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# The Government, in Love.

BY **Chunghwa Suh**

I have been thinking about love. Usually, when I think about love, I think about specific people in my life. Potential love, lost love, the forgotten, the unrequited, the I-don't-know-why-but-I-can't-stop-thinking-about, and everything in between. These spaces create my personal discourse: it is informed by the boundaries I set within the sphere of my relationships, how I identify sexually, and the other rules or guidelines I use to think about love. For example, even though I don't know Joe very well, I think a lot about Joe.<sup>1</sup> And the way that I think about Joe is organized around a myriad of elements that come together to create a fantasy Joe; the person I think about is completely different from the person who exists outside my head. We don't have a lot in common. He's three years older, he grew up in the States, he plays sports, and he carries himself with the casual, confident manner of a handsome white male with above-average intelligence. I am at once unable to relate to Joe and completely drawn to him. I will spend hours thinking about him, poring over details on social media and trying to absorb some of his enigmatic essence of ease. I try to define specific aspects of his personality that manifest in his public persona. What do his hashtags say about him? How does he caption his Instagram photos? Why does he always make that face in his Snapchats?

And all the while, I have been thinking about love. I chose to write three essays about monogamy because relationships have always fascinated me. For the past month, I have been researching, writing about, analyzing, and critiquing the way our society deals with love on a large scale. This research has impacted my personal discourse. The more I learn about sexuality—the different motivations behind how we define it, the oppressive power structures that change its meaning, and the many ways it is prone to change—the more I question my discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been anonymized.

What, exactly, is my infatuation with Joe founded upon? In what ways do I think about him? Why do I continue to think about him, even as I am very aware that he's just *not* that into me? To Joe, I am just a moment: fleeting in the days we see each other, nonexistent in the days we don't. But to me, Joe is a haze, drifting through my mind constantly.<sup>2</sup>

The bias in my first essay, in which I posed the question of whether or not monogamy “works,” came through as a result of my obsession. The topic was a way of pushing back the part of me that was defining myself through Joe; I was seeking the opportunity to reinvent myself, in a sense, through the essay. I had already decided that monogamy was a flawed social construct; I chose to define myself through my rejection of normative monogamy, and thus the influence of society on my sexuality. Monogamy was an evil social structure imposing its boundaries on me. But I now realize I am the naïve public that wants to believe the “repressive hypothesis” that Foucault criticizes in his *History of Sexuality*. Foucault argues that the public is more inclined to believe in the repressive hypothesis in order to see our sexuality as something powerful, something revolutionary. The repressive hypothesis attaches an aspect of political liberation to sexual discourse. It encourages the idea that openly talking about or engaging in “illicit sexual behavior,” or “perversions,” is a way of protest.

But Foucault tells us that, in fact, our very conception of sexuality is founded upon society; sexuality cannot exist without its human, social history. And this history is shaped by the very political structures we convince ourselves we are fighting against. Hence, the idea that we are using sexuality to fight against repressive power structures is null. We cannot see sexual discourse solely through the lens of the repressive hypothesis; we cannot seek to escape power structures through sexuality, because our understanding of sexuality is a manifestation of those structures. My rejection of monogamy—and my self-righteous belief that this rejection somehow set me apart—does not mean what I want it to mean.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Commonly known as “a pathetic crush.”

<sup>3</sup> I ask myself, will I ever find the magical element to my personality that can make

So what is monogamy, and *how* does it work? Why is it that, even as I thumb through the foundational text of polyamory, Dossie Eaton and Catherine A. Liszt's *The Ethical Slut*, I secretly panic at the idea of Joe being with anyone else? Normative monogamy has enforcers all throughout our society, at all levels: the church, conservatives, hopeless romantics, Jennifer Aniston; even young people who try to reject everything "mainstream" recognize monogamy's importance.<sup>4</sup> It is one of the few social institutions so firmly embedded in our culture that it is practically part of our subconscious.

In her article "Against Love," Laura Kipnis traces the inextricable ties between love and monogamy: in society's eyes, to reject monogamy is to reject love. Monogamy's allure can be equated to that of love. Who doesn't romanticize the idea that someone out there is made for them, that they will find *one* person with whom they find a connection above and beyond anything else in the world?<sup>5</sup> If we refer back to my original question regarding whether monogamy "works," this mentality provides an answer: yes, monogamy works and will always work as long as we hold out the human desire to be special. Today, our aggressively capitalist society enhances this mentality. We strive to be the best. We compete. We protect our assets. We are raised in a way that enforces this behavior; it only makes sense that we would treat our relationships the same way.

I therefore began to trace back my own beliefs and let myself be swept into the romantic allure of monogamy. Admittedly, I do see something beautiful about being someone's "everything."<sup>6</sup> It may be me "cool"?

<sup>4</sup>When I asked my 15-person ID1 class whether they wanted to get married someday, 13 people raised their hands; it was interesting to see how normative monogamy is still alive and well amidst a generation growing up with a 50% divorce rate.

<sup>5</sup>Emphasis on the word "find"—part of the romanticized notion of love is very involved in the search. Every romantic comedy relies on this narrative arc; it makes the payoff (the discovery!) all the more satisfying.

<sup>6</sup>However, admitting this feels like a kind of submission to the brainwashing that society enforces upon us. The feeling parallels to agreeing with society's beauty standards (I fawn over the most stereotypically "pretty," emaciated, blonde, leggy models); it means that I am agreeing with the racism and sexism inherent in those standards. Perhaps the romanticizing of normative monogamy is not as clearly

a source of pride, being able to fulfill someone's every desire. It is this quality that Esther Perel, a psychotherapist who specializes in relationships, addresses in her TED Talk about infidelity: cheating hurts differently today, because our expectations of love (and consequently, ourselves) are so vast. When we engage in a monogamous relationship—really, truly let ourselves believe in the concept and the bond—we choose to believe that we are a little bit perfect. As Perel puts it: I am this person's best friend, greatest lover, intellectual equal, I am this person's *very favorite person*. This status is a huge ego boost.

For the emotionally vulnerable, the desperate for any kind of nod of approval,<sup>7</sup> monogamy offers an opportunity to find ourselves. In a way, it is the ultimate validation. This is perhaps why marriage is seen as life's "happily ever after": it marks not only the ending point of the search for love, it also marks the ending point of the search for ourselves.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, a risk: "infidelity has a tenacity that monogamy can only envy." In the sphere of monogamy, if another person enters the picture, it's not just the relationship that shatters. Our very sense of being—and all the validation built upon the relationship—is destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the people who reject monogamy are often painted as emotionally unavailable, scared of love, unable to take a risk, overly defensive—damaged. In some cases, this depiction might be valid. If I tell myself that I don't *need* to be someone's one-and-only, I will not be privy to the pain and heartbreak of infidelity. However, I loathe the notion that self-preservation is the only reason people choose entrenched in the evils of society, but it runs along a similar vein.

<sup>7</sup> See: "depressingly universal qualities of teenage girls."

<sup>8</sup> In the TV series "Bojack Horseman," one of the characters talks about our "age of stagnation." She argues that everyone reaches this point at which they stop growing, and that for most people, it happens when they get married: "You meet someone who loves you unconditionally and never challenges you or wants you to change... and then you never change." While certainly not true for all marriages, I believe that there is validity in the notion that we find some finality in our sense of self once we make the decision to stay committed to someone forever.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is the ultimate "heartbreak." The very pain that infidelity brings is encapsulated in the term: it "breaks" what is most intrinsic to us, that which symbolizes our livelihood, our capacity to love (not just others, but ourselves, as well).

non-monogamy. It diminishes the non-monogamous lifestyle and paints it as a lesser alternative, one that is chosen only by those who are “too messed up to be normal.” This marginalization is what Judith Butler writes about in “Competing Universalities”: with every definition comes the outlying group, and with every argument that the definition is “universal”—that monogamy *is* love—the outliers are further abstracted and alienated.

We must therefore call into question our very need for definitions. If categorization will always lend to marginalization, how do we *un*-categorize? When I began to look at monogamy as an issue, I simply saw it as a shallow duality. The debate in my head was between monogamy and polyamory, and which was “better.” But this binary thinking is the problem: as Butler articulates, “the very categories that are politically available for identification restrict in advance the play of hegemony, dissonance and rearticulation” (“Competing Universalities” 150). By only looking at an issue from two opposing sides, we are accepting the current categorizations in play; we restrict any change and possibility for growth.

Butler uses the discussion around sexuality as a method of further understanding how we can protect the marginalized and change what she calls “the horizon of hegemony.” Based on perspective, the horizon line changes: social norms rely on positionality—we are able to repurpose and redefine them. It is not enough, however, to simply subvert norms. Changing our definitions of social structures only continues to marginalize and dehumanize others. We must reject the boundaries of definition and categorization—blurring the very lines that confine us in the first place. We can look at the development of our society’s understanding of sexual orientation as an example: establishing categories of “homosexual” and “bisexual” as “socially acceptable” within our discourse does not protect these identities. Such distinct categorization continues to encourage our need for comparison, to establish one identity as “better” or more “normal.” However, when we look at sexuality as a spectrum and not a choice between different entities, these comparisons are not so easily drawn.

Language needs to allow resistance to language. Butler argues that our very sense of self is founded upon the paradoxical nature of norms that are “done” to us, and our attempts to live around them. But if these norms make life is unlivable (the way that a binary understanding of gender does to many), we must question them, pry them apart, and understand how we can change them to allow for inclusivity. It is important to note that Butler does not regard all social norms as negative. She acknowledges that certain norms afford a degree of stability that is required to engage in a livable life. The issue of norms becomes problematic, however, when the state and legislation become involved: “what is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some” (*Undoing Gender* 8). My question thus transformed from whether monogamy “works” to whether the state should be involved in its enforcement. How effectively monogamy functions within our society or within specific relationships is But when we see how monogamous marriage is tied with legislation, and how marriage is the only legally recognized form of romantic kinship, it becomes a problem.

Of course, there is the argument that marriage and monogamy are not actively enforced by the government. Polyamorous culture is alive and well among today’s youth.<sup>10</sup> However, with state recognition, marriage becomes the exclusive way of establishing romantic kinship within our society. The spousal rights, paternal rights, details regarded in wills, taxes, insurance, and everything else makes marriage a requirement. And if love and kinship are factors of a ‘livable’ life— which was the very argument used to advocate for gay marriage— then its normative status makes life unlivable for all those who oppose it. Butler writes that

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<sup>10</sup> Although, it is important to note that most polyamorous relationships are still founded on a loose basis of monogamy; in Emily Witt’s memoir *Future Sex*, the triad of Elizabeth, Wes, and Chris is more of a duo with an addendum. Chris and Emily get their “happily ever after” and end up married. They still keep their other lovers in rotation and are open both emotionally and sexually to people outside their marriage, but there is a clear bond between the pair that exists nowhere else. Hence, they at once reject and yet still adhere to normative monogamy.

efforts to establish bonds of kinship that are not based on a marriage tie become nearly illegible and unviable when marriage sets the terms for kinship, and kinship itself is collapsed into “family.” The enduring social ties that constitute viable kinship in communities of sexual minorities are threatened with becoming unrecognizable and unviable as long as the marriage bond is the exclusive way in which both sexuality and kinship are organized. (*Undoing Gender* 5)

The state is essential in defining our society’s terms of love and family. Monogamy is a social construct. It does not work for everyone, and it is not the ideal standard of love that we have made it out to be. For some, it is more restrictive than productive. The state’s endorsement of it is part of the “unwanted legislation of identity” that is being dismantled with issues of sexual orientation and gender.<sup>11</sup>

But if not marriage, then what? Perhaps we should leave that decision to private citizens. I am aware that dismantling the institution of marriage could have unforeseen societal impacts. It is embedded in our culture, and a litany of laws would have to be amended or repealed. But what I like to imagine is a version of myself, in the distant future or in a parallel universe, where non-monogamy is not ‘non-monogamy,’ where relationships are not defined according to gender, number, or any other divisive factors. I like to imagine a future me, uninhibited by social norms, free of the state’s influence preaching the exclusive priority of monogamy above all else.

This is the “remaking of the self” that Butler talks about in *Undoing Gender*. In the future, she writes, “the self must be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself” (*Undoing Gender* 7). I hope to be able to love without the fear of being replaced, without the notion that someone’s affection for me is undermined by their affection for others.

I run away from myself by believing certain institutions, or the eradication of them, will elicit some kind of change in *my* being—my insecurities, unhappiness, and everything else. So I still have some kind of

<sup>11</sup> Cases like *Lawrence v. Texas*, which struck Texas’s anti-sodomy law, acknowledged that the state had no business governing the private sex lives of its’ citizens; likewise, we must ask, why does it have the right to govern the way we love?



essential belief in the repressive theory. I try to see a light at the end of the tunnel, what I imagine as “sexual liberation.” While some spend their lives pursuing the promise of eternal peace awaiting them at the end of their lives, I pursue an impossible freedom from the influence of society. Perhaps my understanding of Foucault—and, concurrently, my understanding of freedom—needs to be further developed. But this is my discourse. It is still being defined.

We have gained much from steadfast, relentless categorization, identification, and a stream of discourse that seeks to flesh out each “perversion,” each category of sexuality: we are informed. We are cognizant of deep aspects of what makes up our desires. But in this steadfast analysis and governance of human sexuality, the hegemonic horizon remains fixed: our laws and definitions protect few, and make life unlivable for many. Change requires a different approach. We must try to reach inclusion and universality through different methods, the return to anonymity. Detachment is the next step in our state’s relationship with our relationships. The government distanced itself from sex (relatively speaking), now it needs to do the same with love.

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