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8 QUEER POLITICS, CONSENSUAL NONMONOGAMY, AND RELIGION: NOTES ON THE ETHICS OF COALITION WORK

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How can queer activism contribute to gaining recognition and material support for a plurality of nonnormative relationships and families, including Consensual Nonmonogamies (CNMs) and polyamories? What is the significance of coalition work in queer legal politics around relational rights? What kind of coalitions may be conducive to intersectional queer politics for social justice and what kind of coalitions may obstruct such a goal? In this chapter, I engage in a series of interrelated reflections on queer politics, religion, and the ethics of coalition work around the legal recognition of relationships not matching the normative pattern of heterosexual dyadic organization. Its main focus is on the potential of coalitions between queer and religious groups.

The chapter argues that coalitional practice forms a key element of queer politics and that coalitions between queer and religious groups are in principle welcome. I further argue that queer and religious groups do not form mutually exclusive populations and that the boundaries between the secular and religion appear to be much fuzzier than usually acknowledged if we carefully examine the history of core political concepts, including those commonly structuring queer politics. Inasmuch as CNM is concerned, the observation that both secular and new-age polyamory and conventional religious polygamy face legal discrimination in many jurisdictions provides valid reasons for considering coordinated responses. Apart from a shared interest in relationship recognition beyond dyadic relational forms, the racist denigration of indigenous CNMs or Muslim polygamy in white settler societies and Western (majoritarian Christian) countries invites coalitions around anti-racism as an integral part of intersectional queer social justice politics.¹ At the same time, I suggest that fruitful coalition work is best founded on a set of shared values, which renders queer coalition work with groups that are overtly hostile toward LGBTQI+ people inherently

problematic. Foregrounding the need to carefully consider the ethical grounds for coalitional practice, the chapter rejects proposals that queer agendas could be advanced through strategic coalitions with conservative religious groups whose major motivation for action is the preservation of civil marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Queer politics strives for ethics of inclusivity and entails the affirmation of nonnormative ways of life. This orientation should not be compromised in pragmatic trade-offs, and queer coalitions need to be built in a way that no particular social group is harmed as a result. This stance rules out queer coalitions with groups that are explicitly hostile toward LGBTQI+ intimacies.

Arguments for considering strategic coalitions with conservative religious fringe groups around plural relationship recognition have been made in an article by Nausica Palazzo published in 2018 and framing the announcement for an international workshop to which Nausica Palazzo kindly invited me as a speaker, and for which an early version of this chapter was written.² As careful readers of this volume will notice, Nausica Palazzo has modified her position on this question.³ I have decided to maintain references to her previous work, because my arguments have been very much a response toward these arguments and because it allows me to emphasize nuances within the ethics and strategies of queer coalition politics and to address larger themes within the political and legal theory.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, I briefly present arguments regarding the assumed potential of queer coalitions with conservative religious groups on the ground of a shared skepticism toward same-sex marriage. This assumption is embedded in Palazzo's socio-legal analysis of some of the paradoxical developments within equal marriage campaigns in North America. In the second section, I argue that institutions such as civil marriage (and by extension civil partnership schemes) problematically reproduce a culture of privilege. In contradistinction, queer perspectives invite frameworks of legal pluralism with the aim of recognizing diverse relationships and families. It is of course

worthwhile to think about how to create viable coalitions for achieving such a goal. In the third section, I suggest that a principled agreement on the validity and value of LGBTQI+ bodies and intimacies is a basic condition for queer coalition work. I argue that the (politicized) affirmation of nonheterosexual, trans*, and gender-queer intimacies and sexualities is a key aspect of queer political visions. In the fourth and final section, I explore questions regarding the possibility of constructive alliances between queer and religious groups with regard to CNM activism. Interrogating the assumption of strict boundaries between queerness (often framed as implicitly secular) and religion (often framed as implicitly heteronormative), I argue that there is plenty of scope for inter and intra-group coalitional practice. At the same time, I emphasize the need to embrace the diversity of relations and to address the intersectionality of power regimes constituting CNM lives within queer coalition work and legal activism. This in turn precludes coalitions with political organizations or movements overtly hostile toward certain populations, including LGBTQI+ people.⁴

Entering Marriage with Conservative Fringe Groups to Create Legal Alternatives to Marriage?

In her article “The Strange Pairing: Building Alliances between Queer Activists and Conservative Groups to Recognize New Families,” Nausica Palazzo proposes that “*new families should build alliances with conservative fringe groups and capitalize on their common interest in creating legal alternatives to marriage*” (italics in original).⁵ In this article, Palazzo critically investigates and evaluates legal proposals made by conservative political actors who oppose same-sex marriage in the United States and Canada and advance legal initiatives “*animated by a desire to dilute the protections for same-sex couples*” (italics in original) or to enshrine the exclusively heterosexual status of civil marriage.

Included in her discussion are designated and reciprocal beneficiary schemes (e.g., those found in Hawai'i and Vermont, and also additional schemes found in Maryland, Maine, and Washington, D.C not originating from conservative fringes), the 2002 Adult Interdependent Relationships Act of Alberta, and contractual models in Alabama and Missouri. Palazzo is interested in the paradoxical effect of these initiatives that have been “queering” family law by functionalizing the notion of family and expanding protections to more relational constellations: “Again, the irony is that such schemes, despite being touted by ultra-conservative organizations or political parties, have resulted in a dramatic pluralization of family law regimes.”⁶

I broadly share Palazzo's critique of narrow and reductionist interpretations of the idea of family, her rejection of civil marriage for its heteropatriarchal legacy, and her analysis of the flaws of marriage equality politics to account for and do justice to the plurality of contemporary relationships, families, and care arrangements.⁷ I further appreciate her argument that “alternatives to marriage are better suited for the advancement of all families—including heterosexual”⁸ ones—because they may have the potential to transcend the fixation on conjugal family, allowing for greater flexibility and simplicity.

At the same time, I feel a certain unease with regard to any conscious coalitional strategy seeking queer cooperation with ultra-conservative religious groups hostile to LGBTQI+ equality or visibility.⁹ Palazzo hypothesizes a shared interest between queer activism and conservative fringe groups around relationship recognition: “Despite differing motives, the pluralization of family forms pushed forward by conservatives aligns with queer activists' interest in opposing the state's hegemonic and normalizing power.”¹⁰

This chapter takes its starting point in my discomfort with this hypothesis. Forging alliances with groups heavily invested in heteronormativity—the idea that heterosexuality represents a natural or divine order—or mononormativity—the idea that intimate and sexual

relationships should be monogamous or organized with a couple framework¹¹—strikes me as something that is at odds with some of the core commitments of queer politics. As I conceive of them, these commitments include an uncompromising affirmation of LGBTQI+ (and other) nonnormative lives, a commitment to radical change, and a preparedness to take an oppositional stance. In the following, I address this discomfort in a series of reflections on legal politics regarding marriage and CNM, the queer politics of affirmation, and queer–religious coalition work.

Queer Politics, Marriage Equality, and Consensual Nonmonogamy

What could a queer politics in the field of recognition of CNM relationships, families, or networks look like? CNM intimacies are manifested in manifold gendered constellations, including heterosexual and LGBTQI+ relationships and families.¹² The sheer diversity of CNM formations renders it questionable whether a singular legal provision can accommodate the multiple reality of divergent needs and experiences.¹³ This argument alone raises doubts as to whether the path trodden by marriage equality activists provides a useful template for a CNM legal activism. Yet there are even more substantial arguments against the institution of marriage. In the following, I draw upon a selection of queer and feminist critiques of marriage equality to argue that a proactive defense of civil marriage as an exclusively heterosexual (and monogamous) institution is not an appropriate queer strategy, even within the horizon of legal pluralism.

Most queer activists in the United States (and elsewhere) have rightly opposed the idea of marriage equality and, in particular, the terms within which marriage equality has been framed as an opening of a heteronormative and mononormative legal institution to same-sex couples.¹⁴ With the exception of those who have suggested that same-sex marriage could in the long-term *queer* marriage as a social practice, queer activists have pointed toward sexist, racist, and classist aspects of the history of the institution of marriage.

Institutionalized civil marriage schemes have further excluded the queer bonds of CNM intimacies.¹⁵

Feminists too (including many lesbian feminists) have pointed to the inequality and disciplinary power residing in marriage (as legal framework, mode of contract, or everyday practice). There has been a long history of feminist critiques of the institution of marriage as being culturally rooted in a patriarchal value system that materially and symbolically reproduces women's subordination to men. Moreover, marriage has also historically functioned as a key element within the institutionalization of heterosexism and compulsory patriarchal heterosexuality.¹⁶ Elizabeth Brake contends that "marriage continues to perpetuate elements of women's oppression understood as the diminishment of their life opportunities through the interaction of systematic legal, social, and economic forces," with domestic violence and economic dependency being key features of these oppressive practices.¹⁷ The cultural connotations of heteropatriarchal family values are so deeply engrained in culture that the problem of women's subordination persists even within a more diversified framework incorporating same-sex couples, Clare Chambers rightly points out.¹⁸

Marriage equality campaigns further lend themselves toward a politics of respectability, idealizing romantic conjugal long-term partnership and monogamous bonding while often actively stereotyping alternative relationship and family structures and, in particular, CNMs.¹⁹ The marriage equality campaign has been at the heart of what Katherine Franke has called the "normative turn" in gay politics in the 1990s, which has had disciplinary effects for those who are not married or refuse to consider marriage (or monogamous coupledness).²⁰ "Not only does marriage equality hold a limited potential for new families, it also, and more dangerously, has undermined the advocacy for pluralistic relationships," Palazzo rightly comments upon this trend.²¹

Clare Chambers' work is important in highlighting the problem of structural privilege, arguing that marriage will always continue to reproduce inequality and discriminate against persons who are single or not married. The same applies to civil unions. Civil unions may be advantageous over marriage from a feminist egalitarian point of view because they potentially attribute rights to people in differently gendered constellations (irrespective of sexual orientation) and because they may deflate the heteropatriarchal symbolism with which marriage is charged. However, they do not cease to (re)create inequality on the most profound level: "The central egalitarian problem with civil unions is that they do nothing to challenge the hierarchy between being partnered and being single."²²

In my point of view, CNM activism can derive more helpful insights from queer critiques of same-sex marriage activism, rather than from any attempts at mirroring its legal strategies.²³ There has been a broad consensus within queer activism to reject the institution of marriage, as it is well expressed in the 2006 statement "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for all our Families & Relationships"²⁴ and the texts composed by the Against Equality Publishing Collective.²⁵ Aligned with the pronounced critique of marriage in feminism and lesbian feminism, many queer activists have called for the abolition of marriage.²⁶ Nonsexual relations, such as friendship or care collectives and freely designated family members, have been identified as being worthy of recognition and possibly legal protection by queer activists and lawyers and legal scholars who have worked in support of a queer agenda.²⁷ If taken seriously, this leads to a demand for the creation of completely new legal institutions, processes, or arrangements.²⁸ Elizabeth Brake's work is helpful here for interrogating the amatonormativity that underpins marriage equality politics and its implicit endorsement of romance/romantic love as a life-enhancing form of intimacy.²⁹

Within an approach of "valuing all families,"³⁰ the recognition of CNM relationships, families, and also polycules becomes subject to practices of recognition beyond civil

marriage and the dyadic couple norm, and within an expanded framework of intimate citizenship.³¹ Legal solutions for achieving such a goal differ in detail (e.g., exploring contract, registration, and ascription).³²

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these possibilities in much detail. Elsewhere, I have stated my support for such approaches³³ which, if taken seriously, point toward solutions that recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, which in turn underscores the validity of solutions rooted in legal pluralism. In particular, with regard to CNMs that present themselves under the umbrella polyamory, relational formations and practices are so diverse that default definitions and categories are not really helpful.³⁴ In light of these considerations, a simple extension of civil marriage rights to multipartner relationships and families (as in polygamy or polyamory), which has been demanded by some advocates,³⁵ appears to be less than satisfying. In the following, I will briefly expand on the options of recognizing multiple relationship constellations beyond a marriage framework. In particular, I will address the problem of status-defined limitations of access with regards to certain legal provisions in relationship and family law.

If we consider the question of legal pluralism in the field of family law, it is of utmost importance to insist as a matter of principle that legal frameworks remain at least potentially open to all. This could mean there is a generic possibility for opting in or possibly routes for opting out. Exclusions on the grounds of gender, sexuality, race, or religion are problematic because they are likely to be the effect of deeply rooted practices of discrimination. Likewise, the channeling of certain groups, subjects, or relationships toward specific schemes (based on categorical status) plays into essentialism and may strip those concerned of vital options undermining choice and autonomy. This channeling may also reinforce existing power structures as happens, for example, when there is an infringement of a person's choice to turn to a secular versus a religious court. Feminist scholars have argued that automatic relegation

to religious courts may create predicaments for (some) women or LGBTQI+ people having less voice (or fewer rights) within certain religious jurisdictions or court practices.³⁶

Clare Chambers presents a plausible argument against religious exceptionalism with regards to family law matters if gender or sexual equality is implicated. She suggests that even within a framework of multicultural pluralism, “we must proceed on the basis that antidiscrimination legislation is legitimate and even required by justice: that it is sufficiently weighty, in other words, to form the basis of coercive legislation.”³⁷

Legally pluralistic frameworks may implement measures of differential provision—in the sense of increased optionality to account for the specificity of wants, needs, or cultural requirements—while insisting on the principle of universality of access. In my view, any provisions of contractual models, registration schemes, or ascriptive recognition practices ought to be in principle accessible to all.

The exclusive nature of civil partnership schemes with regards to sexual preference (or gendered partner-choice) has been a major problem in many societies where these schemes have been created in order to address the relationship-recognition gap for same-sex unions.³⁸ Ruth Colker rightly wrote the following about domestic partnerships schemes in the United States in the mid-1990s: “The domestic partnership approach is arguably flawed because it gives same-sex couples an unacceptable second-class status.”³⁹ The same has been argued with regards civil partnerships in the United Kingdom by Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson: “By rebranding as ‘civil partnership’ a union that is otherwise identical to opposite-sex civil marriage, civil partnerships achieve the symbolic separation of same-sex couples from the state of ‘marriage’. They grant same-sex couples the possibility of legal conformity with institutional arrangements which formally recognize heterosexual intimacy while effectively excluding us from that very institution.”⁴⁰ The provision of civil unions and

domestic partnership schemes has often been used to keep or recreate marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution.⁴¹

While such schemes have often been limited to same-sex couples to provide some form of legal recognition in the absence of access to civil marriage rights—rather than being legal alternatives for all meaningful, intimate, or caring relationships—Palazzo believes that these kinds of legal initiatives may produce unexpected and novel expansions or transformations, with a truly queering potential. This is why Palazzo suggests that “[d]efending’ marriage as a dyadic institution is a concession that queer activists should be willing to make in order to introduce more flexible and ideologically-neutral regimes,” because “[w]ith formal recognition, new families could finally emerge in the eyes of the law.”⁴² Palazzo thus proposes an at least temporary subjection to the stubborn attempts of heteronormative traditionalists (of the secular or religious centers or fringes) to make some practical steps toward material rights for new families in the present or near future, and queer justice in the long term.

I have some difficulties with this proposal to defend an institution that is designed to exclude LGBTQI+ and CNM relationships, which is based on heteropatriarchal values and gender scripts, and which establishes a structure of privilege.

In the next section, I will elaborate on my argument that queer politics is not reconcilable with a strategy endorsing or defending institutions or cultural practices explicitly subordinating or excluding queer people and queer lives. Ideally, queer activism is committed toward an *affirmation* of queer life (in the sense of *queer becoming* rather than simply *queer being*). This will provide the basis for my concluding claim that any queer coalition work—including cooperation across queer and religious identifications—is best grounded in shared values, including a shared opposition to heterosexism, transphobia, racism, economic inequalities, authoritarianism, and fascism.

Toward a Queer Politics of Affirmation

It is difficult to pin down what queer theory and activism mean in any definite manner. Queer theorists have rejected universalism, interrogated rigid categories, and opposed the idea of a canon or even any definition of what queer may signify.⁴³ Moreover, queer has been adopted differently in different cultural and linguistic contexts.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, queer has reverberated with specific connotations in many struggles where it has been articulated. In the North American context (from which many of the examples discussed by Palazzo have been drawn) and also in many of the European contexts I am familiar with, queer has been linked with assertive claims to difference, radical opposition to the dominant gender and sexuality order, and antiassimilationism.⁴⁵ It has been this radical and uncompromising stance which has drawn me to queer work in the formative periods of my academic writing.⁴⁶

This ethos and energy of queer theory and politics is well captured in Michael Warner's book *The Trouble with Normal*⁴⁷ and also in the 1990s work by Anna-Marie Smith,⁴⁸ to name just two major influences profoundly shaping my understanding of queer analysis and politics. Despite their differences, these two authors share a commitment to sex-positivity or, in other words, principled opposition to the shaming of strongly sexualized cultures and subjectivities including the shaming of queer sexualities and genders.

I acknowledge and welcome that the agendas articulated under the umbrella term of queer have significantly broadened since the 1990s to address the power of the norm far beyond gender and sexuality and I welcome that queer analysis is nowadays more likely than then to refer to questions of race/racism, disability, and class.⁴⁹ I also acknowledge that power relations, oppressive practices, and cultural meanings around sexuality and gender differ from each other and that queering practices may often adapt more subtle strategies in many cultural contexts.⁵⁰

At the same time, I find it difficult to embrace interpretations of queer that fully abandon or lose touch with queer politics' historical commitment to an affirmation of nonheterosexual eroticism and culture and to women's, queer, and trans* people's embodiment.⁵¹ As a result, imagining *queer* coalitions that involve strategizing around shared goals with groups openly hostile to LGBTQI+ cultures appears impossible to me.

In order to avoid any misunderstandings and to prevent the charge of buying into an unreconstructed version of identity politics, I would like to explain in more detail what I mean by affirmation. "To affirm something is both to acknowledge and to practice it as a positive, empowering development," suggests Kathi Weeks.⁵² Weeks' theoretical endeavor to describe a feminist standpoint in both materialist and antiessentialist ways provides a great blueprint for what could be called a queer politics of affirmation. Weeks fuses elements of queer theory (performativity), feminist standpoint reasoning (subjectivity), and autonomist Marxism (self-valorization), and continuously harks back to Nietzsche's and Deleuze's notions of the *return*. In doing so, she provides a political standpoint theory that moves from an ontology of biology to an ontology of labor (e.g., care work) and politicization. Thereby she prioritizes *becoming* over *being*, effectively avoiding the traps of essentialism.

"The eternal return, as an ethics that invites us to affirm actively what we can be, provides a guide for constructing a subject that lies beyond the opposition between voluntarism and determinism," Weeks argues, referring to Nietzsche.⁵³ In Deleuze's adaptation of the concept, the return presents itself as a question of *becoming*. "The project of transforming subject positions into standpoints involves an active intervention, a conscious and concerted effort to reinterpret and restructure our lives."⁵⁴ Weeks is not interested in individual identities but in collective standpoints as political projects. Rather than being simply a point of view that naturally flows from certain positions in life, standpoints are the result of collective efforts of consciousness raising about social locations and subject

positions. Standpoints are about the realization of a collective project of becoming and as such they are linked to social and political practice. “A standpoint is derived from political practice. From a collective effort to revalue and reconstitute specific practices.”⁵⁵

Within this radically antiessentialist framework of politicized standpoint reasoning, affirmation is not simply the confirmation of the self (an identity rooted in ontology) but the ethical or political affirmation of a horizon of possible ways of being. Weeks takes recourse to Deleuze’s interpretation of affirmation here: “*To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives*” (italics in original).⁵⁶

Subjectivity is reconceptualized in this account, turning a question of individualized identity into a profoundly social phenomenon. Weeks’ positive account of affirmation, therefore, differs quite significantly from Judith Butler’s more skeptical view of any appeal to identities. Although I prefer Weeks’ account of subjectivity over Butler’s theory of performativity, because of its deeper grounding in social and material practice, it is worthwhile to briefly consider Butler’s approach to show that even within her largely antiidentitarian approach it is possible to track traces of a discourse of affirmation.

In “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” Butler elaborates her critique of a politics of recognition by debunking approaches striving for acceptance with her argument that “the affirmation of homosexuality is itself an extension of a homophobic discourse.”⁵⁷ The emphasis on the restrictive and oppressive aspects of claiming identities are also captured in statements such as “I come out only to produce a new and different closet.”⁵⁸ Discussing Butler’s views, Richard Day points out that while Butler wants to warn us of the exclusivist implications of identity politics, she does not advocate the complete erasure of identities through silence. “[D]isclaiming is not the same as silence,” Day reasons.⁵⁹ He continues: “By coming out *into an open field*, rather than into a hierarchical structure of fixed identities, she [Butler] suggests that it is possible to undermine the coercive regulation of sexuality as

such.”⁶⁰ While Butler advocates the queering of identities and emphasizes their instability and unboundedness through continuous interrogation, she also acknowledges the necessity for continuing to claim—or, as I would say, to affirm identities. This is true particularly in oppressive discursive contexts, always knowing these claims to be “necessary errors.”⁶¹ For example, in “Critically Queer,” Butler concedes that “it remains politically necessary to lay claim to ‘women’, ‘queer’, ‘gay’, and ‘lesbian’”⁶² in order “to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in ‘private’ life.”⁶³

I hope this brief recourse to Butler has demonstrated that even within the work of one of the most identity-critical queer theorists, we can identify traces of a discourse of affirmation (even if they are quite defensive). Weeks’ account is more assertive and also less individualistic. I suggest that it can rightly be more assertive, because it has already refounded the question of subjectivity as being primarily a political one and based on a vision of queer-feminist sociality rather than simply identity as knowledge and articulation of the self.

Addressing questions of racism and survival in societies shaped by white supremacy, Black feminists and queer activists of color have been most adamant that claiming identities are key to the politics of survival and resistance of communities under siege.⁶⁴ These theories have further highlighted the multiplicity of identities, the nonreducibility of difference, the complexity of standpoints, the futility and epistemic violence of claims to universality, and the contested nature of group boundaries. Black feminist thought has advanced the most nuanced views of both identification and standpoint generation. This includes the conceptualization of identities as being in themselves a coalitional project,⁶⁵ an argument that I explore in closer detail in the next section. In this section, I also argue that coalitions between queer and religious groups are an important goal but that queer coalitions (whether in legal politics or elsewhere) are best grounded on *shared values* that include a beneficial

stance toward the affirmation of queer ways of life (in all their difference) rather than a strategic imposition of silence in order to avoid upsetting allies and rocking the boat.

Queer/Religion, Consensual Nonmonogamy, and Solidarity through Coalition Work

Debates about coalition politics have been at the heart of the history of queer activism. Two different political and theoretical tendencies emphasize the need for coalitional practice within queer politics. Most significantly, debates about coalition within queer activism have been propelled by queers of color and other multiply marginalized groups who addressed painful conflicts and exclusions and around class, race, gender, and disability within queer activist projects.⁶⁶ There has also been a rudimentary coalitional paradigm at the heart of queer theory's deconstructive and counternormative thrust, articulated in the attempt to prevent a closure of around identity categories and key concepts of political mobilization and fuelled by skepticism of unitary identity-politics.⁶⁷ Yet this tendency has largely remained subsumed to single-issue political frameworks⁶⁸ and has only more recently been adapted to broader political agendas, as it can be seen in the more recent antiimperialist work of Butler. In the following, I will address both these legacies within queer politics, to underscore my later argument that queer-religious coalitions are an important objective.

Queer of color activists' critiques of "homonationalism"—efforts to center LGBTQ+ claims to sexual citizenship or CNM rights struggles through servicing popular racist stereotypes regarding marginalized racialized groups—and queer necropolitics—recognition strategies harming and threatening the livelihood and survival of such groups—have highlighted (amongst other things) the demonization of Islam in the context of the war on terror.⁶⁹ These critiques implicitly or explicitly endorse coalitions with religious groups on an antiracist platform.

Homonationalism dynamics can be understood as operating in close tandem with what Lisa Duggan has termed "homonormativity," signifying the depoliticization of

LGBTQ+ politics in the face of neoliberal governance within liberal democracies.⁷⁰ Racist formulas and stereotypes have also structured argumentative patterns used by marriage equality movements concerned with same-sex marriage rights.⁷¹ They have also manifested within CNM activism concerning “polynormative” tendencies and rights for multipartner relationships and families⁷² when CNM activists present themselves as representatives of good and ethical nonmonogamy as opposed to Mormon, Muslim, Black or Indigenous CNMs.⁷³ Antiracist and decolonial voices within queer politics have been the primary force of bringing questions of coalition politics (including those with religious groups) on the agenda of queer activism. These debates link with conversations about political practices on solidarity.

Despite the prevalence of insular concerns with transgressive gender and sexual politics and a common lack of intercultural sensitivity or of a deep understanding of the complex struggles of queers who face multiple and intersecting oppressions,⁷⁴ there seems to be a widely shared consensus that solidarity is an important queer value. Practices of solidarity are closely tied to the work of coalition building. “Solidarity occurs *across* identifications, which means without a multiplicity of subject positions there can only be identity of struggles, at which point the concept of solidarity becomes meaningless,” Richard Day comments.⁷⁵ Other theorists, namely queer of color theorists, have pushed this issue even further suggesting that it is helpful to see that coalitions operate not only across struggles and collective identifications but also within them. Anna Carastathis points to the work of U.S. Black and Latina feminists on intersectionality to show that identities themselves can be seen to be intersectional or coalitional.⁷⁶ She thus reminds us, for example, of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s claim that (race-based) identity-based groups are “in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed.”⁷⁷

It should also be argued that Butler's queer-feminist critique of identity-political reasoning has always stressed the coalitional dimension of queer politics, at least to a certain extent. The critiques of the coherence and definability of the feminist subject in *Gender Trouble*,⁷⁸ or of the ontologization of gender in *Bodies that Matter*,⁷⁹ have had the goal of allowing for the articulation, recognition, and intelligibility of multiple, diverse, queer, and trans* genders (within a queer-feminist coalitional project), as Butler explains retrospectively in *Undoing Gender*.⁸⁰ Arguably, the coalitional theme has become even more prominent in her later work, in which she has intensified her critique of imperialist warfare and racism. Within the conditionality of global capitalism and white supremacy and in the face of a regime of intersecting oppressions, diverse populations are driven into precarity and face vulnerability, Butler argues. In this situation, both the oppression and the envisioned freedom of any one minority have to be understood with regard to that of others. Butler reinterprets queer politics as a moment or current within a joint struggle for radical democracy concerned with questions of state violence, militarism, war, border regimes, and systemic racism, as much as with gender and sexual politics.⁸¹

In light of such consciously intersectional and multifocal reconstitutions of queer, queer politics is framed as being inherently coalitional, both with regard to the conceptualization of political subjectivity and the construction of political goals.

Drawing on the discussion above, coalition politics can be framed in different ways encompassing both intra- and inter-identitarian projects and agendas. Yet both forms of coalitional practice are always fraught with power relations. Analyzing rights-based queer (LGBTQI+) and immigrant social movement politics in Arizona and Washington State in 2014 and 2015, Erin Adam refers to these different logics or registers as *inter-* and *intra-movement* coalitions. In Adam's view, legal mobilization within both modes of coalitional politics can either alleviate or reinforce relations of power. Due to the paradoxical structure

of rights-based politics, coalitions often exclude, instrumentalize, or render invisible multiply marginalized groups.⁸² This relates also to queer coalition politics. Acknowledging this ambivalence inevitably brings to the fore the significance of intersectional analysis and politics once more. I return below to the observation that coalitions may be damaging to some of the groups or subjects involved in them. It forms the base of my argument about the promotion of coalitions with politically conservative (religious) groups.

Yet first I would like to further develop the argument that there is nothing objectionable to queer coalitions with religious groups per se. In contradistinction, following queer of color critiques discussed above, I suggest that the stereotypical and racist framings of conventional religious polygamy (whether Muslim or Mormon) or of indigenous nonmonogamies in colonial settler contexts, provide ample opportunities for coalitions with religious (and other groups) around antiracist agendas.⁸³ The fact that both conventional religious polygamy and secular or new-age CNMs such as polyamory face stigmatization and legal discrimination, provides further ground for considering coalitional work between those within certain religious groups who practice CNM with queer CNM activists.⁸⁴ Such politics would not be without precedence since there is also a long history of support of some religious groups for gender and sexual diversity (at least with regard to lesbian and gay politics).⁸⁵ This does not mean that there are strong indicators for a willingness to enter coalitional practices on social and legal family rights between CNM activists and mainstream religious communities in the present moment.⁸⁶

At the same time, it is of course important to acknowledge that identification processes are complex and that people tend to invest in shifting and multiple identities. Queer CNM activists and religious populations are at best not construed as mutually exclusive populations. Butler reminds us that it is a mistake to construe queer activists as a “discrete minority” by disavowing many of those active in queer politics who may be multiply

minoritized. Indeed, the reason why many people reject identity politics and turn toward queer politics is that it allows multiple differences to come into play, which is why “acting in alliance” is a better characteristic of queer than simple identity, Butler suggests.⁸⁷ Similarly, Jeffrey A Redding alludes to the potential of a shared identification, when he claims that “queer sexuality and queer religiosity have much to gain by working with each other,” namely on issues around dignity and family law.⁸⁸

Critical work on the intersection between religious and queer identities has been growing.⁸⁹ Similarly, there is no lack of research emphasizing the confluence of religious and nonmonogamous identifications among many of the those who practice CNM.⁹⁰ Although my personal research into CNM in the United Kingdom did not focus on religion as such, and only contained a small number of self-declared religious believers, individual respondents explained their views on non/monogamy with regards diverse religious confessions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism.⁹¹ Some research suggests that at least in some polyamorous circles or communities, people who are Pagan, Wiccan, or belong to other non-Orthodox spiritual affiliations (and less frequently major religious confessions) may play a significant role.⁹² At the same time, it is possible to identify research suggesting that a strong investment in more traditional collective religious belief systems may go hand-in-hand with negative attitudes toward CNM.⁹³

The discussion in the paragraphs above suggests that, for many, spiritual and religious investments are compatible with queer and CNM ways of life, and that religious identifications themselves may form a significant element within a queer and pro-CNM political stance or personal disposition. There are no rigid and fixed boundaries around and between queer, CNM, and religion. In her book, *Queer Faith*, Melissa E. Sanchez advances a historical and theoretical argument for deconstructing the boundaries and perceived oppositions between queer and faith, based on her research into premodern (Western)

Christian theology and poetry.⁹⁴ Queer theory has much to offer for the reading of theology as much as theology/religious study can help to convey queer desire, Sanchez argues, proposing to break down an unhelpful distinction between the religious and the secular. Upholding rigid oppositions would only lead us to miss the point that ideas such as “the secular” (plus the public/private distinction it sustains) are shaped by Christian theological discourse. “Christian norms continue to haunt secular culture,” Sanchez points out.⁹⁵ “In the modern West, the description of sexual desire through a Christian lexicon of prayer, conversion, salvation, redemption, confession, sacrifice, revelation, and ecstasy is so pervasive that it is scarcely noticeable,” she argues.⁹⁶

In Sanchez’s view, not only monogamy but also notions of friendship or promiscuity—concepts often hailed and mobilized within queer liberationist theory—have been constructed in Christian theological and cultural practices and the racializing logics prevailing within them. Drawing on the arguments of Patricia Holland in *The Erotic Life of Racism*,⁹⁷ she argues that both religion and queer—and concepts circulating within their respective discourses, for example, faith, monogamy, nonmonogamy, transgression, and freedom—are in need of interrogation for their implication in power structures. Sanchez’s emphasis on the close affinity between queerness and faith with regards to discourse, affect, structure, and a shared history of racialization provides yet another avenue for reflecting on the ethics of queer and religious coalitions.

Queer ethics and a queer political vision oriented toward an intersectional analysis of power may invite coalitional praxis. Yet this does not mean that they are easy. In a famous text on coalition politics (in the context of antiracist feminist, civil rights, and antiwar politics), Bernice Johnson Reagon argues that coalitions inevitably struggle with difference and power and are likely to be uncomfortable, hard work, and continuously fought over, and also should not be confused with “home.”⁹⁸ Butler’s more recent work mirrors some of these

views when she argues that “a coalition has to know what its political aims are, but also how to live with certain antagonisms that are not resolved easily or quickly.”⁹⁹ She calls for patience and suggests that certain antagonisms may only be dissolved while or after working with each other.

While I appreciate this point, I also believe that coalitions only appear reasonable if those within a coalition also share a certain set of values and ethical concerns beyond a common political aim. The creation of *queer* coalitions around CNM with groups that are pronouncedly or in a declared way homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, or sex-negative (whether they are religious or secular) is inconceivable from my point of view. Such a move would also forestall coalitions with other possible coalitional partners, such as sex workers, kinky people, swingers, or LGBTQI+ people (and others) who may at times also have a more casual investment in sexual relations with multiple people. Many of these groups are despised by conservative religious actors and have been shamed along with polyamorists in slippery slope scenarios allegedly following from same-sex marriage.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, queer politics dedicated to a wider intersectional social justice agenda should also refrain from coalitions with religious groups articulating explicitly racist views.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

From a social movement point of view, constructive alliances are best based on the existence of a shared set of values. Queer activists and religious groups may share interests and sets of values concerning CNM and wider agendas for social change which may provide the starting point for fruitful coalition work.

I see the affirmation of queer desire and culture, including but not limited to nonheterosexual and trans* relationalities and sexualities, as an integral part of queer political agendas. This is why I consider strategic coalitions with (ultra) conservative groups that are pronouncedly anti-LGBTQI+ as inimical to a radical queer political spirit. Similarly, I find it

difficult to condone a strategy to make such alliances possible by proactively defending civil marriage as an exclusively heterosexual or dyadic institution. Marriage is a cultural bastion of heteronormativity and mononormativity and a structure of pooling privileges. I do not advocate same-sex marriage or any variant of multipartner marriage. In contradistinction, I think that marriage, or at least its privileged legal position, ought to be abolished or transformed within a provision of more flexible, pluralistic frameworks. I also do not suggest that legal relationship recognition necessarily has to be on the top of queer political agendas.¹⁰² Queer coalition work can draw on all kinds of political objectives, addressing the multiple injustices that affect queer lives in all their difference, aiming for social change by addressing multiply intersecting power relations, with anti-racism being a key commitment.

Coalition politics always involve compromise, but decisions on where to draw a line are key to determining the ethical substance of political initiatives and of shaping the experience of coalitional processes. Nobody should be exposed to a hostile discursive environment. Queer politics aims at ethics of inclusivity even if it is not always good at it. This orientation should not be compromised in pragmatic trade-offs.

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Notes

¹ Rambukkana (2015); Vasallo (2019).

² Palazzo (2018); Fondazione Bruno Kessler and University of Trento (2020).

³ See Palazzo's contribution to this volume (2022). In her article, Palazzo argues: "In the end, queer politics as an ethic of inclusivity cannot tolerate that the price of increased recognition of nontraditional families is shouldered by a sub-set of such families. As an antidogmatic theory, if a single gospel were to exist within queer theory it would be that inclusion can never be bargained for something else: the recognition of some affiliations cannot come with a social and personal cost to others." This position comes very close to what I am arguing in my own contribution.

⁴ Aiming at generically identifying key areas of ethical concern in the process of scoping out the potentials or limitations of certain coalitional practices, my discussion inevitably operates on a considerable level of abstraction. Being convinced that decisions about tactics and strategy ought always to be guided by a detailed analysis of concrete (local and transnational) political conjunctures—in other words, constellations of groups, actors, discourses, legal frameworks, histories of struggles, and hegemonies—I would like to highlight that my contribution does not intend to be in any way prescriptive. I do not wish to declare that

certain kinds of alliance are generically right or wrong. My intention has been to address to foreground what I consider to be key criteria in conversations about the ethics of coalitional practice.

⁵ Palazzo (2018, 161).

⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁷ Ibid., 169.

⁸ Ibid., 167–69.

⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰ Ibid. As said, similar arguments were also evoked in the invitation to the international online workshop. See Fondazione Bruno Kessler and University of Trento (2020).

¹¹ I would like to acknowledge that the term “mononormativity” assumes an alternative set of meanings in bisexuality studies, where many scholars deploy it to theorize the normative pressures on people to articulate stable and unequivocal attraction (and intimate and sexual interaction) with people of one gender only within either heterosexual or homosexual framework. See Maliepaard and Baumgartner (2020).

¹² Pain (2020); Sheff (2014); Klesse (2007); Warner (2000).

¹³ Klesse (2016).

¹⁴ Duggan (2014); Barker (2013); Conrad and Sycamore (2011); Bernstein and Taylor (2013).

¹⁵ Lehr (1999); Klesse (2017); Klesse (2018b); Pérez Navarro (2017); Weiner and Young (2011).

¹⁶ Palazzo (2018); Willey (2016); Klesse (2018c); Chambers (2017); Beauvoir (1981); Mitchell (1971).

¹⁷ Brake (2012), 114.

¹⁸ Chambers (2017).

¹⁹ Warner (2000); Emens (2004); Santos (2013); Cardoso (2014).

²⁰ Franke (2011).

²¹ Palazzo (2018, 168).

²² Chambers (2017, 42).

²³ Aviram and Leachman (2015); Klesse (2016).

²⁴ “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families & Relationships” (2006).

²⁵ Conrad and Sycamore (2011).

²⁶ “Instead of seeking to eliminate [the stigma of nonmarital relationships] by analogizing more and more relationships to marriage, why not just abolish the category as a legal status and, in that way, render all sexual relationships equal with each other and all relationships equal with the sexual?” Colker (1996), 77 (quoting Martha Albertson Fineman). See also Barker (2013).

²⁷ Gusmano (2018).

²⁸ Palazzo (2018); Croce (2018); Croce and Swennen (2021); Polikoff (2009).

²⁹ Brake (2012).

³⁰ Polikoff (2009).

³¹ Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, Stoilova (2020).

³² They include, amongst others, advocacy for the creation of an “alternative holistic status” to replace existing civil marriage models, such as Metz (2010); Brake (2012); Croce and Swennen (2021)’s proposal of participatory juridification through “cont(r)actualization”; and Chambers (2017)’s proposal for piecemeal regulation.

³³ Klesse (2016); Klesse (2018a).

³⁴ Anapol (2011); Klesse (2016); Emens (2004).

³⁵ Den Otter (2015); Kilbride and Page (2012).

³⁶ Chambers (2017); Rothschild (2019); Bano (2008). See also Kessler (2022).

³⁷ Chambers (2017, 195).

³⁸ Wintemute and Andenas (2001).

³⁹ Colker (1996, 69).

⁴⁰ Kitzinger and Wilkinson (2004, 144). See also Barker (2013). While an argument for formal equality may initially appear to be compelling, granting marriage rights to same-sex couples is not the only and certainly not the best solution. In light of feminist and queer critiques of marriage, inviting other groups into marriage does not solve the problem of inequality. This is particularly convincingly shown by Chambers (2017). “We must not mistake heterosexual rights for universal human rights,” argues Momin Rahman in a similar vein, concluding that “[f]ormal equality can too often lead to enshrinement of social inequalities” (Rahman 2000, 171).

⁴¹ Barker (2020).

⁴² Palazzo (2018, 237).

⁴³ McKee (1999); Browne and Nash (2016, 1–23).

⁴⁴ Mizielinska (2011); Mizielinska and Kulpa (2011); Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2016).

⁴⁵ Warner (1993, vii–xxx); Bell and Binnie (2000).

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- ⁴⁶ Klesse (2007).
- ⁴⁷ Warner (2000).
- ⁴⁸ Smith (2004); Smith (1993).
- ⁴⁹ Puar (1998); Eng and Hom (1998); Eng (2010); McRuer (2006); McRuer (2018); Ferguson (2004).
- ⁵⁰ Gopinath (2006).
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- ⁵² Weeks (2018, 146).
- ⁵³ Ibid., 135.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 135.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 136.
- ⁵⁶ Deleuze (2006, 174).
- ⁵⁷ Judith Butler (1993c, 308).
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 309.
- ⁵⁹ Day (2005, 88).
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Butler (1993b, 20).
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Cohen (2001); Crenshaw (1991); Sudbury (1998).
- ⁶⁵ Crenshaw (1991).
- ⁶⁶ Haritaworn (2008).
- ⁶⁷ Butler (1993c); Butler (1993a).
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- ⁶⁹ Puar (2007); Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem (2008); Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco (2014).
- ⁷⁰ Duggan (2014); Haritaworn (2015, 11).
- ⁷¹ Aviram and Leachman (2015); Lenon (2016).
- ⁷² Wilkinson (2010).
- ⁷³ Klesse (2018a); Rambukkana (2015); Ertman (2010).
- ⁷⁴ Cohen (2001); Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem (2008).
- ⁷⁵ Day (2005, 90); Haritaworn (2008).
- ⁷⁶ Carastathis (2013).
- ⁷⁷ Crenshaw (1991, 1241).

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- ⁸² Adam (2017).
- ⁸³ Klesse (2016); Klesse (2018a); Denike (2010, 137–54).
- ⁸⁴ Redding (2010); Rambukkana (2015).
- ⁸⁵ Uhrig (1984).
- ⁸⁶ Kilbride and Page (2012).
- ⁸⁷ Butler and Sona (2010).
- ⁸⁸ Redding (2010, 131).
- ⁸⁹ Taylor and Snowdon (2014); Rahman (2010, 944–61); Yip (2005, 271–89); Yip (2008); Yip and Toft (2020).
- ⁹⁰ Kaldera (2005); Stacey and Meadow (2009); Kilbride and Page (2012).
- ⁹¹ Klesse (2007); Klesse (2015).
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- ⁹³ Stephens and Emmers-Sommer (2020).
- ⁹⁴ Sanchez (2019).
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁹⁷ Holland (2012).
- ⁹⁸ Reagon (2009).
- ⁹⁹ Butler and Sona (2010).
- ¹⁰⁰ Klesse (2018a).
- ¹⁰¹ Stacey and Meadow (2009).
- ¹⁰² See Duggan (2009); Howard (2014).