

# INTRODUCTION

## The Ontology of the Couple

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Can one be queer and coupled? Or is the duality that defines the couple form fundamentally at odds with queer existence? In 1998 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner wrote that “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 and to the nation” (556). Since then, however, we have witnessed the couple form become the major vehicle through which gays and lesbians have achieved access to cultural and legal institutions as well as broader social acceptance.<sup>1</sup> While before the late twentieth century, same-sex relations circulated largely outside what Michel Foucault (1978: 56) called the “monogamic and conjugal cell,” today many such peripheral sexualities have been absorbed under the couple’s ever-expanding jurisdiction. Does the present moment require a more honest reckoning with the increasingly central role of the couple in queer life? Or do we need, now more than ever, to revitalize our commitment to the production of a sexual politics that would resist the ideology of the couple?

It is the premise of this special issue that before one can be for or against it, split it up or repair it, one must first understand what the couple *is*. While they share no single vision, method, or approach, the essays collected here are thus united in their attempt to comprehend *the being of the couple*, whether understood as a romantic partnership, a fantasy of mutual recognition, or a death-driven sexual encounter. Staring into the Medusa face of what, at least at first glance, seems to be the least queer of all relational forms, the essays confront the pleasures and the dangers of forming dyadic bonds, forestalling easy judgment at the same time that they open up space for critique. To our joint project, we give the name *the ontology of the couple*, a phrase that names our attempt to comprehend what it means to be *in two*—that is, to have one’s identity or experience bound up for some duration

with another. Etymologically, the word *couple*, from the Latin *copula*, concerns “two of the same kind or class connected or considered together.”<sup>2</sup> Predicated on the fundamental sameness of its two terms, the couple, then, at least in this early definition, might be said to suppress—or worse, eliminate—difference. Indeed, in the context of queer theory, the couple is sometimes said to be founded on the expulsion of “the queer,” whose radical singularity is often positioned against the couple’s (hetero)normative dualism.<sup>3</sup> In Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), for example, “queerness” is the negative force that threatens to undo the Couple, and thus which the Couple must always “positivize” through its dialectical synthesis into a third—the Child—to perpetuate its fantasy of relation.

Must queerness, however, always be positioned *against* the couple? In 2016 we organized a two-day symposium at the ICI Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin, Germany, titled “The Ontology of the Couple” in the attempt to answer this deceptively simple question—a question with which the field of queer studies, we felt, had long been preoccupied. The wager of that symposium was this: that a more careful and studied analysis of the couple form in relation to queer life might encourage reassessment of a host of binary oppositions that had divided the field along what we felt were too dichotomous of lines: normativity versus antinormativity, future versus no-future, negativity versus optimism, relationality versus antirelationality, West versus non-West. Might a confrontation with the couple differently configure some of these field-defining antagonisms? The essays collected here extend the insights of the symposium, touching down on various of these debates in Anglo-American queer theory to elaborate what might, at least initially, seem like a contradiction in terms: a queer theory of the couple.

All the contributors to this special issue attempt to comprehend what in our queer numerology we think of as the radical *twoness* of the couple—that is, what it means to encounter another as *an other*, rather than absorb that other into a narcissistic fantasy of oneself or dialectically synthesize into a third. In the introductory essay, “The Ontology of the Couple,” we editors track the concept of the couple across feminist and queer theory using the numbers *one*, *two*, *three*, and *zero* as conceptual tools to navigate the complex history of these intellectual traditions. Constructing a queer numerology that draws on an eclectic archive of texts from early psychoanalytic theory to Daoist cosmology, we advocate for the necessity of reconceiving the fundamental *twoness* of the couple in relation to the repressed *zero* of queerness. In the second essay, “Playing for Keeps,” Heather Love explores the twoness of the couple through the contradictory feelings of regret

and triumph, pain and pleasure, that characterize being queer and coupled in the aftermath of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States. Destabilizing assumptions about the relative normativity or antinormativity of the couple, Love approaches Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* as a paradigmatic text through which to glimpse the everyday affects of queer life at a time in which "more and more queers are moving out of the basement into the parental bedroom." Nelson's career-long attention to the negative emotions and experiences, Love contends, puts her in a unique position to grapple with something as historically anathema to queer life as it is desirable: the joy of being with an other.

While Love explores the affective complexities of the queer parental bedroom, Bobby Benedicto asks who is forced into the basement when the queer couple emerges as the new emblem of two-in-oneness. Examining the 2012 murder of Jun Lin by Luka Magnotta, the so-called Montreal gay cannibal killer, Benedicto's essay, "Agents and Objects of Death: Gay Murder, Boyfriend Twins, and Queer of Color Negativity," reads Lin's killing as the symptom of homosexuality's reemergence as a form of life. Turning to the phenomenon of twinning in gay male culture as another example of this reinvention, Benedicto shows how the two-in-oneness performed by gay male couples on the Tumblr website *Boyfriendtwin* reveals an inability to confront and accept (racial) difference that can likewise be said to characterize Magnotta's encounter with Lin. Must the queer of color, however, Benedicto provocatively asks, always take on "the burden of repairing the very world that demands its annihilation"? Bringing theorists of queer negativity in conversation with scholarship at the intersection of psychoanalysis and critical race studies, Benedicto complicates the debates surrounding the "antisocial thesis" in queer theory by asking whether the death drive must be understood solely as the property of the white gay male subject with which it has historically been associated.

Is the queer always that unassimilable difference thrust outside the couple, or does it haunt the couple from within? In "Two Much: Excess, Enjoyment, and Estrangement in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*," Lee Edelman and Joseph Litvak, writing as a couple, turn to Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 thriller to argue that the couple form is queerer than it might initially appear. Constantly interrupted by queer thirds who threaten the apparent duality of the couple, they argue that "at the heart of the normative couple form itself is an antirelational queerness that, establishing an estrangement inherent in the couple, also makes the couple strange." Through a close analysis of the film's sexual innuendos as well as its formal techniques, they argue that the very process of formalization—be it the

law, language, the nation, or the couple form itself—can only cohere by projecting a foreign element that allows for the constitution of such totalizing entities at the same time that it threatens their very foundation. Queer impersonality and antisociality likewise pervade the couple in Annamarie Jagose’s auto-ethnographic piece “Anthropomorphism, Normativity, and the Couple,” in which she interrogates the presumed normativity of both coupled life and pet owning through powerful vignettes of her own experience of raising a dog with her partner. Taking issue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s assault on the household pet as a figure for developmentally compliant and oedipalized subjects, Jagose troubles facile distinctions between the coupled and the uncoupled as well as the human and the nonhuman. Destabilizing our ontological certainty about what the couple is, Jagose theorizes the couple as a space in which the familiar and the alien, the personal and the impersonal, produce unforeseen encounters with others both animal and human.

### Notes

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1. We are thinking here not only of the legalization of same-sex marriage in much of the West and beyond, but the much more intangible ways that the queer sexuality has transformed from “a threat to the state” (127)—as Leo Bersani described it in 1995—to a state-sanctioned space with the right to “intimate sexual conduct,” to cite Justice Anthony Kennedy’s majority opinion on the case of *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003. Indeed, as David Eng (2010: 35) has pointed out, it was the projection of the image of coupledom onto what was apparently a one-night stand that *Lawrence* struck down the sodomy law in Texas, and by extension thirteen other states.
2. *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. “couple,” [www.etymonline.com/word/couple](http://www.etymonline.com/word/couple) #etymonline\_v\_19176 (accessed August 21, 2018).
3. In Michael Cobb’s *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (2012), for example, “the uninterrogated supremacy of the couple” is said to turn upon its pathologization of “the single, the singular, or the person without a significant other,” a queer figure whose social exclusion stems from their uncoupled status (1).

**References**

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