

Re-reading Sexuality as a Life Practice

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PETER BANKI & NIKÓ ANTALFFY

One of the things one learns from the very beginning of one's scholarly life is that academic research is not about the personal lives and stories of its authors: it is work "on" the writings of others. Even if it may be plausibly argued that autobiography is neither a genre nor a mode but "a figure of reading...that occurs in all texts" (Paul de Man 1983: 70), the norms and review criteria of academic research demand that we do not disclose our own personal histories as if they were of academic interest. If sometimes it is deemed necessary to break this prohibition, such disclosures are usually contained by being placed at the margins of an academic study, for example, as a dedication, footnote or perhaps as part of the introduction. As academic researchers, we are generally forbidden from taking ourselves as the "object" or "subject" of our research, or rather, from creating the *illusion* of doing so.

This prohibition is not without reason. For even if autobiography is, as Paul de Man argues, a figure of reading that occurs in all texts, personal testimony understood as narration in the first person cannot escape the possibility of fiction, if only because it is always possible that the one who says "I" may lie or perjure themselves. De Man writes:

The interest of autobiography is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does

not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is, the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions (De Man 1983: 71).

In a later text, Jacques Derrida insists on this irreducible relation of testimony to literature. As a consequence, testimony is situated always *between* fiction and truth:

There is no testimony that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury – that is to say – the possibility of literature [...] If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted (Derrida 2000: 29-30).

The conversation that follows between Nikó Antalffy and Peter Banki is composed of haunted personal testimonies informed by readings of contemporary debates around queerness, deconstruction, heterosexuality and polyamory. Perhaps they have little or no justification as academic research, but are “historical novels” on the part of their supposed authors (cf. Freud 1986). In abandoning certain academic protocols “we” have attempted to approach what we felt we couldn’t approach otherwise: let’s say provisionally “the place from where our interest comes”...

A provocative intervention by Christine Beasley will have been our starting point:

Heterosexuality has been addressed in scholarly literature largely as something that is nasty, boring and normative, and on the whole tends to deal with the important matters of oppression, sexual violence, pornography and sex trafficking. The intention is to challenge orthodox approaches to heterosexuality without denying the weight of feminist and related criticisms, the dominance of heterosexuality and the problems in violence often associated with heterosexual practices. However, there is much more to heterosexuality than what is boringly normative or dangerous in sex. Heterosexual

intimacy, sexualities and identities can and do have subversive potential as playful, pleasurable and even peculiar (Beasley et al. 2012).

Nikó: These are the things we want to explore. We’re both coming from a place where we intersect with heterosexuality yet we are coming from an angle that is non-traditional. We certainly do not consider what we do and interact with, necessarily, as nasty, boring and “normal.”

We both understand that the feminist critique of heterosexuality and its related practices have an important place (eg. Jackson 1999), yet the construct that is being critiqued is larger and more nebulous and some of the desires and practices aligned with heterosexuality are pro-feminist. We wanted to explore and expand on these non-traditional spaces we occupy and reflect on their wider significance.

What’s our personal motivation? What is your motivation?

Peter: Maybe I can tell a story that might be a way to answer it. A couple of years ago, I went to a workshop, an all-men’s workshop that was run in Berlin. It was about power and sexuality for gay men, as well as looking at some different BDSM practices. I went to this workshop *because it frightened me* to be in such an intimate context with so many men. The fear alerted me that there was something there that is important for me to look at.

I announced at the beginning of the workshop that I’m not a gay man. In fact I’m not even a bi-man. What was really lovely about that space was that no one there tried to convert me, to tell me that I was a gay man but did not know it yet.

It was an amazing opportunity to learn about gay male fantasies, to really discover how they are in general really very, very different from mine. What

turns gay men on is quite different from what turns me on. And yet, with a little bit of creativity, it was also possible to find ways to get turned on with gay men.

In particular, I remember how at the end of the weekend we were asked to perform our fantasy, our “key” fantasy, with somebody. They put me with a man I actually had had no contact with whatsoever during the entire weekend. I said to the guy, “Look, my fantasy is with a woman. It’s not with a man.” Then lo and behold I had a brainstorm: “Why don’t you put a dress on?”

There just happened to be a lot of dresses in the location where I was, a lot of large dresses because he was a very big man. For him, this was a real limit. He had never done anything like this before or thought of it. For a lot of gay men into BDSM who cultivate a certain macho-ism, they have a bit of a thing with identifying as women. It’s a problem. Whereas I, I do not have this problem.

So he agreed actually to put the dress on. I remember him walking through the space. The gay men were laughing, but they were also clapping. I could tell some of them were thinking, “This is really funny.” But they were also clapping and saying, “That’s a fantastic idea” (In German, they said: “*Das ist ein toller Ansatz*”). I remember it was very strange because a friend, the choreographer Felix Ruckert, turned to me during the weekend and said, “Peter, you’re actually the biggest pansy here.” Even though I was the self-identified “heterosexual” one, what he said was perhaps true because many of the gay men were trying so hard to cultivate a certain masculinity: at least these kinds of leather gay men or “bears.”

Anyway, we acted out the fantasy together. I remember he was just kissing my feet, something very simple. I got turned on because I actually visualised him as a woman. We were both really astonished, because it turned him on as well. We had this fortuitous moment of something improbable happening.

After that, I told another guy there, the composer musician Robert Farrer, what

had happened, and he said to me, “A straight man in a gay male workshop... that’s queer.” And we both laughed. This was really a moment for me. There was a recognition (or rather, the fantasy, dream or joke even?) that I, as a presumably “straight man,” could be related to “queerness.”

It wasn’t about me denying my attachment to heterosexuality. Actually, on the contrary. In a certain way it was because of my attachment to heterosexuality in *this* context that that word “queer” came to the mind of one of the men there. Perhaps it was to turn the tables and suggest that in a gay male workshop being straight was queer. Or perhaps, on the other hand, by using the word “queer” he wanted to allow me some inclusion – or mark my inclusion – in the homoerotic space of the workshop and in so doing reward my willingness to open myself, to participate in creative, *physical* ways with the others, and to not stop at the defense against male homosexuality that most straight men (myself included) and even some gay men have.

I won’t deny either of these readings, but I believe there is a further one, which is more important, more thought provoking: his words and the laughter it provoked in us identified another possibility, an opening that *under certain circumstances* straight, gay and queer would not be in opposition to one another or mutually exclusive categories, but without for all that abolishing their differences from one another. Given my intellectual orientation and background, I would say the laughter that the word “queer” provoked in us at that moment was an effect of deconstruction. It was not that the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality, male and female, queer and straight simply disappeared, but that another difference not reducible to any of them became, for an instant, *readable* (which is not to say, verifiable as presentable and available knowledge). Jacques Derrida defines deconstruction somewhat enigmatically by saying that it is “what happens” or “arrives” (“*La déconstruction, c’est ce qui arrive.*”).¹

¹ “[Deconstruction] is what happens each time there is an event, which by definition is unpredictable and which displaces the state of things in some way and which surprises... that

Thanks to Robert Farrer's reading of my participation in the gay SM workshop, the word "queer" arrived in my life in an intimate way. Later I wanted to explore it more and I produced an event in Berlin called "The Queer Weekend: Romantic Life/Art Performance" which was trying to explore this dream that queer was something that wasn't simply about heterosexuality or homosexuality. It was something independent, *which could also address people who identified as heterosexual*. One didn't have to not be heterosexual to feel intimately addressed by queerness, or more precisely, by the word "queer." At least that was my hypothesis.

Many queer theorists view such a hypothesis with suspicion (for example, Walters 1996, Schlichter 2004), but not all of them, notably Eve Sedgwick (1993) and in particular Calvin Thomas, who has been at the forefront of scholarly debate on the issue. In one of his texts, he defines his project as the attempt to address the question of what "the straight queered in and by theory, a figure at odds and inevitably at evens with the normal – could possibly mean." At the same time, he acknowledges "the very real possibility that any attempt to resignify the figure of the straight (as) queer will only reinscribe and reinforce the very regimes of the normal" (Thomas 2009: 18-19). Thought provokingly, in a footnote, Thomas argues that *absolutely nothing* in the final analysis justifies the engagement of a straight intellectual with queer theory (Thomas 2009: 19). One might ask – and I'll come back to this – what tolerance is there within "queer theory," sexuality, diversity or gender studies, or within Western culture more generally, for an interest, research or desire

produces a deconstructive effect... there is not only deconstruction in universities and books" (Derrida 2000, translation mine *pb*, cf. also what Derrida and Cixous write of dreamexistence and the ethics and politics of the dream (Derrida 2005: 168f., Cixous 2006: 142f.) "*La déconstruction, c'est ce qui arrive...c'est ce qui se passe chaque fois qu'il y a un événement – imprévu - par définition imprévisible et qui déplace en quelque sorte l'état des choses et qui surprend eh bien cela produit cela a effet déconstructeur - et de la déconstruction il n'y en a pas seulement dans les universités dans les un livres*"

that cannot be justified? As Avital Ronell has also asked in an interview she recently did with me:

What would the purely unjustifiable be in practices and grammars of sexuality? You can't justify, "This is the way it is" or "it's not," because you don't have a grasp of it [...] You could say, "No, there's no positive value to this." [But] that we're not allowed to do, we're not yet allowed to say, "There's no legitimacy to what I want, this is just how I get off." I can't tell you it's positive, as a matter of fact, I'm not sure it is (Banki 2013b).

If you don't have a space in your thinking for the purely unjustifiable, then I think you miss something essential about sexuality and eroticism – and probably literature also (c.f. Bataille 1985, Blanchot 1989, Heidegger 1996).

The Romantic in the title of my event in Berlin was a tribute to the mixing together of incompatible genres and codes that the Jena Romantics practiced in the eighteenth century, as well as the non-separation that they conceived between art, poetry and life (Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe 1988, Ronell 2002). It resonates no doubt with what we're risking here: mixing life narration, fiction and perjury with so-called "high theory." Generally speaking, and no doubt for good reasons, such mixing is, if not outright impermissible, then relegated to the margins of peer-reviewed academic writing.

Nikó: Wonderful story!

I have a very different one. I went through a short lesbian phase in my early 20s after falling in love with a lesbian. I remember being amongst a whole bunch of lesbians, desperately trying to belong and realizing that I couldn't really belong there just like I couldn't belong amongst straight people despite engaging in activism, coming out and copping ostracism for being different. I moved through various communities through my 20s and 30s. Some were queer, some a mixture of bisexual and heterosexual.

After the lesbian scene I went through the bi scene. I still identify as bisexual today. Later I explored the kink scene and finally ended up in the polyamorous community. I belonged to each of these yet my desires and search for meaning went beyond all of them.

The lesbian scene had closeted bisexuals, the bisexual scene had a frustrating agenda of proving that bisexuals are monogamous. This is also counterproductive because about half of all bisexuals strive for some sort of negotiated non-monogamy and half of the polyamorous community is made up of bisexuals. There's a lot of non-monogamy amongst bisexuals.²

This drive to present bisexuals as monogamous is an attempt to fit in with the mainstream, to assume privilege while restricting the available desires and ways of being for bisexuals. This is the same straight jacket that same-sex marriage poses for the GLBTQI community and the reason why there has been furious debates around whether same-sex marriage is desirable for the GLBTQI community (Yep et al 2003).

The kink scene was really interesting. There was an explicit opening to queerness and non-monogamy that is the hallmark of a movement that practices radical acceptance of differences in practice and desire. Then finally in the polyamorous community I found the most expansive idea of interpersonal emancipation that resonated with me. Amongst the polyamorous your sexuality can be fluid and varied, consent is vitally important as is equality and honesty. These qualities attract women to the community, who, in turn, often become leaders (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004). Polyamory is a deeply feminist movement in that it seeks complete equality for women within personal relationships and free

² Various studies have produced both estimates and definite numbers. Both of these numbers (non-monogamy amongst bisexually identified persons, and bisexual numbers among polyamorously identified persons) seem to be somewhere between 40-60% (McLean 2004, Sheff, E. 2005, Weinberg, M.S. et al 1995, Klesse, C. 2005).

choice of partners.

It has famously been argued that breaking with compulsory heterosexuality is in itself a feminist act as it takes apart a main tenet of patriarchy (Rich 1980). In the same vein arguments have been made about compulsory monogamy (Heckert 2010, Robinson 1997, Emens 2004): institutionalised monogamy privileges the interests of men and therefore non-monogamy is one possible way of radically re-negotiating the power relations between genders (Robinson 1997: 144).

Beyond this feminist perspective polyamory is also a humanist project insofar as pleasure activism is understood as a communal quest to become increasingly insightful, evolved human beings who strive to make the most of our shared existence by connecting in ethical new ways. As a social movement based on sexuality and relationships it has achieved something unique that aligns with my outlook on life.

Peter: You do not identify as queer?

Nikó: It partially depends on the context as queer means different things in different places. Generally I just say I'm bisexual and polyamorous and I feel quite at home in queer spaces too.

Peter: It sounds like queer is not as important a part of you or your identity as polyamory or bisexuality.

Nikó: I assume that bisexuality and polyamory already involve or include queer. Bisexual is definitely queer though the B has recently been taken out of the GLBTQI.

What is your personal motivation in wanting to write about queerness and heterosexuality?

Peter: Even while believing that I'm heterosexual, I have always had a desire to have inclusion amongst queers or in the so-called "queer community," because my fantasies often involve me being a woman. In a way, I go in the direction of transgender. Even though I'm not a trans-person: I don't live full time as a trans-person. But a strong aspect of my sexuality is – or my fantasies are inspired by – myself being a woman with another woman.

Nikó: That's interesting, because some of my fantasies are inspired by me being a man with another man. You can be heterosexual and think about yourself as the opposite sex with the opposite sex, which is not heterosexual.

Peter: I'm not sure what it is. There are these concepts that a friend of mine, Janet Hardy, has developed called "girlfag" and "guydyke." A "guydyke" is a man who identifies as a lesbian and a "girlfag" is a woman who identifies as a gay man or at least has these fantasies. For her, queerness consists in the ability to identify with the one you desire. That's her working definition of queerness, which does not exclude certain permutations of heterosexuality such as girlfags and guydykes (Hardy 2012, Banki 2013).

There was that aspect and I also wanted some inclusion. I tried to have a float at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney for people like myself. I knew that there were quite a few people like myself, who feel strong affinity with queerness even though they're heterosexual.

They don't simply see themselves as straights applauding and supporting gay people. There's something in them, which is deeper and in a way opens to queerness. My proposal provoked such resistance and blowback from many people who identify as "queer," claiming that queerness was being appropriated or "co-opted" by the enemy, by the heterosexuals. I thought, "No, no, no." I really have to think about this. I have to think through these labels and ask whether it's possible to think a space for people like myself without "co-opting" or taking something away from someone else. And also to ask: what are they afraid of? Is this fear grounded?...And really to think through these kinds of ...

very passionate reactions. I realised that there was something political here that demanded some thinking through (the debate over the Mardi Gras float has been archived, see Banki 2013b).

Nikó: Did you have the float?

Peter: No, we actually decided not to go ahead with the float because we felt that there was such antagonism from so many people that we felt we wouldn't be doing anything useful. What I think is useful, though, is the work we're doing now. Rather than in a public event exposed to the media, which simplifies everything and polarizes people one way or the other. It closes down the space for reflection and thought, which I think is maybe more important than walking in a parade.

Nikó: It's interesting because the poly community also had an entry in the [Mardi Gras] parade. But if I remember correctly, they had to go as friends and supporters of the GLBTQI community. The following year the poly float was edged out in a covert way. They aren't really welcome as polyamory dilutes the gay concept. It's problematic.

Peter: Exactly. For me, this is also its opportunity and its strength.

Nikó: What do you mean?

Peter: The fact that it muddies the waters and dilutes the concepts – or rather, shows how they are already muddied and diluted – is, I believe, the opportunity and the interest of what we are doing. And questioning the logic and presuppositions of some of the border policing that so many people feel obliged to take part in. Perhaps it is even something very positive for the future because if you think always in terms of an opposition to the mainstream, then you never really bring the mainstream with you. Whereas in a way, what we're doing is addressing the mainstream, perhaps, by saying that queerness can also be on your side.

Nikó: Perhaps. I hope so.

Peter: I don't know, perhaps.

Nikó: I also want to talk to the mainstream. I have done this in articles where I came out as a polyamorous person in the media (Antalffy 2012, Maley 2013, Smithies and MacDougall 2009). The main motivation for me is to seek recognition for a different way of being and to show that it is possible to live in a way that is ethically non-monogamous. *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy (1997) was a major inspiration and remains so today. These authors have argued that polyamory is a viable, fulfilling and ethical undertaking that demonstrates the possibility of abundance, shows that openness can be a solution, not a problem, and reveals that sexual economies can easily go beyond the old "starvation economy paradigm" (where love is severely limited and more love for someone else can mean less love for you). They have also shown that honesty, communication, conscious boundary-setting and awareness go a long way in ensuring everyone's happiness (Easton and Hardy 1997).

So in my various articles and interviews I aim to show how non-monogamy works, how it can enhance relationships, your sexual life, your values. For me as a non-monogamous person a good life involves ethically relating and connecting with more than one person at a time romantically and perhaps sexually. I want to spread the message that non-monogamy is viable and can be both enriching and fulfilling.

Peter: It can be a responsible way.

Nikó: It can be a responsible and ethical way, most definitely, for all involved.

Peter: When you say responsible and ethical, the words I've just put in your mouth, what did that mean for you?

Nikó: Responsible and ethical both mean that what you do and how you relate

and who you relate with, who you connect with; these actions happen with the consent of all involved and with consideration of all. If I'm going out with someone and that person already has other people in their life then everyone needs to be in the know. A lot of communication is required for everyone to feel safe and content.

Peter: For example, someone doesn't give consent, then you don't go ahead, right?

Nikó: Then I do not go ahead, no. That is right. It is not like anarchic sluttiness or anything goes. Ethical considerations and responsibility first and foremost guide everyone's actions. I will not go out with someone who doesn't come clean to their existing partners about me. Honesty is a cornerstone of polyamory (McLean 2004, Klesse and Easton 2006: 644).

Peter: That's not the kind of relationship you want to enter into.

Nikó: No, that is right. The beauty of it is that there are millions of people out there, and there are always more possible connections. There is no need to make unethical sexual or romantic choices. And you can convince others to come clean. The more you come out about this, and the more you talk, the more people can make ethical decisions and ethical connections. Then the pool increases.

Peter: So it is really in your interest.

Nikó: Yes, it is in my interest but at the same time I'm hoping it is in the interest of all those people who potentially want to be ethical, connected and enriched.

Peter: I know that there are probably many polyamorous experiences that you've had in your life that were great and fantastic. Is there one that for you has been very determining or a fantasy that for you has been, as it were, structuring of your sexual practice and/or play?

For me, the structural fantasy is probably this idea that I'm a woman with another woman. Then when I found that I could in some way live that, it created these very interesting effects. I thought this actually empowered me and made me feel like this was something I wanted to fight for. Or there was that time in the gay men's workshop, which was for me a very determining and structuring experience.

Nikó: I've had a determining, or a utopian vision, for a while. For a lot of polyamorous people that utopia is an ultimately loosely structured community built on the foundations of freedom, sex, understanding, love and care. Of everyone's needs being taken care of. This vision is important for me.

A lot of love, a lot of care, a lot of connection and not only when you're sexy and young and desirable and politically influential and happen to have the money or whatever desirable characteristics but always, because we can all reach our potential deep down and because we can honour our humanity more than we care about the external things that we have been conditioned to desire. That is deeply utopian for me, as a sociologist and as a person.

I have had some lovely experiences that have reinforced that. When people selflessly care about each other deeply despite that being really difficult: moments, hours, months, years when deep life-giving connections become possible and get enacted in ways that make you want to live, make you want to love, make you want to create and be and give back.

There are also connections that reach beyond what traditional relationships could be, connections to people who aren't with us anymore, yet loved ones and the spirit of an intentional community endure; connections that are beyond sex and operate very much in a place of spiritual intimacy.

These are almost transcendental; they are really deeply emancipatory utopian connections that bring everyone's humanity to the table and illuminate everything beautifully. That's very abstract, but that's my answer.

Peter: Do you think it's necessary to mention this concept of compersion or frubble?

Nikó: Yes, that makes sense.

Peter: Is it significant to you?

Nikó: Yes. Compersion, or frubble, is in a way the opposite of jealousy, the wonderful loving feeling that a partner feels when his/her partner is experiencing joy with someone else (Ferrer 2008). It's a selfless love that reaches to metamours (the other partners or lovers of our own partner/lover) and warms you from inside. Yet it's only one of many sparkly diamonds you find on the way.

Peter: Would you say that your true nature is polyamorous?

Nikó: Yes, for me, it is.

Peter: But what you're also saying is that perhaps for all of us there might be some urge or desire within, if you like, monogamy, let's say as an institution, there is already some polyamory at the level of fantasy or desire.

Nikó: The definition of monogamy includes the suppression of non-monogamous desires (Pepper 2004). If non-monogamous desires did not exist they would not need to be suppressed and policed. The very definition of monogamy admits that desires almost always exist to be with the other, to be with a third person or someone else, to connect to others.

The beauty of polyamory is that you can connect to others in a meaningful way. My motivation in talking about polyamory is that it is liberating to be able to ethically and responsibly connect with more people in new ways.

You're right that desire to relate to more than one person does exist and is

common. The reason why there's such preoccupation with cheating or ...

Peter: That is right, in popular culture.

Nikó: Yes. Popular culture displays a tremendous preoccupation with that desire to be with more than one person. In popular culture extra connections are taboo and cheating has to be resolved with redemption, a return to being faithful to just one person at a time. The norm now is serial monogamy. Before, monogamy meant a lifelong commitment to just one person.

Monogamy is a social construct and gets redefined over time. Currently monogamy means one person at a time but even this definition is unable to contain the desire for more, so this desire keeps roaming around and going somewhere else³. But it has to be shut down. That disciplining, the policing of the boundaries of monogamy is very much a part of monogamy. That conflict between the desire and that policing is what animates the public discourse about cheating (Pepper 2004).

Peter: It's very interesting. I'm asking myself if I'm not already practicing a form of ethical non-monogamy even though I'm monogamous.

Nikó: How so?

Peter: Because I talk with my partner about these things. Maybe my partner said to me once she might like to do something. I simply said, "No, I don't want you to."

Nikó: You did?

³ Infidelity in traditional monogamous marriages is very common. Estimates vary, but 60-70% is a common one (Ferrer 2008).

Peter: Yes. She didn't do it. Maybe that is not monogamy. That is ethical non-monogamy because she has admitted that she has an interest in someone. I simply said, "No." She has respected my decision.

Nikó: As opposed to, "I'm leaving," or "How dare you?"

Peter: I just said, "No," and she thought, "Okay." Maybe at a later time, it would be okay.

Nikó: You're in a space where you're negotiating in some ways.

Peter: That is already in the direction of what you are proposing because there is this concern for the other person. But, thinking of Derrida and Ronell and my other teachers, I can't help but underline that despite everything there is ultimately no guarantee that you're being ethical, even if you think you're negotiating by open and rational consensus and acting out of concern for the welfare of the other person. The values of negotiation and consent can shelter hidden motives and they are not steadfast guarantees against the possibility of abuse. When it comes to sexuality and eroticism, it might be that the most ethical, in the sense of life-affirming, individual is one who in the first moment is not concerned about the other, but acts out of self-interest and even deception. This is, believe it or not, one of Nietzsche's dangerous hypotheses in the second paragraph of his famous book *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche writes:

Despite all the value which may belong to the true, the positive and the unselfish, it might be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life generally should be assigned to pretense, to the will to delusion (*Täuschung*), to selfishness (*Eigennutz*), and cupidity (*Begierde*). It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of those good and respected things, consists precisely in their being insidiously related, knotted, and crocheted to these evil and apparently opposed things—perhaps even being essentially identical with them. Perhaps! But who wishes to concern himself with such dangerous "Perhapses?" (Nietzsche 2009)

Such dangerous perhapses', I hazard to suggest, explode the whole debate about ethics and sexuality. The values of honesty, negotiation and consent, which you're proposing to be cornerstones of ethical polyamory, may well be insidiously related, even grounded in the very things they are supposed to guard against, i.e., deception, coercion and abuse. Perhaps the most dangerous "slut" of all is the one who presents themselves to be acting in a transparently ethical manner (Cf. Hardy 2009). If I claim I'm acting ethically, then I'm not being ethical at all, because of the implied self-certainty of any such claim. There is never an ultimate guarantee that any of my actions are truly ethical. For this reason perhaps, any ethical or responsible decision must, for Derrida, undergo the infinite trial and passage of the undecidable, which removes the possibility of self-certainty that one is making – or has ever made – a supposedly ethical or responsible decision. Derrida writes:

There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this *experience and experiment of the undecidable*. If I insist on this point from now on, it is, I repeat, because this discussion is, will be, and ought to be at bottom an ethical-political one (Derrida 1988: 116).⁴

Nikó: But the very fact that you and your partner communicate to one another about other partners means that you have at least opened up the taboo that exists in traditional monogamy where you cannot even discuss non-monogamy.

⁴ In relation to Derrida's thought, the question of polyamory is compelling and remains to be explored, not only because of what we (think we) know of Derrida's sex life and multiple partners, but also because he insisted, especially in his readings of Levinas, on the necessity of the third, which interrupts *a priori* the intimacy of any ethical face-to-face encounter between two individuals. The irreducible necessity of the third forces all taking of responsibility into an Abrahamic scene of impossible, and at bottom unjustifiable, sacrifice (see especially Derrida 1995: 53f and Attridge 2010: 97-116).

Even fantasies are restricted. You police yourself or police your partner's porn habit. Polyamory is very different. It's about opening up, communicating, exploring. It sounds like there's a bit of that going on for you.

At this point I feel compelled to bring up the same-sex marriage topic. Marriage equality is one of the most visible civil rights movements of our time. Some 12 countries and many US states have already legalised same-sex marriage and more will follow. The twist, of course, is that same-sex marriage is now the most acceptable relationship form for gays and lesbians as this opens the door to the institution of monogamy, which is an essential part of acquiring equal rights. Even US President Barack Obama, when he publicly announced for the first time his support for same-sex marriage, did so by linking this support to the institution of monogamy: "I have to tell you that over the course of several years as I have talked to friends and family and neighbors when I think about members of my own staff who are in incredibly committed monogamous relationships, same-sex relationships, who are raising kids together... at a certain point I've just concluded that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same sex couples should be able to get married" (Klein 2012).

The moral panic over the "slippery slope" argument is further evidence of how mainstream culture is profoundly scared of non-monogamy. The slippery slope argument claims that same-sex marriage will open the door to plural marriage (between several people), then the downward spiral continues to incest, bestiality and so on (Sheff 2011: 494). The obvious end point is the erosion of traditional monogamous marriage. Some of the argument is absurd and as offensive to gays and lesbians as it is to the polyamorous, nevertheless it shows a fear of non-monogamy.

Now, we were going to talk about the politics of queer. There's this issue here that you can only be queer if you are in opposition to the mainstream, right? Is that one of the key ideas?

Peter: I think so.

Nikó: The problem with heterosexuality and maybe even polyamory is that you have privilege. If you are heterosexual you can't be queer because queer is without privilege but also because you attempt to take away the little power that the powerless have acquired. That is very political, right?

Peter: Right.

Nikó: What do we do with that? How do you think about that?

Peter: Of course it's true. It's true and it's not true. It's true in the sense that the difficulties that gays and lesbians, trans, intersex and other queers have is probably a very different thing to the difficulties I experience or the questions I have around my sexuality. But I have also been a victim of homophobia. Homophobia is not just directed towards people who are gay. It's also directed towards people who are perceived to be gay.

In the case of being a man, if you are perceived to be an effeminate man, you can be the victim of homophobia. And that happened to me both at school and after I left. I'm a cross-dresser. I also expose myself in that way. On the other hand, of course, there is a difference and I do enjoy the benefits, perhaps more now than I did in the past, I do enjoy the benefits of being part of a mainstream "heteronormative" culture.

My thinking is that queer is not just a minority movement. I think of queer as something that has a potential for larger transformation, or it opens a space of thinking and desiring and feeling that isn't just restricted to a particular subculture or academic field, which unfortunately is what happens most of the time. Just as homosexuality and lesbianism aren't just simply of interest to homosexuals and lesbians, they have effects on the wider so-called "straight" culture. Elizabeth Grosz makes the same point when she writes: "[H]omosexual relations and lifestyles...seep into, infiltrate the very self-conceptions of what

it is to be heterosexual, or at least straight. [T]he apparently natural coupling of male and female lovers are all unstuck by the existence of lesbians and gays..., which effect a certain loosening or contagion of the sphere of normalcy" (1994: 152).

When gays and lesbians stand up for their rights and become visible, this has the potential to transform and change the way that people who don't identify as gays and lesbians desire and behave. I don't think there's a simple clear line. I understand, of course, the suspicion that many people have towards myself and others, because I'm perceived as coming from a group of people who have oppressed them, as representing "heteronormativity" (see below), regardless of whether I personally have done something bad to them. There's a great deal of suspicion.

I understand this suspicion. On the other hand, at some level I feel that it is important to think about who and where "I" am, to the extent that I "am" anywhere. Not in a reactive way by saying, "I'm on the side of the straights and to hell with the queers" but rather, "My sexuality—or the sex that happens through me—is perhaps a bit in-between and also of interest."

Nikó: Why? How?

Peter: While the sexual practices I engage in are often straight intercourse, sometimes the roles are reversed or take their script from lesbianism. I would say that I have the fantasy of refusing and relinquishing patriarchal authority and power (Cf. Silverman 1992). Of course, it's fantasy. Maybe even a kinky one, though probably not so uncommon. Of course, whether I identify with it or not, I no doubt benefit from patriarchy and so-called "heteronormativity" in many ways⁵. And yet, as a fantasy, this is still powerful. I guess the question is

⁵ Heteronormativity is understood as the mutual constitution of normative heterosexuality and the binary gender order (Genschel 1996, Berlant and Warner 1995, Warner 1993).

whether it is better or worse to have this fantasy and be aware of it as such. I'm not sure. Maybe it is an act of solidarity with the oppressed or I am as patriarchal as they come. It is not for me to decide. But in a politicised context if you're not simply identifiable on one side or the other, that may provoke a lot of aggression from people.

Nikó: And confusion.

Peter: And confusion.

Nikó: Or disappointment even. I get disappointment and confusion because I don't play the traditional role of a straight female but I'm not a lesbian either. I have a male live-in partner and we could pass for a heterosexual couple. We could assume heterosexual privilege but we don't.

We stand up and talk as activists. We talk about our life and want to be counted as people who have multiple meaningful connections with persons of various genders. We actively talk about possibilities, we try to live them and show others how to do that.

Peter: Your live-in partner, he's quite experimental with gender as well, right?

Nikó: He and the others around me I connect with all tend to defy and subvert gender definitions through sexual practices, dressing, behaviour, norms and ideas, where we go and how we are seen. Most of it does not fit in with the hetero norm. We openly celebrate this but also cop flak for it.

I have been verbally abused, criticised and ostracised for not being straight and for not being monogamous. I haven't suffered a huge amount of discrimination but have attracted negative attention. In a way I'm often on the other side from power. That's a definition of queer too, isn't it?

I cannot really perceive either of us as comfortably being in the position of

power, right? It's just a question of exactly what space we occupy in relation to power and traditional queer. We are in a third space, occupied by the polyamorous, the queer heterosexuals, kinky people, the genderqueer and so on.

Peter: There's something that Norrie mAy-Welby says, I mean Norrie's not the only one, Quentin Crisp also said this, "Like everybody, I'm a minority of one." Quentin Crisp was famous for saying, "I'm not identified by my sexuality. I'm only identified by myself" (Broinowski & Duff 1997). Norrie sort of takes it to the nth degree, because Norrie says *zie* is not even intersex, but "sex non-specified": "I'm in minority, because I'm Norrie. I'm Norrie." I always found this to be quite inspiring: the idea that no-one is reducible to any particular name or label. In *The History of Sexuality Part 1*, Foucault reminds us that the very categories of the homosexual and the heterosexual are of relatively recent origin, as is the compulsion to understand an individual's identity in terms of specific sexual practices in which they may be involved (1984: 43). Awareness of the recentness of this history may help us to become less attached to the opposition homosexual/heterosexual and suspicious of the compulsion to believe we know something essential about an individual if we believe we know something about the way they like to have sex and the partners they presumably "choose." Of course, I don't believe we can ever simply escape this because it is such an intrinsic part of our culture, but we could perhaps cultivate a certain ironic awareness and distance from it.

Nikó: I understand this, yet if this is so, how do we organise politically?

Peter: Well, yes, that is where names and labels, the identification as belonging to a group, can perhaps become important for a collective political demand. But, on the other hand, perhaps we can organise in another way. There is a German literary critic and philosopher called Werner Hamacher, who through a reading of Maurice Blanchot argues that up until now we have never had any politics of waiting, only the politics of expectation ("*Bis jetzt gibt es keine Politik des Wartens, sondern nur des Erwartens*") (Hamacher 2006). With that I think he meant to suggest that up to now every political commitment has been

reduced to a program, which is to say, organised with an essential reference to a goal or finality, for example: overcoming patriarchy, capitalism or “queering heteronormativity.” He asks what would happen to politics if you disinvested from the goal, i.e., from the hope and expectation for positive change. It wouldn’t necessarily mean no politics, but it would undermine the justification for oppositional thinking, border policing, and the “us” versus “them,” which I would argue domesticates the revolutionary potential of what “queer” (be it as noun or verb) may give you and I to dream (Cf. Hamacher 1993). I don’t wish to suggest that change is not urgent or that we should simply abandon all politics of expectation, but only to note that because queer has been so often defined in opposition to the heterosexual and the “heteronormative,” the question of who has the right to be called queer and under what conditions becomes so politically important, *which it needn’t be*.⁶

Derrida asked a question once that I think is relevant for the whole debate. He asked: “Has there ever been a concept that was really nameable? I mean nameable with a single name or a single word? The concept always demands sentences, discourses, work, and process: in a word, text... I sometimes feel I have never done anything, ever, other than to try to be coherent in this regard” (2005: 83).

Nikó: How about privilege then as a heterosexual?

Peter: We have plenty of privileges, plenty. I have always had opportunities and privileges that a great many have not had and in all probability will never have. I haven’t had much of a choice in this. But, on the other hand, I haven’t been as invested as others have been in some privileges and I haven’t necessarily

⁶ This is a view also articulated by some recent work in the field, which seeks to “avoid narrowing queer politics to a critique of normative heterosexuality and the rigid gender binary” (do Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel 2011: 2, see also Berlant & Warner 1995).

taken some of the opportunities they have afforded me. Rather I’ve rebelled, maybe masochistically, maybe in a self-sabotaging way. But hopefully not only. I was thinking about this the other night, because I was invited to a school reunion. The school I went to is a very elite private school in Sydney. Many of the people that I went to school with are now very successful doctors and lawyers, and even academics.

I was asking myself why am I not one of them. My experiences as an adolescent in all-boys school, which included often being called a “poofter”... somehow defined my life inasmuch as I said “no” to this or “I don’t want this” or “it hasn’t made me happy” or I was scandalised by the injustice of it or I otherwise simply didn’t fit in or in the end did not want to fit in anymore. Queer as it may sound, it is possible that *because* of the very opportunities and privileges I unjustifiably have always had, I or my unconscious has driven me to be unhappy and/or unsuccessful, as if I had to pay for the guilt and responsibility for benefiting from an unjust society.⁷

Nikó: It’s funny how I was called names in school already: queer, pervert etc.

I feel like this is still going on. I’m exactly the same way caught between the straight heterosexual, heteronormative world and what is traditionally queer.

⁷ In her wonderful book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam writes: “Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault... failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam 2011, 3).

I am lost in this space in-between. And this space has no name or privilege.

You and I, as persons of the in-between, we want a society that not only does not discriminate against gays and lesbians, bi and trans but also acknowledges that sexuality and gender are more fluid and complex than have been admitted. This has some political consequences.

Peter: Even for straight people.

Nikó: Even for straight people. You are attracted to queer people. I am too, but we are not exactly the same. And also that queer is not inclusive enough. You can be heterosexual and queer. You are allowed a choice in there.

Peter: There is an argument, of course, that some queer theorists make that once you are queer, it makes no sense to call yourself heterosexual or homosexual. Queer is in a way beyond the opposition between the two.

Nikó: And it is attacked for its vagueness, for it being so indefinite because all sorts of murky weirdness can hide behind queer, sometimes even heterosexuals!

Peter: Some of the most passionate detractors of what we were doing with the Mardi Gras float were people who identified as queer and whose partners were of the opposite gender. Their argument, I believe, was that if you are queer, it does not matter what gender your partner is. And yet, for them heterosexuality remains the antithesis of GLBTQI identities. The opposition between heterosexuality and GLBTQI identities must be maintained. Norrie mAy-Welby, on the other hand, stepped into the debate and noted that if you take as a premise that transsexuals are part of the queer community, then most of them and their partners consider their sexuality to be heterosexual. "Sexual identity is not sexuality," *zie* said, "and the former can be queer/transsexual while the latter may be heterosexual." On that basis alone, according to Norrie, the opposition between heterosexuality and queerness breaks down (Banki 2013c). For me, personally, I feel I cannot say that I am simply not heterosexual,

because my dominant orientation has been clearly towards women and the world mostly considers me to be a man. Even if I do not close down all encounters with men and genderqueer people, it just makes no sense for me to say, "Heterosexuality is not my orientation"... which is maybe not the case for you.⁸

Nikó: No, for me it's equally to men and women. What do we want to say to close?

Peter: There's a very interesting question that arises out of my reading of Christine Beasley's work (2010): could there be a heterosexuality that is of interest for its own sake without having to appeal to queerness or queer theory? If, as she argues, within the field of critical gender/sexuality studies only marginalized sexualities, frequently named as queer sexualities, are ever considered to be "politically labile" and "transgressive" (206), then to argue for a "straight queerness" or "queer heterosexuality," as I have done, perhaps only reinforces the idea that heterosexuality of itself, (if there is such a thing), can only be boring, nasty and normative. If heterosexuality can only be saved or legitimized by becoming "queer" or non-monogamous, then perhaps something important remains un-thought. Maybe one has to question the very need to justify or legitimise sexual practices and identities. With sexual desire, do we not at a certain point come to the end of reasons and self-justifications? We can't necessarily justify who we are as sexual beings and what we do. That said, however, I tend to think if you allow yourself to open up in any way, that probably makes you more interesting. If you open yourself up at the level of partners, sexual attraction, to the problems and difficulties of polyamory, etc.

⁸ But then maybe, on the other hand, it is necessary at a certain point to *stop making sense* and affirm: "Heterosexuality is not my orientation." Avital Ronell suggests that when it comes to 'sexual existents' one should be careful not to make too much sense, for fear that in so doing we cheat ourselves out of some pleasure. (2013b).

Nikó: With alternative practices, skills, activities....

Peter: Gender...

Nikó: It does come down to all those in the end more than politics, right?

Peter: It's about pleasure.

Nikó: It's about pleasure. It's about desire.

Peter: Creativity.

Nikó: Creativity.

Peter: Risks.

Nikó: Possibilities, risk. For me, it's also about emancipation, giving, empowering yourself and others in new ways that may not fit in with traditional ideas, whatever they might be.

Peter: You in a sense were polyamorous before you became polyamorous, in that at a very elementary level, you just went for it.

Nikó: Yes, I didn't know there was a label or an idea or... no.

Peter: Then later you thought, "Okay. This is probably who I am and this is something worth fighting for."

It's not like if you go the other way, i.e. you're doing something to make a political statement. That's not where you're coming from. You were just doing this—or it was doing you—and then later there was a name. It's the same for me too.

Nikó: Even deeper than that. There was a desire that pointed towards polyamory. The practice emerged from this and then I discovered that the practice and ideas together had a name.

Peter: Then it becomes an issue to fight for.

Nikó: Then it becomes an issue to fight for because you want recognition, acknowledgement, an end to discrimination, you want to send this marginal idea into the world so that it becomes a shared possibility.

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