**The ethics of cutting: learning to love the non-relation**

This article is an attempt to explore the notions of sociality and love in light of the relational aspirations in queer theory and of psychoanalysis’ anti-utopian cautions. I argue in a first section that some queer iterations of affect theory point to a certain structure of attachment, one defined by the impossibility of maintaining the good/bad attachment binary. This suggests that any attachment, including that to sociality as such, is premised on the expropriation of the labour of that which queer theory has called the (anti)normative subject. In light of the inevitability of this labour, I offer with Mladen Dolar the figure of the smoker as a peculiarly queer case of a relational structure (nearly) irreducible to identity, one that allows us to consider the minimal degree of attachment to sociality. I then trace an analogy between this identity-less relationality and love. I consider the status of the loved object through queer Marxist attempts to instrumentalise the objectivity of need as a foundation for emancipatory political action and attempt to refigure love, via Lacan and Michael Hardt, as partaking in the structure of the event. I conclude by offering queerness as an objectified surplus, the present absence of a sociality to-come that is nevertheless always included in the social link. The demand for queerness might then be presented as a continuing demand for a politics that could easily be called revolutionary.

**Introduction**

Much queer theorisation in the past decades has been forced to grapple at least implicitly with two fundamental questions, namely, “what is this identity we seem to assume is such a shared, fungible attribute?”; and “what is identity’s purported power to bind people together?” From our vantage point today, these questions still seem rather pertinent but perhaps so big as to not reasonably demand an answer. It may be the case, however, that their enormity arises rather because of their deceptively empirical character – deceptive because, as queer theory has also (perhaps paradoxically) insisted upon repeatedly, there may be no such thing as identity offering itself to the gaze of objectivity. It may be valuable, then, to shift the terms of this inquiry slightly: how can the emptiness of identity pose as such a monstrous infinity, describing any and all people and social groups, and still serve as a structuring term to the very queer discourse which claims to dethrone it? Is it impossible to go without at least paying lip service to identity and to its ever-extending hold over the linguistic arsenal we deploy to speak about ourselves? This is obviously not to say that the concepts springing from identity have not done much valuable work. There are doubtless good intentions behind what Robyn Wiegman has called identity knowledges (1). The assertion of identity can be affirmative, if only because “[t]o alienate conclusively, *definitionally,* from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 26). “Definitionally” – sexual desire figures as but one part of the wider network of “constituent elements” (Sedgwick, Tendencies 7) of one’s gender and sexuality, elements which always seem to invite their suture and elevation into an overall principle of intelligibility.

I have always paused over the word “authority” in Eve Sedgwick’s insistence on the inalienable right to self-definition, particularly in its post-*Epistemology* hypothetical association with truth: “what it takes – all it takes – to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person” (Sedgwick, Tendencies 8). Does this iteration of “queer” signal belonging to a group, one defined by the exclusion of the non-queer? Does it demand that this queering self-proclamation give a proper name to a non-alignment which may or may not characterise the relations among the constituent parts of one’s gender and sexuality, metonymically standing in for one’s “whole” identity? These differing forms of looking at one’s own coming out may trouble the ascription of authority to proclaim one’s truth. For the declaration itself entails a double inscription: I come out as queer, I etch this signifier onto myself, only insofar as that is what I have been all along. In being queer, however, I further identify myself as an element within a set, that of those who proclaim their queerness alongside my own. The authorisation to truthfully declare my queerness, then, is also an alienation. I discover myself in saying that what I am only exists insofar as it is not mine. I lodge myself in the gap between my queer being and that shared designation. I am queer only in that shared name, one to which others have as much a claim as myself. What place does the authority of self-designation take when that designation is thereby shown to be so precarious as to be virtually empty, and what consequences does this referential precariousness entail to togetherness?

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is only in the circuitous route of the signifier that the social link takes place – by no one’s authority. And the signifier presents itself first as a cut, as the “intrusion” of pure difference that constitutes what might be called, to shed the weight of linguistic rigour, the world. To pose the question of the queer (self-)designation and its truthful authority in Lacanian fashion, one could ask: is queerness one of the master’s signifiers? Is it that which is pronounced by they who say “I am what I am” and this proclamation’s attendant complement, “I am One”? If so, there is little reason to consider “queer” worthwhile, for it would bring us back to that instance in which the pure “I” announces itself as the bedrock of ontology. Queerness would then appear as godliness or animality (in their exceptionality vis-à-vis us mere speaking beings and divided subjects). Or is queerness rather the hysteric’s complaint, the enunciative position of the subject whose division demands the impossible inscription of a Law capable of writing itself unambiguously? But hysterical protest contains the means of its own subversion. In more recognisably queer language, antinormativity may well be the fantasy that sustains a world in which “the normative” is both Law and substance (Jagose 26): Descartes’ god who by his word assures the truth of truth or finally the Other of a language that speaks as self-identical consistency. Antinormativity thus appears as the domain of the pious, joining the queer to those confessional institutions from which we mark our diminishing distance with each devoted reference to *The Will to Know* (Foucault 49).

I do not wish to dispense with queerness. If it is to remain a useful concept, however, it must be shown to do more than simply index the evidently endless variability of designation, self or otherwise, in relation to the hetero-phallo-logo-ethno-etc.-centric. In other words, what is queerness if we take its own claims seriously, if identity is to be always and already superseded and if we refuse to take the normative as all-powerful? In this spirit, I wish to propose that queerness may be one name for a togetherness that cannot be spoken as such. Much has been said about the centrality of “relationality” to queer theory. One structuring controversy revolves around the so-called antisocial thesis, commonly attributed to Leo Bersani and radicalised by Lee Edelman, which finds its counterpoint in the aesthetic experiences which contain and extend a (better) future within (yet somehow beyond) the “lull of presentness” (12), to quote José Esteban Muñoz. This controversy has been endlessly rehearsed, and at its peak seemed to hinge on quite secondary issues pertaining to whether “the future” is commonly shared (it obviously is not, in ways that do not neatly map onto identity knowledges (Fisher 3), and whether so-called poststructuralism may offer us an adequate framework to theorise struggles that are taken to always be about assuring better or longer lives to those who don’t get off on academic sparring (Caserio 819-828).

Rather than carry on with another iteration of such sparring, I want to emphasise that the queer theoretical focus on relationality does provide us with a gateway into productive considerations regarding the place and role of discourse in its fashioning of reality. The term “discourse” is rarely thematised as such in queer theory; it appears to often be taken to be no more than a medium for the remarkably fuzzy notion of “power” (arguably with a capital “P” (Lewis 192), perhaps even its domain par excellence. Lacan’s concise definition may be helpful here: discourse is the form of a social link (Lacan, Encore 70). This definition offers us a way to make sense of how we work on behalf of the social link without being made aware of it. I will approach the issues this work brings forward for solidarity and love first through a discussion of “bad” feelings and attachments. For the purposes of this essay, I cannot hope to do justice to the generality of the literature, so will focus on affect insofar as it provides an avenue to question this work as the structural underpinning of sociality’s reproduction and potential dissolution. I will then turn to a consideration to one specific attachment – that to smoking, evoked by Mladen Dolar as an everyday index of communism –, and consider its relation to love conceived as a structural folding, as a cut. My consideration of love brings me to a discussion of the status of the object in psychoanalysis and in some queer Marxist texts. With this overall trajectory, I hope to suggest a potential inherent in sociality (one that may be called queerness) for politicisation, solidarity, with no recourse to identity or to the liberal fetishism of market choice. Finally, I suggest that queerness may represent one way of thematising the arbitrariness of love, now understood as the founding and re-founding of a social link. It follows that queerness can also be the proper name of a sociality to-come, one that is nevertheless not simply a utopian wish, but a structural inconsistency always and necessarily present in the social as such.

**Bad attachments**

What is it that so consistently binds us to so-called “negative” feelings? It seems counterintuitive to presume that one may become attached to the badness of an emotional state, as if there were an autonomous demand in our psyches for the perpetuation of that which makes our lives unbearable. Yet the conclusion that we do become attached to bad feelings appears impossible to avoid: who among us has not questioned why, after a night of drinking or an overly abundant meal, we “do this to ourselves”? The banality of the experiences of a hangover or of a bloated stomach do not, of course, exhaust the field of our possible attachments to unpleasurable feelings. More recognisably serious fixations, like depression and other forms of melancholia, point to the seemingly incommensurate spheres of wide societal arrangements and micrological subjective sutures. If the structuring terms here thus become the realm of the social and the knotting of the subject to it, it would seem that emotion’s highly mediated actualisation might resist the binary rendering (positive/negative) that allows my initial question – what is it that binds us to unpleasure? – to be interesting in the first place. An intuitive argument for emotion’s participation in such an equivocal space could be gleamed from the copula emotional states seemingly require for their articulation: rarely are we ready to proclaim unconditional happiness or sadness, and even when we do so the question of “why” or “what about” is sure to follow – often accompanied by a demand of moral justification, such that one is called upon to show that the object conditioning, causing, the emotion is appropriate to it or not. It is thus only in emotion’s tethering to both an object and a relational logic to that object that it acquires significance, and it is only in acquiring significance that it can be recognised as good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. This tethering immediately contradicts much of the received wisdom on emotion, which appears to place it in an entirely different, if not outright opposed, realm from that of language’s myriad possibilities of rigorously logical expression (and the myriad but inescapable forms in which logical expression necessarily fails, repeatedly enacting its own condition of possibility). Much like signification (in both senses of meaning and of value (Lacan, Phallus 685-696)), emotion calls for its juridical justification.

It is less clear whether such justification applies to affect, insofar as it is at all distinct from emotion. One might consider Jasbir Puar’s work, for instance, in which affect appears as the privileged means whereby a body relates to itself. Puar describes it as “the body’s hopeful opening, a speculative opening not wedded to the dialectic of hope and hopelessness but rather a porous affirmation of what could or might be” (19). It is clear here that affect is not (solely) a shorthand for emotion. It describes the more basic self-relating of indeterminate intensity – libidinal, physical, psychic, terms with vague but overlapping connotations – and its circulation or coagulation in determinate forms. Further still, affect is both the condition for and the ultimate disintegration of identity, a term Puar often considers equivalent to subjectivity. In the context of her general proposition that ability, disability and debility be triangulated as yet another positive mechanism of the regulatory pervasiveness of power, against the usual rights-based frame which monopolises talk on the inexhaustible diversity of bodies, affect comes to signal the radical contingency of the body’s self-relation, that self-relation’s endlessly complicated multiplication and intensification.

Puar’s characterisation of affect differs substantially from that of Berlant, whose *Cruel Optimism* tells us that affect is also a temporal code, that which makes itself present as the present before its objectification into a “situation”. No longer an object but a perceptual indeterminacy, the affective ushering in of the present time is refigured as genre: “[i]f the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters [...] are also always there for debate” (4). Affect is thus presented as a privileged way of being in the world, as the prime mode of perception of an otherwise disoriented subject whose self-relating is irretrievably lost to the mediation of the external world. Berlant’s turn to those attachments which ultimately undermine our lives, the central theme encapsulated in the language of cruel optimism, may at any rate appear decisively wedded to that “dialectic of hope and hopelessness” from which Puar marks her distance, even if Puar’s target may more likely be the ultimately unproductive disagreement staged between Edelman’s *No Future* and Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* on the rejection or reassertion of the future as a normative ground. Even so, I would contend that Berlant’s position brings out an occluded truth in Puar’s approach insofar as *Cruel Optimism* emphasises a kind of work – of interpretation of the affect-as-present genre; of sustaining and tending to an attachment that assures the continuity of the subject’s attachment to the terms of a life that often slips into the unbearable – that resits its recasting as solely a metabolic relation between humanity and nature.

It has been noted that queer theory is generally averse to the category of labour. Rosemary Hennessy, for instance, has claimed that “[o]ne cost of the erasure of labor in queer theory is the resultant assimilation of queer critique into hegemonic postmodern culture” (Left, 232). In this sense, queer theory’s inattention to the structural role of labour ends up doing the work of “postmodernism” in its stead, that is, the enterprise of refiguring the subject as a fluid, groundless self-experiment in market-mediated lifestyle. Even so, there have been attempts to bridge the gap between queer theory and its disavowal of labour. In Kevin Floyd’s reading of Judith Butler, for instance, the gender identity relentlessly critiqued by *Gender Trouble* is itself refigured as congealed labour, a labour which, imaginarily identified with leisure, leads one to consider it as naturalised, outside history, and thus as an end in itself under the historically determinate conditions of 20th century capital. This productive labour, as Tomsic argues, is not limited to the production of use-values that satisfy human needs, etc., for “[i]f every discourse contains the production of enjoyment—something the psychoanalytic clinic revealed in all its problematic aspects—this implies that there is no meta-discourse or meta-language (to recall another Lacanian slogan), no “pure” language of being beyond the ‘dirty’ language of enjoyment” (10). In addition to the inevitable implication of language and enjoyment, to fully explicate the pertinence of Floyd’s insight, one should remember that Lacan’s notion of *jouissance* follows closely from its bodily inscription in terms of a (normative) totality of which we know very little; in other words, there is an economy of enjoyment and a juridically regulated marketplace for it. The joining of this basic *nomos* and a place for its inscription is what Floyd, following Butler, designates as “the normative”.

Floyd’s approach to labour and the generative relation it entertains towards the normative order of, among others, gender, is particularly important, as it indexes the very point of inconsistency of the structure of the social field. This inconsistency lies precisely in the vector joining labour and its object, human exertion and the ends to which it is productively employed. In other words, if it is the case that Butler’s insistence on the necessity of iterability and reiteration for the creation and maintenance of a normative field can be refigured as labour, then it becomes clear that the precarious consistency of the social itself is premised on the expropriation of the normative subject’s work. This insight is particularly important if we wish to note the sheer amount of such work that is required for the maintenance of heteronormativity’s semblance of unity – and further if we wish to take up labour’s critical purchase upon the production and reproduction of the norm’s unity. At this stage I would note that Floyd’s particular radical historicism fails to take us much further than to the recognition of this knotting of heteronormativity and the work it demands to cultivate its coherence as a system. What this detour through Floyd and Butler provides us with is an avenue to arrive at one of Lacan’s crucial political lessons, codified in his claim that Marx is the inventor of the symptom. To pose this in terms of Floyd’s own concerns, Lacan’s claim here is both partially ahistorical and radically historicist: in partial ahistoricity, there has been no successful compromise in history through which the subject has attained a harmonious, complementary relationship to the (sexual, linguistic, social) Other. As such, to return to the Marxian analogy and assert the simultaneous historicity of Lacan’s argument, the proletariat’s always unrealised universality under capitalism functions as the symptom of bourgeois universalism, the point at which the truth of the capitalist system expresses itself in ciphered form specifically as the violent expropriation of the labour of the many in favour of the few. The question remains, however, that any social system effects an analogous exploitative demand (which is of course not to discount the peculiar absurdity of capitalism, though this issue cannot be dealt with here). Finally, then, it can be said that discourse, all the while it provides us with the only recognisably human of worlds, demands something in exchange. And togetherness does not come cheap.

I have so far attempted to weave a thread running from the attachment to bad feelings, passing through the falsity of the dichotomy between their goodness and badness, questioning the boundedness and unboundedness of an affect that is but the body’s seemingly never hopeless self-affecting, finally to reach the symptomatic knot of the labour required for the tender and diligent repair of social systems premised on a kind of extraction of that labour. From this seemingly bleak itinerary – I arrive, after all, at the conclusion that sociality as such is premised on an inescapable labour whose end is solely to keep its gears running – it may seem ironic to extract a consideration of the possibility of solidarity. Mladen Dolar provides an evocative image: that of the smoker. He writes that

[s]mokers, like proletarians, have no country, but they instantly create liberated territories wherever they appear. Smoking always represented liberty, a fickle freedom against the chains of survival, it is an anti-survivalist stance. It states: I am free in chains, while being chained to this habit that I can’t give up, but these chains allow taking a bit of distance to the overwhelming other ones and I am willing to pay the price (Smoking)

Smoking provides a counterintuitively queerer-than-queer image: after all, in its most evocative figures of the anally penetrated man (Bersani 113-180), the sinthommosexual (Edelman 33-65), the drag performer (Butler 163-179), *et al.*, queer theory’s attempts to present us the agents and possibilities of emancipation and solidarity have been remarkably heavy-handed in their identity investments. The smoker, however, is in principle genderless, raceless, faceless and ultimately self-less. One might go so far as to claim, paraphrasing Jodi Dean, that anyone but not everyone can be a smoker (67).

There remains, however, a clear degree of societal capture of the smoker: the integration of tobacco production in the engine of capitalism, colonialism, the international division of labour, etc. It is useful to note this capture, for it suggests both the futility of the very quest for a catalogue of queer practices and of avatars of antinormativity; and the impossibility to intelligibly grasp an untainted outside to language. Discourse and the expropriation it entails are inevitable, yet there is always the possibility of collective respite from within its overwhelming chains. The smoker (literally) buys into her own death, and only in so doing acquires a degree of temporary, contingent freedom from the deathly symbolic mandate of engaging in the rhythm of production and consumption. Taken from another angle, the smoker emancipates herself from the logic of usefulness – the placement in the productive chain, the assignment of a place and hierarchy in the social world, the burden of an identity she cannot shed but must work to dignify – precisely by insisting that her early grave will nevertheless be one of her own choosing as the social’s intimate outside: consider, for instance, the brief moments in which smokers subject themselves to a collective ostracism (from the pub, from the home) and bring about a distinctive brand of horizontality premised solely on the desire to have a cigarette.

Could it be, then, that our attachment to bad habits, feelings, affects, indexes a sort of labour of “worlding”, to use a now outdated term? Unlike worlding, however, the subjective claim to an agency that is only accomplished in the insistence of an early grave is perhaps an intriguing example of something irreducible to the logic of identity, even at its zero-degree of market inclusion (everyone’s universally shared claim to consumer status under globalised capital). What remains of the smoking subject when she is reduced to her self-effacing desire may turn out to be the very stuff from which solidarity arises. Recklessly, solidarity shows itself as a willingness to be nothing in particular – and in this nothingness finding togetherness: offering oneself to another as nothing and receiving that offer reciprocally. Interestingly, this act may be seemingly homologous with certain depictions of love. As Lacan put it, “love is to give what one does not have” (Angoisse 128), and later added, “to someone who does not want it” (Problèmes). Those we have are never the ones we want, nor can we hope to offer exactly that which others need to end their suffering. The ethical stance, however, is nevertheless to embrace our precarious togetherness. Only then can there be a new sociality, only in the act of choosing – What? If not nothing of this world.

**Love and the social link**

Lacan tells us that the phrase “where there is smoke, there is fire” should rather be read as there is no smoke but for the smoker (Encore 64). As such, the sign becomes not that which designates a something to someone, but that which designates a someone to someone else – that is, that which designates the subject to her own alienated image she presumes to be a subject. The subject that which glides along the signifying chain as mere effect of its operation, is nevertheless integral to it: the boundary between subject and Other is undecidable, such that no subjectivity can be legitimately presumed in the Other, all the while we continue strive to reach it through the bodies of others. This undecidability is what drives Lacan to offer us his myriad topological figures, characterised by non-orientable surfaces, by the seamless gliding from “one side” to “the next” when there ever only is one side, as the presentation of the stakes of subjectivity in language and the intervention of psychoanalytic discourse. The precarious existence we purchase in sociality can also be represented by these topological figures, among which we can find the Möbius strip: if we walk along the strip, there will always appear to be “another side”, all the while that side is mathematically indistinguishable from the one we walk on.

The Möbius strip is also an apt figure for sociality: there is the one side along which we stroll, that of discourse in its fashioning of reality, but there is also the positive absence of the “other side” of the strip and finally the cut required to fashion the strip in the first place. The three terms we find in this image are thus that of discourse, that of its absence in the fantasy of some pre-, extra- or even post-discursive reality – nature, the world, God, the future –, and finally the pure subtraction required to create that non-orientable surface. This pure subtraction can take many forms; here, I want to trace an itinerary which places it in relation to love. If that cut can be designated as love, it must also be noted that what I have just referred to as “pure subtraction” entails a productive gesture: in disturbing the initial coherence of the two-sided paper sheet, the one-sided Möbius strip is produced. That dialectic of hope and hopelessness Puar admonishes is thus shown to never have existed in the first place: the active subtraction of love, even in its queer arbitrariness, is productive yet indifferent to its moral valuation. It brings new forms into being by insisting on what in the old forms is irreducible to everything else in them – love is the ethics of cutting.

Love has no immediate claim to the status of a political concept. One could be reminded, for instance, of Freud’s long reproach to the Christian injunction to love one’s neighbour: “if I am to love [my neighbour] (with this universal love) merely because he, too, is an inhabitant of this earth, like an insect, an earth-worm or a grass-snake, then I fear that only a small modicum of my love will fall to his share […] What is the point of a precept enunciated with so much solemnity if its fulfilment cannot be recommended as reasonable?” (110). The claim of cohabitation is clearly not sufficient to found a reasonable demand of love. What is at stake here, rather than some hazy notion of intersubjectivity or indeed some universalizable notion of love that might bring it to the same footing as a moral imperative, is the status of the object.

From Rosemary Hennessy’s queer, Marxist-feminist *Profit and Pleasure*, we learn that love can appear as an incarnation of the erotic, as a continuous elaboration of our capacity for pleasure and of pleasure’s potential to bind us affectively (28). Hennessy’s framework implicitly shares the psychoanalytic concern with the object, which appears in her argument as the notion of a need that can be met or unmet, and that presents itself historically under many different guises. Going one step further, Holly Lewis’ recent *The Politics of Everybody* grounds its overarching commitment on the abolition of “pointless suffering” (11). Meeting people’s needs and abolishing pointless suffering are compelling moral callings to be sure, as they present us with familiar and intuitive commitments which further allow us to proclaim a seemingly unproblematic universality to Hennessy’s and Lewis’ projects. What they both fail to note is the impossible dimension of objectivity presupposed by both of their intuitions. We already know from Marx that the notion of need ultimately grounds the materiality of the commodity as an external thing that satisfies a human need arising from the belly or the mind (125). The supplementary step Hennessy and Lewis take, one that would have been inconsistent for Marx to have taken, is to put a face to need, to assume its objectivity and thereby the possibility of its complete satisfaction (assuming, in Lewis’ case, that the notion of “pointless suffering” implies a useful suffering and thereby a suffering that serves to the satisfaction of a human need). It is my contention that no such objectivity exists, and certainly not one capable of grounding solidarity on moral grounds alone. This contention implies that whatever may ground solidarity is not a presumptively objective moral condemnation of capitalism or whatever system of oppression, but rather the structural given of expropriation implied in the constitution of discourse as such – an expropriation that is at once objective and subjective. The argument thus implies that love has something to do with that expropriation and that it also has something to do with a certain kind of solidarity. The advantage of bringing psychoanalysis to bear on these issues is that it presents us a sophisticated account of the object with direct reference to the impossibility of universal morality in its exploration of the Kantian categorical imperative and the Sadean unknotting of its hidden truth.

The imperative to meet others’ needs, to heed their pointless suffering – ultimately, the form of the Christian injunction to love one’s neighbour – attempts to reassert a universal moral commitment of which the modern version is spelled out in Kant. Lacan reminds us, in contrast, that this imperative is, in the Kantian field, spoken by the voice of conscience. This is a voice that exists in the subject yet also exceeds her, an objective emanation that seemingly cannot be accounted for in the subject’s history, for it arises precisely after all the pathological “empirical sensibilities” (Nobus 12) are cast off from her. Like Hennessy’s needs that come before and exist independently of desire, and like Lewis’ tragic suffering that knows no ambiguity, Kant’s moral voice is always within the subject waiting to be discovered, if only the subject is willing to turn herself into nothing but the conduit for its dictum.

In this sense, if the Law is encountered by the moral subject, it is only insofar as it is pronounced by something in the subject more than itself. The subject encounters the Law as an objectivity internal to herself after she has cast off the very possibility of apprehending the object through sensuous experience. In this sense, the Law points to an objectness before any object: the object as knowable only arrives in becoming other than simply “object”, which amounts to saying that the speaking being knows no objectivity unchained to its relation to the subject and the Law. Lacan thus claims that Sade brings forth the truth of Kant’s position, by making the “objective” voice of consciousness present in the figure of the sadistic Other, an Other who torments the subject and enjoys her dissolution as though the pain of that dissolution were his own jouissance (Lacan, Kant 774). Paradoxically, then, the closer we get to those needs or to that suffering we are meant to satisfy and mitigate, the more we discover there was never any “we” to speak of, but solely an alterity that can be embodied but not entirely assimilated. In the universality of the object of need, there is no longer any subjectivity, and therefore no possible claim to the good (whose? If there is no longer anyone there but the objective absence, the sheer impossibility signalled by the moral Law). Similarly, on Lewis’ end, we find that the dissolution of the subject faced with the overwhelming that-ness of the object ends up speaking the obscene truth of universal morality. As Sade’s libertines show, there can only be the universality of the Other’s enjoyment (that is, there can only be the abolition of “pointless suffering”, such that all suffering becomes useful according to some arbitrarily defined goal) through the subject’s own extreme renunciation and, finally, dissolution.

If, therefore, there is and can be no objective grounding for solidarity, no universally acceptable standard upon which to ground the struggle for emancipation, it may be that Lacan’s early definition of love as an offer of something one does not have to someone who does not want it merits further scrutiny. The object implicated in the loving gift, that which one does not have and the other does not want, may of course be referred back to lack, to the Freudian object that is always and already lost but must be found anew in the election of the loved object. In this case, we arrive at what Lacan, succumbing to the temptation of systematicity, would call *amur*, a neologism which joins the French *amour*, love, and *mur*, wall, wherein love is but the subject’s reciprocally failed offer of itself to an idealised image of itself as the other. Love would then amount to no more than narcissism (which, in Lacan, is coterminous with alienation), complicating any effort to assert a togetherness independently of a conservative goal of strengthening the ego’s phantasmatic independence. Nevertheless, it could be that there is another current in Lacan’s exploration of love, one that approximates contemporary depictions of the Event.

In the last session of Seminar XX, Lacan tells us that love surfaces solely in the register of contingency. But, as should be familiar to most of us, love also subsists as a perpetual demand, one that could be said to tend to a positing of itself as necessity (think of how melodramatic love can make most of us: what would I do without the loved person? I am nothing without them, etc.). In this sense, love would inhabit a precarious vacillation between contingency and necessity (184) – knowing no possible normative codification (as contingency) but insisting on its repetition as an ever more stringent demand (as necessity). This is a dilemma dear to contemporary political theory: how do we sustain the contingency of a collective political subject without turning it into a necessary essence? Lacan’s answer is of course that we do not: love happens and leaves us to deal with its consequences; its sustenance, in a sense, is always assured by the impossibility to satisfy its imperative.

Similarly, Michael Hardt tells us that “[l]ove is an event that arrives from the outside and breaks time in two. It shatters the structures of the world you knew and creates a new world” (4). Love happens and after it comes nothing can be quite the same anymore. But, continues Hardt, love is outside time: it does not have the structure of the gradual fading of the subject when faced with the overwhelming presence of the object. In other words, love is not the adducing of a privileged object behind the juridical imposition of the Law, but the breakdown of that very Law, which thereby exposes the precariousness of those contours we ascribed to the object. (The “world” Hardt tells us dies and is reborn can only be a minimally serial incarnation of *objet a*, the imaginary envelope of the object-cause of desire presumed to initiate and satiate the subject’s longing). One should thus not give into any sentimental notion of love; love is monstrous, it is the breakdown of everything we hold dear in favour of the impersonality which conditions the very possibility of the social bond – Lacan called it, not without irony, the “approach of Being” (185), noting that it is not entirely impossible that Being as such may compel hatred. One might even go so far as to claim that love is evil (Žižek), for it responds to an imperative beyond any recognisable humanity.

This is the point at which queerness can intervene as a social form implicated in the act of love. Queerness may be figured as love’s annunciatory dimension: the possibility that the very function of desire may be subverted from within, and thus the recognition that the possibility of desiring-otherwise is always and necessarily present as that which impedes the imaginary closure of any discourse. If love thus appears to have some kinship with founding act of desire (what Hardt designates with the re-founding of the world), queerness is the recognition of the ultimate contingency of that which seems most necessary. Love might be more aptly figured as the possibility that the Law which constitutes the elusive contours of the object may be freely, but perhaps not consciously, chosen. And further, that the recognition of this choice’s peculiar contingency may instigate not simply a resistance to discourse’s autonomous functioning but a call to the repetition of the loving act.

In this sense, we might return to the apparent antinomy between hope and hopelessness indexed in the queer (anti)relationality debate. If queerness might be both the structural embodiment of negativity – in Edelman, the interruption of the social order’s compulsive self-reproduction – and the ideality of a relationality that remains not-yet-there (as in Muñoz’s return to Bloch), that is only because any social link contains the surplus-object of its own overcoming. The event-ness of love thus functions as the index of the recognition of that unquenchable surplus: togetherness may not come cheap, as I have said before, but it nevertheless comes and we might be glad to pay the price for it. If it can be said – though this can only be a preliminary indication here (and perhaps, really, anywhere) – that “the question of politics and/as the question of revolution is consistently and critically engaged in and as queerness, which is revolutionary by definition” (Schotten 91), we may further insist that the persistence of that demand for love is also the persistence of a demand for revolution, for the coming of a new sociality as of yet merely announced in the inconsistency of the Law. Not, then, antinormativity, which merely reasserts identity as the ultimate structuring term of discourse, but queerness as the presence of that which announces itself in discourse as its demise and supersession; and love as the name of its annunciatory movement.

**Conclusion**

The heading of “conclusion” sometimes seems a rather unfortunate rendering of the presumption that something definitive may be offered, that one could give oneself to another with no unspoken demand of refusal or with a seamless fit between that which is offered and that which is longed for. Discourse offers no such guarantees. The knowledge we presume to have about our respective manners of coming together are hopelessly precarious, and they only ex-ist insofar as they remain precarious. Queer theory’s unspoken mandate, in this sense, may be to find a way to be-with that does not require the obsessive need for certainty of presence – be it of the future, the world or identity. I have put forward the figure of the smoker as a possibility of refusing that need: today, the smoker’s insistence on enjoying that which slowly chips away at her life places her at an internal distance to a sociality that asserts her “needs” against her desire. To step away from such needs – health, cleanliness, propriety and whatever else smoking has been said to stand against – is also to step towards a possibility of loving otherwise, of sustaining a being-with that refuses any phantasmatic assurance of happiness. This, however, is merely a first step. Refusing oneself to what has been loosely defined as “the normative” fails to articulate the conditions whereby upon the ruins of discourse something may be enacted that is not reducible to an either/or of identity as essence. Insisting on love’s vacillation between contingency and necessity may present a first avenue to thinking through a future, as it were, without the Future, a world without the World, a politics without guarantees. A further step that might be taken in this line of thought has to do with the psychoanalytic setting, and I will close with a brief consideration of that possibility.

I have deliberately not touched upon the issue of analytic work, that signifying production we undertake when we sit on the couch and worry about not free-associating enough. This labour has something to do with that of love. For, to figure love as Event places it squarely in the dimension of the religious, the annunciatory – a dimension in which Lacan places Marx in a suggestion Alain Badiou has elaborated at length. Fortunately or unfortunately, love does not present itself in the words of a winged messenger, but entails work, dedication, perhaps even some degree of fidelity. Understandable worries about the persistence of the couple-form could surely arise with the use of the signifier “fidelity” with its marital, monogamous undertones. Nowhere in this essay, however, has it been suggested that such fidelity may be to an individual. When we love, we love something within but somehow beyond something else – it just so happens that the more convenient route to get that that something within is through a someone. That thing in someone that is not reducible to that someone is not their individuality, not some grand transmutation of the figure of the soul. Whatever it might be, it is decidedly inhuman, and certainly does not partake in the proprietary imaginary that would allow us to say “you have what I want”. There may be some merit in recognising this inhuman as *objet a*, as that which takes the agential position in the discourse of the analyst as Lacan formalises it. If that is the case, a political concept of love may benefit from a sustained consideration of analytic praxis. This is not to say that we should ask psychoanalysts what politics may be; for all their non-dupeness, as Lacan shows, they err all the same. The question, rather, is whether we can err differently in the absence of any authority to do so, and what form of togetherness may arise from such erring. In psychoanalysis’ dream analysts are authorised only by themselves. What social link may arise from that authorisation remains to be considered outside the clinic.

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