

Against the Couple Form

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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.

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 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 "security," 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 community, but merely a collection of isolated family units. Desperately insecure, 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 couples and their kids."¹ How much can a woman forgive? How much does she let slide? How long does she tolerate things being amiss, rotten, fucked up? She avoids breaking up at great costs because disobeying the logic of the couple will stymie her access to the precise mechanisms that supposedly save her from this contemptuous existence.

The semblance of care and a promise of future solidarity convince her to stay in unsatisfying, pathetic circumstances.

The couple functions as both the problem and its solution. If not this one, she just needs another boyfriend, one that will treat her better. A woman may feel the nausea of ambivalence, of being caught between obsession with phallic power and revulsion from it. She does not know which is greater, the melancholia of the couple or the melancholia of denouncing it as a social form. Most opt for the sadness of the couple over the alienation of being cut loose from its grasp. Capital lends a shoulder at every turn, suggesting you watch a rom-com with your girlfriends when heartbroken or providing endless ways to personalize your wedding dress. Similar to the framework of electoral politics that limits the scope of critique to the wrong people being in office, the couple-form attributes women's problems to dating the wrong man rather than to the couple itself.

As long as she stays invested in the idea of romantic love as salvation,

1 Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Verso Books, 2004) 48.
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as the guiding principle against isolation and towards fulfillment, she remains tied to the couple-form.

As another facet of the couple-as-solution, the discourses surrounding austerity measures and neoliberal restructuring frame the couple as a remedy for poverty. One reads tales of young people shifting between poverty and prison as a result of single parenting, especially absent fathers, as if the restitution of the couple could remedy the poverty and structural racism produced by capitalism. State bureaucrats 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 capitalism, 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 generalized 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.²

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 commitment of the couple, expanding its territoriality and octopus-like tentacles 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 fashioned queer relationships in the shape of straight coupledness. Rather than a subversion of heterosexual social relations, assimilationist, liberal homosexuals have fought for the right to fit into the logic of the couple — to get married, to wear a wedding dress, to create familial nuclei able to protect property relations. Homosexuals perpetuate 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 written 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 solidarity, for intimacy, for excitement, for negation, for the event into a consolidation of phallic power and the accumulation of capital.

Who would not arrive at this conclusion: patriarchy and capitalism 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 existing couples. New and perhaps unknown forms of feminist organizing present the only possible frontier for love.

For those who have accepted the couple-form as a sham, as unable to allow the circulation of desire, war, and play, we make the following recommendations. Make no mistake: we are not advocating a subcultural, individualist, lifestyle, or voluntarist response to the couple-form, nor do we blame women who must remain in couples for their material survival. We are, however, committed to praxis.

These may be some of the forms that the struggle against the couple will assume, coinciding with a broader movement towards the abolition of ourselves as women.

Pour menstrual blood on wedding gowns. Send tigers into engagement parties.

Make love. Anything can be sex. The body is rich and varied in its parts and sensations. So many ecstasies have yet to be felt. Get away from the genital organization of "sexuality."

Couple-bust, which Solanas describes: "SCUM will couple-bust — barge into mixed (male-female) couples, wherever they are, and bust them up."³

Wrest yourself from the grasp of the couple's arms (i.e. love jail).

Go out the front door and get caught up in a crowd. Hang out with
3 Solanas, SCUM, 72.

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 creatures!

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 nothing 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 proletarian 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."⁴

Animate other modes of social organization with love and eroticism. 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 egoistic categories of subject and object," as Mario Mieli suggests.⁵

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 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."⁶ 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.

6 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).

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