Love-Sickness and Affective Entanglements of Queer and Heterosexual Forms-of-Life

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This project is an in-progress attempt to think queerness outside the logic of identity. The public rhetorics surrounding queerness-as-identity tend to rely on binaries of nature and nurture, determined traits and cultural choices, and in addition to simply constraining our thinking, these binaries fundamentally fail to account for the deviance and divergences that ground queer lives. So instead, I'd like to think queerness as a kind of experience, one that occurs in different forms but in such a way that similarities may be recognized across differences. By thinking queerness in experiential terms, I want to frame queer people as more connected than not to heterosexuals, but not for the purposes of assimilation—I want to be able to say to heterosexuals, "Look, you are more like me than you are willing to admit." In order to do this, I take up the notion of love, using this term to refer to the broad set of affective relations between a self and its others. This set of relations includes, for my purposes, desires—sexual or otherwise—and identifications—importantly, gender identifications, but also those that are not reducible to gender. I am attempting to describe these affective relations as a shared ground for both queer and heterosexual forms of life, and in doing so I want to locate shared elements of contingency and power in the emergence of these forms of life—again, not for the purposes of assimilation but for the purposes of obtaining a more secure rhetorical foothold within sex and gender politics.

Let me begin with a complaint: the celebratory slogan "Love Wins"—coined in the wake of the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that mandated the federal recognition of same-gender marriages—just bugs the shit out of me. It combines two elements that could not possibly be more of a kowtow to the dominant heterosexual frame: 1) love; and 2) winning. Regarding the former, we should remember that "gay marriage" was only ever a questionably relevant goal for

the queer community writ large, since, as Michael Warner points out, "[a]s long as people marry, the state will continue to regulate the sexual lives of those who do not marry" (96). Regarding the latter, I am reminded of Jasbir K. Puar's response to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" campaign addressing the epidemic of suicide among queer youth. Puar points out that Savage's exhortation may be heard not only as "a call to upward mobility" (151) but further as a "project [that] refigures queers, along with other bodies heretofore construed as excessive/erroneous, as being on the side of capacity, ensuring that queerness operates as a machine of regenerative productivity" (153). So although slogans such as "Love Wins" very much offer a hopeful rejoinder to the very real forces of hate and degradation directed toward queer people today, these rhetorics also project "hope" and "love"—and, indeed, queerness itself—as definitive answers to the uncertainties of political and personal struggles. Personally, I don't buy it.

This is the exigency that I am attempting to address with this project: how might queerness and queer lives be disentangled from both rhetorics of degradation *and* rhetorics of regeneration? How might we understand queer lives in relation to the heterosexual dominant *without* either allowing ourselves to be coopted or casting ourselves as figures of abjection? I suggest here that rearticulating our relation, as queer people, to love itself can open up new rhetorical spaces for describing queerness to ourselves as well as to others. In doing so, I want to call attention to identities and experiences that are often marginalized in the collection of terms and tags under the umbrellas "queer" and "LGBT"—in other words, the "QIA+" that tends to get lost in the alphabet soup. This includes asexual and aromantic people, intersex people, and people who identify as "queer" not as a catchall tag but as shorthand for nonbinary and/or nonmedicalized transgender identities. And we should keep in mind, when it comes to the "+," that there continues to be a proliferation of terms and labels for identities and experiences that

fall somewhere in between the coherently "queer" and the coherently "cishet." Obviously, there is also a range of degrees of privilege and struggle represented in this collection of terms. One of the premises of my discussion is that it is possible to discuss marginalization and privilege as fluid, situational, and reliant on multiple axes of power. So if I tend to focus on identifying particular aspects of marginalization, this does not mean that we should not also recognize aspects of privilege.

First, let me address some prior work toward the disentangling of queerness and identity. In their work on the possibility (or impossibility) of queer composing, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes describe queerness using terms similar to those I am advocating for here. In their article "Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition," Alexander and Rhodes write that they "wish to cultivate textual practices that risk a bit of discomfort in order to air different insights, different knowledges, different bodies, different ways of being (192). The "excess" of queer writing, they argue, "exists textually as written movements and gestures that defy intellectual containability, that transgress our sense of what is knowable," and that cause us "to acknowledge movement, possibility, and being outside of the normative" (197). You can see, then, that Alexander and Rhodes are, like me, concerned about the ways that identity logics limit queer thinking—especially the identity logics formed through pedagogies that prioritize the "composed" over the "decomposed."

However, I am also concerned about the limits of framing queerness as a resource or a reserve of energy that can be put to use creatively, pedagogically, or politically. When Alexander and Rhodes write in this article that they "see an energy, a vitality in composing queerly that is productive of text and critique" (201), I think they are slipping into such a framework. This is a limited description of queerness, I am arguing, because it suggests that a queer person may, in a

sense, "deploy" queerness as a response to a situation. Or—to put it a bit more mildly—it suggests that a queer person may, in some sense, "will" a queer "decomposition" of their self, toward uncertain but presumably radical purposes. Indeed, in their webtext *Techne,* Alexander and Rhodes frame "queer composing" as a process of "de- and un- and re-composition" to the end of "disrupting how we understand ourselves to ourselves." In broad terms, I agree with this this project, but as a description of queerness I find this to be disconcertingly close to the voluntarist notion of a sublime point-of-rhetorical-command, located in bodily capacities yet somehow also immanent to them, a volitional force of de- and re-composition. Granted, I don't think Alexander and Rhodes actually intend this, but I do think that their framework does not fully account for this implication. (To be clear: I also think Alexander and Rhodes complicate this framework in their elaboration of it, especially in *Techne*.)

In my own thinking, I am attempting to circumvent this pseudo-voluntarist implication by taking up the idea of "forms-of-life," which originally emerged from the language philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein but has been revived more recently in the political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. As a description of particular sets of bodily orientations and capacities, the term "forms-of-life"—in the way that Agamben uses it—suggests that "the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power" (150). This is similar to Alexander and Rhodes's assertion that an attunement toward queerness is an attunement toward "power" in the sense of "movement" and "possibility"; however, Agamben here is using a particular Italian term for power, *potenza*, that connotes "potentiality" as opposed to the connotation of *potere*, power as a sovereign or centralized force (Virno and Hardt 262). This is a nuanced distinction, and Alexander and Rhodes's work may be read toward either direction. I want to insist on this distinction, though, because I think it makes

a difference for thinking queerness outside of a voluntarist framework. By framing "life" as *potenza*, Agamben is attempting to identify being with an undisclosed set of possibilities—which, importantly, cannot be made existent through a sovereign will, but rather emerge as contingently actualized potential that recasts and reconfigures the set of possibilities in the next moment. So a "form-of-life" is a life that is inseparable from its situation, not reducible to biology or culture but emergent from those contingencies that go by the name of "biology," "culture," or other such empirical frameworks.

A "queer form-of-life," then, would be an emergent being that, in its bodily orientations and capacities, diverges from the recognizable set of forms-of-life. In this way, such a notion is congruous, I argue, with Sara Ahmed's description of the relation between queer orientations and heterosexual orientations. Articulating queer experiences using a phenomenological framework, Ahmed explains that "[o]rientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward" (3). This *process* of orientation, then, also occurs as an *establishment*, in the performative sense, of possible objects and actions: "Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action *only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action*. Compulsory heterosexuality diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line" (91). This orientation process thus forges capacities for action while also closing off or wearing away other capacities.

So, what Ahmed emphasizes here that Agamben does not is the *foreclosure* of capacities that is a necessary part of the contingent emergence of forms-of-life. But, as Ahmed shows, this contingent emergence also necessarily results in unexpected and even unrecognizable

orientations; this is what results in "[t]he discontinuity of queer desires" (71). What's really important about Ahmed's framework, for my purposes, is that she frames these queer discontinuities as possibilities whose affective and experiential valences remain wholly undisclosed—thus Ahmed does not forward a description of queer possibilities as productively regenerative or re-constitutive, but rather ambivalently open. As she explains, even given the material forces that shape bodies toward normative heterosexual orientations, "accidental or chance encounters do happen, and they redirect us and open up new worlds. Sometimes, such encounters might come as the gift of the lifeline, and sometimes they might not; they can be lived purely as loss. Such sideways moments might generate new possibilities, or they might not" (19). In contrast to the rhetoric of "Love Wins," such a framing of queer forms-of-life posits queerness as not necessarily harmonious, volitional, or victorious. What is queer just occurs.

By foregrounding the notion of "love" within such a framework, I want to suggest that the queer underbelly of the rhetoric of "Love Wins" is love's unsettling contingencies, uncertainties, and indeterminacies. I want to wrest love away from its position as an answer to a set of problems, in order to point out that love *is a set of problems*: for anyone, queer or heterosexual or otherwise, a desire, an identification, or an orientation is not a resolution of a problem, even if it does help form the basis of an identity that *does* resolve one to action. I am arguing that desires and identifications—in short, the affective experiences that go by the name of "love"—occur as problems: problems of relating, problems of understanding, and problems of action and emotion. In this way, I want to draw on Donna Haraway's notion of "significant otherness," which she describes as a set of "emergent practices; i.e. vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary

joint futures" (7). Love-as-significant-otherness thus foregrounds the contingent emergence of affective relations. This notion of love asserts—as I am attempting to assert here—that love poses a problem and demands an ongoing response: as Haraway explains, in such a relation of love-as-significant-otherness "one cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship" (50). Framing love as "significant otherness," then, posits love not only as a relation of ethical responsibility but also ethical uncertainty—in love, our responsibilities are not only toward our other, but also our self, and the form and relation of *those* responsibilities is always undisclosed beforehand.

By asserting this, I borrow a phrase from Cynthia Haynes's exploration of war, state terror, and the rhetorics of Nazism and American exceptionalism; she posits that "[h]omesickness" is "not about missing home, it is about the sickness called *Homeland Security* and our rhetorical task of addressing it in an age of perpetual conflict" (3). Twisting her formulation, I posit that "lovesickness" is not about having too much or too little love, it is about the sickness called love—and the rhetorical task of rearticulating the sickness inherent in forms of love that are called "sick" *as well as* those forms that are recognized as "normal." Whereas Haynes asserts that "[h]ome is not safe" and never fulfills the promise of peace and comfort that we read in it—that "[h]ome/sickness is the symptom of our perpetual conflict with that which inevitably, unremittingly, seduces us into believing there is an answer on the other side of the why" (11)—I assert that love is not happy, and that it, too, never fulfills our expectations of peace and comfort. Love/sickness is the symptom of our significant othernesses, the affective entanglements that seduce us into believing there is a happy object at the end of our line.

In positing this formulation of lovesickness, I want to suggest that queer love—queer desires and queer identifications—must *also* be understood as lovesick forms-of-life. By

recognizing and articulating our own lovesicknesses and significant othernesses, I think we are in a better position to call upon heterosexuals to recognize *their* forms-of-life as lovesick. In this way, I think a notion of lovesickness actually helps us contest the rhetorics that frame queer love as *sick*. I don't just refer to attacks on the legitimacy of gay and lesbian attractions and partnerships; I am also referring to self-relations and identifications that fall outside what we might normally recognize as "love" in the first place. This includes relations that are other-than-romantic or other-than-sexual, as well as orientations whose bodily contours fall outside the binarized boundaries of "man" and "woman." These, too, are forms of significant otherness.

Before I conclude, let me attempt to articulate an example of the sort of lovesick self-relation I am referring to, one found in a queer autobiographical and autotheoretical text that breaks the traditional forms of relating identity and difference. In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa articulates her own experience of queer life as an incomplete juxtaposition of decisive sovereignty and non-agentive responses. In order to articulate her queerness as an emergent form-of-life, she relates consciousness to what she calls *la facultad*—that is, a responsive, pain-sensitive capacity that is "a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between worlds, unknowingly cultivate," though "it is latent is all of us" (39). While these adaptive capacities—consciousness and *la facultad*—give us the ability to act on our own behalf, as our *being* emerges from this mixture, the forms-of-life that occur are not wholly autonomous nor wholly subject to pre-existing power. Rather, as Anzaldúa puts it, our own capacities for decision-making and self-direction—for rhetorical action—are material grounding for our lives that necessarily also limit us: "I spent the first half of my life learning to rule myself, to grow a will, and now at midlife I find that autonomy is a boulder on my path that I keep crashing into" (50). I want to suggest that this is a description of her relation to her self as a relation of

significant otherness: her being, as a set of affective relations and orientations, is a *problem* not an *answer*—a problem that demands a response that forms what we refer to as "life."

Consider her statement: "Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent)" (19). Made up of four parts that each undercuts the others, this sentence is, on its face, incoherent. Yet I want to suggest that we read it as (intentionally or otherwise) representative of the way that queer forms-of-life do actually emerge as lovesick relations of significant otherness. The first part of the sentence ("Being lesbian and raised Catholic") already signals a conflict of identity: Catholics can't be lesbians. But Anzaldúa begins with *being*—that's the ground of the further developments. She *is* lesbian. What comes next, a heterosexual orientation, is the result of what she calls an indoctrination: this would seem to indicate that her ability to *be* what she *is* has been taken away from her. And yet, the next clause (emphasized in her text) states that she "*made the choice to be queer*"—she does not re-use the word "lesbian"—which seems to undercut both the indoctrination and the original *being lesbian*: do you *choose* to *be* what you *are*? Where did this choice come from, if her agency has been taken from her? And then the last, parenthetical addition seems to undercut everything that came before it by suggesting that "for some" being queer is "genetically inherent." This is blatantly a contradiction in terms: identifying queerness as a genetic condition and also a choice scrambles the identitarian logic that gender identification or sexual orientation cannot be both an immutable aspect of someone's body and also a decision subject to ethical judgment. But this is what Anzaldúa seems to imply, and all this is what follows from "being lesbian." Thus for Anzaldúa—and, I would suggest, for all of us—what occurs as a problem of the self, a problem of significant otherness or lovesickness, is what is

constitutive of queer forms-of-life. And disregarding these problems using a restorative rhetoric of love does not help us respond effectively.

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