a vision of queer utopia that’s based on an individualised queer morality in which queer subjects strive to optimise themselves into good neoliberal yet somehow queer citizens?**

Visions

The opposition, struggle, and conflict between family and community is the breach through which glimpses of queer kinship can be seen. And while there is scant queer potential in the family, communities with queer potentials in their future abound: LGBTQ quarters, local pubs, community centres, Trade Unions. And, of course, non-monogamous relationship configurations. There is so much that is possible in this world, and it pains us **(Is that ‘all of us’? And if yes, is it also ‘all of you’?)** to be trapped in the different but equally narrow corridors that so many of us call their lives while going from one end to the other, without ever looking out the windows or tearing down a wall.

Non-monogamous relationships, as we want to understand them in this contribution, undermine the expectations we have laid out above: monogamy, ‘the family’, children as the climax of our lives, but also patriarchy, white supremacy, class oppression, ableism, ...

Within a non-monogamous framework, you are not required to have only one significant other that you care about (and maybe care for), but multiple others that can be openly significant for you. **(#RelationshipAnarchy)** In fact, this may be at the core of what we believe that this understanding of non-monogamy can contribute: an alternative to placing the value of one’s partner, one’s children, one’s nation, etc. above that of all others. **So, non-monogamies, as we understand them here, aren’t just about people’s interpersonal relationships, but about a more general stance towards the world. Don’t just queer**

your relationship with your immediate partner(s), but also those with all other people. Being in a relationship with someone does not only take place when we fall in love with one single person who reciprocates our feelings. Being in a relationship is something we all do, at all times, with all people, and with entities that are not usually seen as people. Being in a relationship means being affected. We cannot not be in relationships with others/Others, and the more we are aware of these relationships and how they affect us, the more we can take control of how we want to do them, how we want to interact with others/Others, how we feel about others/Others.

Employed in the appropriate manner (with the necessary vigilance directed towards intersecting marginalisation that may restrict access – see e.g. Sheff & Hammers, 2011), non-monogamy, centred on questioning the hierarchies between different people and between different entities in the world that we're so used to building, could have wide-ranging consequences for what it means to care (for others, for ourselves, for communities), and how that care is practiced. If we're not required or expected to love – and, by extension, care about – a narrowly defined group of people that we would focus on in monogamous formations, it's easier to appreciate the different ways in which different people matter in your life.

Non-monogamy, then, means blurring the boundaries between oneself – and extensions of oneself such as one's 'family' – and others/Others, as well as the boundaries between those that are hierarchically positioned in different places in relation to ourselves: 'friends' and 'partners' and 'family' and 'strangers' and 'immigrants' and 'the French', and so on. Instead of these neatly defined groups of people with their neatly defined positions and valuations, one might imagine a number of people whom you care about in different ways – some of whom might be emotionally important for you, some of whom you may have romantic feelings for, some of whom you might have sex with, some of whom you might only share a brief glimpse of compassion with on your ride to work. While it doesn't necessarily mean that you love the mail carrier equally or in the same way as the person with whom you cohabit, this understanding of non-monogamy does mean a change in how we distribute intimate value amongst others.

We shouldn't forget here that this isn't intended to be some sort of new age 'Love everyone' movement or a call for the total deconstruction or denial of difference. For example, we might 'care about' the transphobic youth who spit at us differently from the way we'd care about fellow victims of such attacks. And we might care about those whom we consider our partners differently from those we barely know. Sometimes, we might struggle to put these differences into words, and sometimes we might not even want to talk about them, if only to not give them the social power they already possess in so many people's lives. They might look and feel different for different people, and they might matter more or less – differently – for different people.

Non-monogamous relationships can help create new and ethical forms of relating, and help ameliorate the alienation of contemporary societies, but non-monogamous relationships can also be just as hierarchical, anti-community, heterosexist and misogynist as monogamous relationships. Non-monogamy by itself is not enough. A guiding ethico-political position must be fused to it. It must stand. It must stand *for*, and stand *against*. To make full use of the strengths of non-monogamy, it must stand for egalitarian communities of interdependent connection. It must stand against the private, stratified hierarchy of the family. *At the same time, it must stand for a way of living that helps those affected – us – be okay in the end. We might end up a very different kind of okay than we could have ever imagined, but it is nevertheless crucial that we're okay.*

And this is what we mean by the 'middleness' emphasised above. Non-monogamous relationships can allow us, open the space for us, to build communities where the priority is not on having a particular kind of life, reaching certain milestones, but on living (with others) itself.

Non-monogamy has another advantage, too, over other forms of community mentioned so far. Unlike trade unions, for example, communities based upon principles of non-monogamy carry a lesser risk of enforcing a private/public split that can reify certain forms of misogyny and class violence and damage the political efficacy of communal action. More traditional (*are they really traditional? yes!*) forms of community in the Western world rely upon a shadow consisting of the families of their members that carry this violence on their behalf. While communities based on non-monogamous relationships cannot be totally free of this violence, and may indeed be just as bad as monogamy-based families, applied properly, such relations can provide fewer places for oppressive structures to hide.

In offering these reflections, we don't want to contribute to building up a sort of queer morality where queerness is all about self-optimisation in the image of an imagined 'good queer'. This is not a call to optimise ourselves so we may boast to others and soothe ourselves that we're doing what's right. While the personal may be political – and the political personal –, we have no intention of insinuating that changing our individual relationship structures will change the world. Much rather, the way we understand non-monogamies in this contribution, they are an idea that refers to more than just one's personal predilections regarding sexuality, trust, or property.

Coming back to the overarching topic of this issue of the Queer STS Forum, non-monogamy need not be restricted to relationships between humans, but can extend to the ways we value human/non-human relationships as well. Not to mention that there are no neat borders to be drawn around 'purely' human relationships in the first place. 'The world' has always been part of us.

We are well aware that these are utopian visions, but we want to invite you, [and ourselves](#), to think about these visions, and to reflect upon how we build borders and hierarchies in our intimate and non-intimate lives. Non-monogamies hold potential for queer kinship. Let's not leave it untapped.

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