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Clémence x. Clémentine  
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2012

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# Against the Couple Form

Clémence x. Clémentine

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“No more mothers, women and girls, let’s destroy the families!”  
was an invitation to  
the gesture of breaking the expected chains of events,  
to release the compressed potentialities.  
It was a blow to the fucked up love affairs, to  
ordinary prostitution.  
It was a call at overcoming the couple as elementary unit in the  
management of  
alienation.

— Tiqqun, “How to?”

CLÉMENCE X. CLEMENTINE  
AND ASSOCIATES FROM THE  
INFINITE VENOM GIRL GANG

Libidinal flows cut through the social world. Amorous and sexual relations

do not exist in some domain safely taped off from the rest of  
society. Rather they are constituent elements of nearly every aspect

of social life. Desire flows and circulates amongst places of employment,

intellectual debates, political organizing, artistic circles, playgrounds,  
and cemeteries. The elderly patient grabs at the breast of  
a nurse hunched over him. A governmental official strips his  
newly  
hired intern down to her leopard print thong during an important  
briefing in his office. The incarcerated man holds his hand up to the  
glass of the visiting booth, attempting to touch his wife after  
twenty  
years of their bodily separation. These flows of libidinal desire  
operate  
within and amongst broader social mechanisms, such that they  
help animate the dynamics of economic and political life. Often  
a  
locus of politics, desire permeates the so-called “public” terrain.  
Patriarchy incessantly subjects these flows of desire to a system  
of  
organization, a logic that subverts the desiring flows against  
themselves.  
This channeling and organization of sex and amorous relations  
I will refer to as the logic of the couple — that which funnels,  
simplifies, and reduces amorous desire to the needs of patriarchy  
within the capitalist mode of production. This logic assumes that  
women have but a single site for the fulfillment of their social  
and  
sexual desires, that being a romantic relationship with a man.  
The  
couple functions as the threshold, the admission fee, the golden  
key  
that allows a woman to participate in the social world. The couple

promises that, upon entering its grasp, one will no longer suffer from  
alienation, from isolation, from boredom, from rootlessness. The couple grants a woman personhood and social visibility. She obtains  
a title, a temporality, a space through the couple. Marriage enshrines  
this logic and its perpetuation of the specific form assumed by patriarchy  
under capitalism.  
The action and the discourse within patriarchal social relations emerge  
from a group of men interested in each other. In intellectual, political,  
or artistic circles, a cadre of men often monopolize the ability to participate in the production of events or ideas, which is not to  
say that they do anything particularly interesting. Patriarchy has systematically excluded women from the action and the discourse,  
consigning them as a class to perform the unwaged work of social  
reproduction. Rather than an essentialist concept, the category of  
woman stems from a gendered mode of exploitation and relegates  
certain types of labor to a private, unwaged sphere. While women  
busily work waged jobs in addition to performing domestic work,  
men create the sphere of public life in order to insulate themselves  
from coming to terms with their banality and superfluity.

Men grant women access to the action and the discourse by developing

sexual relations with men from this circle. Un-coupled women, those loose dogs, remain on the periphery, always at a distance from

the space where debates, projects, and events are played out. The couple acts as a social form that requires women, in order to participate

in whatever practice or domain they desire, to attach themselves to men via the couple mechanism. The couple-form often constitutes

the single device that protects a woman from the misogyny of a group of men. Who's that? Oh, I think it is Zach's girlfriend, Ben's ex.

Women become known for their relationships to men, not for their

contributions to intellectual or political life. Women's lives diminish

to their roles as the wife of R or the mistress of J, not poets, theorists,

or revolutionaries in their own right.

Women choose different strategies when faced with patriarchal social

relations and the logic of the couple. A woman who goes after a man with power in a certain milieu. A woman who always needs

a man around and will take whatever she can get. A woman who revels in the confidence of being so-and-so's girlfriend. A woman

who cheerfully sits on the "girlfriend couch" during band practice. A

woman who is depressed during the stretches in between boyfriends.

capitalism will take on a drastically different character: “As communism generalizes free access to goods, and amongst other things transforms and increases the space available for living in, it destroys the foundations and economic function of the family. Also, as it is the realization of the human community, it destroys the need for a refuge within that community.”<sup>6</sup> As a historically bounded relation, the internal contradictions of the couple-form will one day arrive at their conclusion, and love will no longer know the territoriality of promises, gender, or subject. In addition to our struggles in the streets and at the printing presses, we open up an additional front against coupledness. Feminist struggle remains the ever-enticing horizon before us.

I strapped my boyfriend with homemade explosives and blew him up. His flesh spread everywhere. So did my affection. I’m sick of love. Let’s fall in politics.

<sup>6</sup> Dominique Karamazov, “Misère du Féminisme” in *La Guerre Sociale*, No. 2 (Paris, 1978) trans. Jean Weir as *The Poverty of Feminism* (London: Elephant Editions, 1998).

A woman who views the man she is with as a mirror of her own prowess.

A woman who holds out for a man impressive enough to advance her. A woman whose intellectual labor is monopolized by staying up late writing apologetic emails to her boyfriend rather than drafting her own poems, theory, or architectural plans.

The logic of the couple mediates a woman’s relationship to herself and her relationships to other women. In the production of herself as a woman, she remains constantly aware of the need to make herself desirable, to make herself worthy of a man’s desire, to be fit for a man’s love. The go on, girl! You’re worth it! dimension of contemporary female subjectivation has coded women’s individual servitude as their self-realization. Post-1950s waves of feminism have reconfigured women’s position in capitalism and in relation to men without necessarily making it any less oppressive. The pseudo-empowerment of women to sleep around, wear lipstick, and buy themselves chocolate if they want to does not amount to any significant change to their structural exploitation. Do the femme fatale, the burlesque dancer, the woman executive have a man, or does a man have her? A woman

may completely internalize the demands of the couple, reproducing

herself as attractive, desired, and sought after - traits that must be

produced - even while railing against the sexually predatory male.

The logic of the couple has strengthened the single woman's direct

relationship to the commodity, the imperative to produce herself as

a commodity. Just as in the sphere of circulation — where allegedly

buyers and sellers exchange equivalents — the single woman trades

hours of primping, toning, and plucking for the ability to be purchased

by a man at the meat market. The couple mediates relations

between women to the extent that they interact not to deepen their

connection to each other, but to gossip about boys, to process their

relationships with men, to trade technologies of femininity whereby

they can improve their status with men. In this way, the couple-form

haunts women when alone or with other women.

One must not dissociate the desire for a sexual relationship with a man from patriarchy's stacked deck. Who are these boyfriends?

What does a woman think having one will get her? In short, everything.

The couple stands in for desire itself, after enshrined, funneled, and reduced to a single object by patriarchy. Rather than

categories of subject and object," as Mario Mieli suggests.<sup>5</sup>

Interrogate and challenge the ways that the logic of the couple constructs

families. Reconsider the bounds of the family and whom one visits over holidays. Rethink social bonds outside of the couple tie,

the blood tie, the legal tie.

Construct autonomous feminist spaces where women produce their

own action and discourse. Banish the mediation by men of relationships

between women. Prevent a single relationship from alienating oneself from the processes that contribute to liberation and the 4 Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2010) 51.

5 Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*

(London: Gay Men's Press, 1980) 56.

abolition of capitalism and patriarchy. Let no single bond stand in

the way of friendship, organizing, and advancing the interests of the class.

Make intelligible the movement of history and revolutionary praxis

as the only possible love story.

We do not mourn the decomposition of the couple-form. We like to

think of it as a blessing, a gift from the future. We consider the abolition

of the boyfriend and the husband part of the historical movement

superseding capitalism and patriarchy. As comrade Dominique Karamazov has written, the constellation of social relations after

plants and animals. Get into space. Replace the dyad, the pair,  
the

two halves that make a whole with third, fourth, n not-  
necessarilyhuman

terms: The three of them and that pack of wolves and that shrub!

The commune! The snow! The tea cups! The knives! The crea-  
tures!

Blast open the contents of the lover: I didn't want to kiss you per  
se. I

wanted everything that you were an entrance into: the smell of  
cigars, the

doors of the city opening to me, samosas, your aunt's house in  
the countryside,

the sense that I could walk around with my eyes closed and noth-  
ing would

injure me.

Go out for anti-seductive strolls, a disinterested cruising that  
vibes

on everything except sex. Or as Guy Hocquenghem writes, "if I  
leave my house every night to find another queer by cruising the  
places where other queers hang around, I am nothing but a pro-  
letarian

of my desire who no longer enjoys the air or the earth and whose  
masochism is reduced to an assembly line. In my entire life, I  
have

only ever really met what I was not trying to seduce."<sup>4</sup>

Animate other modes of social organization with love and eroti-  
cism.

Have a seminar, a reading group, a political party, a street gang,  
a rock

garden more satisfying than two people in a bed ever could be.  
Love

in such a way as "to annihilate the outworn, neurotic, and ego-  
istic

sprouting yearnings for negation or overcoming, young girls  
plan

their weddings while still in kindergarten. Why does a woman  
sell

out for some wank? She gives herself over to the couple in the  
hope

of mitigating her alienation and increasing her sense of "secu-  
rity," in

the same way that a citizen gives herself over to a repressive  
state

that she trusts to keep her secure. While perhaps not visible at  
the

outset, the couple will further alienate and isolate her. She will  
have

to answer to her husband in addition to her boss, entering into  
a

relation of hyper-exploitation. Comrade Valerie Solanas heeds  
the

atomizing function of the couple: "Our society is not a commu-  
nity,

but merely a collection of isolated family units. Desperately in-  
secure,

fearing his woman will leave him if she is exposed to other men  
or to anything remotely resembling life, the male seeks to isolate  
her from other men and from what little civilization there is, so  
he

moves her out to the suburbs, a collection of self-absorbed cou-  
ples

and their kids."<sup>1</sup> How much can a woman forgive? How much  
does

she let slide? How long does she tolerate things being amiss, rot-  
ten,

fucked up? She avoids breaking up at great costs because dis-  
obeying

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FORM 51

3 Solanas, SCUM, 72.



in tiny cursive with quill pens, or the feeling of the sidewalk  
being a  
trampoline. Rather, critiquing the couple involves an analysis of  
the  
way that patriarchy has recuperated women's desire for solidar-  
ity, for  
intimacy, for excitement, for negation, for the event into a con-  
solidation  
of phallic power and the accumulation of capital.  
Who would not arrive at this conclusion: patriarchy and capital-  
ism  
thwart any possibility to love in a way that liberates oneself from  
the  
logic of the couple or from one's own oppression. To liberate  
love  
necessarily involves the abolition of patriarchy and capitalism.  
One  
cannot opt in or out of these structural relations, and the struggle  
against them will be a collective, historical project.  
In this pathetic, stillborn world, we do have feelings. Sometimes  
we  
look at someone and think we are in love with them. We must  
crush  
the illusion that romance is or will be an avenue for liberation.  
We  
must divest from romantic relationships as means through  
which  
we might access a better world than this one. In realizing that  
their  
economies and conventions are part and parcel of the continuing  
soft disaster of our lives, we will leave behind all hitherto exist-  
ing  
couples. New and perhaps unknown forms of feminist organiz-  
ing

as the guiding principle against isolation and towards fulfill-  
ment,  
she remains tied to the couple-form.  
As another facet of the couple-as-solution, the discourses sur-  
rounding  
austerity measures and neoliberal restructuring frame the cou-  
ple  
as a remedy for poverty. One reads tales of young people shifting  
between poverty and prison as a result of single parenting, espe-  
cially  
absent fathers, as if the restitution of the couple could remedy  
the  
poverty and structural racism produced by capitalism. State bu-  
reaucrats  
tell women that the couple and the family that it anchors  
have replaced social assistance programs: you don't need help  
with  
childcare or food stamps; you need a man! The surest way out of  
poverty is to get married! While many women might never have  
access  
to employment, those who do work for a wage face a gendered  
discrepancy in earnings, likely forcing them to rely on male  
wages to  
support their children. These economic mechanisms preserve  
the  
vehemence of the couple-form as a trap for women within capi-  
talism,  
which masks unwaged labor as acts of love and care.  
The logic of the couple has replaced the logic of god. Turn on the  
radio  
and one can hear innumerable accounts of the absolute position  
of the couple: you are the only thing that matters, I cannot go  
on living

without you — or more evocatively — Every breath you take /  
 And every  
 move you make / I'll be watching you. Most love songs contain  
 or start  
 with "I" but the "I" is in fact everyone kneeling beneath the gen-  
 eralized  
 social form of the couple. The male gaze has replaced the divine  
 gaze. As Artaud has asked us "To Have Done with the Judgment  
 of  
 God" (Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu), let us be done with  
 the  
 judgment of men.<sup>2</sup>  
 Surveying these dynamics, one might wonder if women can opt  
 out  
 of the couple, perhaps through an exploration of promiscuous  
 affairs.  
 This option may not go far enough. Do not mistake polyamory  
 for a  
 post-couple paradigm. Polyamory is a multiplication of the logic  
 of  
 2 Antonin Artaud, "To Have Done with the Judgment of God  
 (Pour en finir  
 avec le jugement de dieu)" in *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag  
 (Berkeley:  
 University of California Press, 1988).  
 the couple, not its destruction. Casual sex, primary partners,  
 physical  
 and emotional availability, and other such distinctions contain  
 amorous relations within the negotiation of the couple.  
 Polyamory  
 opens up couple-like formations without the formal commit-  
 ment  
 of the couple, expanding its territoriality and octopus-like tenta-  
 cles

that suck desire into the logic of the couple. Polyamorous or  
 promiscuous  
 relationships function as strategies for women to navigate  
 patriarchal social relations rather than break with or negate  
 them.  
 The logic of the couple penetrates queer relationships as well as  
 straight ones. Homonormativity and gay assimilation have fash-  
 ioned  
 queer relationships in the shape of straight coupledness. Rather  
 than  
 a subversion of heterosexual social relations, assimilationist, lib-  
 eral  
 homosexuals have fought for the right to fit into the logic of the  
 couple — to get married, to wear a wedding dress, to create fa-  
 milial  
 nuclei able to protect property relations. Homosexuals perpetu-  
 ate  
 heterosexual norms and phallocracy through categorizations  
 and  
 role-play, which further codify desires and constitute sex within  
 the  
 logic of phallic centrality and authority. Same sex couples do not  
 escape either the territoriality imposed on desire or the couple's  
 reinforcement  
 and faithfulness to repressive social relations.  
 Dismantling the logic of the couple does not indicate distaste for  
 love,  
 but rather a critique of directing love towards a specific object.  
 One  
 must contextualize the couple-form within patriarchy, as so-  
 called  
 "love" arrives to us through the apparatus of gender. Denouncing  
 the couple does not mean shunning giddiness, love letters writ-  
 ten