

Queering Desire; A Personal Reflection Essay

Lindsey Skelton

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Prof. David Miller

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Queer existence is many things. It is liberating, exhausting, romantic, comical, but a lot of the time it is isolating. Queerness by its very nature is something outside of the mainstream, it exists between and beyond the boundaries of normalcy. We often use this isolation to form communities of care and reframe the expectations of loving and living along our own definitions. I feel lucky to be part of such a revolutionary group, but even this does not protect from the isolation attached to my queer existence. There are many aspects of social life at work to create this feeling of otherness, it is systemic and intentional in its attempts to remove queer life from society. While we oppose this through radical love and theory that seeks to liberate us from the constant erasure, there are times that I feel exhausted by my requirement to constantly remain aware of my difference. Of course, we all feel this differently, based on intersecting forces of power and privilege contained within our identities. I enter this conversation through the concept of desire. I have dedicated much of my adult years to deconstructing and redefining aspects of love and living as they fit into my queer existence. While many things have seemingly fallen into place, and made much more sense through queerness, desire is still a place I get lost in. I will consider my trouble with desire alongside compulsive heterosexuality, lesbianism, and homonormativity. In this, I will outline the larger feeling of queer isolation that accompany having to remap aspects of life that everyone else seemingly gets to take for granted.

It saddens me to consider the commonly held experiences that we have fractured and specified based on the participant. Desire, as Guy Hocquenghem (1972) observes in *Homosexual Desire*, is not something that discerns homosexual from heterosexual. He describes desire as a constant flux, emerging in different forms that only produce meaning based on the context in which we exert it. In the attempts to eradicate queer life, desire has become deeply political. Without being able to control the ever-present flux of wanting, society has created arbitrary

categories of homosexual and heterosexual to organize and regulate. This difference is constructed and founded in the interest of hate. Further, this division was not drawn equally; one must be normal while the other perverse.

I grew into my queer identity unable to access desire as Hocquengham outlines, as something we all share and experience. I only knew the separation between ‘normal’ and queer. Moving away from the comforts of socially accepted desire into something I had only ever known as difference was daunting. To a certain extent, I felt myself draw away from desire completely and conceptualized it as something outside my identity and apart from my life. While this single-faceted sense of othering that comes with queer desire contributed to the overall feelings of isolation, it becomes further complicated when using this background of desire to explore other aspects of my queer identity.

The first term I learned that indicated my sexuality to me was “compulsive heterosexuality”. Through the work of lesbian feminist theorists in the past, compulsory heterosexuality is recognized as the enforcement of heterosexual orientation and rituals on to women through various material and ideological forces within society (Rich, 1980). In my time, however, I got this information from an online PDF that described in much more colloquial terms. Since first learning this term, and exploring it further through authors like Adrienne Rich, I have found a need to expand on it to properly explain my experience with desire. I felt incredibly seen by the observations made by Rich in her work on compulsory heterosexuality. To fully subject myself to the othering inherent in queer desire, I felt I had to be absolutely certain that I was, in fact, a lesbian. I clung to the possibility that I could hold even the slightest attraction to men, enough to keep me safe in the possibility of normalcy. As such, I used any form of heterosexual tendency or experience as a reason to deny my actual sexual identity. It was

not until I found the language of compulsive heterosexuality and explored lesbian theorists that I discovered how intentional this process was. Now exposed to the material and social forces producing that feeling, that needing to be attracted to men, and the intentionality of it all to erase queer existence, I feel simultaneously liberated and more isolated than before.

I needed to expand on this further due to the development of my gender identity. Rich, and other lesbian scholars of the time, lacked the language and subjectivities that we have now regarding gender diversity. While my experience as a young person becoming exposed to the ideologies and pressures of heteronormative society was defined by womanhood, I do not associate with that gender identity. As such, I find myself relating to the theories of queer feminist women while considering myself as something else. With this, I reference a slight connection to the overall isolation of queerness, now feeling othered within my own community, but I often choose instead to view this theory as a launch pad. I take Rich's definition of compulsory heterosexuality and apply it to myself as someone who was socialized as a woman and continues to be seen as one. However, I also use it to critique the way we construct gender and force our childhood gender assignments to define our adult experiences. Especially when we are thrust so aggressively into said gender roles as children and given no language or platform to express our disagreement.

Compulsive heterosexuality complicates my relationship with desire as it further confuses what I truly feel, and what feelings are imposed upon me. As I grow more comfortable into my queer identity, I find myself less fooled by the traps of compulsive heterosexuality. However, it still creeps into my life and provokes anger and doubt. As I struggled with committing to the repressed queer category of desire initially, one can imagine how difficult it becomes when the pressures to perform heterosexuality bear down on my gender and queerness in tandem. A peek

at the path society paved for me to follow, and on it I see my friends and family strolling carelessly while I hike up the hill of doubt and discomfort. It is not only heterosexual rituals that compulsive heterosexuality promotes, but the very ‘normal’ desire it promises, and the further demonizing of anything else. In this, I feel the simultaneous perversion of my queer desire itself and the violation in feeling such desire at all given my role as an assumed woman to be dependent on and attracted to men. The pressures to conform to heterosexuality double down and remind me further how othered my queer desire is.

These feelings are further exacerbated by the specificities of lesbian sexuality. Lesbianism is a threat to hetero-patriarchy as it creates the possibility for a population of people to not have to rely on men for anything (Radicallesbians, 1970; Clarke, 1981). The gender equality movement coupled with queer liberation has produced the conditions for lesbianism to flourish (Miller, 2023). The increased financial freedom awarded through feminist activism along with the decentring of the nuclear family structure under neoliberal capitalism meant that non-men as a group became less reliant on men for survival. Additionally, the gay liberation movements of the past and present have fostered a community of people who can organize and generate social relationships together (D’Emilio, 1998). As such, non-men are less reliant on the social protection of men as well. Despite the incredible positivity and progression these moments have brought to the lesbian community, I find they have also intensified the threat lesbians pose to men and heteronormative, patriarchal society. The forces exerted over queer people to act in accordance to serving and supporting the power of men are aggressively directed towards lesbians due to the multi-faceted threat we pose (Clarke, 1981). This is not to say that no other queer groups face equal pressures, but to display the specificities of these pressures directed at my desires as a lesbian.

I bring homonormativity into the conversation due to the opportunity it promises white, middle-class, monogamous, cis/passing queer people for protection through conformity. I had never considered this term before exploring it through Jasbir Puar's (2006) article, *Mapping US Homonormativities*. In this work, Puar references how some queer identities have been normalized in relation to their ability to assimilate into mainstream heterosexual society. This process rewards queer people for sacrificing their distinct identities in order to conform to hegemonic society while demonizing those who are unable to conform or wholly refuse to. This is important to consider in isolation and queer desire as it works to further fracture a commonly held experience as I referenced in the beginning. Homonormativity continues the attack on desire to perverse the already perverted. Any queer person who cannot conform to the privileged forms of queer existence are now othered along multiple axis. Meanwhile, those queer people who can and do conform are stripped of the very obscurity that makes them complex queer individuals.

This fallacy that we have the ability to be holistically accepted into mainstream society without forfeiting our queerness is entirely false. It is another mechanism used to ensure the dominance of heterosexism, whiteness, and patriarchy without recognizing the overt violence of these structures. It is also inherently oxymoronic as queerness itself is characterized by its inability to be defined according to heteronormative interpretations and experiences. Instead, it serves as a tool to provoke the queer community into separating ourselves and organizing based on who is closest to mainstream society. This working to further position monogamous heterosexuality as the ideal standard of desire.

I feel deeply connected to this process as someone who has wanted so badly for their desire to be considered normal. I am drawn to the prospect of having my queer desire normalized and accepted, as this was a feeling I gave up on when I accepted my lesbianism. The power of

compulsory heterosexuality and the specific isolations of lesbianism expressed above further this fascination. Learning the name and meaning of homonormativity helped break the spell it held over me. The critiques posed by Puar (2006) on the assimilationist nature of homonormativity assisted in this. Additionally, the conversation Marlon M. Bailey, Priya Kandaswamy, and Mattie Udora Richardson (2004) entitled *Is Gay Marriage Racist* exposed the cost at which the normalcy comes. In the fight for acceptance, these activists outline exactly who is left out of the conversation. Those positioned farther from mainstream society in their identities and desires are further invisibilized through the creation the 'normal queer subject'. The acceptance of one comes at the cost of another when discussing normalizing queer desire. This conversation between intersectional feminists outlines how the dominance of heterosexuality interacts with other social forces, namely racism, xenophobia, ableism, and transphobia, to selectively exclude certain queer groups from this normalization. It provides perspective to my previous idealization of normalcy. Normal desire within heteronormative, patriarchal, white supremacist, colonial society is not an ideal that I wish to achieve. The very fact that this has become ingrained in so many queer people, including myself, is a tribute to how present this prejudice is in our socialization.

Furthermore, I am interested in how homonormativity functions to make queer organization less effective. Decentralizing queer forces is a complex and sophisticated process that works to perpetuate the status quo. Thinking of ourselves as being differently queer, differently perverse in desire, ensures that our activism is weakened. Fracturing our community in this way only furthers the oppression of some and positions others closer to being oppressors themselves. I do not wish to continue pursuing activism on the basis of acceptability. Without

considering desire more inclusively and broadcasting the voices intersectionally marginalized queer people, liberation from the violence of ‘normalcy’ is not possible.

While I think it is important to recognize the isolation produced by the oppressive forces working to erase queer life, I also want to touch on the potential for liberation moving forward. For this, I reference back to Hocquenghem and his concept of polyvocality in desire. To elaborate on what was briefly mentioned above, Hocquenghem considers desire to be an amalgam that more specific wants are then drawn from (Hocquenghem, 1972). Considering desire in this way situates all desire as equal and allows for the theorization of homosexual and heterosexual desire as non-existent. Hocquenghem’s work focuses on the social construction of sexuality, as such most of his observations are referring to libidinal desire. I took issue with this when first introduced to *Homosexual Desire*. It felt limiting to discuss queerness as a product of desire without considering that many queer people do not engage in sexual activity or experience sexual desires. As mentioned, being a queer person who had spent many years separating themselves from sexual desire all together, I could not find myself in Hocquenghem’s work. Upon further inspection, however, I sought to expand by understanding of this work. In doing so, I learned about the vastness of desire as a concept. Interrogating my naïve belief that I am someone without desire revealed slowly a new realm of human life that I had not previously considered a part of desire. We need not restrict a word with such multiplicity to a single sexual meaning.

For example, I explore desire through survival and fulfillment. I could not apply this concept to my queer existence while considering it as related to libido. I attempted to locate where sexual desire influenced my decisions and the construction of my identity but, as I felt so disconnected from it, this yielded insignificant results. I thought I did not desire anything

significantly enough to make it relevant to my experience. When I state that desire revealed itself slowly to me, I mean it quite literally. Piece by piece I uncovered new facets of desire belonging to a family beyond sexuality. I desire books. Therefore, I must desire entertainment, challenge, knowledge. I desire adventure, connection, friendship. These things, too, exist within the polyvocal flux of wanting. For some, desire may manifest sexually, and sexuality may be the best lens to theorize this through. For me, it was a great help to expand how I conceptualized and defined desire, as it is something that contains multiple meanings.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak of desire in this way, as I believe it could ease the feelings of isolation for myself and other queer people. In limiting desire to libido, we place another divider among ourselves. The spirit of Hocquenghem's observations lives on through this conceptualization: there is no difference to desire, only specificities of the context in which it is exerted. I should not feel isolated from other queer people because sexuality is not the primary format that I experience desire. This is the same logic that Hocquenghem applies to homosexual and heterosexual, and a logic that could bridge other imagined forms of difference within society. I conclude with these thoughts to suggest that no matter the isolating power desire sometimes holds, it can simultaneously serve as a liberating tool. A tool that may help strengthen queer solidarity and shore up the division enforced on us through intersecting oppressive structures.

This essay served as my attempt to compact and define my feelings and experiences with desire as a queer person. I say this to remind the reader that this is an impossible task, as the minute I delineate a meaning for this concept, it becomes wrong, previous, and obsolete. The very nature of desire and queerness is to be in contestant movement; I can provide a snapshot, but I cannot pretend that it is holistic. Instead, I put this to writing now and commit to revisiting it later, updating its meaning, and remaining in tune with my eternal relationship to desire. I have

used compulsory heterosexuality, lesbianism, and homonormativity as lenses to help decipher my convoluted thoughts regarding desire. Though I chose these examples as they felt most relevant to the conversation, desire is constant and can be found in many other facets of life discussed both within and outside this course. I feel it important to address the shortcomings of this analysis to emphasize that it does not attempt to be static. We know that the queer experience cannot be separated from the absurd, the fluid, and the unintelligible. I intended to provide an account of my queer desire as just that.

As for the isolation I feel within desire, the ever-present otherness within queerness, its interference seems to have diminished as this essay has gone on. The days spent writing this personal reflection have proved incredibly hopeful. While I was prepared to feel saddened by such an in-depth analysis of my own isolation, I instead exposed the imaginary nature of these divisions that caused such feelings. Understanding the true social construction of these divisions does not make them any less real but provides reassurance in knowing that they are not founded neutrally. It is the intention of heteronormative, patriarchal society that we feel separate from one another, and separate from our own desires. Refusing to allow isolation to define my queer existence is an act of resistance and liberation. I did not realize the importance of this until completing this personal reflection, yet it is something I will carry with me each day moving forward. We share in desire, no matter for what it may be.

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