

# Sexy Navigations: Adventures in Building Love in Postnormal Times

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## Abstract

Love has literally been debated to death by thinkers since time immemorial. This article seeks to reframe the discourse on love to restore life and appreciation for its complex beauty and free it from the hopeless utopian project contemporary times have made it into. Likewise, the over-categorization of Western thought has doomed the concepts of sex and gender. By exploring our increasingly postnormal world, and in light of the recent pandemic, this article seeks to reopen the discussion of love, sex, and gender in our precarious times so that we can better understand our identities and pre-empt future conflicts and plot navigations for other impasses occurring beside and simultaneous to the quest for love. By analyzing the concepts of the Manufactured Normalcy Field and the postnormal tilt, we can open up new opportunities to challenge the conventional definitions and structures that hold back society from attaining more accepting, understanding, and preferred futures.

## Keywords

postnormal times, Manufactured Normalcy Field, love, sex, gender, postnormal tilt, identity

## Introduction

To begin, a trigger warning of uncertainty is in order. Since the pandemic began, and noting that Omaha, Nebraska's poor management of the virus' spread has been devastating to its restaurant business, I have been unable to confirm, personally, whether or not the Sullivanesque building at 4524 Farnam Street is still standing. In its latest iteration, the brick and concrete beauty was converted into a "German style Bier Haus," or the closest idea of what those words combined mean to the millennial perpetrators of this most recent gentrified horror.

When I last was a regular to this two-story building, it was a coffee shop notable for being opened until midnight in a city that did sleep, preferring to be in bed by nine bells, much to

the lament of the town's night owls. The name of the building's architect is lost to history, but the style is textbook inspiration from the American architect Louis Sullivan, the "father of skyscrapers" and mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright. Modernism in all its hubris. Whether or not in intension, this building would be built for constant change, its existence for the last 40 years constantly threatened by Omaha's

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penchant for erasing its historical bits for the newer and better with each new stylistic epoch.

It had been known as a café at the edge of the universe for standing alone in a field of concrete at war with flora's revenge in its nooks and crannies. The historical building was slender with a northward patio garden with that sort of elegance that can only be attained on accident, contained by a weathered wooden fence. Inside it was a beautiful contradiction of historical, Midwestern nostalgia and the retro and indy style of hipsters and late environmentalist vegans. The armchair revolutionaries that ran the establishment, their eclectic musical selections, and the quality of espresso were more than enough for those needing a late-night plug-in to serendipity.

Enough coffee always promised a visit to the facilities. As male restrooms go, this one was of a decent quality for sanitation and spaciousness, but it was renowned for its wall space turned canvas for the casual vandal. The collage of solicitous phone numbers, grotesque animations, riddles, quotes, and bathroom wisdoms was a polylogue of often hypermasculine depravity, but remarkable enough to keep one's attention for several moments after the business at hand was finished.

I remember when the sign on the door had changed from the typical "Men's" to a series of symbols, the iconic male figure/female figure/a gray alien head with the inscription below the figures reading "Whatever, just wash your hands when you're finished." When push comes to shove, what better than apathy than try and conceive of the complexity of such categorizations.

Upon entering the toilet's room, a progressive quantum leap had been undertaken. By this, I mean a lightbulb that had been burnt out for years had been replaced and the walls had been freshly painted, the graffiti years in the making, white-washed, literally.

But life finds a way. And the dialog must go on. New scribbles erupted around the toilet. My eyes fell to one quote in particular. At first glance, it was something an undergraduate with a modicum of progressive cleverness might make after being shaken awake from some

prudish slumber. "Everyone is bisexual, gender is a construct." We make such grandiose statements for a variety of reasons, most of which have something to do with a personal need for solidity or making sense in our increasingly complex and uncertain world. Unfortunately, after making such statements we stick to them, guns at the ready to defend our little plot of stability. There is a danger in this practice, often an oversimplification and even more so often, a perceived nugget of sexual wisdom that is actually unrefined within the fragile and often contradictory structures we use to categorize and control the world around us. Recall the debacle of the restroom's label on the door.

This conditioned categorizing calls to mind the fingers of Robert Mitchum in stark black and white. John, one of the duo child-protagonists in the 1955 film *The Night of the Hunter*, gazes with utter suspicion at the simple letters tattooed on the proximal phalanges of Mitchum's character, the Reverend Harry Powell. Catching the boy's stare, Powell proceeds to tell all around the story of right-hand/left-hand, the story of good and evil. H-A-T-E presents on the left hand, the hand which Cain struck dead Abel with. L-O-V-E on the hand that is right, the fingers' veins that run straight to the soul. His two hands grapple, struggling back and forth for dominance. "Oh, brother left hand, left hand hate's a fighting and it looks like a love's a goner!" Powell's monolog describing the Manichaeic cosmic battle between love and hate rings with a chilling poignancy today. Lovers versus fighters or Desire versus Self-Control resonate at a similar frequency. These simplistic dichotomies, lights versus darks, play out well in the melodies on the silver screen, but when placed upon reality, things are not so distinct or easily put in one category or another. While love and hate are essential to understanding contemporary events, more gray matters like despair or alienation need due consideration as well as in the context of these other characteristics.

Such dichotomies could make good headway in the 1950s, but as the world grew more complex, titanic extremes failed to capture the entirety of the reality behind circumstances one

finds themselves in. Rather, as per the dynamics of complexity, it is not just that the picture is incomplete, but in its simplicity, the whole picture itself changes. Failure to understand the depth of our concepts alongside a lack of appreciation for complexity invites violent disruptions through greater instances of chaos. While the system itself may not completely implode, it will adjust and self-correct. The result could be something far from expectation and in certain respects lead to some embedded issues that will not easily be transcended. This is the condition of postnormal times (PNT) (Sardar 2017). And if the proper investigations are not taken seriously during the window of this transitional epoch, what comes next is dangerously left to chance and the unthought, perhaps less than preferred, potentialities.

Previously, I have discussed how religion and faith had not only accumulated greater power in PNT, but how its power through meaning, that is derived from important characters that make up our identities, has elevated religious sentiments to a position long held by rational processes in motivating individuals toward certain actions (Jordan 2017). Here, I began a discussion of how PNT shapes and is shaped by identity. Of course, religious identity is just one aspect of such a complex multiplicity and since finishing that piece my intention had been to tackle the identity found in sexuality, gender, and the pursuit of love, yet since then another major thing had occurred that, if not kicking it all into overdrive, has most definitely highlighted the problem at hand.

While the jury appears to still be out on what the final historical analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic will be, it has no doubt brought discussion of PNT and its various elements into the spotlight of futures discourse (Serra del Pino, Jones, and Mayo 2020). The Earth, for all intents and purposes, stood still and for more than just a day! And while it is definitely premature to say “this changes everything,” the greater fear is that it may not. Serra del Pino et al. insightfully point out that COVID-19 was a “full blown postnormal event,” and in its spread and our responses (personally, nationally, and globally) to it, revealed our own

ineptitude in handling global crises, especially the ones occurring simultaneously. In their work, the authors point to examples of the numerous instances of graffiti, memes, and other displays that cued in on the same conclusion—that the problem at hand was what we considered normal all along, so that, if nothing else, the COVID experience may be at least a great revelation of the problematic normal, let us look into where things went postnormal, and tread lightly into what comes next. May it be something more preferable than a “new normal” and perhaps give us further insight into navigating our postnormal world.

As the clock continued to tick in 2020, and the virus continued its rampage, finding ourselves locked up at home (or wherever we were for the time), we developed an intimate relationship with the normal. We longed for a return to normalcy as we adopted strange new standard operating procedures (SOPs) and for lack of another way, handed over tremendous amounts of power to authorities and to technology. We nervously quipped about the “new normal” part making fun of the absurdity of the global situation, part holding back tears with prayers that this would be temporary. Before the virus, we never had an incentive, let alone an opportunity to question the normal of reality. At least not on the scale we are now. And the supposed “new normal” is not so much new as it is an amplification of the old normal in all its horrid glory. In its growing and coalescing complexity, chaos, and contradictions. Steeped in confounding ignorance and the depths of uncertainty as PNT has been describing for the last decade.

But as we stand face to face with the problem of the normal, let us look deep into the eyes of the normal. After all, a pandemic, normally, is a ripe context for culturing our problems and fears. A mix of existential dread and incomplete understanding of the progress of events allows for a mongering of the worst human nature has to offer. Fear of the unknown on steroids extended to its most nightmare lengths. Compounded ignorances delivered the Black Death to 14th Century Europe. Angry that they could not break the walls of Caffa, the

Mongol army flung bodies into the city in one of history's greatest displays of bad sportsmanship which would unwittingly become one of history's earliest examples of biological warfare (Wheelis 2002). The Bubonic plague gave enough justification for further Othering of the mysterious and unknown Eastern world and, from this, built various stereotypes, many that were blatantly untrue, but hate never needed much justification to hold power. Just shy of seven hundred years later, an outbreak of Typhus Fever on the US–Mexican border forged that border as we see it today. By 1917, fear of German invasions via Mexico and the fad of bad science propagated by eugenics swirled together with a bow of justification in the fear of spreading of this new sickness. Xenophobia and stereotypes aggregated, so much so, that they continue into the contemporary period. The cleaning necessary for Mexican workers to enter the US each day, which included a kerosine bath and fumigation with Zyklon B, led to tighter, more racist policies used by US Border Patrol and also inspired the death chamber designs used in concentration camps in Nazi Germany less than two decades later (Chakraborty 2019). But history is filled with cruelty. So, in our more enlightened age, surely, we had learned our lesson.

But it did not take long for the former US president Donald Trump to promote the nicknames of “Wuhan flu” and “China virus” for COVID-19. To be tacked up, another element of the rivalry turned cold/trade war between the two countries. And yet a clear origin for the disease remains to be determined, doubts abound (Mallapaty 2021). In UK, Malaysia, and India, early super-spreader events tied back to gatherings at mosques have led to a feeding of the fire of islamophobia (Chib 2020; Sarkar 2020; Vetticad 2020). The power of justification claimed by such a global event has also tripped up many delicate balances held by the fracturing support beams of various institutions.

Democracy is a prime example of this. The political bedlam could be contained no longer. While the crisis of democracy had been a long time coming, the flood gates were opened by the coronavirus. Political anger that had been building up in Thailand, Hong Kong, Nigeria,

the US, and many other places had reached a boiling point, but the fire was suddenly cut as populist authoritarianism found a dastardly friend in a world turned upside down. It would be easier to list the countries here that did not have people ready to take to the streets for one particular issue (specific to a national context or even international issues like global warming) or another. And the only way we knew how to cope with #COVID-19 in the early days was to #WearADamnMask, #StayHome, #Social-Distancing, #FlattenTheCurve, by being #TogetherAtHome, and not playing the role of the #Covidiot (Stewart 2020).

And while some severe accounting needs to be done, detailing the credits and debits given to executive power across the world—recalling that power given is rarely ever returned voluntarily—a keen eye ought to be kept on the smaller events that in PNT tend to have graver consequences and speak to a wider effect. While the above was happening, I draw your attention to the lesser seen headlines with the title card “Meanwhile....” In the beginning, there seemed to be a ray of hope. Everyone was forced to slow down and even do a bit of introspection.

As the New Year dawned on 2020, many complained of how social life itself had completely gone digital. There was an initial fear of the loss of the random beauty of chance encounters (Badiou and Truong 2012), but it was easier and seemed to be really matching people nicely, saving time and cutting out the guess work and potential detriment of a toxic relationship. And as we went into lockdown, any trepidations we had of the digitalization of our social lives could take a bit of a break. Dating apps took a major hit, but in all honesty, was that such a bad thing? After all, had not dating apps just turned into virtual masturbation? Dating apps really went two ways: A mode for casual sex on one hand and on the other an honest place for people to try to feel a little less alone (though this was usually attained through casual sex, it could also just result in conversation otherwise not available to the busy or the cripplingly introverted). And research was showing the developers of these apps that the

shallowness of swiping and the superficiality of it all was actually making us feel even lonelier (CNBC 2020).

Humans, the social creatures we are, while in the West we love to categorize everything *ad infinitum*, do no better when we are trapped in boxes ourselves. Escape by any means necessary was top priority. It may have been no surprise that social media usage, streaming, and screentime would hit all-time highs; dating apps or the apps originally designed to make people live in the more physical world found a rebound of their own. Pornography websites might be the only ones to challenge Amazon, a company with perhaps darker ethical quandaries on its desk, for internet dominance. The ready-or-not push into the deep end of digital life opened a new, possibly quite bright, future in a world where a random sneeze could indict you as a biological terrorist and a handshake carried the insult of a prominently displayed middle finger.

Yet for every bright future, perhaps we should look to see if there is a darker underbelly. Indeed, a meanwhile... within a meanwhile... continued. Business as usual. Forced to stay at home was also an order to stay with all the problems that already exist within homes around the world. The UN labeled this the “shadow pandemic” as domestic abuse experienced a 20% increase during the spring of lockdown. Spousal abuse first comes to mind as we put a face to this statistic. Women banged together pots and pans in the Westbank to signal solidarity and took to social media to organize safe spaces to lockdown in during confinement orders. Brazil bore some of the worst numbers, with an estimated domestic violence act occurring every 2 min (Mohan 2020). The UN was wise to use vague labels in this circumstance for the abused, and the abusers took all race, sex, gender, national, and cultural labels. And the abuse is not just amongst adults. Child abuse remains a problem in our world; would we expect it to also take a holiday for COVID? And of course, there are the closeted children, queer, trans, or otherwise who find themselves far lonelier amongst their bigoted families than if they had found themselves in solitary confinement. While the world could begin to look more

and more postnormal from one angle, the good ole normal finds a way to persist.

One could be forgiven for laughing or crying at what the US reported in 2020, it had experienced its first March without a school shooting since 2002 (Lewis 2020). It helped that most schools had been closed by this point. And despite the new SOPs, violence persisted. Much of this violence is targeted at members of the LGBT+ community. While minorities, the youth, and political dissidents have shared the conspiracy theorists’ blame for much of the ongoing ravage of the coronavirus, the gay community has also been hit. When an infected individual in South Korea had been traced back to various gay clubs in Seoul’s Itaewon District, an all too familiar game was a foot again (Kim 2020). Just as the AIDS epidemic was tied to the LGBT+ community, again they found themselves Othered before a new global threat (Straube 2020; World Bank 2020). Once again, a pathogen became the justification for normal hate that an angry world appeared to be chomping at the bit for. Violence shifts from rhetoric to action as homicide against trans individuals continued its upward trend over the last decade. Thirty-seven trans individuals so far have been killed in the US, that number taking a drastic increase as the COVID-19 pandemic went into full swing. In Puerto Rico, the trans community finds itself particularly vulnerable to a string of gruesome murders than kicked off only in April (Avery 2020). And while the US having just concluded its recent presidential election showed itself as a hotbed of division, this speaks to a wider trend of hate and division across the globe. Sex, gender, and love appear to be tragically pigeonholed to this fracturing.

A sliver of hope lies in the fact that the discussion is opened, even if only every so often. So here I hope to really kick the door open and see if more discussions and, heaven forbid, a nice constructive polylogue may result. In response to the state of sex, a flurry of decisions are coming to the fore. France appears to be having a most interesting debate about the allowance of pornographic content online (Braun and Kayali 2020). France, a country whose rich history of art has international renown for not

just crossing, but obliterating, the line on issues of nudity, sexuality, and freedom, where a popular political front, FEMEN, has held a number of top-less protests for various issues concerning women's rights. In the UK, the Mother of all Parliaments found itself debating, in the Palace of Westminster, what sex would be allowed under their COVID-19 regulations (Steafel and Hall 2020). A love sick man was sent to jail for breaking quarantine on the Isle of Man via a rogue-amateur, jet ski flight to mainland Scotland to see his girlfriend (Gross 2020). Courts in the US need to juggle sentencing for lovers who break quarantine in the worst take of *Romeo and Juliet* since Baz Luhrmann when they already have the problem of overcrowded prisons due to minor offences such as drug possession and unpaid parking tickets (Gross and Eligon 2020). Who is looking out for legitimate sex workers (and an interesting debate examines their place as "essential workers") with all of the aid being provided by various governments to compensate the dips brought on by the coronavirus (Furlong 2020)? The absurdity of the headlines we have seen during this pandemic reveals a deeper conversation that needs to be taking place and not brushed under the rug as we tend to be all-too-good at doing.

We make up labels like "new normal" without facing the fact that there are issues with normality itself that we need to be confronting. Certainly, getting things opened again and saving the global economies are essential, but we must not let these titanic efforts sink the other crises we need to be working on, as PNT forces us to face these simultaneously. In really grappling with normality, certain global tendencies to normalize and categorize and build up the grand and confounding mouse traps, I invite us to take a step back and let us talk about sex.

## A World Tilted

If we return to the café at the edge of the universe in Omaha, an analysis of some observations can give us insight into a few key concepts of PNT. The proclamation that "everyone exists on the spectrum of pansexuality"

or that "gender is a construct" to some readers may be bold, while to others, quaint—borderline adorable. A certain worldview was needed to allow for the arrival of such a revelation. And with a bit of background, a few assumptions can be addressed. These assumptions do not stand to judge or even make claims on the noble vandal in question, but instead provide us a jump board onto higher concepts.

Consider briefly the city of Omaha. As the economic hub of the state of Nebraska, it lives up to the standard definition for what is a city, yet through its Midwestern, American sentiment and a large percentage of its population's dedication to conservative, albeit open, yet Christian-derived political views, it retains a bit of the sociological feel of a small town or village. Because of this borderline existence, various contradictions make it a peculiar place. The city itself served as the birthplace of the billionaire tycoon Warren Buffett, the Muslim human rights activist Malcolm X, the former Republican President of the United States, Gerald Ford, and the academy award winning actor Marlon Brando. Since the American Civil War, Omaha has been a very segregated city by design, even if not strictly stated overtly. Certain demographics then were confined to certain geographical locations of the city and through malicious busing and highway routing, mixing of various ethnic groups was minimized in that good ole American way of never talking about it, but respecting the way of things.

While it would be disingenuous to describe the clientele of the café on Farnam Street as not being diverse, by nature of Omaha, the diversity we speak of seems quite limited. A high percentage of those who passed through were white, taking a notable privilege from this despite the socioeconomic disparity (which it should be noted is not insignificant), and of some university level education. This commonality, although not ensuring fraternity, allows for certain commonalities in worldview. An example of this is found in how individuals who subscribe to a numbering system of attraction apply this to their worldview.

There is a certain sociological fascination born in those fanatically adherent to a one-to-ten numbering system of attractiveness for members of the opposite sex. Interestingly, this numbering system differs ever so slightly between the Midwest and say bigger cities on either the East or West coast as apparently attractiveness has a direct proportionality to city population density or geographic location. And if one were to touchdown in an international city say Paris or São Paulo, the calibration of this numbering system was completely cast to the wind. So, beautiful are the “exotic” Parisians or Brazilians that the Midwestern mind could be thrown into existential crisis over it. While this is all superbly subjective as the numerous studies of general populations’ attractions to other populations around the world have demonstrated, this experience keys us into a major concept in PNT thought.

The potential naivety of the phenomenological epiphany scribbled on the bathroom wall gives us a deeper awareness of the process of postnormal burst. In devising a methodology for analyzing trends and emerging issues, so as to build futures scenarios in PNT, Sardar and Sweeney gave us an account of the postnormal creep. The creep carried a particular situation (which could be a person, community, or circumstance) along a metaphorical journey into a thickening of uncertainty and ignorance, a greater overlap or occurrence of the 3Cs (complexity, chaos, and contradictions), and through each of the Three Tomorrows of PNT (Extended Present, Familiar Futures, and Unthought Futures) until arriving at the postnormal burst, an event of definitive postnormality.

As the situation continued along this progression, a Manufactured Normalcy Field (MNF) would help the traveler cope with the change it was experiencing. The MNF built on the ideas of Herman and Chomsky (1988) Manufactured Consent and Rao (2012) Manufactured Normalcy to represent bias in our worldview and perspective (Sardar and Sweeney 2016). Various PNT thinkers have debated whether the MNF is more of a field or filter, but generally agree it is the comforting blanket, shielding a situation and its agent(s)

from the rapid change that occurs as things get postnormal. This rough sketch generally remains intact through the various debates, but an interesting adage helps us get a deeper picture of our tumultuous times.

The tilt is a new concept that is continually being fleshed out in its relationship to the MNF and the postnormal creep. The concept was created when I found myself traveling on a train somewhere between Brussels and London with Ziauddin Sardar. We had been discussing with other members of the Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies (CPPFS) further details of the MNF. A popular metaphor for the MNF was well put by Christopher B. Jones, ... a MNF is created by a relatively small, aerodynamic aluminum tube, or commercial airliner, that travels in the stratosphere at 600 miles an hour, at 35,000 feet above the planet surface. That is not normal, but our culture, our travel patterns and behavior, and our short but rapid evolution as a species now consider that unremarkable (Jones 2020).

A similar phenomenon was happening to us on the train; as the world around us flew by, we could peacefully read the newspaper as if sitting stationary on the couch at home. Essentially, the MNF is a mode of normalization.

Our discussions had also asked what is the role of the MNF to the agent, or, dare we put it in economic terms, the MNF’s owner/possessor? I myself am partial to a metaphor from the field of medicine. The MNF acts as a sort of immune system when confronted with change. I like this metaphor because while the immune system is always working to defend the body, sometimes, when faced with a paradox, it may only be able to fulfill its job by killing the body. For example, a heart attack results when, for any myriad reason, tissue of the heart dies and this sets off a chain reaction between the nervous and circulatory systems that activates similar pathways that would be triggered in the event of a major opened wound. A key indicator is a drop in blood pressure. The body’s normal response is to make the heart work faster to increase the blood pressure and transport more platelets via the blood to the wound and seal it up with a scab. So, the paradox comes when it is the heart tissue that

is damaged, the brain still signals the heart to work harder, and I will leave it to your imagination as to what happens when a broken heart is asked to work harder.

All of this plays about in my head as Sardar and I continue talking or reading as if we could have easily been at a nice café as on a high-speed train. Yet, whenever the train would approach a station for a stop, I would notice another phenomenon. To match the upcoming platform, not all of them being uniform as they were constructed at different times between different standards and different countries, the train would rotate ever so slightly. *Tilt*, if you will. As I looked around at the other passengers, it was hard to tell if anyone else had noticed what I had noticed. The tilt was subtle. If you are not looking for it, or quickly moving to the exit so as to not miss your stop, you might not even notice it. So, the tilt represents those subtle perturbations or disruptions in the MNF. We may notice them, if our MNF is weak or on trial (as many of ours should be during this pandemic!), but with a robust, foolish or otherwise, MNF, we carry on, not a worry in the world. Yet, if you do notice the flame that makes the shadows on the cave wall, then you are faced with a choice. Ride the tilt, let whatever it is and your MNF duel or dance (whichever metaphor you prefer) toward a more change-tolerating being or double down and resist. Based on the tilt, a plurality awaits which ever door you decide to look behind. Mayo (2020) adds, “The tilt leads us to assess the multidimensionality of change and comprehend our place and role as part of that change.”

There is a rich debate underway as to what elements of the contemporary moment are MNFs or tilts, creeps, or even bursts. And the answers to these are not always going to be readily clear, and to make sure our accounting is kept honest, they may change readily either from context to context or moment to moment. The COVID-19 pandemic itself to one person could well be a burst (and many of us are hoping it will be), but to others may be a tilt, or something just in the periphery depending on the focus of one’s lens.

Mayo’s discussion of the postnormal condition has us focus in on the ongoing digitalization of our world. And social media is definitely doing a number to our MNFs (Mayo 2020). I would argue it is, through its algorithms preventing more tilts and potentially taking us into postnormal lag, the space of denial which often results in quite a mess of weirdness and postnormality (Sardar and Sweeney 2016). A point is made in the recent *Netflix* documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, where an early Facebook investor Roger McNamee notes, “the way to think about it is 2.7 million Truman Shows. Each person has their own reality, with their own...*facts*....” This calls to the famous quote by the director, portrayed by Ed Harris, of the television series within the 1998 film, *The Truman Show*, “we accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It is as simple as that.” McNamee goes on to talk about how the recent changes in social media algorithms, aimed at getting you to give more and more of your time, a precious commodity indeed, to the network, reinforces what it determines that you like (Orlowski 2020). It builds this artificial MNF for you. It almost seems like a double MNF that shields your normalcy from any interference from such pesky nuisances as reality.

In a way, the algorithms of various social networks are set to search-and-destroying any sorts of potential tilts out there that may get you to change your mind, let alone think, at least about anything beyond what advertisers would prefer you to think. It only shows you the feeds of those you agree with, or floats images that will make you happy, and prevents anything from prompting an emotional response, beyond what the shakers and movers want you to feel (Turk 2019). So, protected from the reality of a world of difference, we are left to grow fat on the comfort food of our naïve, unchallenged worldviews. And we wonder why the world is so divided. And this is how social media brings us together, to tear us apart. Aided by this dilemma, or crisis, of social networks, we see a crisis of love and sex that stands to have a profound effect on all our futures that will ripple up to the very structures of society as we

know them. This clashes elegantly with the problems of the old normal left unfaced. As we untangle the mess we find ourselves in, maybe we can actually make for a happy, at least hopeful, ending to this love story.

## What Is Love?

I believe the most challenging, yet also the most rewarding, opportunity we have when engaging with PNT is to tinker with our MNFs. As one who has grown to never be content with my MNF, I would argue, destroying the MNF, at least so that it could have a phoenix's rebirth, is the way to go. As a child without a strong tie to tradition or historical culture, nostalgia has never been that addictive to me (beyond 1980s pop culture I suppose). But, I appreciate others' need for and the beauty of proper tradition, religious and cultural practices, and historical context. Being a child whose parents did not impose such an identity-bestowing characteristic, they do not have the same prominence in my identity, but I recognize their importance and their place as pillars of identity. So, I am left in a bit of a bind concerning the MNF. I would rather do battle with my own until kingdom come, but I love others and I believe it is important to respect the choices we make with our MNFs. And when we speak of love, sex, and gender, this appreciation of the Other's MNF is key, especially if we want people to change or grow.

Love is a subject of debate as old as any religion or philosophy and, if I were a betting man, I would say as old as language itself, perhaps even forming it. Therefore, love is an essential element of sociality. Sex and gender I will address later as these terms have been unjustly tied up in flawed and crumbling structures that we will deal with after we get an understanding of love in PNT. To spare you a long, long discussion that you can get elsewhere, I will not chop up or compartmentalize love. What I have to say here, I believe, can be applied to all forms of love and you may feel free to do so, if you are so compelled. For the love I speak to does not differ greatly whether it is love of a being by or for the divine, love of a

familial/blood-tied flavor, or more sexually motivated love for a companion. Aside from the dissection to the point of removing the life from love, that has resulted from philosophical treatises on it, love has been put through the ringer conforming it to various epochs. Like Mitchum's fingers, love had been thrown into dichotomous thinking. Love has been degenerated from a higher form into a diametric opponent of a variety of notions such as hate, anger, fear, or for Elie Wiesel, indifference, to name a few. This robs love of its ability to exist upon a colorful spectrum, let alone be a diplomatic, navigational notion. After all, Aphrodite to the Spartans could be both a god of sexual love and war without needing a dueling Gemini-like personification, but this interpretation is not as easily swallowed as later Hellenistic portrayals. As love was being defined into diminished notion of goodness, it was tainted, like just about everything else, in terms of capitalism, a millennium later. Commodified, love itself took on an exchange-like nature which the digitalization of social life has taken to a whole new, destructive level.

Unfortunately, these problems mean we have a great deal of work to do to shift the trajectory of thought on love for most of history. Love is one of the oldest circles humanity has been trying to square and it mucked things up quite thoroughly. This is both discussed and demonstrated in Zygmunt Bauman's treatment in *Liquid Love*. In continuing the development of his theory of liquid times, which is a taking on of the similar occurrences that lead to the development of PNT in the first place (Sardar 2017), the disjointed nature of the subjects and the difficulty in elucidating his feelings on love's instability highlights the crisis love finds itself in (Bauman 2003). And with such a sloppy mess, it is tempting to give into the postmodern malaise of relativity, chalking it all up to chemical impulses to get you to procreate which of course gels well with exchanges and purchasing power. But what are you to expect after it has been commodified to death?

The Enlightenment thinkers through to the present did give us two notions, a good and a bad. The good was to see love as an encounter.

A wonderful set up followed by a terrible crash landing as they placed love within a dialectic. Love plays a role in Hegel's master/slave dialectic and rolls through to de Beauvoir's man/woman dialectic of patriarchy. This reinforced love as an instrument of power, while also putting it on a dangerous dichotomy then needs to be tossed out, because it has intoxicated love-based definitions ever sense. And so, a history of love as two coming together to be one, opposites attracted, etc., writes itself. The ultimate consequences are the legal definitions we find across the globe that cannot be outdated per say but are dreadfully inadequate at capturing the subject at hand. Though I wish to underline a couple philosophers who have played the hand, we have all been dealt with love and can help us get it into a context for PNT discourse.

The French-Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, built on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl to give us the encounter of the face of the Other. Three key concepts that give a beautiful elegance that both acknowledges without giving power to dialectic thinking or notions of humans in the state of nature. In the face of Others, we find similarity, and thus the capacity for empathy (dare I say intimacy), and difference which can be negotiated through classic love (Levinas 1989). French philosopher Alain Badiou picks up with Levinas in a conversation with French journalist, Nicolas Truong. Where love for Levinas, according to Badiou, is an experience, for Badiou it is an event, a true experience that carries forward into reality. Love is "an existential project: to construct a world from a decentralised point of view other than that from mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity" (Badiou and Truong 2012, 25). For Badiou and Truong (2012), "love is a re-invention of life. To re-invent love it to re-invent that re-invention" (p. 32). To go the extra mile, Badiou and Truong (2012) also untethers love from power and politics, giving it all a sort of collective humanism. "In love, it is about two people being able to handle difference and make it creative. In politics, it is about finding

out whether a group of people, a mass of people in fact, can create equality." (p. 54).

Badiou and Truong's short conversation has its limits. For one, love is two and this definition is quite popular and deemed necessary for a lot of contemporary and particularly legal thought. And PNT is about challenging convention and daring to think the unthought. By disregarding the numbers, romantic love between two really is not that much different from politics. They are projects of creation, undertaken by the many. Key, I think, is the idea of love as difference. Love must be difference and returning to that, we can take a new approach to the postnormal predicament of love.

In PNT, we are individuals engaging the world with our own MNFs. Some of us creep onward, others lagging, others bursting our way from epoch to epoch, maybe occasionally fortunate enough to learn something along the way. In our trajectories, we experience tilts of various shapes and frequencies, yet occasionally, we have a full-on collision. A tilt that truly turns the world upside down. This is love. And based on the strength of the relationship, or the lasting impact after the tilt (for the ones that get away), our MNFs are forever set on a new course, a reinvention toward something different. The challenge posed by the clashing of two MNFs begins a longer construction. I leave it vague and neutral like this because the story continues beyond this point. The tilt can be a prayer or a miracle for the Godly forms love takes, a random act of kindness or the bonds that seal a friendship, and the signing of a contract or proclaiming of a constitution. It could be the birth of a child. Sex could even be a physical manifestation of the tilt. Depending of course how you do it

In accordance to this, love is the answer and should find us a way out of our predicament. Well, I call to mind American president James Madison's famed quote "if men were angels, no government would be necessary." Yes, love should help us form better societies, but it has been entrenched in broken systems and demented through cumbersome convention. And a new normal is not something humans long for.

## Breaking the Wheel

Postnormal times requires us to transcend the issues arising from the 3Cs which often requires a very difficult feat in line with keeping up multiple chainsaw juggling acts simultaneously. We have to have one foot in history, one in the present, and multiple feet for a variety of alternative futures. We must be theoretical and practical. While there is right and wrong, there is also being partially right. We have to think for the short term and the long term while respecting complexity and chaos and minding our contradictions. And then we have to help others do the same. And this gets problematic really quickly when we are talking about sex and love.

A good place to begin with is the present as they say, there's no time like it. The current problem with love and sex is multifaceted. First, conversation about it has been rendered almost entirely taboo both in terms of literal regulated speech and the mental blocks of collective consciousnesses. And it can be quite difficult to have a conversation on a topic that you are not supposed to talk about. Second, history has really set the table incorrectly for the dinner party one would like to have to sort out this polylogue. And finally, particularly the Western necessity which has translated into a sort of global necessity to categorize everything into its own label, thanks to globalization, has proven a bulky handicap. And much like the twisted horror behind Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, the human spirit of endurance has led to a strengthening in relation to the restrictions placed upon it, resulting in the match only needing to be struck to light the touch paper on various identity wars. And always looming in the periphery is the fact that issues in one field, rarely stay isolated, and in the grand complexity of issues that face human beings what is done in love and sex, has effects on other concepts and ripples into the existential questions of what it is to be human.

Having defined love in the previous section, now we can look at our conventional definitions of sex and gender, with the proper caveats and proceed from there. Sex is, in its simplest form, the biological designation concerning

sexual identity, usually linked to genitalia or genetic difference. Gender is more difficult to pin, but it is the role developed. Often sex and gender are differentiated between the physical manifestation and the mental understanding, but this is loaded with pitfalls. Both sex and gender have physical and mental consequences and both exist on spectrums. The flaw that threatens to derail the whole train before we leave the station is well underlined in the extensive analysis of Sedgwick (2018). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick notes the disastrous consequences of our binary understanding of sexuality. This "either or" or dichotomous mechanism *Others* a great percent of persons from the conversation and has indoctrinated the masses as to what is normal or abnormal (yet again, why are there only two).

The worst manifestation of this epistemic failure is in the terms we use. Despite your opinions of the labels, everyone is suddenly either heterosexual or homosexual. You can try to correct this by putting in a few new prefixes, but beyond the dichotomy, the prefixes fall into the pit of absurdity confounding the minds of many, unable to keep up on the minutiae, which is indeed essential, that differentiates pansexual from bisexual from polysexual from queer. This tendency to want to categorize goes deep. Even to say Gay often presupposes a male and more likely than not, a white male, because Lesbians must be some other race or something. It is utterly ridiculous, but we need to build a capacity to be smarter than our language and its games.

Hardy and Easton (2017) promote a retaking of language, such as the term *slut*, but their very undiplomatic approach that is perhaps a bit too in your face for the average, lay person kills the conversation on inception. Likewise, sex is not so easily flagged. Male, female, and... We make ourselves feel better by putting "I prefer not to answer" as a box to tick, but why be coy, we might as well just put Other there, so that all of the trans persons or people who are split between their sex and gender are condemned to be Othered or worst, left undefined, and unworthy, apparently, of a social designation or dignity. Because of this conundrum, we have young

people growing up lost, aimless, alienated, and this is beyond failure. This is a social crime against humanity and we are all guilty of it.

A great revision needs badly to get underway. It will be a hell of a project. The Netflix documentary, *Disclosure*, runs down the history of cinema over the last one hundred years as an almost systematic failure to fairly represent trans people in popular media, but it holds out a candle of hope. In watching the difference between how news and television personalities used to ask questions of trans people between today and 30 years ago, things have changed and people are willing to learn. Cringeworthy questions about how trans masculine individuals hide their penis or questions that essentially boil down to “why not just conform” have been replaced by questions that seek understanding, explanation, and learning on the part of the interviewer (Feder 2020). How novel for a journalist to seek truth through understanding as opposed to provocative exposé.

The way we do medicine has been long overdue for a proper revamping both in terms of the endemic racism in the systems popular around the world, but this needs to carry forward for sex and gender. We need to make big waves socially, politically, and legally about how we work in these realms. We have to break dichotomies and snuff out the fear of the unthought. And then we need to see about what will amount to the greatest work for our future, diving into our education systems, working to build more inquisitive minds so that the next generation can do better than us and not resign themselves to the cyclical failure of history on a mobius strip devoid of tolerance and acceptance, devoid of love.

Many argue for unlearning, but that feels a bit too closely like an erasure. Tearing down statues in passion fueled destructive creation has been going on for millennia, but have we learned any lessons? Is that not the point of the act? Instead, we need to transcend the failures. And this requires looking backward and forward. And we are capable.

Ryan and Jethá have done a tremendous study of sexuality and relationships through a historical anthropology in *Sex at Dawn*. They

elegantly expose the logical holes in science and sociology that have left us with the unfulfillable and nigh impossible project of love as it stands conventionally defined clashing with the acceleration of modernity and the contradictory prudish devotion to the old normal, pretending to be tradition. They begin with the problem of evolution. Where conventionally one would say we have evolved from apes, they challenge not by refuting evolution, but refuting what evolution means in society. No, says Ryan and Jethá, we are not evolved from apes, we are the apes (Ryan and Jethá 2010). Are humans lovers or fighters? Bonobos or chimps? Or does this dichotomy cut out a great spectrum that makes the *Homo sapiens* species an elegant complexity?

*Sex at Dawn* goes on to critique contemporary notions of families and tribes and the roles we take therein. This sentiment is argued in Cordelia Fine’s *Testosterone Rex* where the blue/pink divide colors our world where everything from clothes to toys, our language, and our social order are all defined by these exclusionary and mostly incorrect dichotomies which open political projects, hoping for equality, to dementing by power, domination, and capitalism. It is no wonder university students buckle under it all thinking they have discovered fire with proclamations that we are all a little bisexual (Fine 2018).

But might it be about more than just sex? And might we try to teach our youth to seek out being human and what possibilities that can open up? It might be nice one day to live in a world where we are all just a bunch of *Homos*. And with the rapidly accelerating digitalization of our world, the introduction of robots, and some tough ethical debates concerning our role with technology, having a grasp of humanity will be paramount (Mar 2017). Because when that future comes, ready or not you may not get to decide whether you are a top, a bottom, active, passive, or a verse for that debate, as if those limiting simple ideas will have any bearing in the future of getting fucked.

The criticism raised by Ryan and Jethá echoes a whole subgenre of books on the problems of racial science. Among the finest of

them include Angela Saini's *Superior* and Jennifer Eberhardt's *Bias*, where the history of Western science has been hijacked by eugenicists and racists that used the pure name of science to justify horrifying worldviews. It is important for us to expand our horizons on sexual and gender identities and appreciate them without Othering them and at least be open to learning if the prospect is confounding. Just as we should resist the temptation to call all people from Africa simply Africans, as if the rich history of an entire continent can be dulled down to a simplistic identity, kudos for Europeans, Americans, or Arabs. While generalizations may be necessary from time to time, it is important to be aware of what we say so that we do not lose out on the beauty of the small things. Of difference which is after all the vehicle of love.

And it is too bad because even democracy is infected by these problems. The majority has a freedom to diversity while minorities are confined to coalitions as this appears to be the only way to raise up a voice loud enough so that it may be heard. Feminism is a prime example of this. Just consider the diversity of individuals who would consider themselves a feminist, often by their definition disqualifying others that the majority places in this group. This is the problem with the LGBT+. First off, the + is effectively Othering. Second, throwing all these folks into one community pits individuals who existentially threaten each other into a box and forcing them to rise up against a powerful majority. I have no intension to compare tragedies or intensities here, but the act of pigeonholing the LGBT+ community is on par with how Western powers have carved up the rest of the world, drawing borders around warring societies and calling them savage when civil war results. Of course, this is not to discredit the work the LGBT+ communities around the world have been able to accomplish via the magic of empathy, but it should not be over looked that a great deal of homophobia and transphobia comes from within the other minority communities that these groups are forced to take up the banner with. The Netflix documentary, *The Death and*

*Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), tells the harrowing tale of the inequalities of the trans community within the LGBT+ movements which is only made exponentially worse being a trans feminine individual and being one of color (France 2017). This also highlights that this needs to be a polylogue effort, both within and outside of each community. And democracy is slow and messy and so are people.

At this point then, we must root our language and really tackle the problems it presents for us and learn to appreciate difference and love. Take the tilts as they come, learn, and grow. So, this gets us to the Free Love movement, but I am not calling for a revival of the Free Love movement, which is as problematic as any other movement, but briefly, first, do not drink the Kool-Aid of postmodernism, but more importantly, in taking on tomorrow, this needs to be done with an ethical creativity that has been lacking in the past. Movements are standing on a horizon of change. Movements themselves have become quite postnormal, particularly in their complexity and ability to work without a head and operate without or in resistance to other patriarchal vestiges. The Free Love movement and the Occupy Wall Street movement show the worst case of headless movements, but with the aid of technology, which should still be accepted with certain hesitations, global change seems a lot closer as environmental movements and the Black Lives Matter movements have demonstrated. And like democracy, they will also not win it all in one go, but there is a beautiful opportunity for finding new unthought futures in how these organizations act. Sex, gender, family, community, tribe, society, and civilization need a revision with a more open and plural terrain.

For the thoughts coming out of thinking on PNT to work, you need a proper environment for it to take root. Otherwise, the aware are chased off as kooks and become the victims of this strange hurricane of conspiracy theories and fake news that is pummeling the globe at the moment. Again, this is a hell of a project, and maybe we can creep along using the Overton Window, but we need to really

hammer out ethical frameworks and foster a society that discusses morality. There are rights and wrongs, goods and evils, and they need to be quarried through discourse and debate. This goes especially for love and sex. If you throw the rules out, you might as well throw out the baby as well. It was the fear of or blatant disregard for the complexity of sex and gender (which occurs when you generalize an entire human characteristic or identity as sin), that fed the creation and persistence of silly taboos. And this is why the taboo around sex needs to really be put to rest as we firm up our understanding of the limits. And we need to use this transitional period of PNT to get it right. And, as is the case in PNT, the clock keeps kicking and our world is rapidly digitalizing, we are going to have everything flipped upside down really soon and we need to have the basic groundwork prepared. We need to both understand and work to improve social media and online lives so that the reality of humans and love are challenged, so that tilts are not avoided and so that MNFs can be challenged so that we can take on Baidou's request and see what a collective of people can manage to build.

In the 1989 film, *Do The Right Thing*, Spike Lee pays homage to *The Night of the Hunter*. Mookie, the main character, in route to make a delivery, runs into Radio Raheem, whose boombox is blaring Public Enemy's *Fight the Power*. During a handshake, Mookie takes note of Raheem's new brass knuckles, one reading love and the other hate. Radio Raheem then breaks into a slightly updated monolog of right-hand/left-hand. Always fighting, the diametrically opposed hands struggle. Raheem ends with a "If I love you, I love you, but if I hate you..." he stares off into space, perhaps growing aware of the absurdity of it all. Mookie responds with a tone that almost parodies this, "there it is, love and hate." Raheem gives a "I love you, bro" and they embrace in peace. By the film's end, it is difficult to tell if Raheem came to see out his realization, but interestingly, Lee ends the film with diametrically opposed speeches on violence from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, only to have the final frame of the film be a photo of the two

men shaking hands, a sign of peace in the presence of difference. Love. Whether this is to be fantasy or reality remains to be seen.

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