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ABSTRACT

The work required of politicized subjects to act together, across difference towards transformative justice, is inexhaustible, complex, and difficult. Sometimes it is a battle to speak to one's peers, let alone act in concert with them. This article addresses destructive tendencies of intracommunal queer relationality in particular. Recent events within queer networks have helped us to understand particular impasses in queer organizing as acerbic and self-destructive—what we term here as “acrid.” In such instances, although some useful spaces for critique, criticism, praise, questions, wonderings, rants, reflections, and connections opened up, battlefields on which allied community members viciously attacked one another also manifested. Although generative at times, the debates and dialogues contained a great deal of vitriol, judgment, complacency, demands for apologies and annihilation, and in some instances, threatening and violent language, all which inhibit the momentum of our movements. This article is neither a content analysis of these myriad breakdowns in queer collaboration, nor are we interested in proving that such examples of destructive paradoxical relationality indeed happen. They happen. Instead, we assess the damage of devastated intracommunal relations, consider their queer propensities, and creatively theorize alternative possibilities for better collaborations throughout our queer spaces, communities, and futures.

Introduction

The work required to *act together*, across difference towards transformative justice, is inexhaustible. Concepts like “alliance,” “solidarity,” and “allyship” circulate heavily throughout progressive literatures and communities, indicative of swelling wishes for effective praxis that move politicized subjects beyond theoretical frameworks and into collective action. Such terms gesture toward forms of cooperation that pull subjects beyond the familiar territory of their own communities, into solidarities and alliances with others of whom they may share little in common. These solidary partnerships are tricky and worthy of analysis but are not the contexts within which we home in on acrid sociality in this article. Rather, we are interested in intracommunal political collaborations, queer ones in particular, which despite best theories, intentions, and practices, can and do go rancid. Sometimes it is a battle to *speak* to our peers, let alone, *act in concert* with them.

Recent events within our queer networks have helped us to understand certain impasses in queer organizing as acerbic and self-destructive—what we term here as “acrid.” In such instances, although some useful spaces for critique, criticism, praise, questions, wonderings, rants, reflections, and connections opened up, battlefields on which allied community members viciously attacked one another also manifested. Although generative at times, the debates and dialogues contained a great deal of vitriol, judgment, complacency, demands for apologies and annihilation, and in some instances, threatening and violent language, all which inhibit collaboration. This article is neither a content analysis of these myriad breakdowns in queer collaboration, nor are we interested in proving that such examples of destructive paradoxical relationality indeed happen. They happen. Instead, we assess the damage of devastated intracommunal relations, consider their queer propensities, and creatively theorize alternative possibilities for better collaborations throughout our queer spaces, communities, and futures.

The paranoid position as elucidated by Eve Sedgwick describes how ways of thinking and modes of critique have foreclosed around knowing in advance what one expects to find, and therefore is a fitting epistemological state from which practices of acrid sociality breed.¹ More than a scholarly analytical tool, self-reflexive queers employ critique as a street-level method to cite, manage, and prevent harm within their communities. Although negativity is not synonymous to critical thinking, as Patrick Finn has argued, and though critique is not an inherently negative or negating tool (but rather is always optimistic in the sense that both parties—those being critiqued and those critiquing—are mutually invested in something enough to deem their attachment worth the work of its

upkeep), queer faculties of critique do not necessarily enable generative collaboration in our textbooks, on our Facebooks, within sexuality studies and queer theory, and throughout activist, artistic, and otherwise politicized queer communities.² We ultimately posit that replacing practices of acrid sociality must include attempts to move away from the epistemology of the paranoid position that has come to dominate cultural studies, queer theory, and queer politics despite Sedgwick's prescient warning call decades ago.

Writer and self-proclaimed "organizational healer" and "pleasure activist" adrienne maree brown has observed that acrid sociality is not anomalous within queer communities today but appears embedded in pursuits of transformative justice more generally.

What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small—saying something fucked up. Some are massive—false identity, sexual assault. We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. When we are satisfied that that person or group is destroyed, we move on. Or sometimes we just move on because the next scandal has arrived.³

brown claims that she is not above this behavior, but wonders: "is that what we're here for? To cultivate a fear-based adherence to reductive common values?" It must be admitted that we are not always above this sort of behavior either; nevertheless, it is concerning how these kinds of discussions play out in our communities and to what ends. We apply brown's important inquires specifically to queer organizing. Investigating circuits of acrid sociality within queer networks can, we hope, lead us to explore how we might challenge them to bring about more mutually supportive, productive, and world-envisioning/making conversations. With brown, we wonder: "How do we shift from individual, interpersonal and inter-organizational anger towards viable generative sustainable systemic change?" And what might the practices of holding each other accountable that do not result in "call[ing] each other out until there's no one left beside us" look like?⁴

Attempts to eradicate racist, sexist, ableist, and otherwise oppressive dynamics within one's politicized community is not what we are teasing out here. Nor are we interested in joining the chorus of critiques (and critiques of critiques!) of cancel culture that are presently ubiquitous across liberal and conservative political spectrums alike. Such critiques are often defensive, bellicose, and rooted in underlying agendas. General conversations about cancel culture may be worth having, but in this project we are interested in the relationship of queerness to certain acrid social styles and practices. Queer acrid sociality is a destructive phenomenon of queer relationality, whose sheer force we find alarming. It manifests

in counterintuitive responses to transgressions by those we trust, or once trusted, in which we punish such peers more brutally than those who unequivocally despise us and/or seek to harm us. The sting of betrayal we may feel when a peer wrongs us can lead to anger and the foreclosing of our ability to take advantage of the shared experiences, values, and ideas we have or once had with those we are now at odds with, dampening our chances of moving the conversation forward beyond the wounds, to some place constructive, and maybe even healing. Acrid sociality, therefore, sabotages our chances of recuperating social bonds. It is a road to nowhere.

Although acrid sociality is not isolated to queer communities, we focus on its distinctly queer elements so that we might learn tactics to improve our projects and enliven our movements. We are not the only ones with this prerogative. Kai Cheng Thom wonders “what happens to a community of people who have been raised with sensation of constant, looming danger, of being fundamentally wrong in the way we love and express ourselves?” And “what impact might that collective trauma have upon our bodies and spirits?” Thom’s musings, both anecdotal (she used to be a therapist) and scientific (she draws from neurobiology, psychology, and somatics), construct a compelling rationale for queer acrid sociality within trauma theory. “Every time we are abused, discriminated against or neglected, those neural networks become stronger, while our neural networks associated with safety and loving relationships atrophy. We become physically less capable of imagining a world where *being with others* is not synonymous with *being unsafe*.”⁵ The theory of relational trauma makes a lot of sense, that queers as individuals and a community at large have internalized trauma, activating “ancient, powerful survival strategies,” and resulting in communities of crotchety queers who are “exquisitely sensitive to threat, powerfully oriented to detect the faintest possibility of betrayal.” Thom’s major supposition is that we are hardest on each other: “we become primed to lash out and punish our close and loved ones when they disappoint us—because if we don’t then we might get punished first.”⁶

Yet we hope that we are more than our trauma. We broach several historical and current realities in addition to trauma, like institutionalization, digital media, and other negative affects, which continue to stoke a certain combativeness and maintain an inherent negativity in queer lives, politics, and scholarship. The very foundational and confrontational object relations to heteronormativity still color queer agendas today, continuing to usher in new challenges for living queerly. Within queer studies, as Robyn Wiegman observes, the logic of antinormativity is “both the central political term for a distinctly queer approach to the study of sexuality and the animating agency of its ongoing academic institutionalization.”⁷ An understanding of heteronormativity has been collectively sought

by a loose cabal of researchers in order to disrupt, diminish, and prevent such organizing forces of power—not procure them—in the name of social justice since the concept’s debut in 1991.⁸ And so “the allure of moving *against* appears to have had greater critical currency than the more intimate and complicit gesture of moving *athwart*.”⁹ “Athwart” is the road less traveled for many politicized queer individuals and communities, whereas “against” is a tool we wield magnificently. Our paranoid readings of not only our texts, but predicaments and relationships that arise within our communities, activate the wrecking balls we dutifully drag behind us. In the end, we hope to gain insight into queer subcultures in order to identify social justice practices amenable to both building our communities and sustaining our movements.

Bonds and Breakdowns

Our theorizing on acrid sociality carefully thinks through how queers treat their fellow queers whose solidarity is necessary to ameliorate social and political wrongs that disproportionately affect those at the disadvantaged end of the many axes of difference. We are two white, nontrans, Anglo fags in academia who are cognizant of how our scholarship and activism are always haunted by our social locations and how our theorizing on acrid sociality is therefore vulnerable to epistemological blind spots and quite possibly scathing critique. Although we have engaged in innumerable private conversations about what we are calling acrid sociality with friends and colleagues, expressing concern about the ways queers treat one another, and in particular, how we interact on massively public digital bathroom stall walls like Facebook and Twitter, many have expressed caution about addressing this increasingly common form of sociality publicly, out of fear that they too may become the target of ostracization, online harassment, and physical threats.

Despite this, we take the risk of formalizing our ideas through public scholarship because we are deeply invested in the potentials and possibilities of queer culture and activism, and hope that this is merely the beginning of more robust conversations to come. After all, protests are more than screams into the abyss—they *can* be generative sociopolitical tools. Such was the case when Black Lives Matter staged a sit-in at the pride parade in Toronto in 2016. Despite the fact that some (mostly white) queers were outraged, this BLM action was not demonstrative of acrid sociality (though some community members’ indignant and oblivious responses certainly were!). The demonstration was a claim to exist, an exhortation to the Toronto queer community to hear queer-of-color concerns and actively respond to them. The sit-in urged important discussions, debates,

and political mobilizing around queer belonging, policing, and antiblackness that continue to be fruitful years later.

Intracommunal critique or judgment is not reducible to in-group fighting. Ramzi Fawaz draws an important distinction between “judgmentalness” and “judgment” in his analysis of the 1970 film *Boys in the Band*, and he deems both concepts crucial elements of gay male sociality. Judgmentalness “can produce alternative intimacies outside the gaze of societal and clinical homophobia.”¹⁰ Judgmentalness or bitchiness, in the form of gay snark, can serve as a unifier, a way to engage. Or critical judgment can act as a “tool for holding other gay men accountable for their speech and actions.”¹¹ Critical judgment ensures that we are not fascist faggots to each other for no good reason—we judge each other because we care about each other. The productive negativity contained within both judgmentalness and critical judgment is a queer defensive adaptation from within the confines of a world whose relentless scrutinizing of our queer transgressions of its norms is debilitating. Fawaz contends that the “bitch sessions” and “barbed speech” are productive for the relationships in the film. He identifies such intimacies as “acidic” not because challenging sociality has eaten away at the characters’ friendships, but because these relations “register the bitterness or sting of bonds cemented through shared knowledge of another gay man’s insecurities, manipulations, and character flaws.”¹² Acidic intimacies can manifest in queer communities in a variety of generative bitchy relations, from those Fawaz identifies in *Boys in the Band* and varied forms of “reading” in drag culture as identified by Timothy Oleksiak and C. Namwali Serpell, to Gay Shame’s 2005 “Be A Bitch!” poster that proclaims “Bitchiness has empowered generations of women, faggots, trannies and sissies to resist violence, authority, and male supremacy. That’s right, BE A BITCH.”¹³ Acrid sociality, on the other hand, is a black hole to nihilism out of which nothing grows and nothing returns.

Acrid sociality is not exclusive to activists’ relations. It rages throughout academic and artistic communities as well. Allyson Mitchell, Deirdre Logue, and their coven of collaborators conjured up the first iteration of *Kill Joy’s Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* in Toronto during October of 2013. The “truckers’ nuts,” a repeating motif in Allyson Mitchell’s corpus that were used as ammo for the Kastle’s ball-bustin’ butch exhibit, were among the project’s elements that would prove controversial, as exemplified in this poster’s ripe response to another blogger’s reflections on their experience at the Kastle: “wow im [sic] sorry that you had to step foot into such a dark and sad place personally i [sic] am surprised that they forgot to make a sign that says welcome to white lesbian hell. long live racism and transphobia said the cracker dyke as she smashed a plaster dick in her dreadlocks wig.” The “plaster dick[s],” along with other features of Killjoy’s

Kastle, such as its “overwhelming whiteness,” were condemned in reflections among queers and feminists—many of whom visited the Kastle, many who did not—including members of the same local queer and feminist communities that were involved in the project’s construction and performance. In addition to blogs, and a variety of websites that chimed in (BITCH, BuzzFeed, and Jezebel, to name a few), it was the event’s Facebook page that functioned as the hub for many of the conversations and debates (both locally and abroad) that were incited by the project.¹⁴

The spirited discussions that began in Toronto continued throughout the staging of the Kastle in Los Angeles in October of 2015 at ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives and continue unfolding today after the release of the anthology *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle* in 2019. It is worth noting that reflexivity was intentionally procured within Killjoy’s Kastle. The space, time, and people needed to process feelings and experiences were not only built into the project via a “processing room” that participants found themselves in at the end of the guided tour of the Kastle, but an artistic openness and intellectual vulnerability generally invigorates Mitchell’s personal practices as well as the Feminist Art Gallery’s (FAG) work.¹⁵ A simple content analysis of these online forums, however, reveals missed opportunities and instances of destructive relationality. The project’s Facebook event pages, for example, proved more fertile for accusations and flagged harms than for critiques of the installation and performance itself, which were disproportionality explored in comparison to critiques of members’ online behavior. And so, the hijinks of acrid sociality ultimately precluded critiques of the Kastle brought forth by both local and not-so-local queers on social media. In particular, despite the best efforts of Mitchell, critiques concerning transphobia and white supremacy were decentered from the very conversations they initiated, and therefore hampered from being adequately taken up in many aftermath online discussions. “What makes call-out culture so toxic,” Asam Ahmad points out, “is not necessarily its frequency so much as the nature and performance of the call-out itself.” Call-outs can, though not unequivocally, operate as functions of acrid sociality. Online in particular, “calling someone out isn’t just a private interaction between two individuals: it is a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are.” And so “sometimes it can feel like the performance itself is more significant than the content of the call-out.”¹⁶

Furthermore, acrid sociality is exacerbated by the institutional contexts within which many academic, activist, and artistic queers find themselves scrounging for funding, support, and legitimacy. In the case of Killjoy’s Kastle, Mitchell, Logue, and their collaborators, which included both paid artists and volunteers, received significant institutional support—a reality not lost on the Facebook

discussants on the project's event pages. As one post wondered, ". . . how is it that so many people (aka mostly white people) are coming out in support of a white tenured prof whose project got called out on the representations/absences of race?" An answer to this question should seriously consider how to reconcile queerness and feminism with the neoliberal forces of the institutions many of us reluctantly occupy. Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included* (2012), Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things* (2012), and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013) are flagships in this regard: how we use the institutions that we have gained some access to in order to help make otherwise impossible things happen, and how these institutions use and change us in return.¹⁷ The scapegoating of members like Mitchell and the Feminist Art Gallery in our communities because of institutional contamination breeds divisiveness and diminishes the value and potential of the institutional scraps that some of us somehow manage to access. As Alexis Shotwell notes in *Against Purity* (2016), we all live in compromised times. She suggests that rather than striving to be pure in our individual ethics and politics as we manifest world making projects, if we start with the fact that we (some more than others surely) are all complicit and implicated in the structural harm that comes with living under ecocidal, patriarchal, white supremacist, hetero supremacist, ableist, neoliberal capitalism, then perhaps there is a more equitable future we can carve out from this world.¹⁸

Although there is a place for interrupting violently homophobic and racist projects conducted by malicious people (i.e., punching Nazis in the face), projects like Killjoy's Kastle are not that by any stretch of the imagination, and any such conflation minimizes the grievous harm we experience at the hands of people who actually want us dead. What each of us has learned about building across difference after we have been harmed is that it is useful to process wounds and rage among like-minded friends (usually offline) before we are ready to re-engage comrades that have hurt us, intentionally or not. In rural communities in particular, you cannot afford to throw other activists and cultural workers away because of your criticism of them or their work, however egregious the transgressions. In a small town, the world becomes even smaller when you start treating people who want to be your ally, comrade, or sister in struggle as disposable the moment there is friction. Practicing alternatives to acrid sociality is time and energy consuming, requires a commitment to struggle together, and lacks the instant gratification of lashing out with a mic drop and collecting "likes." Yet, it moves us in directions we want to go, away from "rigid radicalism," toward building something for the long haul.¹⁹

The specters of the feminist killjoy and the queer crank loom large over this project, and although they possess nuanced identities and politics, both are crusaders against the status quo. Both can ruin your party! We focus on the

relationship of queerness to acrid sociality, but not without a nod to the overlap of queer and feminist theory—to the shared terrain of queer and feminist experience, ethics, and politics. This shared queer feminist heritage is not lost on Fawaz, Oleksiak, Serpell, or Gay Shame, who, to varying degrees, identify strong links between feminist consciousness raising and queer cultural production. We also owe much of our affective intelligence to feminist theory and activism. Though our aim is not to verify individual instances of acrid sociality, but rather to engage critically and genealogically with the phenomenon as it relates to queerness, these brief descriptions of some noticeably acrid episodes are useful for discerning generative queer negativity from destructive acrid sociality.

Our emergent theory of acrid sociality remains intentionally provisional here, where we have chosen to be less exact in our examples. We have instead used animating “episodes” in hopes of holding open the usefulness of this theoretical tool without over defining it. Further, we look to Jean Bessette’s work on situating queer speech temporally and in context—harsh language can be used lovingly among friends, but can also be used to destroy relational bonds between potential comrades.²⁰ Although the meaning of language continues to change over time and no form of speech is inherently acrid, many forms of expression in language have the potential to be acrid, both intentionally and not. For that reason, we hesitate to be overly prescriptive in our illustrations of acrid sociality, but we hope that a sense of what we are describing as acrid sociality can be felt if not discerned.

The Tedium of the Medium

Social media is a regular facilitator of acrid sociality, and so we cannot engage with the phenomenon without considering temporality and presence: how it feels to encounter people in the flesh, to debate and disagree with them, and to teach/learn from others through embodied dialogue in real time. The “anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, textuality, and absence of eye contact,” which social media fosters, can intensify communications between digital discussants.²¹ These shifts may be “reflected in reduced behavioral inhibitions, a lowered regard for behavioral boundaries while in cyberspace, and can be expressed in various online interpersonal behaviors which can be positive or negative.”²² In psychological terms, this phenomenon is known as the online disinhibition effect.²³ Queer critique and critical in-group conversations that once transpired in the “letter to the editor” sections of LGBTQ print publications over many months, now happen instantly on Facebook walls and Twitter feeds with less time for considered reflection and careful word choice—not to mention they

are massively public and easily available to out-group readers. The ephemeral nature of some online content and the difficulty of cataloging and archiving such intense back-and-forth digital skirmishes leaves us to wonder whether future generations will have access to the conversations and contestations that engulfed so-called queer communities of the past.

Digital media has opened up new social worlds, and in turn, cross-disciplinary scholarship on these spaces has proliferated.²⁴ A thorough engagement with the contouring effects of social media on individual practices and community dynamics is outside our scope here, but nonetheless, some meditation on mediums like Facebook is imperative because of the primacy of web-based tools and social media platforms in queer academic, activist, and artistic work. We cannot dismiss communications like Facebook conversations and “Twitter wars” as immature and inconsequential, for the effects of our digital realities on our embodied lives are vast. Social media is an extension of our communities, and due to the powerful nature and ubiquity of the internet in urban and suburban places, our communities and the conversations happening within them can proliferate farther and faster, resulting in very real and very diverse consequences. Although social media can help us to publicize/publish our work, secure funding, recruit members, deliver strategies, request help, mobilize us to action, and flag oppression, it can also increase vulnerability by opening our communities up in ways we cannot always foresee or control. Social media can put the theatre of intracommunal relations on display, which can make us susceptible to unfair and incomplete judgments from ignorant outsiders and malicious trolls, adding to the paranoia typical of queer communities.

Digitalized sociality can also cause us to unwittingly over rely on ineffective practices in place of some of the useful traits that constitute embodied dialogue. Sarah Schulman disparagingly describes emails and texts as “unidirectional” practices of communication that “don’t allow for return information to enhance or transform comprehension.”²⁵ Of course, generative communication is possible through emails, texts, and various forms of social media, but she is right to identify that the structures of these mediums have the potential to lead users astray from nuanced dialogue via the allure of simplistic subjective declarations. The linearity of many social media platforms is capable of creating lags long enough to usher parties to an impasse at which communication ties get severed altogether, or motivating dialogue at such a rapid pace that communications are missed and meanings lost. Our screens, as extensions of our bodies, become the affective conduits. As an alternative, embodied dialogue gives us access to a theatre of affects—to an “atmosphere” capable of changing us. With Teresa Brennan’s work in mind, we are left pondering: how does the lack of a “physiological impact” affect our ability to empathize with one another?²⁶

Although acrid sociality is not merely a speech act, it is most discernable when signified through speech and written language. Acrid sociality is distinguishable by its hampering of collaborative dialogue through rhetorical end-punctuation like *mic drops* and call outs, for which social media acts as a fertile incubator. Such dialogue-disablers add to the cranky complacency that floods many politicized circles today. The practice of “calling out” or “cancelling” puts people—including our colleagues, friends, lovers, and family members (both chosen and given)—through the public ringer, which as Ahmad points out, can “enable a particularly armchair and academic brand of activism: one in which the act of calling out is seen as an end in itself.”²⁷ There’s no collaborative potential in a mic drop, despite its oft-seeming utility as a wedge into hegemonic discourse. It is important to note that both instances of call out culture as well as critiques of call out culture can work to silence those citing harm and oppression, and so both can operate as manifestations of acrid sociality if they preclude the possibility of further movement—of a future. As Ahmad himself notes, call-outs are sometimes necessary, particularly when power dynamics leave vulnerable and silenced folks with so few options for resistance.²⁸ We agree with AFROPUNK writer Hari Ziyad that “call-out culture isn’t the problem, but disingenuous holier-than-thou performances, or using calling-out to reestablish the same abusive practices but with the abused as the new abuser, is.”²⁹ The problem is what we are describing as acrid sociality.

When we pound on our keyboards, launching off one-sided communications like missiles at someone without so much as receiving one second of eye-contact, a spoken word, some body gesture, or a single whiff of the atmosphere, our margin for error of misunderstanding and mistranslation undoubtedly widens. Schulman cheekily “wish[es] that all the people of the industrial world would sign a pledge that any negative exchange that is created on email or text must be followed by a live, in-person conversation.”³⁰ Of course, embodied dialogue is not a foolproof enabler of productive communication, and the rapid advancement of digital technologies is equipping social media with evermore-intuitive functions, such as increasingly accessible video and audio group chat options. Still, it is far easier to shun each other online than in-person, and as Schulman has explored, such practices mirror the ways governments (and we add corporations) avoid being held accountable by hiding behind digitalized bureaucratic barriers. In addition, as Ahmad observes, “call-out culture can end up mirroring what the prison industrial complex teaches us about crime and punishment: to banish and dispose of individuals rather than to engage with them as people with complicated stories and histories.”³¹ Replicating such institutionalized anti-social behavior within our queer communities is incredibly toxic. We are also convinced it is avoidable.

It is interesting that ambivalence about social media was evident in the Facebook discussions themselves that happened in the wake of *Killjoy's Kastle*. One contributor shared the Toronto event page in 2013 citing “the problem with the queer community today,” which they identified to be the use of Facebook as a medium to host a discussion about an interactive art installation (a discussion that they—it is worth noting—participated in and at some points dominated).³² Others criticized the medium through indictments against whiteness, cisgender supremacy, and second-wave lesbian feminism, attributing the project’s and Facebook event pages’ limitations to the problematic behavior of other contributing Facebook members. If Facebook uniquely enlivened the problematic behavior that certain posters illuminated, and if contemporary demonstrations, networks, and movements “cannot really exist without digital networks,” as Judith Butler posits, then how can we address the inadequacies of social media, and digital sociality in general, to improve our community relations?³³

The Center for Solutions to Online Violence (CSOV) offers tools for protecting one’s digital self, but they also provide useful resources for thinking about how to “Do Better” while engaging online. The group led by women of color within CSOV called The Alchemists created the *Power & Control Wheel* infographic to help users conceptualize how harm unfolds online, giving us insight into online practices that we should avoid. Furthermore, in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* brown dedicates a chapter to “spells and practices for emergent strategy.” Her scholarship consistently emphasizes a balance between theory/praxis. She contends “if we begin to understand ourselves as practice ground for transformation, we can transform the world.”³⁴ In other words, our micro relations can have a substantial effect on our macro aspirations. Though not all of brown’s recommended practices concern digitalized sociality, her theories of emergent strategy are applicable to any communal relation. She claims to have “found that the work of cultivating personal resilience, healing from trauma, self-development and transformation is actually a crucial way to expand what any collective body can be.”³⁵ Her thoughts on healing are especially pertinent to our exploration of acrid sociality, regardless of whether it happens online or offline, as many acrid practitioners are operating alongside the sting of their trauma. Although these resources certainly are not the only tools at our disposal for reflecting on our online engagement with one another, they are a great starting point for thinking through how acrid sociality can become legible through online actions.

Examining queer communities’ digitalized sociality reiterates how acrid sociality is not about problematic rogue individuals. Acrid sociality is not an individualized phenomenon, although it may have isolating, alienating, and individualizing effects. What is really at stake here is a question about understanding

the forces within and through which people conduct and participate in the construction of the social worlds of their everyday lives—a deceptively complex problem at the heart of British cultural studies.³⁶ When our ability to listen to each other is constrained by the very form of our communication, the chances of fostering dialogue that grows and adapts to the rendezvous of a multiplicity of voices significantly reduces, and the potential for selfish promotions of our own interests to supplant any desire for collaboration increases. Online platforms are common denominators of every example of queer acrid sociality that we reference in this article. Therefore, the enabling and limiting effects of the internet on queer organizing are worth some pause. Acrid sociality, however, is not captive to twenty-first-century queer life or digital cultures.

Queer Cranks

In *No Future* (2004) Lee Edelman builds off Leo Bersani's conceptualization of antirelationality that he rehearsed in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (1986) through to *Homos* (1995) in order to construct what has been identified as the antisocial thesis.³⁷ Edelman's and Bersani's versions of queer antirelationality have their roots in psychoanalytic Lacanian thinking around jouissance, self-shattering, and disrupting the social symbolic order. Both draw from Guy Hocquenghem's political conceptions, whose *Homosexual Desire* (1972) was first published in the company of radical second-wave feminist works like Valerie Solanis's *SCUM Manifesto* (1968) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970).³⁸ The anger and indignant rejections of the reigning social order across the four decades that span these works are easily traceable. When "queer" first began to politically germinate in the early 1990s, anger, bitchiness, crankiness, and irreverence were valued as negative affective forces that enabled queers to disrupt the serenity of the "normal." The mantra "let yourself be angry" from the anonymous manifesto that was circulated at the New York City Pride Parade in 1990 was indicative of this loud ideal in early queer activism to liberate negativity, anger in particular: "They've taught us that good queers don't get mad. They've taught us so well that we not only hide our anger from them, we hide it from each other. We even hide it in ourselves."³⁹ As "bashing back" was a direct response to oppressive power structures and their creations, the structural disenfranchisement of queers around HIV/AIDS and the repeal of gay and lesbian-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in particular, anger was a platform for the promotion of queer subjectivity and survival.⁴⁰

Preceding this queer activist call to bash back, Michel Foucault's precedential theorizing of reverse discourse provided queers, feminists, and postmodern

thinkers of all sorts with a method to bash back conceptually.⁴¹ Since this model of productive negation was provided, queers have worked to “depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than its antithesis,” which has included the reclaiming of negative identifications (such as fag, dyke, witch, slut, and queer itself) and reappropriating of negativity as productive praxis.⁴² The queer antisocial thesis was born from this regurgitation of negativity within queer studies, yet it stands out from other strands of theorizing that take up queer sociality. Whereas queer theorists like Halberstam and Cvetkovich theorize how to embrace queer negativity through its repurposing, Edelman promotes embracing queer negativity through embodiment. Benjamin Kahan summarizes Edelman’s position concisely:

. . . the antisocial thesis, broadly construed, argues that all social life and sociality—encompassing the good life, happiness, and citizenship—is organized by heterosexuality and reproductive futurism (emblemized by the figure of the child) and constitutively excludes queerness. Rather than representing an identity or a group, queerness for Edelman is a figural position, embodying an implacable negativity that “disturb[s]” civil society and the social order (17). While Bersani eschews art’s redemptive power, Edelman seeks to dismantle the social order not to serve some more “viable political future,” but to bar “every realization of futurity . . . [and] every social structure or form” (4). He thus calls for an abdication of the politics of hope altogether and an embrace of queer abjection in the name of destroying the social order.⁴³

We are less committed to the idea that the rise of negativity as queer praxis has been sublimated into forms of acrid sociality, than we are dedicated to distinguishing the generative negativity that has permeated queer scholarship and politics (such as Rawaz’s acidic intimacies and various strands of antirelationality) from acrid sociality. In their introduction to *Queer Bonds* Joshua Weiner and Damon Young claim that “queer is at once disabled and inventive sociality.” “If an askew relation to the normative terms of sexuality occasions a certain negative relation to the social,” they explain, “this means it also precipitates a certain reinvention of the social, of the nature of the ‘bonds,’ a reinvention that is sometimes invested under the sign of transgression, sometimes of utopia.”⁴⁴ Yet, applying this theorizing to the bonds within queer communities is complicated.

Analyses of acrid sociality lead us to ask why we are so vicious to each other—to individuals we share varying degrees of our politics, art, scholarship, bodies, disciplines, values, struggles, pleasures, hopes, critiques, and traumas with across varying degrees of difference. Acrid sociality causes a breakdown in collaboration, a hindrance from fostering any communal cohesion around productive trajectories, and so Weiner and Young’s assertion that a negative relation

to the social is inherently productive because it motivates both a disabling and creative queer sociality, assumes that the disabling agent leaves some remnants of sociality behind. “A shattering can be a starting point,” as Sara Ahmed sagely observes, but only if someone is left standing.⁴⁵ Weiner and Young’s argument, in addition to many a queer claim to the productivity of negativity, does not take into consideration acrid sociality, which contains a pungent bond-disabling negativity that promotes aggressive and abusive behaviors and their inevitable defensive and hurtful responses. In spite of the opening up of negativity’s possible generative outcomes on queer politics and livelihoods, a problem still remains: “feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation,”⁴⁶ but as Heather Love reminds us, “there are ways of feeling bad that do not make us feel like fighting back.”⁴⁷

Gay marriage is one useful site for understanding how antirelational queerness comes to function as an ethical tool of queer subjectivity. Ruti speculates, “if marriage has drawn so much critical energy, it is because it represents the very cornerstone of the system of biopolitical control—a system that valorizes productivity, good performance, achievement, and self-actualization—that queer theory has been so keen to destabilize.”⁴⁸ As many queer scholars and activists have argued, gay marriage dovetails splendidly with the current social order as it operates efficiently as a foot soldier of neoliberal capitalism.⁴⁹ To opt out of gay marriage is to say “no” to the idea that gay marriage is a good idea, “no” to gay marriage as a life-mode (*the* life-mode) to fulfill one’s desire. Ruti’s Lacanian perspective of queer antirelationality is that “social change demands subjects who are able to mobilize behind desires other than those dictated by the normal social order.”⁵⁰ Antirelational critical stances can help us to illuminate queer forms of relationality that the cultural cachet of marriage eclipses.

Although antirelationality has been quite generative in the field of queer studies, antisocial theorists have been regarded as elitist, inaccessible, negative, and foreclosing, and their archives as white, male, and limited.⁵¹ José Muñoz and the queer cadre of other utopian, reparative, and relational thinkers are invested in the present and future in ways that Edelman and other so-called antisocial thinkers are accused of abandoning. Muñoz’s theorizing is a “queer utopian hermeneutic” that queerly functions in its “aim to look for queer relational formations within the social.”⁵² Although we will likely never be “queer” in Muñoz’s surmising, queerness’s constant positioning as our horizon will always play a hand in shaping our relationship to the present, which is one definition of politics. A hopeful and relational queerness is not a petrified concept—it comprises epistemological modes that can and must be translated into everyday practices of resistance in the here and now as Karma Chávez insists.⁵³ “Calling in” for example, as distinguished from “Calling out” by Ngọc Loan Trần, is the work

of acknowledging/allowing mistakes to happen and “calling each other back in when we stray,” as opposed to banishing one from a project and/or shunning one from the community.⁵⁴ Calling in, a street manifestation of Muñoz’s theoretical queerness, is intimate relational work and not the public performative stunts that social media platforms like Facebook orchestrate. Trần does not advocate for calling in to supplant calling out, but is interested in a simultaneous multiplicity of tools, strategies, and methods. “We have to remind ourselves that we once didn’t know. There are infinitely many more things we have yet to know and may never know. We have to let go of a politic of disposability. We are what we’ve got. No one can be left to their fuck ups and the shame that comes with them because ultimately we’ll be leaving ourselves behind.”⁵⁵ Treating our relationships like “Dixie cups,” as bell hooks has also observed, as disposable and easily replaceable, becomes an established form of dehumanization “when greedy consumption is the order of the day” and “when our self-centered needs are not being met.”⁵⁶

Trauma colors queer scholarship, political actions, personal experiences, and community relations, justifying our roles as cranky queers and feminist killjoys. Trauma emboldens us in a sense, while it also begs to be soothed. Furthermore, trauma can effectively destroy our collective ambitions, and lead us to “political depression.”⁵⁷ But if we apply a structural analysis to the feelings and historical traumas we are talking about here—the feelings that we would prefer give birth to generative forms of queer sociality—it is possible to draw out the individualizing, isolating, and bond-destroying outcomes of what we are calling acrid sociality. Raymond Williams’s *structures of feeling*, Deborah Gould’s *emotional habitus*, and Jonathan Flatley’s *affective mapping* all offer ways to think about affect and emotion on a structural level that avoids the pitfalls of individualizing or interiorizing emotions and gives us conceptual tools to perceive how emotions and moods circulate among particular collectivities at particular moments in history.⁵⁸

In “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” Muñoz, in conversation with Lisa Duggan, claims: “W. R. Bion’s notion of valence might also be useful to understand how a belonging in and through affective negativity works for an anti-normative politics. Valency, borrowed from chemistry, is the concept that describes the capacity for spontaneous and instinctive emotional combination, between two individuals or a group. Bion’s concept provides a provisional and partial account of how emotions cement social groups as guiding basic assumptions (what he calls *bas*). Thus as a group or a pair we share happiness and grief, ecstasy and sorrow, and so forth. This affective commonality is a site for commonality and even sociality.”⁵⁹ In this formulation, Muñoz suggests that it is in and through an affective negativity that commonality and collectivity might

coalesce. This is echoed by Flatley's reflections on melancholy and modernism in *Affective Mapping*. Mobilizing his concept of affective mapping, Flatley argues for a sense of collective identification with others against the social structures and historical developments through which negative affects originate. Through an analysis of one's own emotional life and seeing its connections to others, some agency can be derived. Flatley argues, "For only then can one see with whom one's situation is shared, who one's enemies are, what situations must be avoided, skills developed and tactics pursued—in short all the ways one might stave off despair and have some agency in relation to one's own emotional life."⁶⁰ This potential for identification and collectivity based on shared affective states, particularly those marked by negative emotions, may open up space for political organizing and action that transcends or connects subjects across traditional modes of identification (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality) that political organizing relies upon all too often. As Duggan puts it quite humorously, "Bad sentiments can lead us (instead) *out* of dominant, alienating social forms . . . and into a collectivity of the cynical, bitter, hostile, despairing, and hopeless. This is how I find my people!"⁶¹

Conclusion: Fighting Over Scraps, Divided We Beg

What can a theory of acrid sociality do and how is it useful? Are we merely overthinking it? It seems far simpler to just say, "Don't be a jerk!" But acrid sociality is not destructive solely due to its cruelty. Although a bit of humility could go a long way, "enough humility to learn, to be taught, to have teachers," acrid sociality is most devastating through the stagnancy it causes within our queer communities.⁶² brown observes that "[w]e tend to slip out of togetherness the way we slip out of the womb, bloody and messy, and surprised to be alone."⁶³ Although acrid sociality leaves some bonds irreparable, the possibility for new forms of collaboration are many. From the paranoid position, Sedgwick asks scholars to move in a different direction through what she calls reparative readings from the depressive position. By reparative readings Sedgwick means openness to alternative ways of knowing and allowing oneself to be surprised through one's own investigation of a text or a situation—a clear precursor to Wiegman and Wilson's "athwart." "From the depressive position we accept the uncontrollable nature of political reality, we critique the social world but still engage it, we take the risk of hope with full knowledge of the possibility, even the certainty, of failure. We repair our relation to the social and political world that we have also wished to mutilate, explode, destroy. We campaign for Obama, then organize to pressure and transform the political institutions that disappoint

or harm us.”⁶⁴ The depressive position, rearticulated by Duggan above, offers an alternative strategy for investigating the social and how we are called to it.

The depressive position is a commitment to a form of sociality that does not foreclose critique and the circulation of negative affect, but demands of us the humility to make space for parallel readings, the unknown, and the possibilities yet to arrive. We need not throw out our well-sharpened analytic skills or impassioned critique (our very lives depend on these tools no doubt!), but we must exercise caution in how we engage them as to not foreclose generative openings complementary to our critiques. Acrid sociality is the epitome of the paranoid position with its insistence on relating everything one critiques to one’s own fragile selfhood, which only increases our dependence on the institutions and systems we organize against.

More and more, academics, activists, and politicized folks in general, do not seem interested in “meeting others where they’re at” anymore, or engaging with folks who are politically not on the same page as them, especially within the so-called Left. Movement building and holding one another to account takes patience, stamina, and care. Have we drained these resources within our queer communities? It is clear that we cannot undo legacies and systems of oppression like colonialism, slavery, transphobia, homophobia, patriarchy, white supremacy, classism, and ableism with one project or tweet, but our rage and dismissiveness to each other seems to suggest that we think we can. Perhaps acrid sociality is most attributable to collective activist burnout, which leaves us feeling impatient for historical wrongs to be righted. Rodney Diverlus, choreographer and BLM Toronto activist, believes enervation comes with the territory. “Most of us come into our activism already burnt out from living life in the margins. We fight injustice out of a need, we fight each other out of unresolved trauma, a fight that burns what little fire we have left from living. We burn, and we are burned. This endless burning of things and self guts movements of our fiercest warriors. It leaves community ties in tatters, lives shattered and relationships that cease to matter.”⁶⁵ Rest and self-care for those promoting transformative justice is necessary, but as another BLM activist, artist, and academic Syrus Marcus Ware observes, “we have a lot of work to do collectively to create the kind of world where activists are supported in taking breaks.”⁶⁶ Rest equips politicized queers with the creative distance and peace of mind that is essential to differentiating acrid sociality—relational behavior that destroys potential bonds, political affinities, and collaborations across difference with sympathetic others—from the generative possibilities of negative affects for future queer worldmaking projects. We acknowledge that self-care is an easier hoped for than practiced ethic for most activists. Not everyone has the luxury to light candles, fill the tub, and climb in. Staying alive subsumes other agendas. Nonetheless, the recognition

that malnourished subjects are ill equipped to sustain communities of resistance is crucial to extirpating acrid sociality.

Envisioning how to move away from acrid sociality, how to collaborate otherwise, is uniquely difficult for queers due to the prevalence of masochistic relational behaviors that cruelly double as coping mechanisms. “Our trauma thinking is not bad or evil,” Thom asserts, for “it has allowed us to survive the unthinkable.”⁶⁷ Nixing such queer survival strategies, like the embodied negativity that the antisocial thesis recommends, is beside the point. Rather than ignore our trauma she suggests that if queers could learn to shift our perception of our trauma from an individual experience to a collective one then our energy could be applied to collective healing as opposed to acrid sociality. “We defend our boundaries by lashing out and punishing the people who have crossed them,” Thom observes, “when sometimes what we truly want to ask them is to bring them closer, to ask them to respect and love us more skillfully and compassionately.”⁶⁸

Queer antagonism toward the dominant and symbolic social order has only sharpened our relational intelligence. As an army of exes, we know a thing or two about intimacy, accountability, and potlucks. Queer antirelationality is a social prophylactic that protects us against the status quo and fortifies our desires. It encourages us to misbehave in predestined categories and spill out of insipid morality. Queer antirelationality is not responsible for queer acrid sociality. Rather, it enables us to make space within a cramped institutionalized world for alternative ways of surviving, thriving, and hiving. We are far from antisocial. We cruise parks. We courageously navigate polyamorous relationships. We have the guts to choose our families. We fuck our friends and befriend our fucks. But acrid sociality sabotages all that. Although some have observed that queer studies is moving beyond the “false choice” of attaching to queer renditions of the social versus bulldozing the symbolic social order, acrid sociality is a practice that enacts a conservative turn backward, cancelling out any such intuition gained through recent queer theory.⁶⁹

Queer antirelationality is not just about negation, it is a methodology of queer creativity. Acrid sociality, on the other hand, is queerly destructive because it razes the creative incubators that are our queer bonds. We echo Tom Roach’s claim that friendship as a radical queer politic can “fight against the institutional impoverishment of the social fabric” and provide a workshop “for the creation of unconventional forms of union and community.”⁷⁰ Since friends are “neither possessive nor possessed, neither owner nor owned,” friendship “bespeaks the anarchical contingency of all relationality.”⁷¹ As carla bergman and Nick Montgomery contend, friendship “names interdependent relationships as a source of collective power, a dangerous closeness that Empire works to eradicate through

relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units.”⁷² We must continue to seek strategies that resist the normalization of queer subject relations and prevent the hijacking of our crankiness, competitiveness, and communality by institutionalized methodologies. We need relational methods that allow us to practice in our very communities what we theorize in our texts and teach in our classrooms. We require tools for supporting and enabling each other, even when we inevitably fail one another.

Have we forgotten that “we have the ability to love one another, deeply and securely,” and that “we are capable of imagining a world, of bringing a world into being, where we do not have to kill each other to survive?”⁷³ As social-sexual pariahs whose very communities have been built around instances of “shared estrangement,” the strain from tarrying with the negative to bring about transformative justice is a very queer problem. We must acknowledge, however, that acrid sociality is not part of any radical politics of queer negativity. Acrid sociality, typified by smug, self-righteous, and performative shutdowns of dialogue, is a middle finger to building solidarity across difference. A rejection of humility. An aversion to difficult teaching and learning. A refusal to try to build anything, however imperfect the blueprints. If we are looking for communal strategies that can enable queer collaboration and propel movements onward, then we must develop a theory of acrid sociality—a first step to recognizing acrid sociality when it occurs, identifying how such forms of relationality fail us, and a mandate to seek better ways to build one another up while holding each other to account.

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