

Rethinking Relations:
Queer Intimacies and Practices of Care

by

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Did you know that I collect?
Take objects from places from people
Look for the ways that they come together
Put them in ways that maybe they should

And today I realized that I forgive you. Because I like you more than you've hurt me.
And because I meant it when I said we are not people without each other.

Who can tell
That I try and reveal the ways we all can take care of each other.
Who do I tell? That things are fixed in the processes of knowing one another.
Of learning to create what we think we maybe once had.

INTRODUCTION

A Queer Anecdote and Analytic

My mom, second wave feminist, politically radical single parent by choice, a woman who has not so much as entertained the thought of a life partner (other than myself) since she committed herself to me 22 years ago, called me a few minutes ago to tell me that, come this summer, she is getting married. My initial reaction was, of course, shock. After all, my mom taught me that marriage is for the politically weak, that it is an institution of social, patriarchal, and racial control. Next, rather than demanding to know with whom and how this came to be (as I have heard nothing from my mom of new important people in her life, much less of any “dates”), my immediate reaction post-initial shock was, somehow, one of joy and excitement. *Has my mom found someone she loves and is happy with? To share an empty house with, a companion to alleviate the loneliness of old age?* No, my mom reminds me, today is April first¹.

Relieved that I do not have to reconcile my mom’s newfound lifestyle with my (and her) political beliefs, what is most interesting about this (quite clever) April Fools joke is that I was so ready to adopt the congratulatory stance that is “proper” and “appropriate” in such a situation. Despite my absolute commitment to queer politics, to resisting kinship and relationship normativity, and to a world in which marriage is not the privileged signifier of a successful, happy life, in the instant that my mom became “one of them” I was more than willing to be happy for her, to humor the notion that maybe such a lifestyle change *could* bring her happiness. That

¹ Nor, as my father convinced me earlier that morning, do I have a new surprise baby brother (something that is way more believable than my mom getting married).

my response was so easily, so instinctually, one of uncritical support—what does this say about the role and influence of marriage ideology in producing our understandings of life style choice and personal relationships? Despite my “knowing better,” I am still the product of societal constructions of love and relationships. Rationally, I know that even if my mom were to find “happiness” in some new-found love of another, such an experience would not derive from getting married, or settling down in a co-owned house, or from structuring the content and path of their relationship in line with normative standards of domestic long term monogamy. Yet, my emotional response demonstrates the profound power of relationship heteronormativity and love ideology to infiltrate our desires for affective and intimate life. Indeed, social reality is steeped in normative rhetoric of love and domestic coupledness.

While ideology functions to obscure the processes through which desire is manifest, subjective experiences of social reality and interpersonal relations are constituted through contextually contingent and symbolically significant meaning making processes. Heteronormativity constructs certain bodies, life styles, and identities as privileged, proper, and pure in opposition to those constructed as deviant, impossible, and “others” (Warner 1993: xxi). This system pervades all of social reality so that interpersonal relations and the social organization of contact are produced through and policed by their relation to normative meaning making processes of signification. Fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity, social relations are important sites for the reproduction and consolidation of processes of normativity, privilege, and power. Subjects consistently make agentic decisions about the means

and modes of contact they have with others. These decisions are always already imbued with normative meanings, yet social interaction does not necessarily have to reproduce normativity on its own terms—and in a sense, it never quite does. In rethinking and reorienting the normative logic that organizes social relations and in recognizing that engaging with an other does not necessarily follow easy codes of signification, a vital aspect of heteronormativity is challenged.

This thesis is a discussion of the normative values and meanings that organize and produce social interaction and forms of relatedness. My purpose is twofold: to discuss the ways that socio-historical, political, and economic processes have produced hegemony around family, relationships, and social lifestyles. And to argue that the meanings that inform this hegemony can be exploited and reworked so as to foster a social reality not bound and gagged by normative social codes. This thesis asks: what would it mean to interact queerly?

The nuclear family comprised of two married adults with the children they produce, who reside, consume in, and produce outside of a common domestic unit (understood as home) is a material manifestation of neoliberal capitalist and anti-feminist values (among others) aimed at social control, inequality, and an unquestioned reproduction of the heteronormative order. Social hegemony structures how and with whom we relate and what our relations mean. As an institution of heteronormativity, the nuclear family has developed through socio-historical material processes and has consolidated as both privileged and natural the norms governing interpersonal relations. Lifestyle normativities of monogamy, private property, whiteness, middleclass aspiration, and consumer nationalist citizenship are upheld

and reproduced through subjects' unquestioned adherence to the nuclear family and normative romantic relationship. The development of the nuclear family as heteronormative institution with the meaning making power to produce and police subjectivity is the subject of chapter one.

The domestic long-term monogamous relationship—the basis of the nuclear family—has become the compulsory way to organize one's socio-sexual and affective processes of care. Its organizing logic of futurity, commitment, sexual fidelity, and affect has produced the heteronormative domestic relationship as the privileged and privatized site of intimacy and social, as well as material, reproduction. Docile citizen subjects are produced and policed through the codes that regulate their social interactions. The hegemonic organization of social interaction is maintained by binary constructions of meaning, including but not limited to erotic/non-erotic, friendship/kinship, friend/lover, physical/emotional, self/other, in-love/love, and sex/gender. Because “institutions of social reproduction are coupled to the forms of hetero culture,” these binaries and other normative processes of signification not only police but fundamentally produce subjective desires for and experiences of interpersonal relations (Berlant and Warner 1998: 561). The heteronormative domestic monogamous relationship as a privileged and compulsory mode of organizing interpersonal life and its meaning making processes is the subject of chapter two.

Queer politics and practices refuse and resignify categories and signifiers of normativity that construct certain bodies and lives as deviant “others” through and in opposition to those privileged as natural and pure. Queering, as a process, is about

naming and resisting heteronormative demarcations of intelligibility, of who and what counts as personhood. Because subjects are necessarily produced and materialized in relation to normative meaning making processes, it is not possible to simply escape such violent systems of signification (Butler 1993: 241). Rather, queer politics finds resistance in subverting and exploiting normative values and meanings. It is a privileging and proliferation of those bodies, lives, and identities constructed as incoherent through normative processes of signification so as to call into question, and “offer a critical perspective on, the norms that confer intelligibility itself” (Butler 2004: 73). Limited binaries of signification structure and fundamentally produce our desires for and experiences of self and other. Understood as ontologically distinct, the self and other are produced through strictly regulated codes of social interaction. However, recognized as necessarily relational, subjectivity and social interaction take on new meanings through expanding the values people attribute to their social relations and the meanings assigned to any social, interpersonal, or physical interaction that transcribes between subjects.

The reproduction of heteronormative society is dependent on the reproduction of normative kinship and relationship forms. The social organization of intimacy as well as social and material resources necessary for the reproduction of life is a system of normativity that violently otherizes as it creates meaning. Because it is through social interaction that both subjective reality and the material conditions constitutive of life are reproduced, interpersonal relations and kinship constructions are important sites for subverting and resignifying social processes in ways not conducive to normativity’s reproduction. As Judith Butler argues, “the task at hand is to rework

and revise the social organization of friendship, sexual contacts, and community to produce non-state centered forms of support and alliance” (Butler 2002: 21). This thesis extends queer theory towards a consideration of interpersonal relations to advocate for a politics that recognizes relationships as embodied experiences and performative social constructs (Butler 1988: 521). To this end, I rely on the concept of queer friendship as an analytical framework through which to think the queer potential of social relations. That is, because friendship is non-dyadic, personal, and not rigidly defined, it is useful for queering concepts of intimacy, commitment, affect, and care that regulate and organize normative relationship forms and kinship structures. By using friendship to expand and complicate the meaning making processes constitutive of interpersonal relations, I will explore intimacy as a spectrum not necessarily bound to normative social structures and relationships, but rather a fluid, context-contingent interactive process.

Thus, with an understanding of the ways in which sociohistorical processes consolidate as natural and produce as normative specific ways of organizing and experiencing interpersonal relations, chapter three is a partial exploration of alternative kinship organizations and relationship structures. It focuses on those queer others produced through heteronormativity and the possibilities they present for reworking normative conceptions of intimate and affective life. In it, I suggest a radical “shift away from coupledness as the focal point of intimacy” (Jamieson 2005: 200) and I argue for valuing “a fuller range of practices of intimacy and care” not held to normative standards of kinship structures or relationship forms (Roseneil 2005: 251). By recognizing the ways that non-normative intimacies explode binaries

of friend/lover, erotic/non-erotic, and kinship/friendship, we might challenge the hegemonic social order that reproduces heteronormativity. As what I call counter-privates,² queer interpersonal relations and intimacies subversively rework dominant meanings of commitment, care, and intimacy that structure and produce normative social relations. Thus, chapter three is an attempt at multiplying the ways in which queer organizations of social relations and practices of care can resist and call attention to the violence of heteronormative constructions of intimacy and relationship forms.

I want to state from the outset that, in a sense, my project has already failed. I do not, nor can I, fully escape the discourses of romance that so fundamentally pervade our understandings of interpersonal relations and that this thesis sets out to critique (as my reaction to my mother illustrates). However, what I try to romanticize is not the societal construction of love and relationships on their own terms but rather, the creative potential that lies within and beyond such terms to expand and multiply the ways in which subjects relate.

My research is interdisciplinary, my methodology hybridized. I review materialist feminist, Marxist, and queer theoretical literatures on the family and I rely on ethnographic and sociological examples to illustrate my theoretical arguments. Ultimately, I draw on queer theory as a method and analytic to critically think the ways social reality is produced through systems of normativity and otherness. Chapter one works from the perspective of Marxist feminists: that subject positions and conditions of inequality are the products of sociohistorical, economic, and political

² I am playing on Michael Warner's notion of "counterpublics" and will expand upon this in chapter three (2002 80).

processes of exploitation. Chapter two relies on this Marxist feminism as a backbone to generate a queer critique of heteronormative relationality, while chapter three develops a queer theory of promiscuous friendship to analyze ethnographic accounts of counterprivates. My ethnographic examples are drawn primarily from four main texts: Christian Klesse's *The Spectre of Promiscuity*, a sociological account of non-monogamies and polyamories in the UK; Peter Nardi's *Gay Men's Friendships*, an ethnography of gay men's social networks of care in the greater LA area; Kath Weston's *Families We Choose*, an ethnography detailing the kinship practices of GLB people in the San Francisco Bay Area; and Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy*, an ethnographic account of a gay men's barebacking and bug-chasing subculture in San Francisco. I rely on these four ethnographies, among other examples, to partially illustrate the variety of forms intimacy, care, commitment, and sex can take in queered relationships and kinships.

Finally, integral to my thesis is the presupposition that, necessarily constituted in and through interactive relation to one another, humans do not exist apart from their interpersonal interactions and communicative processes of self. While life is necessarily reproduced through social relations, the meanings attributed to and the forms such relations take are not etched in stone, but rather, contextually contingent. That is, "the satisfaction of the need for sensation and affect is historically produced and takes different forms in various social formations" (Hennessy 2000: 214). Because social relations are integral to and constitutive of subjective reality and day-to-day life, it is all the more important to subvert the heteronormative order within and through them. A queer politics of relatedness recognizes that people are

intricately entwined with one another. Thus, in framing the subject's "becoming as always already structured through the various communal sites to which she belongs" (Rowe 2008: 27), I argue for a mode of relating and "an ethics of care, which holds as axiomatic the fundamentally relational, interdependent nature of human existence" (Roseneil 2004: 414). In refusing the limitations imposed on structures of intimacy and practices of care, interpersonal relations can become transformative sites of queer resistance.

CHAPTER 1

The Family as Ideology, Institution, and Practice: A Materialist Feminist Account

Introduction: Historical Periods, Constituent Components

While, as an ideology, The Family¹ is experienced as an inherent and natural aspect of biological human existence and social organization, the family as it exists today is the material product of historical economic and political conditions. In what follows I will outline how The Family as (hetero)normative ideology has developed through five periods or catalysts of history, organized and understood in terms of capitalist formations: pre-capitalism, industrial capitalism, post-World War II economic boom, the development in the 1970s of neoliberalism, and finally, global capitalism. Describing the development of the normative family as ideology within these somewhat linear terms is helpful because it illuminates how The Family as an institution and practice is a historical construction that has been produced, reproduced, and transformed across and through time. In academic and activist scholarship,

materialist feminists have continually worked to develop an analytic capable of disrupting the taken-for-granted in local and global social arrangements and of exposing the economic, political, and ideological conditions upon which exploitation and oppression depend (Ingraham 1996: 170).

This chapter is a materialist feminist account of how, through sociohistorical and economic conditions of exploitation, The Family has developed as a normative institution and ideology.

¹ I use “The Family” when I am talking about the normative nuclear family as an institution and ideology of normativity.

While a more detailed discussion of how ideology operates will take place in chapter two, for now, it is enough to say that part of the work and function of ideology is to make a normative image or ideal appear stable and unchanging—ahistorical. Thus, despite The Family’s fluid and historically contingent status, it appears engraved in stone. This chapter breaks down and illustrates the development of The Family in terms of four key elements that comprise and define it as normative ideology: monogamy and emotional nurturance, private property, the division of labor, and consumer citizenship. While there are other characteristics of The Family, I argue that it is these four regulating norms that constitute The Family as we know it today. Thus, in the paragraphs that follow, I will trace the creation and development of these four defining normativities that comprise The Family as well as its ruling and regulating ideology. By detailing how these elements of The Family were produced in relation to historical capitalist development, I show how The Family as normative institution and ideology with the meaning making power to regulate and produce subjective existence has developed into a fundamental organizing structure of heteronormative society and the state (Warner 1993: xxi).

Pre-capitalism to Industrial Capitalism: Wage Labor and the Invention of Private Property

The ideology of The Family has its roots in the invention of private property and the development of capitalism. In Friedrich Engels’ detailed outline of “The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State” (1902) he explains the evolution of the family from “savage” group marriage and polyamory/polygamy to present day “civilized” monogamy and nuclear families. Prior to monogamy, upon death a man’s

property would be passed not to his children but first to his siblings and next to his sister's children, while a woman's property would pass to her children (1902: 119). As private property and wealth increased, "mother right," whereby descent is reckoned matrilineally, was overthrown so that men could pass their property on to their children (125). With this, he argues, came monogamy, at least for the mother, so that it was clear who the father was for the purposes of private property inheritance. This led to "the establishment of the exclusive supremacy of the man" and, thus, "the patriarchal family" (Engels 1902: 121). Thus, the modern-day nuclear family and monogamous relationship is based on patriarchy and private property. Engels' analysis demonstrates that life-long monogamy and the nuclear family form are not natural essences of human relationality or kinship forms, but developed out of specific material conditions. However, this link between monogamy and private property continues today, as the heteronormative ideology of The Family continues to reproduce the necessary conditions for the reproduction of private property and wealth, as Louis Althusser argues (1971: 132).

The ideology of The Family further developed with the rise of industrial capitalism and wage labor. Prior to the development and expansion of industrial capitalism, the American family functioned as an "interdependent unit of production" whereby the survival of each individual depended on the labor of all and ultimately, on the unity of the family (D'Emilio 1993: 469). Thus, the U.S. nuclear family developed out of a patriarchal economic unit. However, as capitalism developed and wage labor became more common, the function of the patriarchal family evolved from one of economic necessity to that of emotional stability. Wage labor made it

possible for individuals to support themselves—to be independent. At the same time, a newly affective public/private binary arose whereby the private sphere of the home became the setting of heterosexual intimacy, and *marriage* developed as an institution of procreation with reproductive marital sex enshrined as the only acceptable intimate form (D’Emilio 1993: 470). While industrial capitalism and wage labor in particular fostered the construction of the U.S. family as one of heterosexual intimacy and emotional stability, it also opened up subject possibilities for both homosexual and heterosexual *identities* (D’Emilio 1993: 470). That is, because wage labor brought people outside the private sphere of the home, “capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals’ lives” and thus, for the development of gay and lesbian identities (D’Emilio 1993: 474). However, because subject positions only have meaning through and in opposition to one another, the development of gay and lesbian identities necessarily coincided with that of a heterosexual one and, in turn, the development of heteronormative ideology.

With the social reorganization necessitated by wage labor capitalism, the nuclear family and monogamous couple became “sanctified as the source of love, affection, and emotional security” and the “family became defined against the heartlessness of a capitalist system that was, in fact, the material source for its ideological evolution” (Eng 2010: 27). With the rise of industrial capitalism and the accompanying destruction of the patriarchal family unit as necessary for economic survival, The Family was reborn as the enshrined unit of private intimacy and emotional security, the realm of social reproduction without which subjects would

lack the necessary mind set and training to submit themselves to the seemingly natural world of capitalism and labor² (Althusser 1971: 132). That is, it is through The Family as an ideological unit of social and emotional reproduction that docile workers may be produced, that capitalism can subsist and be made to appear as natural and essential to society. In turn, it is through capitalism's ensured reproduction that the normative ideology and structure of The Family is codified as natural to human social organization and affective relations.

As the heteronormative nuclear family and household acquired notions of domesticity and privacy that enshrined it as the pure site of affect, love, and emotional nurturance, The Family also became enshrined as a characteristic of proper whiteness. One example of a discourse that proliferated monogamy and marriage as essential to cultivating proper love and lifestyles, as well as whiteness, were the marriage advice manuals circulating in the early 1900s. In response to the onset of industrialization and the rapid rise of machinery in day-to-day life, early twentieth century discourse worried over an emotional disconnect wherein human morality was depleted by technology and life was being taken over by machines (Carter 2007: 85). The cultural response and "solution" was to strive for compassion, love, and romance in marital and familial life. Thus, marital advice literature argued that "strong marriages were essential to the strength of the nation" and that strong marriages were attained through a "deliberate cultivation of sexual pleasure in the marriage bed" (Carter 2007: 77, 76).

² As Althusser argues, the work of ideology is to, through capitalistic processes, mask the material conditions of the existence and exploitation by producing the social conditions that accompany such exploitation as not only natural, but desirable (Althusser 132).

However, while such advice literature explicitly emphasized the “strong marriage’s” need for emotional nurturance and pleasure, what was left unstated, yet reinforced nonetheless, was the requisite of whiteness for such a “strong marriage.” The marital advice literature “made the argument that marital love is the core value of whiteness” (Carter 2007: 88). What was threatened by machinery and modernization was not simply human morality and emotional sanctity, but *white* morality and emotional sanctity. As a result, the marriage and family types that were championed as the path to a pure lifestyle and a healthy nation were coded in white norms of domesticity; proper marriages and families were effectively constructed as white ones. It was through the cultural reinforcement of “good” marriage as the foundation of a “good” society that the “discursive suturing of normal heterosexuality to whiteness” and thus whiteness to family normativity took place; whiteness became invisible, “its racial specificity obscured by its claim to normality” (Carter 2007: 79).

The normative nuclear family was further codified as white through the marriage manuals’ appeals to self-government and democracy in advising couples on how to negotiate their marriage and sex life. Because, in the early 1900s, self-government was understood as an inherent trait of whiteness, and whiteness as a trait of the U.S. nation-state, the use of the concepts of self-government and democracy—themselves entrenched in nationalist identity—for producing proper family forms effectively constructed the American family as white (Carter 2007: 88). Indeed, it was through exhibiting proper heterosexuality, monogamy, and family form that the “ethnic whites” of the late 1800s were gradually able to lay claim to proper whiteness by the 1920s (Carter 2007: 115). These shifts wed marriage—the correct sexual and

affective practices—to whiteness and to Americanness by the 1920s. Thus whiteness, along with marriage as the central iteration of sexual intimacy and affective love within the proper kinship structure, is revealed as one defining characteristic composing normative domestic and affective notions of The Family.

These norms of white domesticity and the nuclear family also reinforced binary gender roles through the sexual division of labor. Prior to the development of capitalism—in hunting and gathering societies—while men and women often had divided labor roles, there was not a true sexual division of labor. This is because, prior to private property and surplus wealth, there was not one sex who controlled the means of production, exploiting the other’s labor; thus, there was no class division between men and women (Gough 1975: 70). Rather, with Engels, Kathleen Gough argues that, “the power of men to exploit women systematically springs from the existence of surplus wealth, and more directly from the state, social stratification, and the control of property by men” (1975: 70). Industrial capitalism created a public/private binary because it necessitated a separation between productive and reproductive labor; in order for people to work for wages outside the home, the conditions for their reproduction had to be reproduced inside the home.

As production explicitly for exchange developed, productive labor became “social” and outside the home while women were relegated to reproductive work inside the home. From this sexual division of labor, differences between men and women with regards to their roles in production was converted through ideology into notions of differential worth (Sacks 1975: 231). Thus, industrial capitalism reinforced essentialized binary gender roles through its creation of a hierarchical sexual division

of labor that served as the foundation for the social organization of the normative nuclear family. Twentieth century discourse and marital advice literature further produced essentialized binary gender as constitutive of the family through its construction of monogamy and love: the idea that one person is completed by an opposite-sexed other (Carter 2007: 94). Thus, by the mid-1900s, industrial capitalism had produced The Family as a field of normativity for the regulation and production of wealth and private property, emotional nurturance, white domesticity, monogamous romance, and essentialized binary gender norms. And, although the form of capitalism has changed, these norms remain central to the ideology of The Family.

Post WWII Suburbia

While the development of capitalism and the invention of private property lay the groundwork for the nuclear family form as normative ideology, it was in post World War II politics and late capitalism that the contemporary ideology of the heteronormative American family found its anchor. The current ideology of The Family can be seen as a societal response to the Great Depression, WWII, and the economic prosperity following the two. As Coontz demonstrates, “from the hardships of the Great Depression and the Second World War, and the euphoria of the postwar economic recovery, came a new kind of family ideal that still enters our homes” (1992: 14). Ideology of the normative nuclear family is the accumulative product of nationalist narratives of patriotism and liberty—reinforced in times of war—as well as of the “American Dream,” reinforced in times of prosperity and recovery from

economic hardship. The Family as ideology produces and is produced by these nationalist narratives because, viewed as the building block of society, The Family serves as their point of convergence and material manifestation. The “self-reliant family” is considered “the standard social unit of our society” (Coontz 1992: 69). As such, the normative nuclear family is harnessed as an image that will guarantee American success, both private and public, through its proper (re)production of the normative and valuable citizen subject.

In the aftermath to WWII, the white suburban nuclear family was projected in media, pop culture, and politics as the saving grace of American society. With post-war prosperity, young couples were encouraged to start their own lives, away from parents and extended family. Wider kin ties and multi-generational households that had been necessary in times of economic hardships were now rejected and replaced by the single generation nuclear family as an economic unit and site of emotional nurturance (Coontz 1992: 26). While The Family was further produced as a site of affect and love, private property was produced as the appropriate location of such nurturance as the home became a defining characteristic of the normative nuclear family. By 1960, 62% of American families owned their homes (compared to 43% in 1940) and, “85% of the new homes were built in the suburbs, where the nuclear family found new possibilities for privacy and togetherness” (Coontz 1992: 24). This is the root of white middle class suburbia as normative family environment. Post WWII federal loans helped many white families become home owners. As a result, suburbs were segregated and home ownership, and thus The Family, was produced as a quality of whiteness (Lipsitz 2006: 5). Property ownership and suburbia also

constructed the normative nuclear family as white through federal highway building projects that facilitated the development of white suburbs while urban renewal programs destroyed the neighborhoods of people of color (Lipsitz 2006: 6). Thus, as the home was codified as the private site of The Family and emotional intimacy, it was also reserved and protected for whites through exclusive public policy initiatives that enabled white families to become property owners while segregating towns and destroying neighborhoods of people of color. As a result, post-WWII prosperity and nationalism not only produced suburban domesticity, but also reinforced property ownership as a constitutive characteristic of both whiteness and The Family, further conflating the two.

While pop culture and the media constructed the privatized suburban nuclear family as the patriotic answer to the threat of Communism, The Family was further enshrined as essential to American identity and society because it furthered capitalism through family consumer habits. For example, in the five years following WWII, while food spending rose 33% and clothing spending 20%, spending on household goods rose 240% (Coontz 1992: 25). Such a statistic is indicative not only of the further structural development of the nuclear family, but also the bolstering of white middle-class consumerism as central to The Family ideology. White family consumerism was also reinforced in the very urban renewal programs that contributed to white property ownership and destroyed neighborhoods of people of color, replacing low-cost housing with shopping centers and office buildings (Lipsitz 2006: 12). Thus, families of color who could hardly afford to get by were having their livelihoods destroyed so that white families could buy more things for their privately

owned suburban houses. In the post-WWII era, The Family became more privatized and nuclear as home ownership and suburbia became central and defining norms. With peoples' new homes and economic prosperity came an invigorated consumerism and a notion of citizenship defined in such terms: buy goods xyz, better your family, protect the nation.

The sexual division of labor and, thus, rigid gender roles was also reinforced as part of the ideology of The Family in this time. While ideology makes the sexual division of labor appear ahistorical, "the majority of industrial workers did not earn enough to support a full time housewife until the 1950s or 1960s" (Stacey 1996: 43). As a result of post-war economic prosperity, white, middle-class people could afford to live off a single income. Consequently, the ideal of man-as-bread-winner and woman-as-domestic-care-giver was in reach for the white middle class and, because such families were constituted as proper American subjects, this ideal was reinforced as normal and natural for the nation. The nationalist narrative of the American dream, individualism, and self-reliance were reproduced through the sexual division of labor, "in which female nurturing sustained male independence vis-à-vis the outside world" (Coontz 1992: 69). The ideology of The Family that developed in this period gained such momentum and power because it was propagandized as the cause of economic prosperity and as the realization of American nationalist ideals. As a result, the American public has developed a sort of historical amnesia in which it "erroneously associate[s] the family with nature and project[s] it backward into a timeless past," working as ideology to mask the socioeconomic and historical conditions in the service of an exploitative narrative (Stacey 1996: 39). Post-WWII white suburbia and

consumerism produced the normativity of The Family as white, middle-classed, deeply gendered, consumerist, and suburban. These constitutive elements of The Family would only be strengthened with neoliberalism.

1970s and 1980s Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a social and economic ideology that emerged in the late 1970s and has come to be a defining characteristic of U.S. capitalism, public policy, and political rhetoric ever since.³ It can be described as “the expansion of markets and the dismantling of barriers to free trade in a globally integrated economy” (Eng 2010: 29) and is premised on notions of individual rational choice and a color blind logic that obscures race and class inequalities and institutional oppressions (Harvey 2007: 21). In neoliberalism, market rationality is applied to all aspects of life and social services are privatized. A neoliberal political economy relies on social policy that participates in an “active creation of the historical and social conditions for the market,” such as the normative family form (Lemke 2001: 194). Central to this form is what is commonly termed “family values,” a conservative backlash to some of the liberalization of the 1960s and 1970s. “Family values” is neoliberal in that the discourse effectively obscures the institutional and systemic foundation of social inequalities, cloaking them in a rhetoric of rational choice and individual pathology.

Neoliberal rhetoric and public policy reproduce the normative nuclear family as a site of affect and domesticity as well as whiteness. The neoliberal “politics of

³ Here, I am primarily concerned with defining neoliberalism and the material ways in which it reproduces constitutive components of the normative nuclear family. A more nuanced discussion of neoliberalism as an ideology of normativity and otherness will take place in chapter two.

colorblindness reconfigures whiteness as property to focus critical attention on the private structures of family and kinship as the displaced but privileged site for the management of ongoing problems of race, racism, and property” (Eng 2010: 6). Because of the rhetoric of rational choice as well as the privatization of social services, neoliberalism effectively creates racial oppression and class inequalities while claiming to contain their solution through an appeal to proper family values and morality. For example, “it often attributes the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values” and, meanwhile, there has been a “demonization of black families in public discourse since the 1970s” (Lipsitz 2006: 18). Similarly, the “decline of the African American family” is used to explain poverty and unemployment among African Americans, rather than systematic structural racism (Lowe 1995: 105). Thus, a failure to adhere to norms of The Family—nuclear, suburban, heterogendered, and white—is constructed as the cause of social inequalities. Such discourse furthers notions of white domesticity and the privately owned home as a site of emotional intimacy and personal affect as well as defines the proper American family as exhibiting proper gender roles and consumer habits.

In response to the “heathenism” and social “debauchery” of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to disguise the root causes of wealth disparity of the 1980s, the 1980s saw a conservative backlash in which United States politics, media, and pop culture pushed a return to “decent” family values (Coontz 1992: 98). In 1981, for example, the Family Life Act mandated that “family life courses must be taught in public schools” (Elia 2003: 68). In late 1980s, a series of think tanks and policy institutes such as the Institute for American Values and the Council on Families in

America emerged as research and advisory boards for political campaigns and significantly impacted public policy as well as the ideology of The Family during the Bush Sr. and Clinton years (Stacey 1996: 54). Also in conversation with such public policy think tanks and commissions were social scientists of the time who, vested with the authority to produce “true” knowledge of the nature of human beings and the state of society, espoused the two parent biological nuclear family as natural and essential to raise healthy children (Stacey 1996: 59). Linked to this normalization is the pathologization of non-white families, as well as poor or single-parent families, as “broken families” which did not espouse proper American values. The kinship forms these families took was seen as responsible for social ills and inequalities.⁴

Neoliberalism, as a political and economic rationale—a system of thought—constructs whiteness, domesticity, and private property as inherent elements of a “natural” and normative family structure, punishing, even as it creates, the rest.

The Family vis-à-vis Global Capitalism: A Self-Consuming Commodity

While neoliberalism originated in the early 1970s, it has transformed and continues in today’s post-1990s global consumer capitalism. The current economic order is one of out-sourcing and deindustrialization, a global and transnational capitalism that has transformed producer/consumer relations so that more and more production occurs in poor countries of people of color for privatized consumption by

⁴ This construction did not go uncontested. For example, Carol Stack’s “All Our Kin” illustrates the agency and power of African American families to challenge normative constructions of kinship forms and resource distribution. Constructed as “broken” and “backwards” for their social, economic, and racial make-up, Stack’s informants refuse dictates of single-family households and private property through collectively organizing and sharing their sparse resources across wide ranging networks of kin so as to secure the basic survival of all.

the West (Harvey 2007: 26). Global capitalism scales the basic consumer/producer binary constitutive of labor relations up to the globe: “The West” is the capitalist consumer who exploits “Third World” proletariat laborers and producers.⁵ Thus, in this era of capitalism, the normative family of proper U.S. citizenship and social reproduction is constituted as a unit of consumption. In turn, as I will show here, The Family is also a commodity to be consumed. As Donald Lowe demonstrates, “with women in production, the home has become a center of consumption,” and the “commodification of social reproduction increases the variety of goods and services that were formerly considered peripheral, and are now perceived as necessities” (1995: 142). Part of the function of capitalism is to produce desires and construct needs which sustain the illusion that they can be met through consuming commodities. The rise of two-income families as well as the imaginary of The Family fuels the consumption of household goods. This, in turn, perpetuates the ideology of The Family, redefining daily necessities and consumption practices as essential for sustaining The Family in image and in practice (Lowe 1995: 95).

The Family is reproduced—its normativities sustained—not merely through consumption, but through specific consumption practices in which The Family as a commodity is what is consumed. As distinct from industrial capitalism and the transitional 1950s and 1960s, in late capitalism of the post-1980s, the structural opposition between “production” and “social reproduction” has collapsed (Lowe 1995: 127). The reproductive labor necessary for sustaining the private sphere of the

⁵ This is not to say that every subject in the U.S. is of the capitalist consumer class but that the idealized normative subject is constructed as such and that this is the role of the U.S. in global economic relations.

home and family can no longer be understood as distinct from the public sphere of labor relations. In previous eras, this public/private binary and the opposition between familial life and work life that it engendered worked to mutually constitute the normative nuclear family as site of emotional affect in opposition to the harsh realities of capitalism. This obscured the real conditions of exploitation inherent in capitalism. While this ideology still remains, the collapse of such binaries means that the social reproduction (still) necessary for capitalism has itself been commodified (Lowe 1995: 92).

The Family is a unit of consumption not only because it is made to consume commodities, but also because these commodities are consumed through reproductive labor. The Family is now sustained and *made to exist* through consuming commodities. As Lowe argues, “commodified goods and services for natal production, health care, child- and preschool care, urban/suburban socialization, and formal education and training have almost totally replaced the non-exchangist social-reproduction practices formerly provided by household, kin, and local community” (Lowe 1995: 92). The commoditization of reproductive labor demonstrates how The Family is produced in the current era of global neoliberal capitalism: the commoditization and privatization of social services characteristic of neoliberalism (such as pre-schools) combines with the increased global consumption of household goods. In consuming goods and services tied to reproductive labor, the normative nuclear family and its ideals of intimacy, monogamy, and white suburbia is also consumed. Through media, advertising, and the circulations of images and signs, the ideology of The Family is marketed, consumed, and reproduced as normative and

natural. At the same time, through the goods consumed and the privatization of social reproduction, The Family as normative entity is effectively commodified.

Conclusion: The Family as an Ideological Form of Social Control

Thus far, I have outlined the historical production of the nuclear family along with its ruling ideology—The Family. I’ve emphasized the production, transformation, and surprising durability of The Family’s constitutive elements: monogamous and affective marriage, the nuclear family, whiteness and middle-classness, consumerism, and private property and privatization. As a political rhetoric and analytic, “neoliberal practices and policies organize the unequal distribution of social goods and human labor—indeed, human life and freedom—into a biopolitics of global capitalism” (Eng 2010: 29). The Family as a hegemonic ideology works as a form of biopower⁶ to produce and police subjective existence, lifestyle form, and the organization of society. The Family is produced as the *only* viable option; populations are made to live in its image. Thus, as I have shown here,

the term family has been synonymous not just with heterosexuality, broadly defined, but with a very specific brand of heterosexuality, which ideally involves marriage, baby making, monogamy, ownership of property, espousing middle class and white values, etc (Elia 2003: 65).

These more durable elements of The Family constitute and delimit the forms of lifestyles, relationships, and kinship structures understood and imagined as possible.

⁶ As the “power of regularization,” biopower “consists in making live and letting die” so as to optimize populations and produce them in accordance with ruling ideologies that ensures the continued domination and exploitation inherent in capitalism (Foucault 1976: 247).

At this stage of history, The Family is a statistical anomaly and powerful image of normalcy. As subject positions are produced through historical and economic circumstances, “consumer culture’s primary role of providing ‘choices’ through a process of differentiating, providing symbolic capital, or producing identity,” creates the ideal conditions for subjects to “choose” nuclear family forms and lifestyles (Grewal 2005: 30). One of the biggest threats to capitalism is that “subaltern populations might develop alliances with people in other positions in the class structure” to form a powerful and mobilized working class (Hennessy 2000: 14). To prevent this from happening, the ruling class has devised strategies to keep people from uniting, strategies that take form in the social organization of peoples’ lives. This logic, produced by the ruling elite, becomes the hegemonic condition for appropriate lifestyles, personhood, and relationship forms. This is what The Family is today: a foundational organizing unit of society that masks the root causes of social inequality, instead attaching people to idealized forms of proper heteronormative relationality. The Family keeps people from organizing along class lines or in ways not conducive to exploitation and domination by serving as a hegemonic logic outside of which people can almost not conceive of livelihood or society, much less of themselves and their relationships.

As a commodity to be consumed, The Family is more than ever an unreachable ideal. Further, as the transformations in capitalism have demonstrated, that the normative nuclear family is no longer *materially* necessary does not result in its *ideological* demise. Instead, The Family’s ability to perpetuate normative systems of domination and subordination is stronger now than ever. While “a multiplicity of

lifestyles” is necessary for global capitalism, and the white suburbanized normative nuclear family has been de-centered (rendered a non-statistical norm) in practice, it is still produced as an ideological norm through the imagery and meaning making processes of consumption and nationalist discourses (Grewal 2005: 16). This is because even though the material reality of the nuclear family is not essential for capitalism, its ideology is. The multiplicity of lifestyles are not neutral; they are organized along hierarchical axis of power and systems of normativity. These systems allow for the social reproduction of “otherized” subjects and relationships, which, in turn, sustain the power and hegemony of normative subjects and relational forms. Thus, in our globalized era of late capitalism and neoliberalism, The Family as a field of normativity that produces and polices its deviant “others” is reproduced not in practice but in ideology and imagery. One crucial way this happens is through the construction of the domestic long-term monogamous relationship as the privileged, natural, and private site of intimacy, sex, affect, and care. The heteronormative relationship as a form of social control is the subject of chapter two.

CHAPTER 2

Compulsive Desires, Inhibited Intimacies: Relationship Normativity

Introduction: The Family as Heteronormative Ideology

Jane and John are in love. They met in college and started “dating” their junior year, meaning they developed an intimate relationship based on emotional attachment, mental connection, and a mutual desire to care for each other and to be intricately involved in each others day-to-day life. After a couple “what are we” conversations, the couple decided to commit to monogamy. After graduation, they both moved to the same town and, after another successful year of monogamy they moved in together, sharing rent and other material resources. After successful cohabitation for a couple of years, Jane and John became engaged. With the help of their parents, a wedding for the following year was planned and, soon after marriage, the couple found themselves in a suitable economic situation to buy a house. Because they are young, there are no children yet. But it is understood that, circumstances permitting, they will eventually have a baby, to be named after Jane’s grandma if a girl and John’s uncle if a boy. The couple alternates traveling to each other’s parents’ homes for Thanksgiving and Christmas. They maintain steady jobs, lead a modest life, and go to the movies or out with friends on weekends.

The story of Jane and John is well known. It is a cultural narrative that dictates the way in which a romantic relationship is “supposed” to develop and the acceptable lifestyle young people are expected to strive for. Of course, there are different versions of this story. Perhaps the couple does not cohabit before marriage or do not receive college educations. Perhaps their names are Jane and Julia. Contextual varieties and historical modifications aside, the central point of this cultural script

remains the same: it is only natural and proper for an individual to seek out—and eventually attain—a committed domestic monogamous relationship, located in the home (preferably owned), and oriented towards reproducing children and remaining together forever in the life the couple has created for and through their love for one another. After all, love is forever—right? Such narratives are reproduced as natural and normal, the meanings of “love,” “commitment,” and “intimacy” assumed and understood, because sociohistorical conditions have developed an ideology of The Family that contains within it acceptable kinship, relationship, and lifestyle forms and which pervades and constitutes social reality. In what follows, I explain how heteronormativity and ideology function to consolidate meaning and produce dominant narratives of kinship and relationships as essential and compulsory.

As Althusser famously demonstrates, “the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology” (1971: 132). The ruling class’s dependence on the exploitation of the working class in order to maintain its own power and status necessitates not just economic domination over the worker, but ideological domination as well, so that the logic of power and hierarchy becomes naturalized and unchallenged. Thus, as “the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind,” the role of ideology is to police social existence in order to reproduce the conditions and subjectivities necessary for the ruling elite’s continued social and economic domination (Althusser 1971: 158). This is done through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), as Althusser names them, such as the church, the education

system, and the family, all of which serve to indoctrinate individuals with ruling class ideology, thereby producing docile subjects who live by—and ultimately strive for—normativities and lifestyles that secure the conditions of reproduction for ruling class power (1971: 145).

The previous chapter outlined the historical production of the normative nuclear family to demonstrate how The Family works hand in hand with the state and with capitalism to perpetuate ruling class domination and hegemony. The Family operates as an ideology because it indoctrinates subjects with specific ideas and representations through which to interpret, articulate, and experience interpersonal relations. In this case, the specific ideology is one of *relatedness*, of what a relationship is, of who family members are, and of the role of a family in an individual's life. As queer studies after Butler has established, compulsory gender normativity is an ideology that constructs binary gender roles as natural so as to violently stigmatize and police subjects whose genders do not easily cohere to such a binary. While the ideology of gender normativity is in part produced and reinforced through normative kinship and relationship structures, the ideology of The Family must be afforded its own analysis. The ISA of The Family constitutes heteronormative notions of kinship and relationship structures and obscures the ultimately performative and constructed existence of social, sexual, and intimate relations. It is also, as I discussed in the last chapter, neoliberal.

The neoliberal global economy both produces and capitalizes on difference so that more consumer markets and production mechanisms can be developed (Harvey 2007: 20). This means that a single family form is not only not possible in modern

day capitalism, it is also not desirable. However, it is still in the service of neoliberal capitalism to punish and police difference constructed as deviance because social hierarchies justified through rhetoric of the rational individual are necessary for exploitation. Thus, while a singular family form is not beneficial in practice to a state of neoliberal capitalism, it is beneficial as ideology.

Neoliberalism, then, is central to The Family as a regulating ideology because, as an idealized image to strive for, it serves as a justification for social inequalities. Neoliberalism not only constructs the subject as always already rational, but it also constructs rationality itself so that certain behaviors or modes of existence are understood as inherent and natural. Neoliberal rationality is one whose “point of reference is no longer some pre-given human nature, but an artificially created form of behavior” and, as an ideology, it “endeavors to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (Lemke 2001: 199, 202). It then violently reinforces and polices such social rationality. The Family and its ideology is one site that this is materialized. As “an artificially created form of behavior,” domestic long-term monogamy and the white nuclear family have become engrained in U.S. cultural consciousness as a predetermined given of human existence and social reality, effectively guaranteeing the reproduction of the exploitative conditions necessary for late capitalism.

The attribution of systemic oppression to people’s failure to conform to white middle-class notions of the proper nuclear family form serves both to disguise the root causes of oppression as well as to further reproduce the nuclear family as normative in opposition to deviant others. Since the function of ideology is to

reproduce itself as natural by disguising material reality, it should come as no surprise that “while family support policies in the United States are the weakest in the industrial world, no society has yet to come close to our expenditure of politicized rhetoric over family crisis” (Stacey 1996: 47). In this case, the ideology of the normative nuclear family is reproduced through its construction of “failed families” as the cause of poverty, while further reproducing such oppression through the construction of the nuclear family as normative and natural. Neoliberal ideology of The Family blames systemic inequalities such as poverty and racism on the “unruly” families of poor people and people of color, thus reproducing white middle-class values as normative and natural. It constructs the citizen subject as one who makes rational choices so as to pathologize oppression and construct poor people, people of color, and queers (and many others) as deviants responsible for their own de-subjugation. Thus, the production of the white middle-class nuclear family as normative and natural operates as ideology because it has the meaning making power to construct any other kinship form as “deviant” pathological “other” and, consequently, to blame institutional inequalities on such families’ failures to reproduce monogamy, domesticity, private property, and consumption.

Like all dominant state ideologies, The Family (and neoliberalism) is intricately connected to the ideology of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity constructs the heterosexual and heterogendered order of society as privileged and natural: “heterosexual culture [has the] exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (Warner 1993: xxi) because it controls and determines “those relations of power that circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth” (Butler 2004: 57).

Heteronormativity constructs certain modes of being as essential and normal: binary gender (woman/man), binary sex (male/female), binary sexuality (homosexual/heterosexual), and binary relationship types (friend/lover or erotic/non-erotic) produce subjects whose identities do not fit nicely into these binaries as deviant pervert “others.” It is through the construction—and the violent policing—of these “others,” that heteronormativity is able to reproduce itself. For example, in opposition to gender normativity, people whose genders do not easily fit into the categories of “man” or “woman” are constructed as pathological deviants or impossible humans. In the same way, relations of care or intimacy that do not easily fit into the organizing logic of kinship and relationship normativity are produced as invalid and punished in discursive as well as material ways. The Family is a heteronormative ideology because it constructs certain kinship forms and specific relationship structures, modes of care, and practices of affect as privileged and natural while, at the same time, marking forms of intimacy that do not cohere according to the dominant lexicon as deviant or impossible “others.”

This chapter seeks to name and critique the ways in which kinship and relationship normativity produce certain practices of care, affect, and intimacy as the only acceptable—imaginable even—means of organizing interpersonal relations and the reproduction of life. I do so by developing a queer critique of relationship and kinship normativity. Defined in opposition to heteronormativity, queer theory seeks to privilege and validate subjectivities constructed as “other” by heteronormative ideology. In celebrating non-normative gender and sexual identities, queer theory explores the ways in which “these sites of disruption, error, confusion, and trouble

can be the very rallying points to classification and to identity as such” (Butler 1991: 16). However, as a field dedicated to naming, deconstructing, and resisting sites of normativity, queer theory has given little attention to the normative family and long-term monogamous relationship form as discourses and ideologies of power that violently police the forms intimacy may take. Rather, heteronormative kinship organization and relationship structures have been recognized as a characteristic of heteronormative ideology, but have not been closely examined or critiqued as regulatory apparatuses in and of themselves.¹ Kinship and relationship normativity have been discussed with regards to gender and sexual “norms” and “others” but less so with regards to the “norms” and “others” of specific social organizations and relationship forms. The heteronormative ideology of The Family is an ideology of the nuclear family, of the heterosexual matrix, of domestic-life long monogamy, and of marriage and reproduction. It is a site of normativity that “circumscribes in advance” what forms of intimacy, structures of relationships, and arrangements of kin “will and will not count as truth” (Butler 2004: 57).

The Family is a particularly potent ISA because it is responsible not only for reproducing heteronormative relationships and kinship structures, but also for reproducing—through those structures—other normative ideologies of acceptable existence such as gender, education, citizenship, class, consumerism, nation, race, private property, manners, productive workers, and overall notions of respectable personhood. If The Family is policed and reproduced and normative relationships

¹ This is not to ignore or erase the very important—and informative work—of scholars such as Kath Weston, Carol Stack, Peter Nardi, Samuel Delaney, and Michael Warner (among others) on queer relations and kinship/relationship normativity, scholars who have laid the ground for my critique here.

maintained, then the nation-state and capitalism, i.e. the power and status of the ruling class, is kept intact. As a powerful ideology and site of heteronormativity, the institution of The Family has produced in people specific desires for and experiences of relationship forms so that narrow conceptions of intimacy, love, and commitment continue to define the terms in which people conduct their social and affective relations. Because a fundamental project of queer theory is the naming (and further reworking) of the ways normativity constitutes subjects and their desires, and because kinship and relationship structures have received little attention as sites of normativity, this chapter seeks to name and deconstruct specific components of heteronormative kinship and relationship ideology. In it, I will explore the ways in which normative experiences of intimacy, love, and commitment, while understood in monolithic and essentialized terms, are heteronormative constructs that effectively police and produce inter-subjective forms of relatedness.

Normative Desires for Love and Intimacy: A Story of Compulsive Complacency

As the “relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life,” I understand “kinship practices [to] be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency,” wherein human dependencies are the material and affective practices necessary for the reproduction of life (Butler 2002: 15). Kinship relations are fundamentally tied to our understandings of property and space. As a result of private property, kinship relations became those with whom you share your things. As a result of industrial capitalism, kinship relations became those with whom you share your feelings. As a result (in part) of the division of labor, kinship practices

became restricted to the private realm, intimacy relegated to biology and in-love reproductive monogamy. Because “heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy,” it has the power to produce in subjects desires that, in turn, reproduce heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553). As a result of the historical development of the family, kinship and interpersonal relations have come to be organized such that heteronormative imperatives have penetrated peoples’ personal lives, not only influencing, but fundamentally constituting, subjective experiences of desire and intimacy. In this section, I focus on how heteronormative meaning making processes constitute subjective desires for and experiences of love and intimacy so as to reproduce the normative social organization of kinship and relationship structures as privileged and compulsive through violently policing and circumscribing the forms interpersonal relations may take.

The historical development of The Family form has inculcated desires for long-term monogamy, biological reproduction, private property, and affective nurturance at the site of the domestic home. Because subjects are produced in relation to each other, they are in some sense codependent for the reproduction of life (Hennessy 2000: 210). However, the form kinship takes is not limited to normative biological kinship or romantic relationship structures. Subjective desires to organize the reproduction of life around a romantic monogamous relationship, private property, and the nuclear family form are not only “constituted in the course of historically social practices,” but are also constructed as “biological entities” essential to human personhood so that heteronormative relationship structures are experienced

as necessary for subjective existence (Rubin 1993: 10). Thus, heteronormativity not only produces the hegemonic social organization of care and kinship as privileged and natural, but it also produces specific experiences of love and intimacy such that, through subjects' most personal desires, the social conditions necessary for the consolidation and reproduction of heteronormativity are reproduced.

Subjective experiences of and desires for love, intimacy, and personal affect within romantic relationships are social constructs of the heteronormative order. They form a heteronormative "love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 554). This love plot operates as an ideology because it produces an understanding that true personhood and cultural citizenship is reserved for those whose lives culminate in the eventual realization of the normative monogamous romantic relationship, followed by a biological nuclear family. That is, to belong to society, one's personal life, kinship structure, and interpersonal relations must be organized such that its constituent elements of domesticity, shared property, emotional support and practices of care, intimacy, and sex all "line up with each other" to "signify monolithically" the lived reproduction of heteronormativity (Sedgwick 1993: 6, 8). The practices of care and intimacy, understood as kinship, through which life is reproduced must—in order to belong to normative society—take place in the space of the home and at the site of the normative nuclear family.

The narratives of normativity that define what forms intimate relations may take have such power over subjective desires precisely because life is reproduced necessarily through and in relation to others. People do not exist apart from one

another; interpersonal relations are thus fundamental to both selfhood and the ways in which people understand their lives (Rowe 2008: 27). While interpersonal relations are necessary for the material and affective processes constitutive of life, the forms such relations may take is infinitely expansive. However, because it is “through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy” that heteronormativity is produced as natural, specific notions of the appropriate forms such relations may take are constructed for the purposes of regulation and social control (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553). The normative relationship form is used as a “domestic security apparatus” to ensure the reproduction of heteronormative intimacies (Kipnis 2003: 42). Intimacy is privatized and commitment standardized, policing the forms relationships may take. Thus, as Laura Kipnis argues “domestic coupledness is the boot camp for compliant citizenship” and acceptable personhood because it is through the reproduction of relationship normativity—and the nuclear family—that the heteronormative order may be maintained (2003: 46).

Intimacy, Commitment, and Reproductive Futurity

While, as shown in chapter one, monogamy is the product of specific sociohistorical and economic conditions of capitalism, it has been distilled into ideology: the desire for love to materialize into life-long domestic monogamy is experienced as an essential desire of personhood. The narrative of the normative relationship—how it unfolds, what it consists of, the “good life” it promises, is a story we all know very well. So well, in fact, that it is hardly recognized as a story at all. Rather, as Jane and John demonstrate, it is most often accepted as the natural way to

conduct and experience affective life and is rarely deconstructed or critiqued. To start, there is the “heteronormative expectation that a sexual relationship moves in a predetermined direction towards cohabitation and ‘settling down’” to live together happily ever after, forever (Roseneil 2005: 250). This is indicative of how property and space, as well as notions of reproductive futurity,² guide normative meanings of sexual relationships. Assumed to be both romantic and monogamous, the heteronormative sexual relationship must not only take place in its natural environment (the domestic private home), but must also strive to culminate in owning such a home, as well as in biological reproduction and a nuclear family to nurture within such a home. Thus, the “‘life course mindset,’ which focuses on generational reproduction within the heterosexual family as *the* significant productive activity and space” is a constitutive component of the normative relationship form (Roseneil 2004: 411). Such a mindset orients normative relationships towards the future to ensure reproduction both of docile citizens and of the social and material domestic processes necessary for the reproduction of heteronormative kinship. Reproductive futurity is an organizing principle of normative domestic relationships in the sense that generations are reproduced through normative kinship structures and affective processes, as well as in the sense that the future is reproduced in said terms (Edelman 2004: 2). In being fundamentally oriented towards the future, the normative

² By “reproductive futurity” I am referring to Lee Edelman’s phrase “reproductive futurism” to describe “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman 2004: 2).

monogamous relationship—and its constituent cohering elements of intimacy, privacy, and affect—is reproduced as privileged and natural.

Further, for the normative romantic relationship to be oriented towards the future as such, it must carry with it and embed in individuals a strong desire for—and specific conception of—commitment. Within heteronormative ideology of relationship structures, “falling in love means committing to commitment” (Kipnis 2003: 56). What I am interested in here is not so much the notion that relations of care or kin necessitate a component of commitment, but rather in the specific meaning of commitment within normative relationships and the practices it has generated as well as prohibited. The heteronormative relationship form is founded on a construction of commitment that contains within it monogamy as a prerequisite, but that also has meaning far beyond sexual fidelity. People experience “love as the prerequisite to life-long commitment that unfolds in conditions of shared domesticity, the expectation of mutual sexual fulfillment,” and the understanding that intimacy or intense affect must not take place outside of such a relationship. This is because, according to dominant ideology, love must (eventually) involve such a practice of commitment (Kipnis 2003: 25).

Heteronormative ideology constructs intimacy as necessarily private, as taking place within the couple form, at the site of the domestic home, and as restricted to relations of biological kin. Thus, “along with the sex it legitimates, intimacy has been privatized” and, as a result, people are conditioned to experience love and intimacy as necessarily private practices (Berlant and Warner 1998: 559). Rather than taking place anywhere else, in any other relationship form, or structured in any other way,

practices of affect and intimacy are privatized in a double sense: first they are relegated to the domestic domain, constructed in opposing binary relation to the public realm of economics and politics (this serves to strengthen capitalism and the division of labor). Second, intimacy is privatized such that an individual ought to experience intimate relations *solely* within the conjugal relationship and nuclear family form.

The relegation of intimate relations to the domestic domain is a historical development. In the 19th century, as Michel Foucault argues, “the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed” (1978: 139). Because it is located “at the juncture of the ‘body’ and the ‘population,’ sex became a crucial target of a power organized around the management of life” (Foucault 1978: 147). As a result, ideologies and normativities governing the acceptable forms that sex can take emerged. Among them was the notion that sex can only occur between a married couple and in the bedroom. While the stigma against sex outside of marriage has waned, the norms that constitute acceptable sex as only taking place in a committed romantic relationship and in the privacy of the home have persisted. Thus, there is a “privatization of sex and a sexualization of private personhood” for the sake of policing subjectivity and producing docile intimacies (Berlant and Warner 1998: 559).

As such, sex is not only privatized in the sense that it must take place behind closed doors, but also in the sense that proper sex must only take place in the emotionally intimate, monogamous committed-couple relationship. That is, an

individual's capacity for intimacy is privatized such that one may only be seriously intimate with one's sexual partner, and sexual with one's intimate partner. At the same time, private personhood is sexualized in that relations that are domestic or intimate in the sense of close personal affect and connection are conceptualized as necessarily entailing monogamous romantic sex.

The heteronormative ideology of acceptable relationship forms is also influenced by neoliberalism. In this logic, intimacy is privatized because there is a scarcity of love and intimacy and, as a result, an individual's personal intimacy must only occur within the normative monogamous relationship form so that it can be maximized and maintained. Because "neoliberals attempt to re-define the social sphere as a form of the economic domain," normative interpersonal relations and components of affect and intimacy are conceptualized through an economic analytic (Lemke 2001: 196). Neoliberal market rationalities, which assume that subjects have the capacity to conduct their lives according to economic calculations of profit, loss, and risk, have infiltrated the ways people conduct intimacy. As a result, "caring, friendship, sexuality, and parent-child relations become special cases of advantage-seeking individual choice under conditions of constraint—in short, of economic rationality" (Zelizer 2005: 29). Because neoliberalism is oriented towards the privatization of social services and capitalism towards the privatization of wealth, property, and other resources, romantic relationships constituted through such ideology effectively privatize intimacy so that it may only take place at the domestic home and within the couple form and nuclear family. The effect of this is that love relations come to entail a sense of "ownership" over one's partner. In intimate or

committed relations, a subject's emotional or material capacities—to varying degrees—are privatized in that they are constructed as for the sole consumption of and ownership by the other partner.

If intimacy is understood as necessarily private and kinship as entailing the emotional and material exchanges necessary for the reproduction of life, then commitment is understood as devoting one's whole (or near whole) self to generating intimacy and kinship within the long-term dyadic—and privatized—relationship. Founded on the “notion that intimacy relies on and is intensified by keeping ‘others’ at a distance,” relationship normativity constructs commitment as involving the full, private commitment of *self* to other (Jamieson 2005: 191). Generally speaking, what it means to commit revolves around what one gives of one's self to an other, a certain moral—as well as material—accountability that has at its core genuine trust and the desire to engage in exchanges of care with an other. Tied to monogamy and relationship normativity, a “committed” relationship is one in which subjects necessarily “privilege their couple relationship above all others” and, as such, refrain from developing close interpersonal connections with anyone outside the couple (Jamieson 2005: 200). This is because normative relationships are constituted as necessarily threatened by the existence of outside intimacy.

The privatization of commitment contributes to the construction of the normative couple relationship as the privileged site of intimacy through and in opposition to heteronormative constructions of friendship as necessarily platonic, asexual, and devoid of intense affect or care. The range of ties people are permitted—or even thought capable of having—with others is violently circumscribed through

strict friend/lover and friendship/kinship binaries that organize the hetero-social order of sex, intimacy, and affect. This is violent because heteronormative love and relationship ideology constructs a double standard whereby, on the one hand, it “creates the modern notion of a soul—one which experiences itself as empty without love,” and on the other, the forms of love permitted—or even thought possible—are limited and regulated (Kipnis 2003: 26). Thus, in the same instant that subjects are stigmatized for not “finding love,” they are also prohibited from engaging in love relationships of any sort other than the normative committed couple. In this sense, non-normative love relationships are otherized and produced as queer.

Intelligibility: Opposing Binaries, Categorical Coherence

While there is an infinite array of forms intimate relations may take, subjects are so ready and willing to conform to the heteronormative model because it is through “normative kinship configurations by which the ‘human’ becomes recognizable” (Butler 1994: 15). Subjects not only readily conform to the dictates of relationship normativity, but also experience its components and constructs as essential desires manifest from within. Relations that fall outside of the available lexicon of signification are produced as unintelligible in opposition to normative relations that are produced as privileged, natural, and deeply human. Thus, while interpersonal relations are social constructs materialized and necessarily articulated through symbolic imaginings and meaning making processes, the ideology of kinship and relationship forms effectively induces subjects to experience (hetero)normative

modes of intimacy, desire, and commitment as inherent and essential to human existence.

Societal constructions of what love means and what forms are acceptable for love relationships to take constitute and are constituted by heteronormative binaries that, understood as an essential part of human nature, organize the way subjects experience desire, kinship, and romantic relationships. As Lynn Jamieson points out, “typically, two main boundaries have been identified: boundaries between the familial and non-familial” (2005: 185). As a result of privatized conceptions of commitment and essentialist understandings of kinship, a strict binary of family/non-family or kinship/friendship is imposed for the regulation of relationships. This binary produces in individuals the desire to differentiate between relations of kin and that of friends so that privatized intimacy and relationship categorical coherence may be maintained. Thus, according to relationship heteronormativity, “the claims that parents, children, and siblings can make of each other and the commitments that are honored are of a different order than those that friends make” (Roseneil 2005: 235).

Such categorical coherence is necessary for the reproduction of the heteronormative order because it not only guides the materialization of love and intimacy into “appropriate” relationship forms, it also maintains notions of kinship as biologically essentialist—that is, as necessarily deriving from blood and as stemming from some deep natural essence inherent in human personhood. The culturally constructed friendship/kinship binary constructs friendship in necessary opposition to

kinship.³ It further privatizes intimacy and commitment and limits both to the normative romantic couple form. By constructing the category of friendship in opposition to that of kinship or the romantic relationship, the kinship/friendship binary does the ideological work of reproducing the romantic couple as the privileged site of intimacy. As a result, subjects understand “proper” forms of intimacy, care, and love as necessarily taking place within the normative relationship and nuclear family structure.

While the friendship/kinship binary is a major organizer of the ways people do relationships, relationship normativity is similarly constituted by other binaries that categorize and attempt to define interpersonal relationships. Similar to the heteronormative mandate of binary gender categorical coherence, “people devote significant effort to negotiating meanings of social relations and marking their boundaries” (Zelizer 2005: 35). When the study of linguistics combined with that of kinship, “kinship positions were elevated to the status of fundamental linguistic structures” and, as a result, kinship categories came to function as “positions that make possible the entry into language” and “without which no signification could proceed” (Butler 2004: 46). Thus, according to heteronormativity, “kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognizable family form” (Butler 2002: 14). As a result, kinship and relationship normativity dictates that for a form of intimacy to make sense, for it even to exist, it must assume and be properly described by a normative identity category.

³ Historically, the friendship/kinship binary formed through “the particular version of modern friendship which emerged in the mid-twentieth century which promoted the companionate intimate heterosexual couple as the primary arena of intimacy” (Roseneil 2004 411).

Such categories are often organized in binary fashion: similar to the friendship/kinship binary is the friend/lover binary or the “together”/ “not together” binary. Other normative terms that designate specific meanings of and practices within a relationship include: “dating,” “just friends,” “lovers,” “engaged,” “life partner,” “exclusive,” “married,” and “separated.” These terms carry within them specific meanings and cultural codes, all for the sake of disciplining intimacy and regulating relations. Identity categories are necessary for heteronormative relationship structures to maintain their dominance because it is through them that “people constantly draw moral boundaries between proper and improper uses of intimacy” (Zelizer 2005: 18). Subjective reality is fundamentally constituted by heteronormative relationship ideology such that subjects police their own relationships and forms of intimacy. While such categories do not necessarily give accurate descriptions of the material and affective ways a relationship is manifested, they are compulsively adopted to do just that and, as a result, subjects often find themselves trying to squeeze an interpersonal relationship into a box in which it just won’t fit. Furthermore, as relationships are produced through their identity categories, it is difficult for intimacy and affect to take place outside of the privatized committed relationship form because there is very little language to describe and classify non-normative intimacies. Because there is a “hierarchical valuation of sex acts,” as well as relationship types and forms of intimacy, relations that cannot be classified according to normative dictates of love and intimacy are stigmatized. As a result, individuals are willing to view their relationships in line with normative categories and notions of “proper” intimacy (Rubin 1993: 11).

Thus, “participants and third parties devote exceptional effort to marking what the relationship is and is not” because, according to normative processes of signification, marking a relationship effectively constitutes it as such (Zelizer 2005: 34). However, what is fascinating here, beyond the participants’ need to categorize their relationship, is the need to do so for a third party, a witness. While on the one hand, the ideology of normative love relationships holds that “love speaks an inner truth” and as such is pure, “beyond criticism and beyond the judgments of the law,” on the other hand, it holds that love relationships require a public recognition to be validated (Warner 2000: 100). In marriage, the state is the third party that validates the couple relationship. Beyond “equal rights,” part of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement for marriage is about gaining recognition by a third party—that of the state and the public at large—so that a couple’s normative relationship can be validated, and in a sense constituted, as one of true love, commitment, and proper privatized intimacy. Because dominant notions of love and “the couple form [are] sentimentalized by the internalization of a witness,” a constitutive component of normative coupledness is an identity category to signify and demarcate it as such to third parties whose public recognition and validation is necessary for the relationship to fully assume its identity (Warner 2000: 103).

Relationships as Performative

Because, in order for a relationship to be intelligible, it must assume a normative relationship identity category, such categories are both prescriptive and descriptive. The category used to identify a relationship form effectively constitutes it

as such. Thus, in compulsively using normative identity categories to “describe” relationships, such relationships take the form and structure of the category. An identity category that designates the form and nature of a given relationship is a fundamental component of that relationship’s existence. It functions as “the name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak” (Butler 1993: 226).

While in this statement, Butler is referring to binary gender categories that, according to normative society, make a subject intelligible, if the “me” and “I” are replaced with “us” and “we,” one can see how categories for identifying and classifying relationship types are necessary, within normative society, for constituting inter-subjective relations. Normative categories of and labels for relationships function as “the name that precedes and exceeds [*us*], but without which [*we*] cannot speak” (Butler 1993: 226). A relationship is not intelligible without a name through which to signify—and police—its meaning.

Processes of signification that police and produce interpersonal relations circumscribe and limit the kinds of relationships and intimacies thought possible. An insistence on describing relationships as and constituting them through normative identity categories and the meanings they ascribe is violent because people’s genuine ways of relating are often not reducible to normative relationship categories and symbolisms. Furthermore, because the privileged normative subject is constituted through and in opposition to the deviant pervert “other,” people whose various relations do not easily fit into normative categories are stigmatized and pathologized. For example, intimate friendships outside the romantic couple model, romantic relationships that do not involve genital sex, or people who feel their relationship is

not easily classified by the notions of what it means to be “together” or “not together” are all (queer) forms of intimate alliances that do not fit into normative relationship identity categories.

While violently policed and produced as “other” through and in opposition to the privileged construction of the domestic monogamous relationship, queer relations demonstrate that the hegemonic logic governing the production of acceptable intimacy is not inherent to human existence, but rather, an ideology, and that relationships are performatively produced social constructs. I would like to extend Butler’s theory of performativity to explain inter-subjective relationships. Because “recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject” relationship categories “are not expressive but performative” (Butler 1993: 226). As such, “these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (Butler 1988: 528). Interpersonal relations do not materialize from some deep, inherent truth essential to the given relationship but rather, are produced through and in relation to the available categories and meaning making processes of signification. In naming and deconstructing the processes through which meaning is produced, queer theory points to the fundamental relationality and performativity of subjectivity. That is, any concept, characteristic, or subject is made to be only through and in relation to what it is not. Here, however, I am applying performativity to the very relations through which subjects are performatively produced. That is, as subjectivity is constituted through performativity as well as relationality, social relations are constituted performatively as well as through their own relationality.

As embodied forms of inter-subjectivity, relationships function as situations, as acts that simultaneously signify and constitute what happens between people. A social relation is both a process constitutive of subjectivity and an interaction constitutive of the relation itself. Thus, as “modes of patterned and performative doing bring kinship categories into operation,” normative interpersonal relations and articulations of intimacy—while experienced as compulsory—are not expressive of essential and innate desires but, rather, are brought into being through their doings (Butler 2002: 34). That is, the social materialization of interpersonal relations are performative social constructs because interaction, like “kinship, is a kind of *doing*, one that does not reflect a prior structure but which can only be understood as an enacted practice” (Butler 2002: 34).

Thus, relationships are enacted through practice. They are constituted in form and content through the interactive enactment of culturally relevant symbols of signification. The form a relationship takes is not expressive of some deep internal connection manifest from within. Rather, because relationships are performative, the form a relationship takes effectively produces the interpersonal connection felt to take place. In the following chapter, I explore the potential of rethinking relations, queering the norms of intelligibility that govern what forms intimacy may take and what categories affective relationships may assume. Queer relations name, rework, and challenge these norms through engaging in intimate kin and relational practices that refuses to cohere according to the normative lexicon of signification.

CHAPTER 3

Queering Kinship and Relationship Structures: Towards an Ethics of Care

Introduction: Deviant “Others” as Sites of Lived Resistance

The Family is a site and system of normativity with the regulatory power to constitute in individuals the desires to form a family structure through the heteronormative long-term monogamous domestic relationship. As ideology, The Family is produced and reproduced as normative and natural with the meaning making power to produce all other forms of intimacies as not only perverse and deviant, but also as unintelligible and unrecognizable impossibilities. Yet, despite normative codes of intelligibility, while the social foundation of any human process is a given, the form a given relation takes is not. Rather, interpersonal connections and intimacies may materialize in a variety of forms and fashions and the form such a relation takes is, in effect, constitutive of that relation itself. Thus, “because meeting [our] corporeal needs always takes place through social relationships,” the material processes of exchange necessary for the reproduction of life are also those practices that tend to take place in the domestic setting and that are enacted through intimate interpersonal relations; “in this sense, social interaction itself translates into a vital need” (210). However, just as the normative family structure and relationship form have come to exist through specific historical and social circumstances, the queer “others” produced in their shadow as simultaneously dangerous and impossible are also made to be through historical circumstances.

Furthermore, such queer forms of relating and reproducing life are necessary for normativity’s reproduction and sustained privilege because it is through

constructing non-normative intimacies as dangerous and deviant that heteronormative kinship and relationship structures are reproduced as natural and pure. For kinship and relationship normativity to maintain its hegemony, it must construct “regions of illegitimacy,” the forms and structures of intimate alliances that had better not be, yet that, through their very existence and deviance simultaneously challenge the norms of intelligibility and reproduce their power (Butler 2002: 17). While it is through the reproduction of illegitimate intimate alliances—counterprivates—as dangerous and unthinkable that normativity is reproduced, it is through the privileged and celebrated reproduction of such intimacies that normativity is challenged and resisted. Contrary to dominant ideology, there is a “whole constellation of intimate relationships” that fall outside of the heteronormative sphere of legitimacy or intelligibility (Jamieson 2005: 195). As a result, for a queer scholarship and politics of lived resistance, we must make it a habit of “consistently asserting the importance of relationships that lack social status or even a vocabulary to describe them” (Weston 1991: 212). While we only have certain means and categories for articulating them, the ways that intersubjective relations of affect, intimacy, and care may materialize are as diverse and infinite as subjectivity itself.

This chapter names and explores those intimacies, practices of care, kinships, and relationship structures that are not organized through or in-line with heteronormative categories of relatedness. I argue that a queer resistance to the violence of kinship and relationship normativity means seeking out and privileging those interpersonal connections that exploit, rework, and resist the constituent components of the normative nuclear family and long-term, monogamous couple

form. As kinship and relationship normativity is reproduced through the violent policing of queer intimacies, “these sites of disruption, error, confusion, and trouble can be the very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such” (Butler 1988: 16). Whereas kinship normativity dictates that for a relationship to exist, it must assume a recognizable form, must fit into an identity category appropriate for such a form, and must not transcend the designated boundaries and norms of that form, a queer politics of relatedness can “establish the possibility of love beyond the grasp of that norm” (Butler 2004: 74). Through cultivating intimacies that refuse and resignify normative practices of care and categories of personal relationships, the normativity, violence, and exploitation organizing acceptable kinship forms can be challenged.

What are Queer Relationships?

Liberating sex from necessarily taking place within the normative, future oriented, monogamous relationship is fundamental to queering relationship forms. In his analysis of the workings of intimacy, Anthony Giddens’ discussion of kinship and sexuality is critical of prior eras in which sexuality was seen as fundamentally tied to the normative, romantic, monogamous relationship. Sex was privatized, as I argued in the last chapter, in the sense that it was not only supposed to take place in secrecy behind closed doors, but also in the sense that it belonged in the realm of the private relationship, sequestered off from any other form of social interaction and prohibited from taking place in any other relationship form (Giddens 1992: 177). While “love used to be tied to sexuality, for most of the sexually ‘normal’ population, through

marriage,” sexuality is “now a means of forging connections with others on the basis of intimacy, no longer grounded in an immutable kinship order sustained across the generations” or oriented around the normative marital relationship (Giddens 1992: 58, 175). Such a transformation in the forms of relationships that can be made sexual, according to Giddens, is the result of sexual liberation.

Thus, Giddens sees a sexually liberated society as a healthy one, and he understands sexual liberation to exist in the processes whereby sexuality is freed from existing necessarily in the domain of the private romantic relationship. I agree with Giddens that sexual liberation, in this sense, is necessary for the development of social relations that do not police the forms of relationships made to be sexual. But I want to take his logic a step further and argue that there is a fundamental liberation of intimacy that needs to take place in order to further queer relationality and processes of subjectification. That is, “liberated from ‘sex,’ Eros has culture-building capacities well beyond those available in present-day society” (Giddens 1992: 167).

Relationship and kinship normativity privatizes both sex and intimacy such that each is dependent upon the other: the normative relationship is privileged as the only pure site of sexuality and sexuality privileged as the only pure site of intimacy. However, “the democratization of personal life,” in which subjects are free to engage in various forms of interpersonal and intimate relations, sexual or not, that do not assume the normative narrative of relationships, is a liberation of both sex and intimacy (Giddens 1992: 182). A queer project of kinship and relationality cultivates a plurality of intimacies and inter-subjective connections not held to normative standards of relationship forms. Interpersonal intimacies not defined in hierarchical relation to the

privileged sexual relationship are sites of subjective reproduction that challenge heteronormative dictates of how people relate to one another for the social and material reproduction of life.

Queer relationships are those that, in liberating intimacy as well as sex from the normative relationship form, materialize through and exist in ways that complicate and blur the boundaries between categories of friend, lover, and kin. As discussed in chapter two, relationship categories police and produce normative relationship forms. However, what is disavowed by strict relationship categorical coherence is “a set of identificatory and practical crossings between these categories that renders the discreteness of each equally suspect” (Butler 1991: 17). Relationships that do not cohere within normative categories of signification effectively call into question the logic of such rigid categories. Thus, queer relationships are ones that, through blurring boundaries, trouble and rework the category and classification system of heteronormative relationships.

Because queer relationships have no pre-existing, culturally prescribed script to adhere to, the involved subjects must engage in a radical process of constitutive negotiation and self-identification to determine how and in what ways a relationship will proceed. The cultivation of queer relations that defy normative relationship identity categories “involves a constant interaction between interpretive and behavioral practices to maintain a mutual definition of the relationship” (Nardi 1999: 143). While it is not possible to completely abandon normative relationship scripts, for subjects whose modes of relating fall outside a distinct and coherent relationship

category or cannot be reduced to a friend/lover binary, such negotiated identification is a necessary—and libratory—project.

The rigid categories and models of relationships available for describing subjective experiences of intimacies and interpersonal connections are cultural ideals which cannot, in reality, give any true or whole articulation to interpersonal subjective experience. Thus, relationship self-identification is a critical aspect of queer relationships because it creates room for relationships that trouble and transcend normative categories of signification. As Jennifer Bauman,¹ a lesbian in Kath Weston's ethnography of queer kinship practices, explained, "the potential for innovation in relationships without clearly demarcated boundaries" or models to follow means that, through self-identifying one's relationships, a plurality of creative forms of doing intimacy become possible (1991: 152). Similarly, for people who refuse the heteronormative mandate of monogamy, "having an explicit agreement about non-exclusivity opens up the possibility to realize the full potential of different relationships" (Klesse 2007: 104). Mutual self-identification in relationships allows for an appropriate, context contingent, embodied materialization of the specific form of intimacy felt by the subjects to be taking place and it allows for a recognition of relationships as fluid processes rather than static, stable entities.

Any given relation—dyadic or not—is a co-constituted and interactive embodiment of subjectivity. Thus, in resisting compulsive models of normative relationships and in recognizing that interpersonal relations of care and intimacy can exist in a plurality of formations, subjects engage in a "cooperative determination of

¹ When citing ethnographers' informants, I use the name given by the ethnographer and provide any relevant biographical information they provide.

the conditions of the relationship” (Giddens 1992: 190). In cultivating intimacies that are not restricted to the confines of a specific prescribed category, but are instead based on each subject’s vested interest in connecting to and caring for an other, the socially sanctioned modes of relatedness thought possible are transcended, their logic questioned and limitations revealed.

In his ethnographic work on non-monogamies, Christian Klesse reported his informants as engaged in such processes of inter-subjective self-identification. For example, Marianne, a bisexual polyamorous woman, argues for “taking each relationship on its own merits and doing with each person what feels right” (2007: 77). Marianne’s approach transcends and challenges normative categories that produce and police relationships. Through such negotiated self-identification, the content and meaning of any given relationship can be decided by the participating parties, according to the context and the subjective needs and desires at hand, rather than attempting to mold and squeeze the relationship into a limiting identity category.

The self-identificatory approach described by Marianne is also a useful approach for queering kinship networks. In her work, Kath Weston described subjects using similar practices of self-identification to foster networks of kin relations not tied to biology or a single household site.² For example, one of Weston’s informants and hosts, Toni Williams, explains that her family consists of the people around her whom she can call on for help with day-to-day tasks (Weston 1991: 109). Weston writes, “what Toni portrayed was an ego-centered calculus of relations that pictured family members as a cluster surrounding a single individual, rather than taking

² For both Weston and myself, kinship consists of those social relations through which the emotional and material processes necessary for the reproduction of life are attained.

couples or groups as units of affiliation” (1991: 109). Toni conducts her kin connections similar to the ways in which Marianne conducts her interpersonal intimacies, thus blurring the friend/kin binary and queering kinship.

For some people, relationship self-identification and articulating each relation on its own terms allows for a queering of intimacy in the form of eroticized friendships. Ed, one of Peter Nardi’s gay male informants in his ethnography on gay men’s friendships, explains, “I don’t view sex as taboo, but instead see it as an expression of friendship on a physical level” (1999: 93). While normative meanings of sex and physical touch do not allow much room for a physical or sexual manifestation of friendship, for Ed, sexual activity is the best way to materialize certain friendships. Because Ed refuses the normative assumption that friendship is necessarily asexual, he can recognize his subjective desires for and experiences of intimacy that transcend the friend/lover binary. In this way, he is able to consciously construct his relations, to self-identify and enact his friendships on his own, mutually negotiated and subjective terms. Thus, approaching, determining, and enacting “each relationship on its own merits,” is a queer form of relating because it creates room for a recognition and cultivation of various intimacies that do not or cannot materialize through violent relationship normativities such as the friend/lover or friend/family binaries.

These queer relational practices resist a dichotomous distinction between kinship relations and interpersonal intimacies. Social relations that help organize the reproduction of a subject’s life, even those devoid of physical intimacy or strong emotional closeness, are still intimate relations because they exist in the personal

sphere and entail at least a small degree of trust, commitment, and care.

Understanding interpersonal relations this way is important for de-privatizing intimacy and commitment as well as for working against the privileging of the normative romantic sexual relationship over all other relations in a subject's sphere of connections. It allows for an understanding of the performative productions of non-heteronormative modes of relating affect, intimacy, and care.

In arguing for a performative understanding of relationships, I am not suggesting that through self-identification, subjects can simply create from the ground up their intimacies and interpersonal relations. Relationships are not simply made to be through individual agency, but are the products of complex social processes and contexts.³ To say that relations are performative is not to say that they are created through performance, but rather, that they are constituted in content and form through processes of signification (Butler 1988: 626). Like gender and subjectivity, "people enact their relationships on a day to day basis" and various processes of "communication work reflexively to create and recreate various types of relationships" (Ringer 2001: 140, 142). Thus, both subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are performative because they are constituted through reflexive and relational processes of signification.

In the model of social organization set forth by both Marianne and Toni, inter-subjective social relations were conceptualized as "ties that radiated outward from individuals like spokes on a wheel" (Weston 1991: 109). In order to cultivate a

³ I am of course referring here to the common misunderstanding of Butler's theory of performativity; that because gender is socially constructed and performative, subjects may simply choose and create their own genders.

plurality of relations with varying degrees of intimacy, commitment, and mutual care, an individual must understand their own autonomy in reflexive relation to others.⁴ Because “the autonomous individual is able to treat others as such and to recognize that the development of their separate potentialities is not a threat” to their selves or to their relations, it is through a radical notion of the reflexive autonomous self that networks of self-identified relations revolving around mutual care and intimacy can proliferate like spokes on a wheel for the queered reproduction of life and subjectivity (Giddens 1992: 189). In this way, autonomous reflexive self-realization, understood as a recognition of one’s own forms of relatedness as constitutive of oneself, is necessary for queered relationships. Thus, the autonomous individual is accountable to himself through a self-conscious *proliferation of intimacies* aimed at multiplying care and inter-subjective connections. These queer relations liberate sex from the normative relationship and intimacy from sex such that a variety of sexual or intimate relations of care may proliferate on their own merit. In working towards a queered relationality, relationship self-identification and reflexive self-autonomy combine to open up a plurality of relationships. As such, queer relations of varying content and degrees of commitment can develop in relation to each other without one intimacy necessitating violence towards or priority over another.

⁴ I am extending a relational and reflexive understanding of selves to relationships: just as the self is fundamentally a reflexive project because, rather than existing prior to meaning making processes, it is made to be through its own processes of signification, relationships are reflexively produced as well—“reflexive in the sense that terms introduced to describe social life routinely enter and transform it” (Giddens 1992: 29). An understanding of relationality—that any subject only exists through and in opposition to other subjects—does not preclude a certain understanding of the autonomous self, as embedded in relations of subjective constitution. That is, because subjectivity is necessarily materialized through interpersonal relations, “in the arena of personal life, autonomy means the successful realization of the reflexive project of self—the conditions of relating to others in an egalitarian way” (Giddens 1992: 189).

These forms of queered relationships are not, it should be clear, limited to gay and lesbian relationships. Heterosexual relationships can be queer just as gay and lesbian relationships can be heteronormative. The power and hegemony of The Family can be seen in recent campaigns for the legalization of same-sex marriage. While marriage has historically been a patriarchal institution of heterosexual privilege, the current mainstream gay rights movement—very much a neoliberal project—is seeking “equality” through inclusion in marriage and assimilation to the heteronormative nuclear family form and domestic relationship model. As Lisa Duggan argues, such a politics can be understood as homonormative because it “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002: 179). A politics that strives for same-sex marriage is a politics that legitimates and reproduces the normativity and hegemony of The Family. It is also a reproduction of the normative, monogamous, long-term relationship model, enforcing its regulatory constructions of commitment and intimacy as privileged and natural.

Furthermore, such political work means that family forms that do not revolve around marriage or the normative relationship will be stigmatized as well as blamed for their own desubjugation for “choosing” not to marry. As Michael Warner argues, “marriage, in short, would make for good gays—the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt their sexuality, and who would not insist on living differently from ordinary folk,” but rather, conform to the normative nuclear family form through domestic monogamy, private property,

appropriate consumption, and proper articulations of intimacy (1999: 131). Marriage as an institution is the central point around which the ideology of The Family revolves and is reproduced. Same-sex marriage, like all marriage, is also the consolidation of heteronormative organizations of privatized intimacy, commitment, and affect. In working towards inclusion in such an institution, gays and lesbians are not seeking to transform it, but rather, are making an appeal to normativity—are working to be considered proper consumer citizen subjects. In this way, the normativity of The Family—the construction of long-term monogamy, home ownership, and consumerism as the only acceptable or possible life—is reinforced through the main stream gay and lesbian fight for marriage equality.

In opposition to these homonormative relationships, queer relationships are those that defy mandates of privatized intimacy and categorical coherence, those that blur normative relationship identity binaries of friend/lover or friendship/kinship. In this chapter, I develop a queer reading of counterprivates—spaces of non-normative sexual and affective intimacies. As Michael Warner writes, counterpublics are discursive and material spaces defined in opposition and through their resistance to those of dominant society. They resist the dominant order of a heteronormative society in which public space and relations are invisibly naturalized and privileged as heterosexual and heterogendered, instead calling attention to the hierarchies and exploitation that dominant society relies on for its sustained power (Warner 2002: 86). Queer *counterprivates*, then, are spaces that have the power to resist the hegemonic organization of intimate processes so as to queer social relations as well as the wider reality constituted through them. As counterprivates, queer intimacies exist

in defiant deviance to the normative organization of privatized relationships and intimacies, which simultaneously code the public as heterosexual and normative sex as private (Berlant and Warner 1998: 555). Thus, cultivating queer counterprivates that subversively rework the norms of intimacies and personal relationships might serve as a lived political resistance to the hegemonic organization of both the heteronormative public and private.

Queer “Friendship as a Way of Life”⁵

As Michel Foucault advocates, I will explore a queered concept of friendship as a means of articulating and enacting various forms of intimacy (1989: 310).

Cultural conceptions of friendship entail an understanding of friend relations as voluntary, un-coerced, and not bound by strict rules and regulations of intimacy. Any individual can have a variety of friendships, developed on their own accord and not in any inherent conflict with any other friendship. For this reason, friendship represents an ideal site for understanding how queer kinship relations and intimacies can be developed according to a friendship ethic.

The notion of the reflexive autonomous self as embedded in relational networks of care, kinship, and intimacy is conducive to conceptualizing relations as queered friendships. Re-conceptualizing friendship as encompassing a radical creative potential for forms of intimacy and care that reproduce life outside of normative kinship and relationship forms relies on a notion of the autonomous self: it envisions networks of relatedness bound not by biology or privatized intimacy but, by

⁵ I am borrowing here from Michel Foucault’s interview “Friendship as a Way of Life” (Foucault 1989: 308).

an ethics of personal agency and accountability. As James Carrier argues, “the relationship that is most moral is that which reflects the spontaneous affection that two autonomous unconstrained people feel towards each other” (1999: 25). Queering friendship effectively deconstructs the friendship/kinship binary as well as the friend/lover binary because it allows for the recognition of friendships that involve forms of intimacy and care most commonly restricted to and privatized within normative kinship relations. As such, queer friendships are critical for cultivating counterprivates.

Using the lens of friendship to queer dominant modes of relating is useful for complicating normative constructions of commitment and accountability, as well as for demonstrating the need to self-identify and negotiate the terms and content of one’s relationship. For example, in an essay on friendship kinships, Karen Lindsey describes her close friend Kathy: “we both know that the mechanisms for creating continuity aren’t there for us. We want commitment from each other, and we feel commitment to each other, but neither of us knows the parameters of that commitment beyond the present” (Lindsey 1994: 470). Because commitment and intimacy are privatized within normative romantic relationships and because such commitment is oriented towards a future foreverness, it is difficult for subjects engaged in queer committed friendships to know how to conduct and construct the quality and quantity of commitment. That is, “while there are social formulae for commitments to both family and lovers, there aren’t any for commitments to friends” (Lindsey 1994: 469). With no easy category to conform to or normative relationship narrative to follow, for intimate friendships that are not necessarily privileged over

other relations and that do not involve a full giving of self to other, there are “fewer outside forces to define what we *should* give to each other and want from each other” (Lindsey 1994: 471). For Lindsey and Kathy, their specific form of commitment to one another does not transcend the present. This is in opposition to heteronormative constructions of commitment as future oriented and necessarily forever.

As there is a lack of cultural prescriptions and mandates demarcating the content and parameters of friendships, the fluid category of friendship is a critical site for the proliferation of a queer ethics of relatedness and practice of care. Because the categories of family, lovers, and friends are not distinct entities, but rather, overlap and merge within queer systems of relating, it can become even more complicated to understand how and in what ways to commit or construct relations. As a result, queered friendships can be understood as critical sites of transformation when it comes to constructions of intimacy and commitment. In what follows, I use queer friendship as a model for queering dominant conceptions of relationships and kinships more broadly.

Friendship as Kinship

Queer relationships resist and rework the normative category of friendship through alternative organizations of affect and care. This section explores the way friendships articulated and enacted in terms of a kinship ethic offer further possibilities for queering binaries and categorical coherence constitutive of relationship heteronormativity. While sociohistorical circumstances have constructed the biological nuclear family and its constitutive norms as the only legitimate social

organization of care and kinship, alternative organizations of the affective and material processes necessary for the sustained reproduction of selfhood and life—such as that of queer friendship networks—constitute queered kinships that effectively rework and resist fundamental components of kinship normativity.

Fred, a retired educator from the East Coast and an informant of Nardi's, feels that "it sometimes seems that the deeper and richer the friendship, the more mundane the things we can find pleasure in doing together" (1999: 147). While on the surface, Fred is describing his close friendships, he is also articulating the way that queer kinship is produced. It is the mundane, day-to-day life processes, often associated with the private or domestic realm, that characterize "alone" time (see also Roseneil 2005: 244). While such tasks are not particularly eventful, they are necessary for a sustained reproduction of subjectivity as well as other material and emotional aspects of life. Similarly, of her chosen kinship friendships, Weston explains, "a low-key atmosphere framed our interactions during supper as everyday experience rather than a guest-host relationship" and "conversation, while often lively, seldom felt obligatory" (1991: 104). For both Weston and Fred, the most intimate relations are those characterized by a certain casual comfort. In sharing mundane activities and the everyday processes that reproduce life, queer friendships acquire the intimate comfort of kinship. Thus, in "grounding their emotional security and daily lives in their friendship groups," queer kinship is enacted through casual and often mundane activity (Roseneil 2005: 244).

If love relationships and intimacies are articulated as friendships—exploiting and expanding the normative understanding of what friendship means—such

relationships have the power to transform and queer normative narratives used to understand categories of relatedness. For example, the “Care, Friendship, and Non-Conventional Partnership Project” was a research project carried out to assess “people who do not live with a partner—construct their networks of intimacy, friendship, care, and support” (Roseneil 2004: 412). The report concluded that “there was a high degree of reliance on friends, as opposed to biological kin and sexual partners, particularly for the provision of care and support in every day life.” Further, they were not leading lonely lives of social isolation: people not embedded in heteronormative kinship models were, rather, “enmeshed in complex networks of intimacy and care, and had strong commitments and connections to others” (Roseneil 2004: 413). Through the “prioritizing of friendship,” the “decentering of sexual/love relationships,” and “experimenting beyond heteronormative conjugality,” these people received “care and support in every day life,” through friendships transformed into kinship (Roseneil 2005: 249). Thus, people whose day-to-day lives and social processes of care are carried out through friendships are in queer kinship organizations both because they defy the kinship/friendship binary and because they resist privileging of the couple relationship as the necessary and privatized site of intimacy, affect, and care.

Kinships materialized and articulated through friendships effectively resist and rework fundamental aspects of relationship and kinship normativity. For example, many subjects engaged in queer relationships and kinship choose not to cohabit with those with whom they are most intimate, but rather maintain their own autonomy in terms of living space. In queer relationality, and contrary to normative

constructions of domesticity, “living alone is not about cutting others off but creating a base from which equal intimate relationships with others can be sustained” (Wasoff, Jamieson, and Smith 2005: 208). Claudia Card explains that, “my partner of the past decade is not a domestic partner. She and I form some kind of fairly common social unit which, so far as I know, remains nameless.” (Card 1996: 7). Card and her partner do not cohabit or share an economic unit but they still share a committed, intimate kinship that revolves around emotional closeness and being bound up in each other’s lives. This is a queer counterprivate partnership because, while they are highly involved in each others lives, they do not self-identify as a domestic unit and they resist the heteronormative imperative to organize such a relationship along lines of private property, a shared home, and pooled economic resources.

On the other hand, a near inverse of Card’s form of intimacy, Emily and Bill have never been lovers but have lived together for three years. They self-identify as a “home base, a family” and understand their relationship to be “far deeper than a conventional roommate arrangement” (Lindsey 1994: 468). However, as Emily explains, “what others could not understand was that this attachment did not preclude our having lovers.” They eventually had to live apart because “Emily decided she couldn’t have ‘an all-encompassing love relationship’ and still live with Bill” in their self-identified kinship friendship (Lindsey 1994: 468). Thus, while Card and her partner queered their relationship by refusing both a pre-existing label and the cultural mandate that one’s most intimate relationship consists of a shared home and finances, Emily and Bill had a queered relationship in that they cultivated an intimate kinship friendship through a shared home, but their intimacy was one of affect rather than

sex. In different ways, both dyads queer the cultural mandate that romance, sex, affect, a home, and an economic unit must all line up into a coherent picture of The Family and its relational norms (Sedgwick 1993: 6). Although it is difficult and, for Emily and Bill ultimately impossible, both social units defy normative relationship categories and societal mandates that an adult eventually enter into an “all-encompassing love relationship” privileged above, and to the exclusion of, other life-sustaining intimacies.

As performative social constructs, normative narratives and categories of kinship and relationship structures produce that which they claim to describe. People strive to fill normative categories of relatedness (i.e. “together,” “just friends,” “in love” as well as kinship categories such as “mother” or “brother”) because those are the available terms and signifiers for making sense of what happens between people. For heteronormative society to reproduce itself, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” so that strict categories of meaning are used to produce and police normative relationship forms and kinship structures (Butler 1991: 13). However, because relationships are reflexively constructed, normative identity categories can be refused and reworked. This is not to say that a given relationship can be simply chosen and willed, that in calling someone my sister they become so. Rather, relationship performativity means that any relationship is constituted through its repeated enactment of social interaction; this repetition produces the content of the relationship. A person becomes my sister not simply because I call her so, but because, through the content of our repeated interactions, our relationship is

constituted as such: it exists as it is expressed. With this, it is possible to rework dominant relationship categories to resignify norms and create queer counterprivates.

For example, some queer organizations of kinship play off of and rework dominant kinship labels most often associated with biology. While, according to heteronormative constructions of kinship, labels of “mother,” “cousin,” “husband,” “sister,” “aunt,” etc denote a prescribed biological relation—or at least one by marriage or adoption—queer kinship organizations often re-signify these normative categories of meaning. For example, one of Weston’s informants, Ray Glaser, donated sperm for a lesbian couple. He did not want a parental role, but did want to know the child and play a more uncle or god-parent-like role (1991: 170). In Norway, a quadruple parenting situation was formed by a lesbian couple who each gave birth to one of their kids. The biological fathers are partners and the two couples share custody (Folgero 2008: 132). A friend of mine raised by lesbian parents has grown up referring to close family friends as aunts and uncles, to their children as cousins, and to the other children who have spent significant time living in or around her house as siblings. It is impossible to tell the difference between biologically and socially related kin in how E talks about her family members. The important point in this is that it *doesn’t matter*. Rather than relying on entrenched normative categories of kinship to denote social relations, E and her family self-identify their relations and refuse the boundaries of essentialist kinship categories. A classified ad in the *Gay Community News* read “Have love will travel—Does your baby need a grandma?”

Middle-aged lesbian couple need grandchild to dote on” (Weston 1991: 191).⁶

Finally, as the film *Paris is Burning* (1991) demonstrates, drag houses and drag ball culture are important sites of queer kinship for urban queers of color who build queer families by reworking the elementary categories of kinship.

All of these examples show the diverse ways that, through expanding normative kinship categories of signification, family forms that do not cohere according to the norms governing the heteronormative family model can create their own patterns and structures of kinship. Contrary to normative organizations of kinship that seek to reproduce biological essentialism and categorical coherence, the organizations depicted above cultivate a lived queer resistance by “disidentifying,” in Jose Muñoz’s terms, with normative categories of signification. These queer kinships harness and exploit normative identity categories, articulating a queer form of lived resistance because they “scramble and reconstruct the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Munoz 1999: 31). Queer kinship organizations that recycle, rethink, and reconstruct the encoded meanings of normative kinship identity categories offer a critical perspective on and resistance to the violent limitations of heteronormative kinship ideology.

To Treat Friends More Like Lovers and Lovers More Like Friends

⁶ I am refraining from a nuanced discussion of queer child rearing because it could be the topic for a whole other thesis. Queer child rearing practices are important sites of reproducing queerness and queering reproduction, as well as for alternative kinship organizations and subverting notions of gender and who is allowed to procreate.

Just as queer friendships offer opportunities to queer kinship, so too do sexual relationships articulated in terms of a friendship ethic. One such relation is that of the eroticized friendship. Because eroticized friendships can take any number of forms, my point here is not to detail and account for every such form, but rather, to explore the ways in which friendships that are made erotic and/or sexual can and do challenge heteronormativities governing acceptable relationship forms. In his ethnography on gay men's friendships, eroticized friendship was one common theme explored by Peter Nardi. According to Nardi, while 80% of his informants have been or are sexually attracted to their best gay male friends and 78% express affection through touch, most close friendships do not develop into sustained sexual ones (1999: 83). However, about a third of his informants reported having sexualized friendships (1999: 93). As Nardi demonstrates, because there are no normative scripts to adhere to, it is not uncommon for gays and lesbians to engage in self-identified friendships that, through their erotic content or sexual potential, push and blur the boundaries delineating what counts as friendship in normative contexts.

Eroticized friendships are queer relationships on multiple levels. To start with, because relationship normativity dictates a strict friend/lover as well as a together/not together binary, friendships that are not strictly platonic challenge such binaries. George explains that "I do not actually see any bright line dividing the 'friend' category from the 'lover' category, and it makes perfect sense to me to have sex with a friend as a recreational activity and as an expression of strong feelings for each other" (Nardi 1999: 79). Thus, for George, the categories of "friend" and "lover," contrary to relationship normativity, are not mutually exclusive opposites but rather,

categories that overlap and merge with one another. A queered conceptualization of relationships “pictures friends and lovers as two ends of a single continuum rather than as oppositional categories” so that, in a context of queered relationality, it is not antithetical for a friendship to be sexual or for a relationship to occupy an ambiguous space between “together” and “not together” (Weston 1991: 120). These eroticized friendships challenge the heteronormative mandate of relationship categorical coherence that constructs friendship as necessarily asexual. Contrary to heteronormative understandings of friendships and relationships, “sexual passion may be one of the driving forces behind the formation of close friendships for many gay men, even if it is not constitutive of the friendship itself” (Nardi 1999: 84). While a friendship between gay men may or may not involve sex, Nardi’s informants demonstrate that eroticism and sexual passion characterize many such friendships.

In challenging the friend/lover binary, sexualized friendships also constitute queer counterprivates that rework and resist the privatization of intimacy because they produce intimacies and sex in a plurality of forms not limited to the romantic, long-term, monogamous relationship. Eroticized friendships demonstrate that, contrary to heteronormative constructions, commitment does not necessarily entail dedicating one’s whole social and sexual self to a single other. Rather, it is possible for a subject to commit himself—in various modes and measures—to multiple people at once. Such an enactment of commitment also challenges heteronormative notions of reproductive futurity because, rather than orienting a given relationship towards an idealized and static future foreverness, inter-subjective commitments are realized in

the present and oriented towards whatever understanding of the future is appropriate for the specific subjects and life paths involved.

While people who have eroticized friendships may or may not identify as polyamorous, they engage in multiple intimacies rather than privileging a single monogamous relationship. Queer relationality recognizes that “people vary dramatically in the extent to which and the means by which they seek to expand or contract the degree of intimacy prevailing in relations” (Zelizer 2005: 34). While relationship normativity would not recognize the wide variety of these relations as intimate, the subjects discussed here *are* engaged in intimacies and they *are* committed—in varying levels—to multiple people. Furthermore, recognizing the diverse and proliferating forms intimacy may take is a feminist and queer approach because it allows for a radical practice of emotional and physical consent.

Eroticized and sexualized friendships, beyond challenging the friend/lover binary, also call into question an erotic/non-erotic binary. That is, in relationships existing on a friend to lover spectrum, or that complicate a linear understanding of a relationship progressing from friend to lover, it is not always clear what counts as sexual or what meanings are implicated in being sexual. Louis, a fifty-nine year old from the West Coast, explains, “all my best friends titillate me. There is an attraction, a passion, even without sex” (Nardi 1999: 83). If Louis experiences a sexual passion within his friendships and his best friends “titillate” him, are such friendships—even if there is no “sex”—sexual? For relationships that blur the friend/lover distinction, “erotic attachments [are] not always consummated nor do they necessarily fit the categories of sexual and social relationships that have been established in modern

times to describe such relationships” (Nardi 1999: 27). Just as kin-friendships queer identity categories, so too do friend-lovers queer categorical coherence with regards to sexual activity. Erotic attachments and enactments do not necessarily fit the available categories for signifying, discussing, and understanding the sexual.

By normative standards, people “are defined as a couple if they are having sex” (Rothblum 2002: 79). However, as Nardi notes, many eroticized friendships do not necessarily culminate in sex and people who have sex with each other are not necessarily a couple. Relationships that call into question what counts as a couple may also call into question what counts as sexual. Like Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, it is not always clear whether subjects are engaged in “sex” and a relationship that does not culminate in sex can still be a sexual relationship. For example, “ex-lovers often remain friends and the passion of the friendship may have the eroticism of the prior genital sexual relationship” (Rothblum 2002: 81). Such a relationship, while not materialized through the act of sex, is still a sexualized one and, as such, calls into question the legitimacy of understanding relationships as either sexual or not.

What is conveyed between people through sexual or physical intimacy has no easy correspondence to the strict categories of meaning that organize normative relationships. For a heteronormative “together” relationship, “sex” is privileged as the sacred physical manifestation of the couple’s bond. With pre-marital sex becoming more and more acceptable in heteronormative society, the degree of sexual activity between a couple often corresponds to their level of seriousness: sex is understood as expressing the content of a relationship. However, in relationships that are not easily

understood as “together” or “not together” and where physical activity is not definitively sexual, the relationship of the subjects’ physical activity to their emotional intimacy or interpersonal connection is not easily discernible. At what point does physical intimacy become sexual? Why are constructions of what counts as sexual considered so important in understanding and experiencing relationships? A romantic friendship of mine for over a year was decidedly “not sexual,” although it was based on and constituted through physical intimacy and touch. Because we decided that having sex was not how we should materialize our friendship, my relationship with O was categorized as not sexual. However, because we were (consensually) choosing to materialize our emotional intimacy through physical touch, cuddling, and sleeping together, our modes of relatedness were not so easily understood as either sexual or not.

In any given interpersonal relationship, it may or may not be important to have a clear understanding of what the relationship is, of what material or physical enactments ought to take place for expressing it. It may or may not be possible. The corporeal experience of physical intimacy and touch is not reducible to an erotic/non erotic binary. What’s more, the compulsory need to organize relations of intimacy in line with such a binary is a prime example of the violence relationship normativity does through circumscribing and delimiting the forms intimacy may take.

Because what counts as sex—or even sexual—is context dependent, whether a given relationship is sexual must be determined by the subjects at hand. For relationships that complicate an erotic/non-erotic binary or “when couples are not genitally sexual, they may need to find new language for sexual activity” (Rothblum

2002: 82). For example, rather than defining their erotic activity as sex, “Ruth and Iris call what they do together in bed ‘bliss’” (Rothblum 2002: 82). My relationship with O, while not materialized through genital sex, was an eroticized and romantic friendship. What counts as sexual cannot be articulated through normative binary categories of meaning but rather is a more complicated phenomenological experience that cannot, in any true sense, be definitively explained. Queer relationships that cannot be easily defined as “erotic” or “not erotic” and subjects that are not obviously engaged in having “sex” or not, reveal such distinctions to be problematic—as well as unhelpful—for understanding the sorts of physical intimacies that take place between people. Relationships that bring attention to the trouble of such binaries are also important sites for challenging relationship normativity because they exploit and rework the significance of touch in normative relations of intimacy. In “experiencing love as contingent and confluent and seeking to live their sexual relationships in terms of a friendship ethic,” subjects engaged in sexualized friendships effectively queer the heteronormative organization of intimacy, commitment, and eroticism that privileges the future-oriented, monogamous domestic couple as the only appropriate site for all three (Roseneil 2005: 248).

Queering Reproduction

Throughout this chapter, I have pointed to the ways queer relationship and kinship formations, through their alternative organizations of commitment and intimacy, constitute counterprivates that challenge the reproductive futurity and “life course mindset” integral to heteronormative relationships (Roseneil 2004: 411). As

normative relationships' enactment of commitment and intimacy are oriented towards permanence and reproductive futurity, the normative family unit and domestic home are the central sites of both social and biological reproduction. They are thus imbued with the responsibility of reproducing (hetero)normativity, acceptable relationship forms, and hegemonic ways of living. In this section, I explore the potential power of queer kinship forms to queer social reproduction and, in doing so, to reproduce queerness.

The reproduction of heteronormativity is dependent on an unquestioned investment in the reproduction of the future. In contrast, queer projects often revolve around reproducing non-normative acts, identities, and cultures. Given this friction, queer critique has engendered a dialogue that interrogates the reproduction of the future. Most notably, Lee Edelman argues that queerness demands total "epistemological self-destruction" because "the fantasy of a viable 'alternative' to normativity's domination" does not escape normativity but, rather, commits us to a reproductive futurism in which we are continuously defined and redefined through our relation to normativity (Edelman 2007: 195). Thus, according to Edelman, positively inhabiting an "otherness" that is demonized through normativity is not a queer project because it reaffirms and reproduces normativity and its power to define reality and subjective existence.

Understood this way, there is no escape in queerness: the only queer project is to not exist. In a refusal to reproduce normativity, Edelman advocates a refusal of all social reproduction (2004: 6). Because valuing and striving towards a future through participating in social reproduction necessarily entails reproducing signifiers of

normativity, “resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life,” through ultimately *renouncing* all life and social existence is the only true queer project (Edelman 2004: 30). Such a stance, while perhaps theoretically radical, takes as its presupposition a subject privileged enough to renounce all social existence and relations (Munoz 2009: 94). It assumes a queer subject who is always already surviving and it erases the role that community and social relations have played in protecting people from material violence as well as from alienation and stigma. Because subjects are relationally produced, Edelman is right to point out that any social reproduction, even in the name of resisting normativity, is still an enactment and a reproduction of violent systems of significations. He is wrong, however, to argue that such a reproduction should be wholly abandoned and that it cannot still contain within it a queer libratory politics.

In his book on barebacking,⁷ Tim Dean demonstrates how the concept of reproduction can be both queered and harnessed for survival tactics of pleasure and intimacy. Barebacking and bug-chasing⁸ queers normative biological and social reproduction in several ways. In orienting their sexual and social lives around and towards a culture of pleasure and intimacy, barebackers challenge heteronormative values that privilege reproduction of the future. They also question standards of health oriented towards such reproduction. By participating in an activity that heteronormative culture would name as engendering death, barebackers reproduce

⁷ Barebacking signifies an identity and community of self-identified gay men who engage in unprotected anal sex.

⁸ Bug-chasers are barebackers who “have made [HIV] central to their erotic lives” and who either deliberately seek to contract HIV or who are indifferent to whether or not they contract it (Dean 16). Not all barebackers are bug chasers. Some only have bareback sex with individuals of the same HIV status as themselves, while others do not want to know the status of themselves or their partners.

their own queer lifestyles and, as such, are challenging normative notions of what it means to reproduce life (Dean 2009: 6). That is, rather than prioritizing the reproduction of the future, barebackers prioritize the reproduction of their sexual culture, their kinship, and their intimacies.

In opposition to the heteronormative future reproduced through couples' commitment to life-long monogamy, bareback sex produces both community and interpersonal relations through a commitment to the values of pleasure, intimacy, and promiscuity. Dean explains, "fidelity to the subcultural ideal of erotic pleasure necessitates betrayal of the mainstream cultural ideal of health—or, more precisely, betrayal of a distinctly medicalized understanding of what counts as healthy" (2009: 60). As I discussed in chapter one, modern biopolitics defines "health" as the reproduction of life and the future; as such, it produces a narrowly heteronormative conception of what kind of life is worth reproducing (see Foucault, Lemke). Barebackers' refuse these normative notions of health through their reproduction of a subculture whose health relies not on living in the future, but rather on experiencing erotic pleasure in the present. In this way, barebacking is a queer challenge to normative ideals of health and reproduction. Further, in refusing the cultural stigma assigned to promiscuous, casual, and unprotected sex, bareback culture invokes a queered version of generational futurity and lineage through its commitment to reproducing inherited traditions of gay male sexual activity. As Dean argues, for barebackers, "the casual sexual encounter provides an opportunity for connecting with a mostly invisible erotic tradition peopled by generations of what might be thought of as tribal ancestors" (2009: 174). Thus, barebackers' social reproduction of

a queer lifestyle centered around sex and intimacy rather than oriented towards a future reproduction of normative life is an example of queer social reproduction. Contra Edelman, in reproducing queerness, bareback communities effectively queer reproduction.

Bug chasers further queer notions of heteronormative biological reproduction through their eroticization of the “bug” and their practice of viral transmission. They redeploy a rhetoric of substance, insemination, and procreation to describe “breeding” HIV, enacting a “fantasy of the rectum as not a grave⁹ but a womb” where one who possesses the virus inseminates one who does not (Dean 2009: 171). In breeding and reproducing the virus, rather than babies, procreation is queered in a very literal way. “By basing kinship on viral transmission,” Dean suggests that bug-chasers and barebackers “have reasserted what might be considered a retrograde emphasis on blood or ‘substance’” (2009: 90). While heteronormative kinship and reproduction rests on a logic of biological essentialism that constructs and cherishes blood and bodily substance as the true markers of kinship, I understand bug-chasers’ emphasis on making kinship through the sharing of HIV positive sperm as a queer and subversive reworking of and resistance to heteronormative notions of relatedness. For example, bug chasers conceive of each other as co-parents to the bug and as “bug brothers” because, “a shared bodily substance—whether conceived in terms of blood, DNA, or HIV—represents the basis for not only community but also, more profoundly, kinship” (Dean 2009: 84). Furthermore, the permanence of HIV and the commitment entailed in deciding to contract it makes the exchange of the virus a

⁹ Dean is referencing Leo Bersani’s (2010) “Is the Rectum a Grave?”

queered version of the exchange of wedding rings (Dean 2009: 85). These queer practices, in other words, redeploy normative understandings of blood, substance, and relatedness. Thus, they do not exist outside of, but rather rework and exploit, normative constructions of relationality.

Bug chasers and barebackers produce queer kinship oriented around a queer lifestyle that values intimacy and sex at the expense of reproducing a normative future. Intentionally transmitting HIV or swapping sperm “facilitates the fantasy of achieving permanent connection through transient encounters” (Dean 2009: 174). This “permanent connection” shows us that barebackers are not oriented towards reproducing the future but, rather, around reproducing the present (or a collapsed generationality that exists in the lateral present). By resignifying such rhetoric and meanings, by reproducing a social existence not oriented towards the future but rather around pleasure and intimacy, and by challenging the heteronormative cultural values of kinship and reproduction, barebackers and bug chasers enact a kinship that reproduces queerness and queers what it means to reproduce.¹⁰ As such, they open up a space for reconceptualizing a range of queer sexual and intimate practices as possible sites of non-normative reproduction.

Promiscuous Intimacies: A Queer Ethics of Care and Pleasure

¹⁰ While it is beyond the scope of my analysis here, as a violent and politicized epidemic that has stigmatized gay men and queer sex as deviant and perverted, HIV and AIDS has proven an important and historical site of queer community, kinship, and activism in which friends, lovers, and acquaintances have shared the burden of caring for one another and sharing both emotional and material resources (Crimp 1987, Preston and Lowenthal 1995: 7).

Relations of sexual promiscuity¹¹ that privilege sex and physical intimacy resist normative discourses of acceptable sex. The heteronormative privatization of intimacy constructs promiscuous sexual relations, anonymous or not, as necessarily devoid of depth and intimacy. Societal notions of purity demonize sex for the sake of sex as well as any sexual activity not based on an emotional bond. However, as is the case for bug chasers and barebackers, “rather than being understood as self-destructive behavior, promiscuity could be redescribed as promoting reciprocal care and self-protection,” as well as community, intimacy, and kinship (Dean 2009: 5). People and communities who “portray their interests in sexuality in terms of arousal and pleasure,” rather than in terms of private intimacy and commitment, resist the heteronormative organizations of sexual and intimate relations (Rudy 1999: 136). Here, I explore the ways counterprivates premised on promiscuous sexual pleasure refuse the normative arrangement and coherence of intimacy and sex, opening up a queer ethics of community and care.

Sexual intimacy for the sake of pleasure counters the privileged position of sex as necessarily demarcating emotional and mental closeness in normative relationships and points to the potential of sex as an intimate bond not premised on how well the subjects know one another. For some, the physical pleasure of a sexual encounter may have nothing to do with forging a close connection. Yet, for others, sex creates intimacy through embodied physical, rather than verbal, communication, through exchanges of sexual pleasure rather than knowledge and thoughts.

¹¹ Here and throughout, I am using “promiscuity” as a positive reclamation so as to queer some of its more stigmatizing meanings.

At the risk of romanticizing something whose power lies in its refusal of romance, it is the potential of sex to throw into crisis the distinctness of human bodies and selves that opens possibilities for a queer ethics of promiscuous care. For example, Dean argues that, “bareback sex tries to blur the boundaries that separate persons from each other” (2009: 105). It is this blurring that proliferates horizontal interpersonal connections. Whether people know each other well or not, a certain group affinity and ethics of communal care is engendered through what Kathy Rudy terms “sex radical communities” (1999: 133). As she argues, through various acts of sex and physical intimacy, “the boundaries of either individual are blurred—both literally and metaphorically—such that each individual becomes—at least momentarily—a part of something larger than him or herself” (Rudy 1999: 134). Relations formed around or based on sex not only resist normative understandings of acceptable intimacies but, in doing so, complicate what it means for people to connect. They multiply sites of interconnectedness, exposing the relationality of subjective constitution. Thus, in facilitating physical intimacy, sex for the sake of pleasure calls into question the limits of the individual body as self-contained; it illustrates that selves are necessarily constituted in the processes of relating with and connecting to one another. As Dean argues, “sex confuses the separateness and hence distinguishability of bodies, thereby shattering (or threatening to shatter) our sense of corporeal integrity” (Dean 2009: 22). For example, “fisting brings one man so far inside another as to temporarily obliterate the boundaries that conventionally separate persons. By occupying exactly the same physical space simultaneously, men in this fantasy have become in some sense identical, beyond individuation” (Dean 2009: 46).

In transgressing the walls of skin thought to separate selves, physical and sexual encounters of intimacy represent a physical manifestation of the relational and always already connected social experience of selves and bodies. In this way, sex constitutes a physical embodiment of the fundamental relationality of human existence.

Furthermore, promiscuous sex often forges communal ties. Rudy argues that people engaged in promiscuous, public, or anonymous sex, rather than being unable to conform to heteronormative monogamy and constructions of intimacy, “organize their sexual-social lives on a different model, a model that is fundamentally communal” (1999: 136). Thus, contrary to heteronormative depictions of promiscuous sex, which constructs it in negative relation to any sort of emotional, mental, or affective bond, sex radical communities, in creating culture oriented around sex, demonstrate that promiscuous sex relations engender a certain ethics of care and commonality. In Rudy’s account, orientation toward the community (rather than an individualized partner) makes possible a range of queer ethics and practices of care (1999: 137). Similarly, in his auto-ethnographic account of sexual experiences in the porn movie theatres of pre-AIDS epidemic Times Square, Samuel Delany articulates promiscuous sex relations—anonymous and not—as generating various forms of connection and intimacy between people from all walks of life (Delany 1999: 15). He explains that, while many such “encounters were wordless” one might “blossom into a conversation lasting hours, especially with those men less well off” (Delany 1999: 15). Of one such theatre, in which he regularly encountered many of the same people, he writes, “the place seemed almost a kind of family, with a neighborhood feel” (Delany 1999: 20). Through his intimate exchanges of talk,

company, and sex with various people of all different sorts in what can be called a sex radical community, Delany shows us that “anonymous” and “promiscuous” sexual relations hold within them a sort of group affinity and sexual ethics of care. Sex radical communities like this one produce and proliferate communal care relations such as pleasure and interpersonal contact; they prioritize group caretaking, rather than privatized, individualized, or isolated dyadic care.

Bareback subculture and other sex radical communities illustrate the value of promiscuous sex and pleasure for generating community and intimate ties that do not directly correspond to heteronormative organizations of sexual and emotional intimacy. In fostering community through queer sexual or intimate relations, subjects in sex radical communities “will stake out emotional territory inside the lives of others, and feel responsible even for those friends with whom they have not shared sex, for they recognize in this community that each is part of the other” (Rudy 1999: 137). Promiscuous intimacies generate queer resistance to relationship normativity by challenging the normative correspondence of sex with private monogamy and emotional commitment. In valuing and proliferating the diverse ways in which physical bodies interact and subjectivities connect, these queer counterprivates provide a model of a queer ethics of care that moves beyond the confines of monogamous sex/emotional dyads and towards a larger queer community.

Conclusion: Queer Relational Subjectivity

Approaching social relations through a queered model of friendship effectively liberates intimacy from sex and from the normative relationship model. If,

as some argue, “the realm of friendship is becoming more central to notions of self and in the management of everyday life,” friends as kin and friends as lovers represent two dominant ways social relations might be queered today (Allan 2005: 228). Subjects are living and reproducing their lives through queer affective intimacies and kinship formations that expand and rework the concept of friendship. As demonstrated by the social organizations discussed here, “the boundary between ‘familial’ and ‘non-familial’ relationships is increasingly blurred as the constellations that people designate as ‘familial’ become increasingly diverse” (Jamieson 2005: 194). Queer organizations of care resist and rework the organizing principles and identity categories of heteronormative kinship and relationship structures. They are those intimacies not tied to sex, those life partnerships not tied to house, those commitments not tied to future foreverness. While the heteronormative *nuclear* family is used to police the social organization of intimacy and affect, “increasingly, the *unclear* family” invokes possibilities for queering kinship and relationality (Allan 2005: 228).

Queer articulations of intimacy and sex challenge normative organizations of relationship structures and kinship forms as well as point to the fundamental relatedness of personhood and social reality. Because sex radicals “are in the process of providing us with a new kind of ethic based not on individuality, but rather on community,” they “function as a model for a new subjectivity, radically intertwined, united, and interdependent” (Rudy 1999: 141, 142). What’s more, the range of queer relationship organizations depicted thus far is not meant to be a coherent outline of queer social models but, rather, to point to the infinite potential of intimacy and affect

to exist and proliferate outside societal constructions of intelligibility. A certain ethic of affect and accountability is produced in queer social relations through autonomous self-reflexivity, relationship self-identification, and an understanding of the fundamental relationality of social relations themselves. In this way, counterprivates might allow for a proliferation of queer intimacy and inter-subjective connection, reproducing life and self-hood in ways The Family never dreamed.

CONCLUSION

Queer Community, Reparative Relations

Queer Relationality

This thesis, by extending a queer critique from subjectivities to relationships, has attempted to foster a proliferation of ways of relating that expand, challenge, and rework the normative conceptions of intimacy, affect, commitment, and sex that inform and produce social relations. Because the subject is made through its relations, non-normative interpersonal relations must be fostered for the continued reproduction and celebration of queer bodies, lives, and identities. As Donna Haraway argues, “‘The relation’ is the smallest possible unit of analysis” and insight into the reality produced through meaning making processes of normativity and otherness (2003: 20). As such, it is “the relation” which must be queered.

In discussing and celebrating queer relations, I am by no means attempting to present a coherent outline of the ranges and forms interpersonal relations may take but, rather, to point to the impossibility of doing so. Queering relationality is fundamental to a queer project because in generating a range and diversity of non-normative lifestyles, bodies, and relationships, the heteronormative organization of interpersonal normativity and otherness is challenged as queer subjects and relations “repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized” (Butler 1990: 31).

Just as it is through social relations of exchange that life is reproduced, it is through interpersonal connection and embodied intimacies that subjectivity is constituted and lived. Giddens describes love as being somehow removed from reality, from the wider sociohistorical context through which it is produced and he

understands subjects of such love to be so engrossed in their experiences that they too become disconnected from the rest of their lives (Giddens 1992: 38, 40).¹ However, love relationships do not transcend such realities but are constitutive of them. It is through a variety of intimate relationships of care that subjects are continually reproduced through and in relation to their wider social practices and everyday life. It is also through such relations that queer communities and practices are socially reproduced.

The relationship between broader socioeconomic and historical iterations of The Family and the performances of intimacies detailed here is interdependent. As John D’Emilio argues, the wider conditions of industrial capitalism are reproduced through the intimate nurturance of affective relations; it is through intimate relations of the self that wider reality is constituted, not avoided (1993: 469). But at the same time, inter-subjective connections and interactions are not limited to and cannot be adequately articulated through the meanings and narratives we have been given to organize contemporary social life. While, heteronormative processes of signification attempt to do this ideological work for you, queer forms of relating resist and rework heteronormative significations of the self. A refusal of dominant relationship scripts complicates and obscures the meanings attributed to any social interaction. There are immense creative possibilities within this: “beyond the normative coordinates of selfhood lies an *orgy of connection* that no regime can regulate” (Dean 2006: 828,

¹ I am referring to Giddens’ understanding of “passionate love” as a love in which “emotional involvement with the other is pervasive—so strong that it may lead the individual, or both individuals, to ignore their ordinary obligations,” in contrast to “romantic love” as a love that inaugurates a narrative of self, “inserting self and other into a personal narrative which has no particular reference to wider social practices” (1992: 38, 40).

emphasis added). By re-thinking social relations and their connections to subjectivity, this “orgy of connection” can be accessed such that the self and its relational surroundings constitute an embodied reproduction of queerness, touch, affect, sex, and connection.

Because it is in social relations that lives and selves are reproduced, queer relations empower subjects in their living and becoming. Rather than a heteronormative social order, what is reproduced through “criminal intimacies”—queer counterprivates—is not only subjectivity, but queerness as a mode of affect and form of care (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558). For those marginalized through violent systems of normativity, queering the social relations through which the self emerges is an ethical and reparative project.

In this way, queer possibilities for organizing social life might not only reproduce queerness, they might also remake the material relations that enable and privilege certain social practices over others. A notion of family as bearing no immediate or pre-determined relation to the organization of property, blood, resources, and sex allows for a proliferation of kinship forms and modes of sustained care. Social relations and forms of intimacy not organized around normative constructions of commitment and kinship “counter the widespread assumption that some forms of intimacy are necessarily deeper, more crucial, or more authentic than others” (Zelizer 2005: 16). With a recognition of the inherent value of intimacy and interpersonal connection and a refusal to privilege heteronormative kinship and relationship structures, queer relations produce an ethics of care not bound up with hierarchies of normativity and otherness. A recognition that “not all practices of

intimacy require exclusionary boundaries and that boundaries have been overemphasized in the conceptualization of intimacy” effectively expands the forms that intimate social relations can take (Jamieson 2005: 185). A de-emphasis on the monogamous domestic relationship as the focal point of and privileged location for reproduction allows for a radical re-articulation of the meanings of commitment, affect, care, and intimacy. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner remind us, “making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (1998: 558).

Furthermore, as heteronormative ideology and culture is produced by and reproductive of relations of exploitation and inequality inherent in capitalism, a queer organization of the social relations reproductive of life presents possibilities for a material resistance to the current economic order. When people “succeed in sustaining each other’s lives, they don’t do it with love alone, but with concrete contributions to their joint material welfare” (Zelizer 2005: 34). The normative nuclear family and domestic relationship keep intact a privatized and hetero-familial organization of resources and gendered division of labor that relies on a public/private binary. However, queer organizations of households, relations of care, and resource distribution can subvert and resist the constituent elements of The Family ideology so fundamental to capitalism and the ruling elite. Resources can be shared across household lines, property can be de-privatized, and the division of labor can be re-worked all together. For example, by living in collectives or queer household formations, by dispersing child care across a network or community of adults, and by

organizing resources such that they are not concentrated or maintained in a single household site but shared throughout networks of kin, queer social arrangements serve as a form of material resistance to systemic oppression and inequality. Furthermore, they de-privatize both the material and intimate processes necessary for the reproduction of life. In this way, queered conceptions of commitment and care can transform and resist, not only discursive and ideological regimes, but also the contemporary economic order of private wealth and resources.²

Unbound from narrow normativities and relationship dictates and recognized as interactive and embodied performative processes of subjective constitution, interpersonal relations take on a plethora of meaning. Because the normative meanings and ideologies we have cannot possibly account for all of what happens between people, queer resistance to the heteronormative social order lies in our power to “change our human capacities for affective bonds and the sensations and the identities formed around them” (Hennessy 2000: 208). Emotional intimacy, mental connection, and physical touch do not have any easy, linear, or definitive correspondence. Gayle Rubin speaks of “benign sexual variation,” of the need to counter the “hierarchical valuation of sex acts” through sexual diversity and “erotic creativity” (1993: 11, 35). In the same way, we need to counter the hierarchies and normativities of relationship and kinship forms through cultivating diversity and creativity in the organization of intimacy, affect, and care. Social reality is messy. However, attempting to police social relations and to organize inter-subjective

² Carol Stacks’ ethnography “All Our Kin” does just this sort of work. In it, she describes the ways in which an urban, poor, black community of dispersed kinship networks de-privatize material resources as well as affective practices of care and intimacy necessary to sustain lived existence.

experiences into stable categories of meaning does not account for the incoherence and complications of social reality, but, rather, violently limits the content and forms interpersonal connections and intimacies may take. What happens between selves or bodies cannot be reduced to the languages or categories of meaning we are given to articulate such experiences. In expanding the ways relations may materialize as well as the meanings produced through such relations, it is my hope that inter-subjective experiences of and desires for self and other can mount a challenge to the heteronormative social order and begin to reproduce a queer one.

The Self, the Body, the Skin, the Other: Towards a Queer Ethics of Relating

I opened chapter three with the notion that, because human needs are carried out through social processes characterized by degrees of affect, intimacy, and care, social interaction is itself a vital human need (Hennessy 2000: 210). Social interaction can also be understood as a human need insofar as it is through interaction with and in relation to bodies, selves, and symbols that the subject is made. One is always other than what one is not, as well as intricately implicated within one's other (and one's otherness to one's self). As Aimee Carillo Rowe argues, "there is no subject prior to infinitely shifting and contingent relations of belonging which temporarily define the contours of her being," just as there is no concrete dividing line between various selves (2008: 27). Phenomenological experience of corporeality is a collective process. Relations of belonging are those fluid and abstract inter-subjective processes of communicative exchange that situate the subject, temporarily demarcating, molding, and blurring the boundaries between self and other. Thus, the self does not

exist prior to its relational surroundings, but is produced through them: “we make each other up, in the flesh” (Haraway 2003: 3). Life is reproduced through and within social interaction. Given this, what is at stake in the lives of others, in the contents and forms of peoples’ collective attachments to one another?

I want to “reframe subjectivity at the edge of the skin,” as enacted and materialized in the spaces between bodies, to help illustrate why queered interaction and forms of relatedness are fundamental to a project of resistance (Rowe 2008: 35). As for physical intimacy, touch is integral to affective kinship or relationship forms because it is through such intimacy that selves and bodies are not only sustained, but fundamentally constituted—in a sense, continually born. In addition to constituting self-hood, interpersonal relations also produce the material and social conditions necessary for the reproduction of life. While there is no easy binary delineating physical versus emotional intimacy (as self-hood cannot be detached from the body), subjectivity is produced through its physical as well as emotional communicative interactions and intimacies. Bodies and selves do not exist apart from their interactive relations. Subjectivity is enacted and articulated in between and on the surfaces of the body because it is skin that is both thought to separate selves and through which bodies connect. The ontological self and corporeal body are materialized through interaction that takes place in and at the body’s edges. Relationships are embodied experiences.

Because subjective reality, knowledge, bodies, and selves, are made to be through relations of intimacy and connection, “being is constituted not first through the atomized self, but through its own longings to be with. Belonging precedes being”

(Rowe 2008: 27). Fundamental to both relationships and subjectivity is belonging, is longing to be and being in longing. We long to be in comfort, we long to belong with one another, and it is through our longings and belongings that we are made to be. If it is through longings for and belongings to otherness that the self is inaugurated, then “this inclination toward an other involves seeing others to whom we belong as inseparable, not separate, from us” (Rowe 2008: 36). Taking into account the interconnectedness of self and other—that one’s well being is intricately bound up with that of others—a libratory ethics of interaction can be developed that has at its core a commitment to care and accountability and that takes as its presupposition that various forms of interpersonal connections and intimacies are vital to subjective existence. Donna Haraway argues for “an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness” to account for the ways in which we are signified through and in relation to otherness (2003: 3). If relations of affect or intimacy are conducted through an ethics of significant otherness, what would inter-subjective exchanges of care and belonging look like?

Haraway points to the necessity of forging connections as well as to the impossibility of ever fully connecting. “One cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship” (Haraway 2003: 50). While connections can only ever be partial and are always embedded in an infinite array of other relations, it is necessarily in connection to otherness that we are both signified and significant. A ceaseless questioning of what takes place between people and of the subjectivity engendered through a relationship then, rather than taking for granted normative relationship narratives, is a consciously

queer mode of relating. When we flourish significant otherness and recognize the importance of inter-subjective connections, we cultivate a moral “sense of ‘self’ that is radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong, with whom we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable” (Rowe 2008: 27). Queering the social relations through which the self is produced entails re-conceiving one’s own well-being as integrally bound up with that of others. Such an approach recognizes the value of interpersonal connections and relations of care, intimacy, and affect in and of themselves. In organizing our social, affective, and intimate lives in ways that expand and resist heteronormative meaning making processes such that affect, intimacy, and pleasure may be proliferated, social reality and subjectivity is queered.

With an understanding that one’s self hood is intricately and fundamentally tied to the lives of others, we might yet orient our interpersonal relations and interactions towards embodying and cultivating an ethics of care. Jose Muñoz uses the term “ecstasy” to denote “a mode of contemplation or consciousness that is not self enclosed, particularly in regard to being conscious of the other” (2009: 186). Queerly relating entails reproducing life through a radical consciousness of significant otherness and a refusal to be self-enclosed. Reconstructing intimacy as a spectrum and recognizing the infinite variety of ways interpersonal connections can materialize, as well as the various meanings they can signify, resists the hierarchical organization of intimacy. The ways we engage in social relations have political implications. In belonging to and through our significant others, in being inseparable from those with whom we engage in interactive exchanges, and in striving for a

radical accountability within our relations of belonging, we can constitute our lives through an ethics of care, intimacy, and affect.

In the end, I am not interested in defining what intimacy is, only in holding open the infinite ways it can transpire. While it cannot be completely removed from the normative constructs through which it is lived, intimacy necessarily transcends those narrow categories of meaning used to articulate and signify its processes. Intimacy has something to do with what transpires between subjects.³ If subjectivity exists on the edges of the skin, the self made to be through its relational and embodied interactions of belonging, what does this say about the specific content and meaning of any given interpersonal relation? What is conveyed between bodies that lie intertwined, through the quick fuck at a play party, in the making of food, or the sharing of resources? In dominant society, the term “significant other” is used as a gender neutral term to name one’s primary spouse: it speaks of domestic monogamy and private intimacy. Here, however, it is useful for signifying the significance of the other in signifying the self and thus for articulating the vast significance of otherness. As a normative category, “significant other” entails a specific social and material organization of the reproduction of life. Queered, the significance of others can proliferate and expand in meaning: what sorts of homes can people create in and through the lives of others? We are always already bound up with otherness, made to be through our relational belongings. A queer ethics of affect and significant otherness, a commitment to flourishing care and pleasure beyond the narrow scripts

³ This is not to say one cannot be intimate with oneself; more along the lines of, there is no such thing as one self, and, every subject has multiple selves. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, Michael Cobb’s work on singleness would be interesting to further explore intimacies of the individual.

we are given, to being accountable to one's other, is not only a form of resistance, it is a form of survival.

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