queering heterosexuality

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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. 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.

in this piece i will be considering the impact that taking on queer politics has had in my life, thinking through ways that queer- ing 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\(^1\), 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 anarchaqueer liberation\(^2\) 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 anarchaqueer 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.

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\(^3\), the anarchist punk infoshop in Toronto.


\(^3\) 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 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
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. 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 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. 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 com-

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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

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 nonmonogamy had been pretty rocky. During my undergraduate degree, I struggled 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...
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 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 Slut5.

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 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 heterosocial 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.
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 responsi-
bility. i feel like mainstream society has inculcated in us the value
of irresponsibility, and in anarchism we seem to link this to free-
toomodology, to spontaneity, and liberation. whereas really
it is a kind of trapping capitalist individualism that seems unsus-
tainable.

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, anar-
chists or not, though by anarchists it might be couched in terms
of a liberatory politics. but it seems more like a failure to be re-
sponsible to those people with whom we are engaged in intimate
relationships.

at the workshop, the facilitator, who was an older indigenousi-
dentified 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 impos-
sible 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 re-

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.” we all have different bodies, different
body parts, different desires; we all want different things from rela-
tionships, whether they are intimate, sexual or otherwise. so why
shouldn’t we negotiate our relationships ourselves instead of fol-
lowing 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 meet-
ing 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 commu-
nicating in ways that rebuild trust?

at some point i was lucky to participate in a class at the toronto
anarchist free university 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 respect-
ful with them. even if their motivations are different than yours
(e.g. a party night hook-up or one-night-stand might be one per-
son’s motivation, whereas an active polyamorous practice com-
mitted to alternative sexual, intimate, and community-based rela-
tionships might be the other’s). honesty and respect, appropriate es-
tablishing of consent among all concerned parties (including some-
times those who are not present i.e. the other person’s other part-
ner/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,

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1990.
7 Toronto Anarchist Free University. http://www.anarchistu.org/
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 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 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.
tend 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-eco-political situation is too unstable to have kids, but some are brave enough to do it anyway. Eight 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 ex-partner who has a current partner and two children, living in new

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fers 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 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.” [9] 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. [10]

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 roommates 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 ex-

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