

POLY THEORY:



Making Meaning and Re-making Culture through Rhizomatic Intimacy

By Joy Brooke Fairfield and her rhizome
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Hi everyone! So this presentation is called

POLY THEORY: Making Meaning and Re-making Culture through Networked Romantic Relationships

But I actually changed the title to:

POLY THEORY: Making Meaning and Re-making Culture through Networked ~~Romantic Relationships~~ *Rhizomatic Intimacy*

I'll talk more about what this word rhizomatic means, but the reason for the change is that *(like many people who are practicing non-traditional relationships)*, I struggle to find terms that feel accurate. For me, non-traditional relationship practice involves trying to shed labels *(and the norms they imply)* so the process of creating new labels feels counterproductive. I was playing with this term "networked" but the IT/computing resonances weren't working for me. I don't want to be "networked" with my partners and lovers; I want to exist sensuously and passionately with them.

The term rhizomatic refers to a certain kind of plant structure, most famously recognizable in the ginger root. I felt it might be helpful to ground this theoretical conversation in the planet and its organic, biological processes. Please take my change of title as an indication that the terms and concepts I'm sharing are still under construction.

As a brief introduction, my name is Joy and I've been a "practitioner" of non-traditional relationships for the past eight years *(or thirty depending on how you count)*. Probably clear by now, I am also a shameless academic. As I see it, academic discourse seeks to describe world phenomenon in increasingly specific and precise ways, eliminating as much judgment and prescriptiveness as possible. The critique of academic discourse is that it is very dry and places a high value on being dispassionate. For people *(like me!)* who value a passionate encounter with life, the highly intellectualized, abstracted communication style of academia can sometimes feel constraining. However I find it also deeply freeing to work towards the (impossible) goal of observing and analyzing the world without judgment. If anyone understands how precise communication can result in increased bodily freedom, it's poly people, so I hope you'll go along with me in my somewhat stilted academic language.

I'm currently a PhD student at Stanford in the department of Theatre and Performance Studies. Performance Studies is a relatively recent academic field that studies anything and everything through the lens of performance. People commonly



associate performance with theatre, music or dance, but at a basic level, the word “perform” just means *to do* something, and performance means *a doing*.



For example, think of the “performance” of a “high-performance vehicle.” In that sense, “performance” refers to the effectiveness and efficiency of the car. High-performance simply means it does what is expected of it very well. In Performance Studies we are always inquiring not about what something IS but what it DOES. Not its innate *nature*

but rather how it performs or functions. One of the foundational principle of Performance Studies is that 99% of what we do in daily life is not completely spontaneous original action, but rather, is a repetition with a difference of something that we’ve seen before. As we move through life performing these repeated doings of identity (our gender, culture, community, profession, education, etc) we affect and are affected by each other. Just like audience members witness and incorporate what they see onstage or screen, so too does witnessing and incorporating interpersonal performances have the power to change us. While to some the notion of performing can seem fake, in Performance Studies we think of performance as a powerful way to enact change. By “doing” our identity in certain ways, we build communities and share information with each other. Innovations in how we “do things” shift daily performances of identity, introducing differences into the shared behavior pool just as individual gene mutations introduce variations into DNA.

My academic approach to talking about non-traditional relationships involves the question of what they *do* and what they have *the potential to do* within culture. I’m referring specifically to contemporary Western culture, i.e. Globalized/(Post) Industrial Commodity/Consumer/Corporate Capitalism (*in academia we call this neoliberalism*). This current paradigm circumscribes most of our personal choices whether we like it or not. I’m concerned about the effects of this current ideological paradigm on the health and well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. While the goal of academia is to remain dispassionate and non-prescriptive, I remain passionate that life on this planet is beautiful and should continue (*hopefully that’s the last “should” I’ll say in this paper*).



I embark upon this academic inquiry because **I believe the knowledge generated through “doing poly” has the potential to disrupt widespread habits of thought and action common to contemporary culture.** In addition to throwing a sabot

into the machine of globalized capitalism, I also see “poly theory” (*as I’m somewhat playfully calling it*) rich with alternative possibilities for coexistence that can be widely useful outside of our specific community.

In other words, in looking closely at the daily life practices of poly people I see the generation of a new body of knowledge—or perhaps a newly remixed body of knowledge—that has paradigm-shifting possibilities. While this sounds new-agey, I see it not as a grand revolution in consciousness, but a continuation of cultural change, part of an ongoing process of shaping our shared social world. I propose “poly theory” as a new avenue of inquiry for philosophical thought within the previously existing field of cultural studies, described below. More than just creating a new topic for dissertations, establishing “poly theory” as a legitimate mode of analysis (like feminist theory) reframes questions of interpersonal intimacy as a productive category of theoretical analysis. The practice of “rhizomatic intimacy,” a term I promise I’ll unpack momentarily – results in the development of ways of knowing and being that, if further disseminated, may be able to effectively perform change on dominant contemporary culture.

So this is essentially a manifesto for a new mode of analysis: a poly theory lens through which to examine the world. What I see through that lens might be very different from what others see. Feminist theorists, for example, frequently disagree with each other, but through their ongoing conversations—and the trickle-out manifestations of those conversations within popular culture—discourse is generated, old ideologies are eroded and new ones can accrete.



For example, the feminism of Hillary Clinton, Lady Gaga and the characters in the movie “Bridesmaids” don’t agree, but together in conversation, they begin to establish a discourse, a way of talking about gender and power in this contemporary moment.

Most practitioners of “rhizomatic intimacy” develop theories and philosophical positions on love, relationship, identity and even culture as a natural outgrowth of their lived experience. My theories here do not attempt to stake out a definitive territory for all of us involved in this kind of relationship. Rather, I am trying to describe (*specifically and dispassionately*) the implications of what I see when I look closely at my experiences and those of my friends and lovers struggling with and savoring life inside non-traditional relationships. I value that knowledge as more than simply anecdotal, but as evidence of transpersonal workings of culture moving through us.

When I talk about culture, I’m talking about shared meaning. Culture exists from the micro to the macro level: the culture of a single household to the culture of the planet. Usually we talk about racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, age, sexual identity or interest-based groupings: youth culture, gay culture, Native American culture, German culture, D&D culture. It can be thought about as a shared repository of transpersonal meaning, as well as the mode of transmission for that meaning (*it’s the bank but also the currency*).

Culture involves shared reference points as well as shared communication modes, making it like an inside joke writ large: it is collectively-created meaning, widespread and well-documented enough to transmit itself between strangers and over time.

Cultural Studies is an academic discipline that looks at how a society knows itself. While the fields of sociology and anthropology rely on empirical measurements that hold some claim of scientific objectivity, Cultural Studies examines how we generate and share meaning through art, language, and media representation. Cultural theorists look closely at art objects like movies and novels as well as cultural structures like social groups or public events. These products are considered not simply expressive or practical, but as evidence of the operating worldviews of a time and place. So a cultural studies analysis of, say, *The Avengers* might look at the representation of class and wealth as manifest in the character of Tony Stark. What can he tell us about this current socio-cultural moment and, perhaps, our capitalistic idolatry of the benevolent genius billionaire?

Cultural theorists analyze how relationships of power and structures of established meaning pervade culture in often subliminal ways, creating the texture of what we see as “everyday life.” People who think this way (*like this girl*) often get accused of “reading too much into things.” But this is the beauty of this mode of analysis: social habits that have become so normalized that they can be mistaken for “natural” are revealed as constructed by human concepts, and thus susceptible to change. (*For example, 50 years ago many people would have said that it is “unnatural” for a girl to have this scalp-lock hairdo that I’m currently sporting...now we know that “nature” has nothing to do with those kinds of gender norms and expectations*). Appeals to “nature” are almost always attempts to uphold the social order against actual or imagined attacks.

Individuals who cannot fit comfortably into the accepted social order of things



have particularly useful perspectives on that social order.

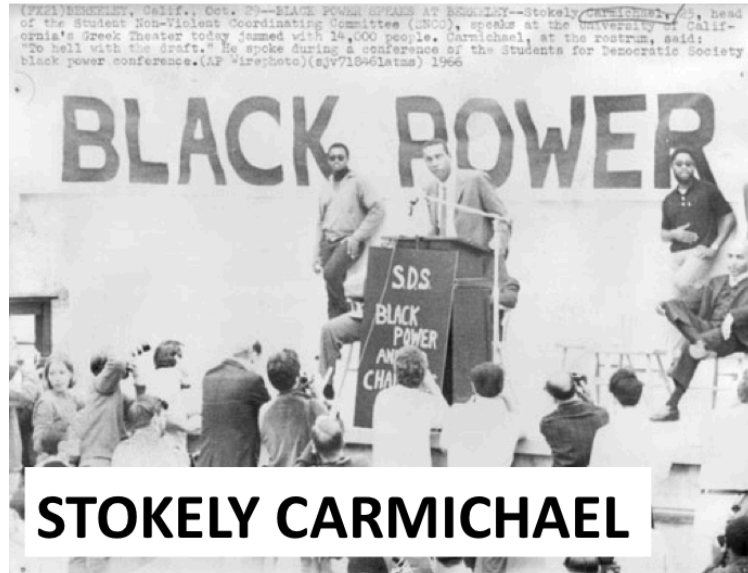
Cultural theory acknowledges that certain individuals who cannot fit comfortably into the social accepted order of things have particularly useful perspectives on that social order. Thus, they can be invaluable in helping to understand and deconstruct it. Falling under the general rubric of “Cultural Studies” are a variety of area studies like African-American Studies, Feminist and Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Transgender Studies. These sub-fields study

not just *people* who identify as black or queer, but the forms of knowledge that have been produced both as a result of and in spite of their position as a subjugated population. The invention of new language to describe community-specific embodied knowledge can be a powerful step to imagining life without those constraints.

For example, in the late 1960s a black activist named Stokely Carmichael coined the phrase “institutionalized racism.” A structure of injustice that was utterly obvious to people of color in this country was given form in shared language and as such, became easier to identify in its various manifestations. In the early 90s, a queer theorist named Michael Warner introduced the term “heteronormativity,”

naming what had until then been an unnamed but oppressive force with a variety of negative effects on gay and lesbian subjects. Both Carmichael and Warner were able to translate embodied knowledge that had emerged from observations of their own immediate community into shareable concepts that challenged the un-interrogated operating assumptions of their culture. Naming these concepts brings experiences that might otherwise be considered simply “personal” into shared awareness: first to the subculture itself, and later to attentive others in the wider public. This brings to mind the classic feminist slogan “The personal is political.” Of course, revealing social pressures and constraints through new terminology does not immediately make them disappear, but it can be a first step to a much longer process of social change that must then enroll activism, advocacy, artistic creation, public and private discourse, legislation, etc. Through these various activities, all of which also generate new language and concepts, subjectivities are shaped and communities are formed.

The struggle for social equality of one minority group doesn’t simply improve the living conditions for members of that sub-population. Rather, the discourse produced helps break apart previously un-interrogated structures of dominance that have imperceptibly limited *all* of society. For example, the civil rights movement began the long journey of increased equality for people of color in this country. It also resulted in the widespread dissemination of the idea that discrimination based on *anything* other than the content of one’s character is unethical and unacceptable and that no one should accept second-class citizenship. Similarly, the rise of feminist thought and activism not only brought about many material changes in the lives of women, but also began to wash away at notions of gender, family, and labor that had previously been considered ‘natural’. Queer Liberation activists work not just towards the acceptance of gay people as normal but towards a world in which normalcy is no longer the dominant social ideal. Trans theory holds within it not only a critique of the gender binary, but through questioning the “naturalness” of male and female categorization, it levels challenges to all the social institutions in which the policing of gender takes place, for example, the medical system, the prison system, and the military.

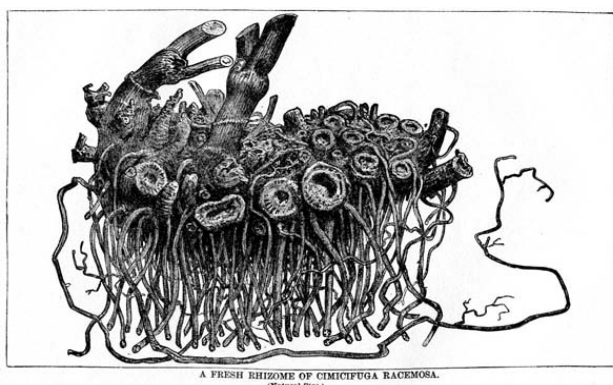


In each of these examples, it's not *being* a minority, but *doing* minority identity that results in the generation of new knowledge. *Being* black doesn't make you wise, *being* trans doesn't make you wise, but *doing* black in a racist, white-dominated society means you learn certain valuable things. *Doing* trans—ie, figuring out how to live and love and grow and thrive as yourself in a transphobic society—results in certain kinds of knowledge. These ideas get shared through art, academic writing, political activism and simple conversation. Once those ideas reach a kind of critical mass, there is enough momentum to shift society's norms. Usually the legislation lags way behind the wisdom of individuals living out those existences, as well as that of their allies. Culture, as cemented through legislation, through keeps laughing at its old inside jokes long after they've stopped being funny to most people.

It is crucial to acknowledge that non-monogamous people do NOT face the same kind of violent discrimination suffered by many of these subjugated groups. By and large we fly under the radar of overt societal discipline, and many of us benefit from a backpack full of social privilege based on other factors that can balance out the potential difficulty of our non-traditional relationships. By comparison, queer theory was birthed in the crucible of the AIDS crisis, and trans theory is co-arising with activism that is focused on trying to keep transfolk from getting murdered.

Non-monogamy is a chosen practice. Even if we are somehow “genetically programmed” to love multiple people, we choose how many partners we are going to have. This identity-structure is based on actions, on choice, on *consent*. Our minority is a *doing*, not a *being*, and it is through this *doing* of multiple partnerships that new meaning is made. Personally, I'll be sad if “a poly gene” is discovered. The inconclusiveness of whether non-monogamy is a choice or a biological proclivity is valuable. As such, it becomes impossible to hammer down a firm identity for “The Poly Person.” And why would we want to? **Our alternative relationships are not dedicated to building or bolstering individual identities but about acknowledging the myriad ways in which our bodies and hearts are interconnected and desire even greater connectivity.** This is very important for non-monogamous activists to consider: how can we advocate for increased social visibility and greater access to rights without constructing another solid box for “us” to be inside and “those other people” to be outside of? As we resist the boxes of “monogamy” and “mainstream relationships” let us endeavor to avoid building new ones in which to trap ourselves.

In an effort to avoid these boxes, I propose the notion of the rhizome.



Rhizome is a term in botany for a specific kind of root system that grows outwards in horizontal underground stems, emitting many roots and shoots, each of which has the potential to grow into a new plant. Because new stalks can grow from any number of nodes, rhizomatic plants, like bamboo and clover spread quite rapidly, expanding outwards even more than up. Rhizomes are notoriously hardy; they

grow underground, protected from many environmental threats, and they can store large

amounts of energy. This gives them a great longevity: certain colonies of rhizomatic *Quaking Aspen* trees, for example, seem to have been alive for over 1 million years.

Rhizomatic structure and growth has captured the imagination of philosophers for a long time. Carl Jung used the rhizome as a metaphor for the collective unconscious. French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze adopted the term to describe a model of system-building that contrasts with typical Western habits of logic and organization. According to Deleuze, the traditional mode of rational analysis since the Greeks is based on the model of the tree. In this so-called “arboreal model,” rational thought and structure starts from a place of solid certainty and moves outward, with each increasingly weak element dependent on the stronger branch before it. Movement through this structure unfolds through contemplating a series of either/or options, choosing one, and following that choice until the next juncture occurs. Branches on each side create symmetry over the y-axis. Above and below the x-axis, the root system mirrors the branches. The arboreal model is based on a hierarchical and binary logic tied to a stable vision of origin and end. As such, it reinforces notions of authority, dominance, dependency, lineage and linearity.

Arboreal models of organization show up in the famous model of “the family tree,” as well as in “chain of command” schematics of how power flows through institutional structures.

The rhizome is not the opposite of the tree – in fact rhizomes can contain hierarchical or binary elements, they just also exceed and transgress them. Cutting across power structures to connect at will, the rhizome model has no beginning, no end, and no center. It grows in multiple directions at once and can suffer a variety of losses without dying. Asymmetrical, de-centralized, and non-hierarchical, the rhizome model does not prioritize power and doesn’t fear annihilation (*a good example of a rhizomatic structure is the internet*).



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I propose the rhizome as a way of imagining the structure of multiple loving relationships. Rhizomatic intimacy proposes a fundamentally non-hierarchical vision of connectedness. This is not to say that every love is the same: the love rhizome has thick branches of intense, long-lasting, committed connection and very fine wispy branches of short or faint intimacy. But the non-hierarchical structure implies that all different kinds of connection can be meaningful, life-affirming, and world-structuring. Life-partnership need not be the pinnacle of intimacy as commonly imagined, but can instead be a significant stalk on a larger root system of love. Rhizomatic intimacy is something that *everyone* practices to some degree: parents love all their children, and strong love connections frequently flourish with non-romantic, non-parental relations like friends, mentors or mentees, aunts and uncles, godparents, as well as temporary care-givers like nannies, end-of-life nurses, and sex-workers.

While everyone experiences rhizomatic intimacy, non-monogamous people are consciously investigating it, including the scary parts that involve sex and long-term

commitment. It's not surprising that these are the parts of love that are hard to imagine sharing. Sex and enduring companionship (especially between possibly reproductive couples) has been legislated by the social order for as long as humans have been organizing themselves into groups. Jealousy, competitiveness, and fear of loss around sex and relationship have been engraved so deeply into our social habits that they feel very "natural." Whether or not there is a biological basis to jealousy is outside my area of expertise, but what is certainly true is that in both idea and practice, rhizomatic intimacy requires a radical revisioning of jealousy and competitiveness. This is why most people don't do it. It's often the first thing people say when they learn about my relationship structure: "Don't you get jealous?" Maybe some of you lucky people don't experience jealousy but for me, part of the practice of rhizomatic intimacy has involved trying to understand this deeply physical, emotional distressing experience.

As a preliminary case study for poly theory I want to look at this specific practice that non-monogamous people *do*.

What do poly people do? They learn how to deal with feelings of jealousy.

Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge this as a skill, or what in performance studies we call technique. Within non-monogamous culture, there are a variety of resources (books, workshops, therapists, etc) that offer practical advice on what to do when this inevitable human emotion arises. Not theoretical concepts, but physical tools: take deep breaths, ask for reassurance, treat yourself to something special, etc. Very few other contemporary social practices

encourage learning how to dismantle jealousy. Certain apparatuses have been developed to help deal with other difficult emotions of contemporary life; we have pills for depression and anxiety, classes for anger management, but jealousy is rarely addressed.

This is because, unlike sadness or anger, jealousy is necessary for the smooth running of contemporary capitalist society. The threat that jealousy levels to individual self-esteem generates a huge amount of shared, interpersonal, circulating competitiveness, which is the engine of capitalist economics. Competition is the philosophy undergirding our failing global economic situation. When you feel jealous, you will compete, and in our society, competition has become almost synonymous with participation. We are sold on competition as a necessary hurdle for happiness: You must win to be successful, you must be successful to matter, you must matter to be loved. **This worldview creates workers for a system that prioritizes the exchange of commodities over the exchange of human intimacy.** Jealousy management is not taught in kindergarten because such techniques are fundamentally challenging to the status quo.

Personal feelings of jealousy spur commerce. The more people remain afraid that they are going to lose love, the more products can be sold to try to soothe those feelings. Advertisers attempt to stimulate jealousy through endless campaigns to buy more stuff. We are taught to feel jealous of the happiness of the rich and famous and encouraged to



consume products in hopes of achieving the happiness that we're not sure we deserve. Many of us conceptually understand this system of manipulation, but that knowledge doesn't necessarily protect us from its operation on our psyches.

Under capitalism gone wild, relationships begin to be packaged like products. Love, and specifically marriage, is "commodified," ie, turned into an object that can and should be acquired. After you get *your* degree and *your* job, you get *your* spouse, your house, and then *your* kids. **This system of personal affiliation modeled on possession is a dangerous kind of objectification that continues very old traditions.** It is a not-distant ancestor of selling off your daughter to the rich guy down the lane. This is what contemporary structures of loving relationship are trying to shed: first feminist marriage and later gay marriage have been working to transform the institution from a system where women were chattel property into an equilateral alliance of human energies.

As legalized marriage for same-sex couples trudges slowly but inevitably towards reality, non-monogamous people must continue to imagine more. Objectification of relationships prioritizes the desired object of "being married" above the messy encounter between ever-evolving individuals. Let non-monogamous people insist loudly that relationships are not things and that real interactions with real humans provide much richer and more enduring pleasure than products could ever give.

Because of the challenges they level to our competitive and commodifying urges, I see rhizomatic relationships as innately anti-capitalist. When I told a friend of mine this, she said: "Couldn't exactly the opposite be argued? Doesn't multi-partnership encourage unbridled expansion? Isn't adding on new lovers just part of the capitalist fantasy that you can get whatever you want?" (*This is a great question*). What I see is this: through non-monogamous relationships, you have firsthand experience that expansion is very difficult and requires radical change. For example, I live in a triad, and when my partners and I decided to move in together, it was a big decision that took a lot of conversation, commitment, bravery and hope. This kind of intentional, conscious "opening up" (*Thank you Tristan Taormino*) is the opposite of the Starbucks-on-every-corner mode of manic, avaricious capitalist expansion. In the rhizome, you can only add new shoots and roots if there is the available energy to sustain them. In poly relationships, it becomes quickly clear that sometimes there's just not energy to keep expanding outwards in a healthy way.

In addition to techniques of jealousy management, rhizomatic relationships require the development of greater systemic awareness in which each person is attentive to the collective resources of the group. It becomes a shared task to assess if there are sufficient means to pursue new connections, or whether it's more important to focus on



enriching and strengthening what's currently present. This is a practice of sustainability. Collective resource management is precisely the kind of consciousness that needs to be developed in our culture in order to slow down the environmental collapse that seems almost inevitable. Re-imagining systemic thinking as a social value and sign of civic participation can help shift our relationship with the planet away from the current abusive situation based on exploitation and objectification.

German philosopher Theodore Adorno called this multi-player, systemic awareness "constellational thinking." Constellational thinking resembles the rhizome in that it strives to avoid classification and hierarchies. Instead, it looks at the links between things, those connections sometimes invisible to the untrained eye like the cause and effect of environmental pollution or the cellular change of falling in love. Constellational thinking is difficult because it requires prioritizing multiple people and acknowledging as equally valid and valuable individuals with diverse needs and abilities. I think the best constellational thinkers are mothers of multiple children and teachers of young students. As with mothers and teachers, non-monogamous structures require a great deal of sacrifice. Often the needs or desires of someone else in the constellation come before your own. Unlike parental or classroom relations, however, there is not a static hierarchy regulating power inside rhizomatic intimacy. There is no "mother," rather, the nurturing function shifts hands dependent on the situation. There is no "teacher," though different people may play the role of guide at different moments. No one is required to always be in service. Thus what is necessary at all times is a dynamic responsiveness to the present moment; only through this awareness can it be determined who is most capable of making a sacrifice and who most needs assistance. Unlike blood families and workplace organization, within the rhizome there is no institutional overlay of power distribution (*though there are of course social components like race, sex, and class that can affect intra-relationship power dynamics, I think every relationship must face these very real things, but that is another lecture*). Positions of power and vulnerability are in constant motion: sometimes you give aid, sometimes you need it.

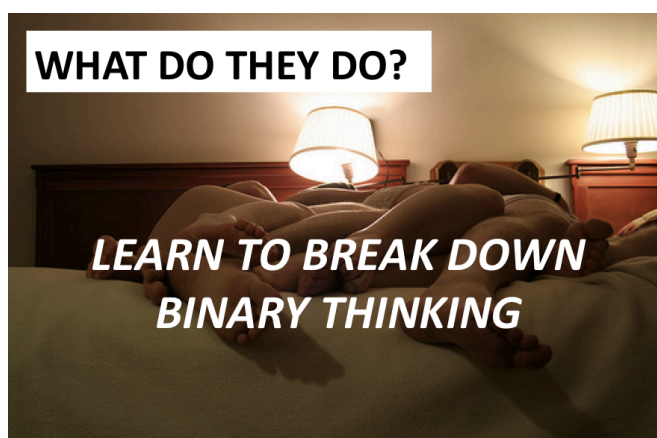
What do poly people do? They learn to think constellationally. The practice of non-monogamy results in the development of concrete skills in asking for help, giving help, and receiving help, all of which are necessary tools for sustaining a collective. This awareness of multilateral mutual sustainability on the intimate, interpersonal level is not separate from the kind of consciousness necessary for global sustainability.



So working with jealousy is an anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist practice. Constellational thinking leads to the development of techniques of environmental and social sustainability. Now one final thing, and this one I can't describe without reference to my own personal experiences. I mentioned that I live in a triad, which obviously

informs a lot of my experience with poly right now. In addition to attempting to exist in a rhizomatic, constellational mode, I also live the everyday experience of having not one, not two, but three different options for *everything*. Through living this out for almost two years I've come to realize just how often my brain had previously divided things up into two options. This unconscious, knee-jerk binary thinking easily condenses into "wrong" and "right," or, more accurately "my way" and "that jerk's less effective and efficient way." (*I hope you're all better partners than I am, but I don't think this thought process is uncommon*). The question of "who's right" changes in a triad. There are suddenly more possible ways, and thus more uncertainty about rightness and wrongness as categories. In trying to make decisions I find I listen more closely to my partners than I often did in prior dyadic relationships. There is still the possibility of collapsing into camps and alignments, but the polarized positions of "self" and "other" that are almost unavoidable in a dyad are not nearly as common. Sometimes we find a synthesis of our three divergent positions; sometimes we don't and are forced to coexist within the complexity of our unique worldviews.

What do poly people do? They learn to break down binary thinking. The embodied practice of trying to engage rhizomatically with multiple equals challenges the us-versus-them mentality that is responsible for our failing two-party system of national politics as well as most instances of global conflict. On a tiny scale, my family is attempting to imagine systems better than contest or war through which we can either resolve or learn to live within the differences between us.



This requires work and a commitment to dedicated and authentic "intimacy politics," which is another phrase I offer up to you. This term is a remix of the notion of "identity politics," a phrase that has been used since the 1970s to describe how oppression imprints upon individual consciousnesses and results in the formation of political perspectives. All the aforementioned social justice movements engaged in active identity politics, mobilizing the force of their own experiences to call for changes in social priorities. Identity politics have been lauded by some as responsible for most of the progressive social policies of the last few decades, and maligned by others as having divided America into smaller and smaller social interest groups competing in the ever-expanding "Oppression Olympics." I offer up "intimacy politics" as not a replacement but a necessary sister or perhaps lover to "identity politics." **Intimacy politics calls for action based on awareness of the unfair power discrepancies that identity politics have revealed. Intimacy politics is also aware that the most productive force for change lies not in individuals but in the intimacies between them, where existence and co-existence is negotiated, difference is touched, and compassion is cultivated.** Intimacy politics reminds us that love, not commodities, should mediate relationships between beings. It values sustainable linkages and slow, conscious expansion. Intimacy

politics proposes that it is possible to have a "you" and a "me" without having an "us" and a "them."

I'm not an evolutionary biologist, but I hypothesize that the desire to love and be loved is a deep, prehistoric instinct, much like language. The notion that life-long, partnered monogamy is a "natural" instinct seems as silly as saying "French" is a "natural" instinct. Monogamy and polyamory are both beautiful emanations of the love instinct, but both are just arbitrary outcroppings of a deeper structure. Examining rhizomatic intimacy is a potent reminder that love is bigger than we can imagine, and that attempting to systematize it into human culture is an unavoidably awkward reduction. **A relationship is a metaphorical structure that love hangs out in for a little while.** It's a model, which doesn't mean it isn't real or significant. We need the constructed dioramas of representation in which to glimpse the hugeness of the cosmos. But it's important to take responsibility for the models that we build and understand that what we make on a small scale we also manifest in grand ways. This is another intensely-lived reality of rhizomatic relationships: We are making this all up – not just sex and romance, but all human edifices. Through the practice of non-monogamy, we learn that inherited structures surrounding love, sex, and shared daily life are negotiable between consenting adults acting with integrity. Let this awareness remind us that so too *all systems regulating human organization and behavior* are vulnerable to change, not based on exertion of power, strong over weak, but on increasingly-intimate exchanges of knowledge within equally empowered, always-already-interconnected points within an ever-expanding network. This is love in the rhizome.

This is dedicated to my rhizome with particular gratitude to Joe, Beth, Marty, Damien, and Leanna, all of whom I relied on in those last desperate hours when I feared I was nuts. All images courtesy of random people on the internet. Thanks random people! If you want to talk more about these ideas, email me at polytheorymanifesto@gmail.com