

QUEERING ANARCHISM

Essays on Gender, Power, and Desire

Edited by C. B. Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano



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Straightness Must Be Destroyed

SAFFO PAPANTONOPOULOU

It's a body!

A baby is born. The doctor slaps a gender onto the body—"it's a boy!" or "it's a girl!" For those whose bodies do not seem to fit easily into the categories "male" or "female," the doctor—almost invariably—will treat this as a medical emergency. The parents will be intimidated into forcing invasive surgery: mutilating the baby's genitalia so they will appear to fit easily into these categories. For all bodies regardless, the category "it's a boy!" or "it's a girl!" must be applied onto the baby. From the very moment of birth, our bodies are fit into a social system in which there are two genders, built upon the myth that the two sexes are "natural." Our heteronormative society considers it urgent that *everybody* be labeled "boy" or "girl"—to the point that it will not shy away from using violence against intersex bodies in order to apply these labels.

For some reason, the vast majority of people identify with the gender label that was applied to them at birth without their consent. (This majority of people we call "cisgender." The rest of us are transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, etc.). But then again, the vast majority of people seem to be content to go along with most things... After this we grow up and we learn all sorts of other roles that stem from the label "boy" or "girl." This label determines everything from what sort of toys we are supposed to play with, to what sorts of expectations are to be placed upon us in social situations, to what kind of sexual desires we are supposed to have. We cannot escape these assumptions; they are everywhere. Daring to transgress these norms can result in violent punishment. These norms, and the threats that back them up, are all a part of straightness.

Straightness is not an orientation, or even really an identity, but a system of social relations. In that regard, straightness is very much like capitalism. Straightness is a multi-faceted set of social rules that





police our bodies, our minds, our desires, and the ways we interact with others. Straightness tells us that people with certain bodies have to be “men” and others have to be “women.” It tells us that men have to act in certain ways, and women have to act in other ways. It tells us that we have to have certain kinds of desires, and not others. It tells us that we have to fuck certain kinds of people, in certain positions, for certain reasons. We can change certain aspects of straightness—for instance, the fight for gay marriage, which seeks to allow privileges for certain monogamous, normative gay couples, without challenging the state institution of marriage altogether—but ultimately we need to destroy this system that polices every aspect of our existence—from the deeply intimate to the highly public.

Like any system of social relations, straightness is both something that is “out there,” in the larger world we call “society,” or “the system,” as well as something that is “inside”—in our heads, our hearts, our minds. It is something that we do to other people as we have had done to ourselves. For people who call themselves straight, it is something that one is constantly proving and reifying. Part of this is because straightness is an impossibility. The ideal man and the ideal woman—these are impossible ideals. Nobody ever quite fits. Part of straightness as a social system is the collective effort of those who subscribe to force themselves and others around them to meet this definition—to kill the inner queer in order to fit oneself into the straight mold. These are the internal contradictions of straightness.

The destruction of straightness would not mean the destruction of heterosexuality. “Women” and “men” would still exist. “Women” and “men” would still fuck each other. The destruction of straightness, however, would mean the destruction of a set of norms, of assumptions, of hierarchical social relations that are forcibly imposed upon all of us. The destruction of straightness would mean we no longer take it as self-evident that being born with a certain kind of body makes someone a “man” or a “woman.” The destruction of straightness would mean we no longer take it as self-evident that people with certain bodies will desire certain types of other bodies. The destruction of straightness would mean the destruction of the “ideal” woman and the “ideal” man. The destruction of straightness would mean a world in which all of our bodies, all of our desires, all of our genders, all of our consensual sexualities, would be honored and viable.



Queering Shit Up

Queerness is, by definition, the antithesis of straightness. Queerness is the total of every desire, every body, every way of relating, that is prohibited by straightness. Queerness includes gender non-conformity, transness, homoeroticism, BDSM, or even the radical notion that two hetero men who are friends can hold hands in public. Queerness is everything that straightness is not. Queerness is every desire, every way of being, that is forbidden under this regime. Queer liberation seeks to liberate all these forms of expression—as long as they are consensual. Queer liberation is the destruction of straightness. Queer liberation is the abolition of gender hierarchies, as well as hierarchies based on sexual desire. Straightness, by contrast, *is* hierarchy. Part of anarchist struggle is to create spaces outside of these hierarchies within the shadows of this world. Therefore, the destruction of straightness (and the building of alternatives within its shadows) is *inseparable* from anarchist revolution.

There are people in my life who are predominantly heterosexual, who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, who live in monogamous relationships, but whom I would consider queer. What do I mean by this? There is a world of difference between those who have accepted the dominant order of things because that is what they have been told and they have never questioned it, and those who have actually challenged themselves. If you have searched within your soul and challenged yourself and come to the conclusion that you feel yourself to be the gender you were assigned at birth, that you are sexually attracted to people of the “opposite” gender, etc., then that is completely different from someone who calls themselves “straight” because they have never challenged the social norms of straightness. Not questioning these norms—within yourself and your relationships with others around you—is to play into the dominant order of straightness. Questioning them—regardless of the conclusions you may reach—is a revolutionary act.

Straightness Doesn't Make Any Sense: The Internal Contradictions

I want to look at a few concrete examples of how straightness functions in our society. Before doing that, I want to preface this with



the recognition that there is tremendous diversity across cultures in terms of gender and sexual norms. In case you were wondering about my own background, I am a queer, transgender, thirdgender anarchist. My family is Greek-Egyptian and my mother was a war refugee. I was born in the United States. I write this based on my own experience of being queer in the United States, and I do not mean to generalize this across all cultures. However I hope and I believe that these ideas will prove relevant in a variety of contexts. All of these examples are imagined as taking place in the United States, but could perhaps be translated and transformed to represent gender and sexual regimes in other cultures and other contexts.

A working-class, heterosexual, cisgender man wants to marry his girlfriend. His girlfriend is a heterosexual, cisgender woman who comes from a middle-class background, but is currently broke. She feels entitled to a very expensive diamond engagement ring. He feels slightly jilted by this—"why should I have to pay for something so expensive for *her*," he thinks. She feels hurt by this and feels that he doesn't love her enough. They get into a fight about it. Finally, he takes out loans and maxes out all his credit cards to buy her the ring. The money that he borrows from the credit card industry—and which will cause him to be enslaved in debt for years to come in order to pay back—goes to support the blood diamond trade in Southern, Central, and Western Africa. There, people have been massacred, societies torn to shreds, to fuel Westerners' hunger for shiny objects.

This is one way in which straightness as a system of social relations feeds into and is fed by capitalism—particularly capitalist economic (neo)colonialism and its quest to ravage the people and the lands of the global south. Both members of the couple are oppressed and wounded by a set of social norms—which exists outside the two of them—which has dictated the right and wrong ways for them to express their feelings for each other. She feels entitled to a diamond and feels hurt if he doesn't provide. He is expected to provide and feels his masculinity called into question if he doesn't. Finally, he ends up enslaved in debt to the banks and credit card companies who make tremendous profit off the two of them. Their straightness is integral to a capitalist set of social relations that is built off of environmental destruction and genocide against people in the global south, while feeding them into an institution of debt slavery.



Two straight-identified, cisgender men are best friends and feel a deep love for each other. They go out of their way to express this affection for each other without challenging their privilege as straight men—subconsciously creating excuses to touch each other. Fortunately for them, there are a plethora of such forms of expression available in straight society—wrestling, for instance. Straight society is full of supposedly desexualized excuses for two male bodies to touch. But the two of them will never simply hold each other. We can see, it is not simply a matter of them being straight people—we are looking beyond straightness as an identity—rather, straightness is an internalized set of social relations that dictates the acceptable and unacceptable ways in which the two of them may physically interact. Wrestling, moshing, various form of hazing, and real physical violence...these are all contexts through which the internal contradictions of straightness may be literally hammered out.

A cisgender man identifies as straight, and is very homophobic. He meets a woman he is attracted to and they go somewhere to have sex. In the process, he finds that she has male genitalia. He flips out and reacts violently against her. This is a fear that many trans women, such as her, must constantly deal with. He beats her and calls her “it” and “faggot” and other dehumanizing things. All the mean time, in the back of his mind, he is really trying to beat back a part of himself—a part of himself that maybe knew she was trans and sought her out, a part of himself that he is very uncomfortable with. She has been made into a target from the outset—first as a target for his frustrated desires, second as a target for his fears of himself as a result of those desires. Her marginalized status—as a woman in general, and as a trans woman in particular—allows him to dehumanize her and use her as a vessel to project everything that he despises about himself—everything about *him* that does not match *his* own internalized straightness—onto her. She is an escape hatch for the internal contradictions of straightness—and she may be killed for it.

A young cisgender boy first learns about anarchism by going to punk shows. He feels naïve but doesn’t want to show it. He hears from his friends about how “real” punks and “real” anarchists do things—it’s all tremendously macho. He feels pressured to perform a certain form of anarchism because he feels his masculinity threatened if he doesn’t. Some older (straight, cis male) anarchists



pressure him to take part in an action involving property destruction. He doesn't totally feel comfortable doing it, but feels the need to prove himself, and prove his straight masculinity. He gets arrested and it turns out that the older anarchists who pressured him were government agents who set him up. They took advantage of his vulnerability—particularly his need to perform a certain type of anarchist straight masculinity—in order to entrap him. He ends up spending a long time in prison. Regardless of the forms of desire this young person may feel, queer liberation for him would have meant having the strength to be vulnerable—the strength to say no, and not be masculinity-baited by the cops. The irony is that this form of straight masculinity is an enormous vulnerability for straight males—and those who associate with them. In other words, straightness is a threat to security culture.¹

Various forms of queerness exist inside everyone. People who identify as straight are people who have, to varying degrees, suppressed this queerness. But that doesn't mean it doesn't pop up sometimes. These are the contradictions of straightness. The ways in which straight-identified people police their own straightness and then (sometimes violently) project that woundedness onto others (particularly queer and trans people) are all forms of violence (both psychological and physical) that are inherent to the social institution that is straightness. This straightness predominantly and primarily oppresses queer people—for instance the woman who was subjected to transphobic violence. But it also confines straight people. It forces straight people to take out loans to assimilate to a particular model for showing affection. It forces straight people to kill a little part of them—sometimes endangering themselves and those around them. This struggle to abolish straightness is a struggle that plays out within anarchist and anti-capitalist communities as well as in capitalist society at large.

Queer Liberation is for Everyone: Queering Anarchism

What does this all mean? For one thing, if you are scratching your head now and wondering if there is such a thing as a straight person anymore—good. If your concept of normal is feeling a little less secure—good. Everyone is, in some way or another, alienated, confined, or oppressed by rigid gender roles and sexual mores. In



other words, the moral of this story is not just that straightness must be destroyed but also that *queer liberation is for everyone*. There are certainly people with a great deal of *straight privilege*; we can't forget about that. But what matters the most is, do you act in a way that reinforces straightness as an oppressive social institution? (For example, do you make gender assumptions about people, assume people are heterosexual, make insensitive assumptions about people's pronoun preferences, judge people whom you view as gender non-conforming, etc.?) If you challenge the ways you have internalized straight forms of social relations, and listen to people with less straight privilege than you, then you will become, in a ways, less straight. You will become part of the solution—creating a better world for queer and trans folks and queer experiences of gender and sexuality within the shadows of this world.

When we talk about queerness as something separate from identity, something beyond just queer *people*, we see it as a set of desires, relationships, ways of being, ways of acting, and forms of gender and sexuality that are violently repressed, through various means, by straightness. In other words, it is straightness that insists all bodies must be either male or female. It is straightness that dictates those whose bodies don't fit the binary model of sex/gender must be mutilated at birth. It is straightness that says male-bodied people must identify as “men” and act as “men.” It is straightness that says female-bodied people must identify as “women” and act as “women.” It is straightness that confines us to certain limited numbers of acceptable ways to express our desires. Everyone who dares to defy these prescriptions, and all the desires we feel that fall outside of them—this is queerness.

Those of us who live the most visibly outside of these straight norms are often subjected to violence. Trans women, drag queens, and effeminate gay men along with bull dykes and trans men, are the most common target of straight men's projecting of their own traumas around gender and sexuality. Straight people, especially straight men, as the people with the most privilege in our society when it comes to gender and sexuality, have an obligation, as part of an anarchist movement, to unlearn their own gender and sexual assumptions. All of us have an obligation to unlearn straightness—to unlearn the ways we have been socialized into straightness, much like the ways in which we have been socialized into capitalism.



There is an old Situationist slogan that calls to “Kill the Cop Inside Your Head.” Killing your inner cop means abolishing capitalist ways of thinking, abolishing the messages the state has fed us and we have internalized. This is a hard, painful process, and it is never fully complete. Part of killing your inner cop and dismantling internalized hierarchies is deconstructing forms of oppression you have internalized: class society, racism/ white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, ageism... All of these forms of oppression are part of systematic hierarchies we internalize. Anyone who is an anarchist and wants to work to create better worlds needs to work on all of these struggles within themselves as part of a larger anti-capitalist, anti-statist struggle. Part of killing the cop inside our head means addressing internalized straightness.

The struggle for liberation is one that extends from the small-scale to the large-scale and back again. From the small-scale, intimate world of our own personal relationships, deep down to our minds and our bodies and our souls, to the large-scale world of globalized capitalism, the struggle for queer liberation, and the struggle to abolish straightness; these are inseparable from anti-capitalist and anti-statist struggle. The collective effort to abolish straightness is one that serves to benefit all in the long run. The collective effort to abolish straightness, to allow for queer forms of gender, sexuality, identity, and performance out of the closet and into our own anti-capitalist struggle—this is a kind of liberation for all. Taking the time to reevaluate the language we use to communicate about gender and sexuality, and the assumptions we make about people’s bodies and desires (including our own), is not only absolutely essential for the inclusion of queer *people* in our struggles, it is essential for the inclusion of the *queerness* that is present inside all of us. This kind of queer praxis, and the radical inclusion that it allows, is absolutely essential to any kind of genuine anti-hierarchical, anti-capitalist, anti-statist struggle.

- 1 Please note, I am not arguing that there is anything inherently “straight” about property destruction. There are plenty of anarchists out there who practice various forms of direct action—including property destruction and other forms of action—in ways that are conscious of inter-group power dynamics. What I am concerned with is not which particular forms of anarchist politics are used, but rather what



concerns me is the cult of machismo within many anarchist communities, and the ways in which these forms of machismo make straight men and those around them vulnerable.