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Polyamorous Intimacies: From One Love to Many Loves and Back Again

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One of the emerging sexual stories (Plummer, 1995) of the early 2000s was that of consensual non-monogamous relationships. This story attracted intense public interest, with celebrities quoted as having open, or multiple, relationships, many newspaper articles and television documentaries focusing on ‘real-life’ experiences, and a burgeoning number of self-help style books being published on the topic. The cultural exposure of polyamory was such that the word entered the Oxford English dictionary in 2006 and elicits over a million Google hits due to the many online communities devoted to polyamory (mostly based in the US, Canada and Europe).

There has also been increasing academic interest in the topic, with conferences, special issues of journals, and edited collections devoted to the topic of consensual non-monogamies (for example, Haritaworn et al., 2006; Barker and Langdridge, 2010). Polyamory is undoubtedly the form of non-monogamy that has received the most attention in recent years. This involves people openly having multiple romantic and sexual partners, and is often positioned as separate from other forms of non-monogamy such as swinging and open relationships.<xen>¹</xen>

This chapter begins with a brief review of the ways in which polyamory can be seen as a response to the dominant ‘mononormative’<xen>²</xen> form of relating, critically situating this in the literature about transformations in identity, intimacy and relationships. Following this, we provide an overview of empirical research which has explored how polyamory is negotiated
and experienced in practice, including the kinds of contracts and borders negotiated by polyamorous people in order to manage their relationships. In particular, we focus on the kinds of relations, exchanges and affects emerging within polyamory. We then argue that a form of ‘polynormativity’ has emerged which echoes mononormativity in the manner that it privileges certain forms of (romantic) relating. This section of the chapter contests the idea that polyamory should always be seen as providing more democratic and free relationships, by instead focussing upon the norms and rules that (potentially) govern polyamory.

We next present an alternative understanding of polyamory, which we have all written about in recent years, that involves shifting from a concept of ‘multiple lovers’ to ‘multiple loves’, which may include, for example, love between friends, love of the planet, and love of the self (Heckert, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010). This way of relating has been termed ‘relationship anarchy’, ‘polytical’ or ‘relationshipqueer’ and is embraced by some who define as polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous, although it is by no means as commonly expressed as the more conventional and normative forms of polyamory. Particularly, we explore the potentials of queering the distinctions between monogamy and non-monogamy and the hierarchies among different kinds of relationship and different kinds of love.

In the final sections, we offer a (r)evolutionary love ethic drawing on anarcha, queer and women of colour feminisms, inviting a broader transformation of intimacy, shifting from individualised understandings of (non-)monogamy toward a loving awareness of our embodied and ecological interdependence. This love ethic is (r)evolutionary because it includes the possibility of profound personal and political liberation, without restriction to either a classical notion of revolution as a particular type of historical moment or evolution as involving
geological time-scales. Loving awareness can happen in an instant, transforming perception, relationships and movements.

**One love: mononormativity**

Pieper and Bauer (2005) located polyamory as a form of resistance to the dominance of ‘mononormativity’. This is the commonly held notion that monogamy is the good, natural, normal or right way of forming intimate relationships: an integral part of Rubin’s (1984) charmed circle of human sexuality. Public representations of relationships in the global north are overwhelmingly mononormative, with the romantic couple in a long-term loving, (hetero)sexual relationship being the commonly held notion of what ‘relationship’ means (Barker, 2012). This can be demonstrated, for example, by the omnipresence of images of such couples in billboard and television advertising, and by the proliferation of women’s and men’s magazine articles and self-help books about how to form and maintain such relationships (Wilkinson, 2012). There is one love which people are meant to aspire to, and that is mononormative romantic love.

Clearly, this current understanding of love is socially, geographically and historically situated. Summarising her examination of the history of marriage, Coontz states that: ‘people have always loved a love story. But for most of the past [we] did not try to live in one’ (2005: 10). Such coupled relationships, in the past, were about money, resources, child-rearing, but seldom romantic love as it is currently understood, which Coontz argues emerged in the 1950s alongside the concept of the ‘nuclear’ family. This is not to say that romance was not present in such relationships (or that money and resources do not have a part to play in contemporary ‘romantic’ relationships), but rather to point out that there was not the overwhelming emphasis on romantic love that there is today.
Theorists of intimacy such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have located the emergence of this form of love in a wider ‘transformation of intimacy’, which has its roots in the democratisation and individualisation that is said to be taking place in the global north. This, plus the recognition of ‘same-sex’ relationships and an increasing narrative of gender equality, means that most coupled relationships now, in theory, involve two individuals who desire to be equal and free and to pursue their own autonomous goals. Giddens (1992)optimistically hailed the resulting possible ‘pure relationship’ as one based on choice, equality, discussion and negotiation. However, others have pointed out that this move towards autonomy and agency has been combined with other societal shifts in the global north that continue to constrain our intimate lives (Jamieson, 1997; Wilkinson, 2012). Some argue that the decline of religion, the increase in people moving away from their place of birth, unstable working lives, and the sense of lack which is encouraged by a consumerist culture, has meant that people are increasingly seeking self-validation, meaning, security and belonging within the private, couple relationship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

There are thus clear tensions between autonomy and possession in current romantic relationships (Bauman, 2003). The ideals of finding ‘the one’ and the ‘happily ever after’ exist alongside those of personal growth and self-improvement. Although there are ways in which these can coexist – for example, through the relationship being regarded as personal success and offering more financial freedom and security – this double aim can also put relationships under pressure (when individual goals conflict, or when there is a desire for relationships to both remain static and to adapt over the increasingly long lifespan). Such tensions have been implicated in rises in divorce and separation rates (Lewis, 2001), affairs and infidelity within monogamous relationships (Vangelisti and Gerstenberger, 2004), single-person households, and
‘disposable’ relationships (Bauman, 2003). Recent research suggests that neither heterosexual nor lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships reveal the kind of equality and negotiation that Giddens and others anticipated. Rather, shared rules of monogamy, and relating more broadly, tend to be assumed and implicit unless something happens to bring them into question (Heaphy et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011). Also, there are narratives of relationships still in circulation which are based upon a return to gender inequality, with the ‘opposite’ sex being viewed as a puzzle to be solved in order to be correctly ‘played’, using a set of tools, in order to get what you want (whether that be love and commitment or a one-night stand) (Barker, 2012).

**Many loves: polyamory**

Within this context, many have hailed open non-monogamies in general, and polyamory in particular, as potentially radical alternatives (for example, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Heaphy et al., 2004). Polyamory can be seen as a challenge to mononormativity given that it presents the possibility of loving more than one person at a time, and – often – within a context of aiming at open negotiation and ethical treatment. In particular, and echoing themes around the transformation of intimacy, polyamory self-help style literature has presented polyamory as superior to monogamy because it is said to enable and require more self-awareness, personal autonomy, and more mutuality and negotiation within relationships (Anapol, 1997).

Polyamory can provide an opening up of the types of mind-set and emotions that may be normalised in coupledom, such as jealousy, competition and possession (Mint, 2010). Mononormative feeling rules can be understood as linking directly to an increasingly individualised neoliberal capitalist consumer culture, founded upon insecurity, risk and individualism. Monogamy, exclusivity and possession can be seen as a way in which to uphold the competition and anxiety on which capitalism relies. Illouz (1997: 3) has highlighted how
‘capitalism is characterized by an entire cultural-mind-set’ in which the language of love echoes the language of the marketplace. We are taught to possess our significant other, to mark our ownership, to suspect and even feel hostile towards others because of the fear that they could take our ‘possession’ away from us. These critiques of monogamy clearly echo earlier second-wave feminist critiques which highlighted the ways in which the romance myth is founded upon a notion of scarcity. For example, Comer’s (1974) feminist critique of monogamy challenged the ways in which romantic love is seen as a limited resource, whereas others forms of love such as love for children and love for family are not. Comer claimed that

monogamy has come to be the definition of love, the yardstick by which we measure the rest of our emotions... Like so much butter, romantic love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is to spread it ‘thinly’ (Comer, 1974: 219).

Therefore, might polyamory have the potential to enrich our relationships outside of the romantic dyad? Critiques of monogamy and marriage from various feminist perspectives have challenged the ways in which women’s time, energies and resources are absorbed by the heterosexual romantic dyad (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949]; Ferguson, 1989; Jónasdóttir, 1991; Jackson, 1995; Barker and Ritchie, 2007; Harvey and Gill, 2011). The (hetero) romantic couple is therefore portrayed as especially damaging to women, coupledom is seen to be diverting women’s attention from wider political issues, and keeping them in solitude from the rest of the world (Rosa, 1994; Robinson, 1997; Munson and Stelboum, 1999; Solanas, 2001 [1968]). A rejection of mononormativity could be a way in which to expand the potential for spaces of encounter, to be open to new loves, new intimacies, new affects and new ways of relating to the world. Might polyamory therefore be a way to enrich sociality and create more convivial communities?
Relations

Polyamory potentially opens up wider possibilities for relationships than exist within conventions of monogamy, by disregarding popular notions that any form of sex or love outside of a couple dyad represents ‘cheating’ or ‘infidelity’. Some people employ the notion of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ relationships to construct the possibility of multiple romantic relationships on different levels. Others use terms such as ‘V’ (one person with two main partners), ‘triad’, ‘quad’, ‘family’ and ‘web’ to articulate different possible modes of multiple relationships (Labriola, 2010). In addition to recognising and naming romantic relationships, other forms of relationship terminology have come into existence, such as ‘metamour’ for the partner of one’s partner (Barker and Ritchie and Barker, 2006), enabling the possibility (or even necessity) of a relationship with the person who, in monogamy, would be viewed as a ‘mistress’ or ‘other woman’ (tellingly also the gendering of the term is removed within polyamorous language). However, the separation between romantic love and other forms of relationship, such as friendship, remains as in monogamy, at least in the language of ‘love’, ‘relationships’ and ‘partners’.

Recently, some have also written about the modes of relating involved in polyamorous families (for example, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002; Iantaffi, 2006). Sheff (2010) found that polyamorous parents reported having extra emotional and practical resources when in multi-parent families, suggesting also that this provided additional role-models demonstrating a diversity of possibilities for children to pursue. As with many monogamous relationships, however, there were also difficulties in negotiating break-ups with children who had become close to partners.

Exchanges
Along with modes of relating, certain forms of exchange become opened up, and closed down, in polyamory. Clearly the potential of sexual and romantic exchanges with more than one person are opened up, but there may be limits agreed, for example, under ‘polyfidelity’ whereby no sexual or emotional relationships are allowed outside of a specific polyamorous unit (such as a triad or family).

Three common ways of managing exchanges emerge from discursive research on agreements and contracts amongst polyamorous people (Klesse, 2007; Finn and Malson, 2008; Wosick-Correa, 2010). First, there is frequently a separation of ‘love’ and ‘sex’. Unlike swingers and those in open relationships (who generally allow sex, but not love, outside a main couple), both emotional and sexual exchanges are possible, but there are some who insist that all contact outside a specific polyamorous unit is ‘just sex’, or at least ‘secondary’ in nature, or who keep certain sexual activities sacred to one relationship, whilst others insist that all relationships are regarded as love or ‘partnerships’ without any purely sexual relationships. Secondly, there are those who maintain a kind of relationship security by keeping their relationships separate, and those who do the same by keeping things together. For example, some prefer not to know details of what their partners do with others and may insist that nobody else is brought into the home or spends the night, whilst some prefer to be kept as informed as possible, or even to do everything together. Finally, some prefer what Finn and Malson (2008) call ‘freedom of contract’: having a clear agreement and boundaries about what is and is not acceptable, whereas others prefer ‘freedom from contract’: resisting prescribed behaviours and focusing on self-awareness and open communication to ensure and display trust, commitment and stability of the relationship.

Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) widens out the concept of exchange to consider the possible exchanges which polyamorous parents, and their children, may have with the wider world, for
example, choosing between passing as monogamous, distinguishing a school/home border in terms of openness of exchanges, and deliberating ‘polluting’ mononormativity by being open about their relationships.

**Affects**

Much has been written about the affective and emotional possibilities which polyamory does, or does not, enable. Obviously, there is the potential for loving more than one person at a time, which is generally not regarded as possible within mononormativity. ‘Falling in love’ with an additional person is inevitably read as no longer being ‘in love’ with one’s partner. Although some popular fiction deals with the tension of loving two people at once, the situation is closed down by the need to choose between them. For example, this is a common theme in popular television series such as *Sex and The City* (for example, Carrie, Big and Aidan) and *Grey’s Anatomy* (for example, Meredith, Derek and Finn, or Owen, Cristina and Teddy).

Jealousy has been explored in depth by many writers on polyamory, and it has been well noted how polyamory might challenge conventional mononormative ‘feeling rules’ (for example, Ritchie and Barker, 2006; Mint, 2010). The notion of jealousy is expanded by polyamorous people in two different ways. First there is the creation of terminology relating to different strengths, or amounts, of jealousy: ‘wibble’, ‘wobble’, and ‘jelly moments’ being terms invented for ‘smaller’ jealous moments which are owned (Easton, 2010) and regarded as impermanent rather than being seen as natural and the ‘fault’ of the objects of jealousy. Secondly, there are words (such as ‘compersion’ or ‘frubble’) for the ‘opposite’ of jealousy, which allow for the possibility of feeling good or positive on seeing one’s partner with another partner. Detailed examination of the ways in which polyamorous people visualise their experience of jealousy demonstrates that it is felt in diverse ways between and within people, for example, some express
it as feeling knotted up and tangled, as an outward spikeyness and defensiveness, as insecurity
and vulnerability, as terror of loss, as feeling very small as if one might disappear, as being
uncomfortable in your skin, as feeling painfully stretched, and as an almost enjoyable form of
self-righteous rage (Barker et al., 2012).

There are also forms of affective and emotional regulation within some polyamorous
arrangements and communities, as we have seen above in the attempts to control and contain the
kind of sexual and/or emotional feelings people develop for one another via the regulation of
behaviour. Some have said that they have a general sense of jealousy not being acceptable,
within certain polyamorous communities, such that it can feel unspeakable when it is
experienced. There is a recognition of affective states such as being in NRE (New Relationship
Energy) (Iantaffi, 2011), which require management in order to maintain existing relationships.

**One love? Polynormativity**

Although polyamory clearly offers new ways of doing intimacy, it is important to highlight how
some of the most dominant sexual stories surrounding polyamory often help to uphold some of
the basic premises on which mononormativity is founded – mainly by emphasising the
importance of romantic love above all other forms of love. In each of the preceding sections we
explored ways in which relational and affective possibilities could be both opened up, and closed
down, within polyamory. Here we will examine, more broadly, the potential restrictions, rules
and rigidities that have emerged.

Popular narratives of polyamory often present a vision of ‘love’ that is all too familiar.
This phenomenon is what we term ‘polynormativity’: an increasingly assimilationist and
individualistic approach to non-monogamy (Wilkinson, 2010). For example, Klesse (2007)
found that one of the dominant narratives surrounding polyamory is the importance placed on long-term meaningful relationships that are founded upon love, honesty, understanding and trust. This suggests that the values found in polyamorous relationships often mirror existing definitions of contemporary romantic love and the so-called reflexive self (Giddens, 1992). These narratives are frequently framed within a discourse of choice and individualisation. Often, polyamory is described as a radical new way of loving differently, yet many of these definitions echo prevailing ideas surrounding monogamous love and therefore the valuing of romantic relationships above all others is often left unchallenged (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Popular sexual stories about polyamory are easily appropriated and assimilated into existing narratives about romantic love, and hence are potentially easily marketed and commodified. There is now a small but growing range of ‘poly’ merchandise (mainly from the US), from t-shirts and mugs to Valentine’s Day cards, bearing slogans such as ‘Love is complicated, polyamory is honest’, and ‘Share the love!’ Polynormative depictions of polyamorists in such contexts portray them as wishing to assimilate into existing systems rather than challenging the foundations upon which romantic love is privileged above all others.

Furthermore, it is important to not over-romanticise the political potentials of polyamory, or to create new sexual hierarchies in which non-monogamy is always positioned as unquestionably ‘better’ and ‘more political’ than monogamy. It is crucial to note the ways in which new normativities and hierarchies have emerged in descriptions of what polyamory should be. In many self-help style texts about polyamory there is a repeated focus on being in control of your own destiny: with a bit of time and effort anyone can choose to be ‘poly’. What has emerged is almost a form of, what we term, ‘polyromanticism’ where polyamorists are portrayed as wondrous human beings who have the emotional capacity to have many lovers. Easton and
Liszt (1997: 268), for example, describe polyamory as an ‘advanced sexuality’. Here there is a clear hierarchical separation not just between polyamory and monogamy, but also perhaps between polyamory and other forms of non-monogamy. The language of ‘ethical non-monogamy’ can serve to marginalise other forms of non-monogamy, such as swinging. For example, there is often quite a clear (but unspoken) classed distinction in polynormative narratives, with articulate middle-class polyamorists distancing themselves from a stereotypical image of working-class ‘swingers’ (Noel, 2006; McDonald, 2010).

It can be helpful to acknowledge the ways in which hierarchies can develop within non-normative sexual cultures. As discussed above, popular understandings of polyamory often help to create new ‘feeling rules’ and new normativities. At times pressures arise when there is a prescriptive and narrow definition of the ‘right’ way to do polyamory. For example, polyamory’s emphasis on intimate freedom and agency could also inadvertently become a form of control. The focus on openness in polyamorous relationships can sometimes lead to a sense of exclusion or feelings of inadequacy for those who may still have a more ‘rule-based’ intimate life. Some may feel a sense of personal failure and disappointment about their inability to maintain a ‘truly’ open relationship. Likewise, there may also be the expectation that people should feel a certain way, which could mean having to hide emotions, especially jealousy. In order to understand the varied and complex ways in which cultural mononormativity, and community polynormativity, affect different people we must take into account people’s different positionalities and life histories. The free non-rule based vision of love that popular depictions of polyamory promotes may be more difficult for some people to embrace than others. A whole range of factors might affect a person’s decision to be openly non-monogamous or not: where they live, the support networks they have in place, alongside educational background and economic and financial
factors such as the necessity to publicly continue a monogamous relationship for financial security. Being openly non-monogamous might not be something everyone feels able to (or will want to) embrace. Popular understandings of polyamory frequently fail to take into consideration the deep personal (and practical) attachments many people may still have to romantic coupledom.

In the remainder of the chapter we aim to overcome some of these problems by moving our focus beyond non-monogamy. In so doing, we hope to avoid the process of shaming and othering, of placing some intimate arrangements as more ‘advanced’ or more ‘radical’ than others. Instead, we wish to highlight that there is no one way of doing polyamory. There are many relationship formations that challenge the norms of monogamy, of which a multiple relationship is just one kind. A politics of anti-mononormativity does not necessarily mean that a person must be in a multiple, or even an open, relationship: it is vital to differentiate between a rejection of monogamy and a critique of mononormativity.

Here we will develop a broader definition of polyamory, one with the potential to create affinities with a whole host of people who are excluded by the state-promotion of romantic coupledom. Current polynormative depictions of polyamory seem to serve a privileged few rather than showing solidarity with all of those who are oppressed by mononormativity (Haritaworn et al., 2006). Popular sexual stories about polyamory limit their focus solely to issues of sexual and romantic love, and other forms of love and intimacy remain invisible. However, we argue that polyamory could potentially blur the definition between the sexual and non-sexual, the romantic and the non-romantic, especially if we shift its meaning away from having ‘multiple lovers’ to ‘multiple loves’. By defining polyamory as ‘multiple loves’, we argue
that polyamory is not just about non-monogamy, it is something that many people might already be practicing in their everyday lives.

**Many loves: queering ‘amory’**

While valuing amorousness, we invite a more expansive experience of love in order to open up situations which may have grown rigid with any form of normativity or hierarchy. By decentring romance, the term ‘polyamory’ no longer requires a border between monogamy and non-monogamy, thus taking the binaristic and oppositional energy out of a potentially polynormative identity (Klesse, 2006). In other words, polyamory no longer has ‘others’ to disavow or to define itself against. It seems unlikely that there is anyone who loves only one thing in life; perhaps we are all polyamorous (Barker, 2012). These points are intended to invite some spaciousness around poly as an identity category that is imagined to create a border between one set of people (the polyamorous) and others (the monogamous, the swinging, and so on). Recognising the ways that love affects lives beyond the romantic, the domestic, the private, we see love as a potentially revolutionary force, enabling transitions from moments, relationships and even cultures of domination to ones of connection (Rosenberg, 2003).

As noted above, some second-wave feminists have argued that a particular organisation of, and emphasis on, romantic love can often confine women, isolating them from the rest of the world. As an alternative, they have emphasised the revolutionary potential of friendship and solidarity among women. Similarly, many anarcha, queer and women of colour feminists have also advocated a broader understanding of love beyond romance: a (r)evolutionary love ethic which makes space for connection among individuals, communities, movements and ecosystems, bridging divisions of gender and race, species and class (Hooks, 2000; Carrillo Rowe, 2008; Bertalan, 2011; Davis, 2011; McBride, 2011). Love can function, for example, as a direct
inspiration for (r)evolution: a process unbounded by classical notions of revolution as an event or evolution as taking millennia. Anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, for example:

took her experience of love as confirmation that inside of her there was a life force that the world – her mother, father, husband, the church, the state, the factory – had tried to capture but had been unable to extinguish. This knowledge gave her inspiration to change the world in such a way that such love would be more likely to blossom and more likely to persist (McBride, 2011:163).

In a (r)evolutionary love ethic, this outer work of changing the world is combined with the inner work of letting love blossom and persist within oneself. As the sufi mystic and poet Rumi put it, ‘your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it’ (British Broadcasting Corporation World Service, 2012). And, as bell hooks wrote,

awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination […] by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet (hooks, 2000: 87).

hooks has been lovingly criticised for romanticising love: ‘Whereas she appears to associate love with total and complete liberation from fear and the will to domination, I understand it as an ongoing emotional process integrally associated with everyday fears, pain, problems, uncertainties, dangers and complexities’ (Davis, 2011: 127). For our purposes, love is not a process, but the direct experience of being open to life as it is – including anger and pain, joy and sorrow – without the need to control, dominate or deny. Attachment to particular emotions, pains or pleasures can distract us from that experience, acting as barriers, taking our awareness away

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from love. Notice your own experience. What happens in your relations with others, with the world, when your attention is taken by self-centred desires? hooks offers a vision of selfless love – one that involves the release of all attachments to domination, attachments which can be incredibly subtle, which can run through all our relations. So, while a loving relationship is a process that, as Davis points out, will include all sorts of feelings, the experience of love itself brings a spaciousness and openness to possibilities, even during moments of conflict, anger and other challenges. Love involves the acceptance of uncertainty, unlike domination which is the attempt to create certainty through control.

Have you ever been so caught up in the certainty that you need to do something that you have ignored your body’s clear signals that what you are doing isn’t good for it? Most of us have. It is a very subtle form of domination that can occur within the bodymind. How would it feel, instead, to have a loving relationship with the body? To learn to recognise the will to power over (puvoir) in the mind and learn to listen to the will to power to (puissance) inherent in the body. We all have a capacity for strength, vitality and physical skill. In a culture of domination, attachment to these capacities is intertwined with all sorts of hierarchies, as is attachment to thinking of ourselves as weak, helpless, wounded (Brown, 1995). A (r)evolutionary love ethic might queer polyamory by inviting us to love our bodies just as they are and to honour our bodies by caring for them so that we might live a life that is also of benefit to others. It might invite us to attune our sensitivity to our bodies, observing when the body needs a rest, or needs a challenge, allowing us to find that sweet, queer spot between effort and relaxation (Barker, 2012). It might also invite us to nurture our capacity to love other bodies, not just those that we find easy to desire sexually, but to express a loving-kindness toward all the bodies on Earth with whom our lives are entwined.
What kind of political economy would evolve out of, and nurture the capacity for, love? Clearly it would not be a capitalist one based on institutionalised greed and individualism. Consider, too, the tragedy of the State, Nietzsche’s ‘coldest of all cold monsters’. The State is an impossible attempt to create a unified body politic, at once defensive in relation to other (non-)states and internally aggressive toward elements deemed to be dissident, dangerous, different (Dean and Massumi, 1992). The State is always a state of fear, and where there is fear, there is no room for love (hooks, 2000). The tragedy of the State is that the desire to experience unity is a beautiful one which can never be met by the strategies of State (police, control, define, judge). The fundamental confusion of the State is that unity does not already exist, that it must be created through force and guile.

We witness a queering of polyamory in the global movements and micro-politics of everyday life which demonstrate not only that ‘another world is possible’, but that an ‘anarchist world already exists’ (Jeppesen, 2011: 208). Just as thought is not the truth of the self, capitalism is not the truth of the world economy, nor the State the truth of politics. Exchanges based not on profit or power games, fear or greed, but on love, solidarity, mutual aid and a recognition of our ‘embodied interdependence’ (Beasley and Bacchi, 2007: 280) abound. Gibson-Graham (2006), among others, have dedicated themselves to highlighting the non-capitalist forms of economy which already exist, much like Colin Ward (2011) and other anarchists have documented numerous examples of other-than-State forms of social organisation.

One love: queering poly

Our final approach to lovingly queering polyamory is to invite a love of life itself. We ground our (r)evolutionary love ethic in a queer ontology, a monist proposal that life is already unified.
You and I and everything on this earth may appear to be discrete, separate, singular. But this is merely part of the tragedy of the State.

Advocating just such a queer ontology, Tuhkanen (2009) looks to Anzaldúa, Deleuze and postcolonial theory to develop new forms of subjectivity through the recognition of our biological and spiritual interconnectedness. For Anzaldúa (1987), this is expressed through two key terms: evolution and spirit. In terms of form, we are all mixed: our bodies are made up of multiple species (parasites, symbiotes), our cultures created through the crossing of borders, the mixing of identities. Evolution, here, is the continuous process of becoming through bridging, crossing, connecting, queering, loving – changing ourselves and each other through the very fact of being alive. No ironic queer performativity is necessary here. Life’s very evolutionary nature is queer, refusing to be contained by the borders of categories invented by the human mind (McWhorter, 2010).

While evolution produces great diversity, many potential loves, in Anzaldúa’s queer ontology it all stems from a single source: spirit. ‘We’re supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it’ (1987: 36). Such statements are frequently greeted with embarrassed silence by scholars of the global north. As Alexander puts it,

There is a tacit understanding that no self-respecting postmodernist would want to align herself […] with a category such as the spiritual, which appears so fixed, so unchanging, so redolent of tradition. Many, I suspect have been forced into a spiritual closet (2005: 15).

A secular worldview might also become fixed and unchanging. Lagalisse, for example, suggests there is a certain irony in the disavowal of spirituality by many anarchists from the global north.
The anarchists in my research aimed to subvert neoliberal political economy, yet they did not question the disenchanted worldview that it is imbricated with, which is a cosmology of its own – a self-referential, all-encompassing paradigm as historically specific as those identified as religious – and one that takes for granted the ideal hyperrational subject presupposed by neoliberalism (2011: 665).

This hyperrational subject may take its fullest form in scientific discourse. Biophysicist Pietak notes the challenge of taking seriously traditional views of an inherent ‘life energy’, like Anzaldúa’s spirit – known as chi or qi in Traditional Chinese Medicine, prana in yoga and Ayurveda, sila to the Inuit and nilchi’i among the Navajo – because of the manner in which they have been associated ‘with implicit irrationality and thus, scientific shame’ (Pietak 2011: 43).

She carefully outlines a scientific case for taking life energy seriously, just as Alexander, Lagalisse and Anzaldúa, among others, make a strong case for taking spirituality seriously in the realms of transformative, decolonising scholarship and politics.

In Tukanan’s reading, ‘Anzaldúa suggests we understand all locally sculpted forms and situationally formulated names as evolutionary expressions of spirit’ (2009: 98). Whereas Anzaldúa inherits her notion of spirit from a Mestiza fusion of indigenous spirituality and Catholicism, the German anarchist mystic Landauer’s description of spirit and (r)evolution is remarkably resonant with hers: ‘the spirit will not establish things and institutions in a final form, but will declare itself as permanently at work in them’ (Landauer, 1978: 130). For Emma Goldman, too, spirit was essential to radical politics. As Kathy Ferguson writes in her exposition of Goldman’s political thought, ‘While Goldman dispensed with the deity who is said to bestow it, she continually invoked the “animating vapor infused by the breath,” the “life principle” as
both the grounds and the vehicle of her politics’ (Ferguson, 1989: 153). We, too, might learn to see life as ‘beauty in a thousand variations’ (Goldman 1998: 150).

A (r)evolutionary love ethic, with an emphasis on the simultaneous beauty and mystery of spirit, invites an anarchic, queer subjectivity. A love of spirit, of life itself, might infuse all our relationships, undermining hierarchies and softening normativities. Like Anzaldúa, we might see that ‘all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls’ (1987: 85). This awareness of spirit similarly fuels a compassionate view of crime by anarcha-feminist Voltairine de Cleyre:

Out of one great soul-stuff are we sprung, you and I and all of us; and if in you the virtue has grown and not the vice, do not therefore conclude that you are essentially different from him whom you have helped to put in stripes and behind bars (2004: 154).

The same could apply to those we might label oppressors (Barker and Heckert, 2011). Not only does a (r)evolutionary love ethic help us release our judgement of others, it does so by releasing our judgements of ourselves, by dissolving our own borders and allowing ourselves to evolve. Whereas the State attempts to contain and control, spirit is mysterious; and ‘the foreclosure of the unknown not only prevents people from becoming revolutionaries, it also serves to stop revolutionaries from becoming’ (Bertalan, 2011: 217). If spirit is indeed the basis of all life, radical love of the other is always a radical love of self. As Blagojevic insightfully observes, ‘our resistance to changing ourselves is marked by the fact that we are always already exposed to what is different and other – that we are other’ (2011: 39; emphasis in original). How might we relate to that within us which we might be drawn to labelling as dissident, dangerous, different? Perhaps with love.
Conclusions

In emphasising a love of life itself, we include the love of life’s rich diversity, its ‘beauty in a thousand variations’. Whereas the State, whether the mental state or state as apparatus, has an image of unity into which difference must either fit or be rejected, the anarchy of love knows that all difference springs from the unity of spirit, of life itself. It does not require hierarchies nor normativities, though it acknowledges they might arise. In a hierarchical society, people are taught to not trust themselves or each other, to follow authority-claims rather than the integral authority of their own experience. And so we understand, and sometimes feel, the attraction of rigid rules, of the illusions of certainty and external authority. We invite an awareness of the ways in which the desire for certainty results in a loss of intimacy, a loss of freedom. And with that awareness, each of us, wherever we are at, might allow ourselves to be present, intimate, loving, with whatever we are experiencing in each moment.

In these times, as in all times, much is uncertain. Climate change, various crises of capitalism, and everyday violence in many variations can trigger fear, anxiety, rage. Becoming spacious in order to allow these emotions to pass through can create space to better face these challenges with open hearts and minds. Openness in all relationships can create space for the collective and creative work of facing these challenges. We recognise that people may need or want to prioritise openness in some relations more than others. Different relationships involve different ways and degrees of opening body, heart and mind. Groups form, based on affinity, identity or experience, in order to practice openness with each other. This can be profoundly liberating for the group members, particularly when it is okay to have different interpretations or experiences of the group’s commonality. Can there be space for the uncommon in the commons?
Love also leads to the bridging of groups, not the instrumental networks of power over, but the desire to know others in order to help each other live well. This becomes confused in societies where to live well is imagined to depend on a degree of relative privilege rather than recognising the insecurity created by inequality. So while we speak of the unity of life, we recognise the differences of experience of that life, both inherent to life’s diversity and as resulting from the ongoing production of hierarchy. The practices of loving, bridging, queering, opening which we invite will look very different for different people at different times.

For many women of colour, the relational work of alliance/identity formation arises out of necessity and survival, while for feminists of privilege, whose survival needs are often obscured by the privileges they enjoy, the process of unlearning individuality, separation, and segregation becomes vital in engendering the desire to know others (Carrillo Rowe, 2008: 56, emphasis added).

In much the same way, people’s relationships with sexual practice look very different at different times. In decentring romantic love and sexual love in our anarchic interpretation of polyamory, we by no means seek to diminish them. Instead, we simply ask what happens when a loving openness is brought to any relationship, whether it be a friendship, a long-term lover or a one-night stand, professional, comradely or sisterly, romantic, erotic or celibate. We might live the answer to that question and, in doing so, live well.

References


Notes
Swinging involves couples having sexual relationships with other people (either individually or together, often at social gatherings). Open relationships are couple relationships that are open to one or both people having other sexual relationships.

Mononormativity is the culturally normative understanding that romantic relationships should be monogamous.

Same-sex relationships are often presented in this way too, particularly in the fight for civil partnership and ‘same sex marriage’ as has been pointed out by work on homonormativity and the ‘good gay citizen’ (for example, Bell and Binnie, 2000).

New Relationship Energy (NRE) is a term used to describe the heightened emotional and sexual ‘buzz’ at the start of a relationship.