

Queer Love? Really?

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Sex is queer,¹ a matter of polymorphous perversity as Freud knew a century ago,² but love not so much.³ Like sexual desire it, too, is universal,⁴ and like sexual desire it is experienced within and expressed to particular persons, with particular psyches, souls, and bodies, each of us embedded in specific cultures and historical situations. Like sexual desire, love can be experienced and expressed in what sometimes seems an infinity of ways, from tough to tender and all points in-between. Of course the two merge – maybe especially in youth, ah romantic love - but for many men⁵ not inevitably or always. Damon Young allows that “there is a love, somehow distinct from and irreducible to sex and its figures.”⁶ Thankfully, as there are situations where sex and love ought not combine, as the incest taboo affirms. While God’s love may be the archetype for many, for the secular parental love may be the source of any sense we have of love’s unconditionality. While few parents avoid making their love on occasion conditional, few – one hopes – love only conditionally. Knowing that love is – ought to be – unconditional, non-transactional, came from somewhere.

Sex can be casual, love never. Sex can be political; it can be a pastime, even an addiction. While not always chosen, love is more powerful – I know, that’s claiming a lot given how horny the young ones can be - what each of us wants and needs. Yes, sex too, but one can survive without sex if need be. Love not. It’s like oxygen for the heart. If one can control one’s behavior a sexless life is conceivable.⁷ A loveless life is another matter. One can live without sex but not without love. Sex is worldly, love not necessarily. Love feels transcendent – God again – and can exist even when sex is prohibited. When the two are fused, fucking is out-of-this-world.

Queer love in education brings me back to the incest taboo. In other eras – ah, the ancient Greeks, even in Foucault’s time (although the backlash is well underway⁸) – the strict separation of sex from teaching was not always obligatory. But in our prudish period teachers - whatever their sexual identity - better keep their distance from kids of any age. The institution where I work calls it conflict of interest, a legalistic phrase and rightly so, as the consequences can be legal. I keep my distance alright, keeping my office door open whenever (especially young male) students meet me there. Better to meet on Zoom; even the homophobic appear to relax when I’m not actually there. (Yes, I’ve a specific student in mind.) As for love, that could be cool, as long as the noun isn’t modified by “romantic” or “queer.” Infamously, Freud thought that the “best teachers are the real homosexuals,”⁹ an accusation obviously false empirically but in homosocial¹⁰ terms a theoretical point well taken. In that homosocial sense, all men are gay (as my husband insists), a conclusion one might also reach from Simpson’s insightful study of sport¹¹ or Herdt’s study of the Sambia.¹² In an essay on queer love David Halperin keeps our minoritarian identity intact while mixing sex and love, not conflating them, but skipping from one to the other, on occasion subsuming the one within the other. He strings together “passion, eroticism, love”¹³ when love can lift us – especially us gay male teachers – above (or around) the first two. The case be made that love starts before sex,¹⁴ learned as infants from our caretakers, often our mothers or another woman, although men are evidently increasingly involved. Halperin follows Foucault, determined to make what gay men experience as special and “new,” somehow sidestepping institutional formations,¹⁵ even asocial (after Bersani), always political (invoking Hocquenghem and Foucault).¹⁶ Sex and love between men are special alright, but they are also special and “new” for straight, bisexual, and trans people too. When Halperin writes of “love’s random vagaries, its weird or unexpected intensities, its obscure objects, uncertain aims,

unsystematic pleasures, and nonsensical desires,”¹⁷ surely he’s thinking of sexual desire not love, as the former can be anonymous and with groups while with latter tends to be more focused, even when it’s love of country. I’m in love with you, specifically. Pleasures follow, sexual and non-sexual. Sexual desire (of whatever stripe) doesn’t always observe social niceties but love can be quite observant of social forms, from holding hands to going to dinner with other couples, never mind marriage and raising children. Halperin is wrong when he writes “such love” – he’s referencing queer love but he means gay male sexual desire – resists integration into “sanitized” society.¹⁸ That’s what has happened to us: thank god. Gay, lesbian, and trans couples are totally routine in several societies: that’s how capitalism works; it incorporates anything subversive into commodities to be consumed. Capitalism compels obsession with the “new,” including in academic life, evident when Halperin – still discussing Foucault (not so new anymore) – writes “queer love entail[s] new modes of conduct.”¹⁹ Really? Nothing could be more ancient than love and sex between men,²⁰ as that Leviticus passage makes clear: after all, one doesn’t prohibit what’s not happening. Since time immemorial men have loved and had sex with each other, as they have loved and had sex with women and children. With sex anatomy has everything to do with it, but with love not necessarily. Love does not always – again, often ought not (in the case of children - and students I say) – eroticize. Sex could be socialized – especially if schools encouraged so - but love takes time, comes from the heart, is not necessarily an expression of desire - falling in love is a romantic phenomenon only, more to do with desire than love. Love is a decentered and sometimes unconditional affection for another. After twenty-six years – how long my husband and I have been together - sex and love can split apart. The fact that love remains long after lust fades requires one to acknowledge the two were always distinct. Having slept with more fine-looking young men than I can count during my (earlier) gay life, I know –

always knew - that lust was the consolation prize.²¹ Love never is. There are guys you fuck and guys you keep, i.e. “keepers,” and the two can be but not are not always the same guys.

Yes, love between men (and between women and women, between men and women) is “intense” but not necessarily “uncodified.”²² Men know their “codes” rather precisely, part of the reason why love between men can be so easy: we often understand each other exactly. Not only “homosociality”²³ follows. None of this constitutes “counter-conduct”²⁴ except possibly when sexualized, and then only to hypocrites and inhuman others (often trapped in institutionalized religions with their psychotic fundamentalisms). Homophobia is precisely that – fear of one’s repressed homosexual desire – projected as a “threat” that gay men might find happiness and express their good fortune in public.²⁵ Halperin thinks that unless marriage is queered it won’t work for gay men,²⁶ ignoring that marriage between a man and a woman doesn’t work so well either, a fact many attempt to contradict by emphasizing ritual, roles, and tradition. Only strong socialization or commitment can contradict the tensions that can arise when two people – however much they love and/or sexually desire each other – try to make a life together. All the clichés about married life convey just how queer marriage is - never mind the divorce rate. Moreover, recall that men are involved in both gay and straight marriage. Many men can separate sex from love and notoriously do; gay marriages are hardly the only kind that can be “open.” Men cheat on their wives constantly; I’ve slept with more than a few myself.

Halperin pronounces the “lonely, thankless, and inexpressible nature of love, whether romantic or parental.”²⁷ One may love alone but it’s not lonely, as love’s quite the companion in itself. Nor is love thankless; it is its own reward. Even when bottled up inside it exceeds expression, certainly in words – I love you more than I can say – so one finds non-linguistic and

indirect ways to communicate, from keeping the ice tray filled for his cocktail hour to smiling at his then inebriated efforts to be amusing. Such signs not only acknowledge the “poverty of expression,”²⁸ as my husband gets it. I can’t imagine life without him.

Gay men, lesbians, transgender queer (including straight and bisexual) people remain at risk, even in the United States and Canada - but then so is everybody. Everyone will be as long as humanity is capable of inhumanity, something not so easily educated out of our make-up. Overall, at least in those two countries, queer people are no longer victims on a mass scale, no longer sexual renegades. As Damon Young notes: “Queer (or rather gay) love, then, has achieved visibility ... at the paradoxical cost of its own absorption into a universal for which it now valiantly stands as an exemplary model.”²⁹ Not sure how “valiant” our love is, but “absorbed” is surely right: now we’re in TV retirement ads for god’s sake.³⁰ That’s one price we pay for such “normalization” - sole possession of the term “queer.”³¹ We’re not so queer anymore. We never were, actually. That was what was mistaken about the appellation in the first place, that and the hatred behind it.³² And “straight” people were never not queer. Given the down-low and the too-often nasty politics of heterosexual relationships,³³ so-called straight people could be considered more queer than we are. Yes: “love [is] something somehow distinct from sex, less punctual, less decisive, less insistent, more fragile, more difficult to figure, and more durational, if not enduring.”³⁴

We gay men don’t own love. No one does. All of us – gay, straight, bisexual, transgender – seek someone to love. That same someone may be the same person we desire sexually, but not necessarily. “Queer love” in education? Keep it confined to the curriculum. Sit alongside Halperin: study poems lamenting and celebrating love in all its forms, including sexual ones. The

distinctions and confluences between love and sexual desire? Clearly a topic for courses in philosophy, social studies, health. Its variability of feeling and expression? Enter anthropology and history. Science has to be in there somewhere – oh yes, that gay gene – but it is history³⁵ that strikes me as knowledge of most worth. Only then can students see how specific and universal love is.

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Endnotes

¹ Referencing Sedgwick, Jagose (1996, 97) reminds that “despite its routine circulation as a descriptive term, queer can only be auto-descriptive emphasizes the extent to which queer refers to self-identification rather than to empirical observations of other people’s characteristics.”

² As my friend Peter Taubman reminded me when I shared with him the Halperin essay. Peter knows psychoanalysis; you can get a glimpse of that erudition in Taubman 2011.

³ Damon Young (2017, 197) would seem to disagree, defining queer love as “love that is nonheterosexual or otherwise at odds with gendered norms,” a conception that mixes two concepts - and phenomena - that especially educators ought to be keep apart. He imagines love as even “queerer than sex” (2017, 198), but later allowing that queer love is “not reducible to sexuality” (2017, 209).

⁴ No “liberal insistence,” no “high-minded egalitarianism” (Young 2013, 15) I am suggesting, just an empirical (for fundamentalists, an ugly and intolerable) fact. See also Young 2017, 197..

⁵ There is no “monolithic male subject,” Awkward (1995, 98) reminded.

⁶ Young (2013, 15) is commenting on the question Luke asks Jon in *The Living End*.

⁷ Technically speaking, that is, as sex goes on in the head maybe more than anywhere else.

⁸ <https://medium.com/queertheory/foucaults-metoo-moment-a672a1d9a869>

Accessed July 26, 2021.

⁹ Quoted in Taubman 2011, 4.

¹⁰ Sedgwick is of course the source here, for decades quoted widely to make a series of significant points about men and the often convoluted character of their bonds with each other. “Within a patriarchal culture,” Savran (1998, 186) points out, “the more intense male homosocial desire becomes, the more intensely male homosexual desire becomes stigmatized and proscribed. As Sedgwick emphasizes, this pattern has proven crucial at least since the early modern period for the maintenance of relations between men. . . . For Sedgwick, the vigilant policing of the male bond ensures that desire between men will rarely be directly expressed in (what passes for heterosexual) discourse. Rather, by means of an erotic triangle, male desire is mediated through the body of a woman whom two men profess to love.” Some convert empirical fact into political potential; Derrick (1997, 223 n. 27) argues “that homosexuality disrupts the narcissism of male homosocial mirroring.” Also citing Sedgwick, Stokes (2001, 18) addresses the racial nature of homosocial bond: “White supremacy, then, can be usefully understood as a homosocial network that commodifies and appropriates the bodies of white women and black men in order to consolidate both whiteness and heterosexuality as governing ideologies, ever present

abstractions, condensed forms of panic, and political structures,” adding “that the homosocial may be a necessary component of any attempt to keep whiteness white, to keep whiteness pure.”

¹¹ Simpson 1994. He studies much more than sport, but on that topic (and focused not on coaches but players): “Hugging, kissing, jumping on top of on another, delirious with pleasure, young men and old, express for a moment, with the sacred walls of the football ground, a love that is as exuberant and irrepressible as it is inconceivable outside those walls”(Simpson 1994, 79).

¹² Pinar 2006, 23-26.

¹³ 2019, 399.

¹⁴ They may start simultaneously, as Freud postulated:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25988723/>

Accessed July 27, 2021.

¹⁵ Foucault was wrong when he wanted the love between men not to “resemble any of those already institutionalized” (quoted in Halperin, 2019, 400). Resemble these it does, made obvious by how easily gay men have slipped into institutionalized married life. Never mind “tops” and “bottoms.”

¹⁶ 2019, 403 n. 14. Hocquenghem inspired my first foray into queer theory, celebrating anal eroticism while mocking the phallocentrism of the macho-Marxists in my field (Pinar 1983).

¹⁷ 2019, 419.

¹⁸ 2019, 399.

¹⁹ 2019, 401.

²⁰ As Jane Ward (2015) reminds. On “heteroflexibility” see 2105, 28, on infantile sexuality – mentioned earlier - see 2015, 29, on sex as symbolic see 2015, 36.

²¹ Young (2017, 200), too, notes that love – as “attachment” (a rather vanilla term for love, no?) - cannot be “reduced” to lust.

²² 2019, 400.

²³ And its “vexed relationship between the homosocial and the homosexual” (Savran 1998, 73). Discussing the Beats - Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Cassady - Savran (1998, 69-70) suggests that their “tangled and shifting homosocialities ... not only challenge the normative male bonds of the [post World War II] domestic revival but also dramatize a deep-seated disturbance in the relations between son and father, the subject and the Law, and the writer and the society in which he must reluctantly participate. Despite the fact that the first two figures were ostensibly homosexual and the latter two ostensibly heterosexual, the complexity and intensity of their bonds attests to the difficulty in separating the homosexual from the homosocial.”

²⁴ Halperin, 2019, 400.

²⁵ 2019, 403. Foucault seems Halperin’s source here: see 2019, 403 n. 14. Genius that he was, even Foucault cannot escape the historical moment he lived through. Nor can he – nor any of us – escape our own psychic situation. When Foucault found what to do the next morning an issue – even a political one (see that note 14) – he was projecting. How about breakfast?

²⁶ 2019, 404.

²⁷ 2019, 408. Halperin is here referencing Robert Hayden’s poem “Those Winter Sundays.”

²⁸ 2019, 413. Yes, love can make us “illiterates” (Halperin 2019, 416) - a view disputed by Young who asserts that “love is narrative” (2017, 198) – but I say *all* of us, not just those who claim “queer.” So-called “counter-love” (2019, 416) – by definition not love – seems grasping at

straws, as is Halperin's entire essay, an erudite attempt to keep queer the exclusive property of gay men.

²⁹ 2013, 14.

³⁰ It's summer 2021 as I write; on TV are TIAA ads featuring an aging couple. So much for queer love being demarcated by temporality (Young 2013, 15), specifically "no future."

³¹ Young (2017, 199) would seem to concur, observing that now homosexuality is legally legitimate it is no longer queer.

³² Not only "behind" but "within" it, as homophobia internalized by those who identify as gay can be crippling. Hardly the same as the violence – the murder – associated with "Brokeback Mountain," but psychologically crippling all the same.

³³ My husband and I just finished watching (yes, on Netflix) the first three seasons of "Virgin River." No gay theme except indirectly: the unpleasantness of these heterosexual relationships – even between Mel and Jack – could turn anyone gay.

³⁴ Young 2013, 21.

³⁵ For years – when I was working on these topics (Pinar 1998, 2001, 2006) – I subscribed to the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, surely a central source for any curricular treatment of the subject: <https://jhistsex.org/>