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The Affective Enforcement of Heterosexism: Self-Doubt and Queer Desire

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Abstract

In this paper I undertake to describe and theorize an important way in which subjects are kept "in line" with heteronormativity at the level of embodied affectivity. To do this, I synthesize a phenomenological understanding of sexuality with contemporary work in philosophy of emotion to thematize a form of self-doubt that is felt in relation to the experience of queer desires. I argue that the elicitation of such feelings of self-doubt is a crucial way in which a wider affective milieu of heterosexism is unjustly enforced. To achieve these aims, I first conceptualize heterosexism as an affective milieu, meaning a sociocultural system with prescribed "feeling rules." Section 2 then draws on phenomenological discussions of sexuality to show how (erotic) desire is an existentially significant aspect of our affective lives. I then develop an account of self-doubt, in section 3, as something felt, self-alienating, and self-involving. Finally in sections 4 and 5, through examples drawn from autofictional literature and film, I parse out two forms of self-doubt and the unjust harms they incur. First, self-doubt as an existential background feeling. Second, episodic self-doubt which is enacted to regulate the salience, legitimacy, or self-importance of a particular affective experience.

Keywords: self-doubt, desire, heterosexism, heteronormativity, affective intentionality, emotional self-alienation, hermeneutical injustice, internalized homophobia, affective milieu, the erotic, queer desire

1. An Introduction to the Affective Milieu of Heterosexism

Heteronormativity structures our world and impacts our subjective lives in complexly multifarious ways. In this paper I undertake to describe and theorize an important way in which subjects are kept "in line" with heteronormativity at the level of embodied affective intentionality. To do this, I synthesize a phenomenological understanding of sexuality with contemporary work in philosophy of emotion to thematize a form of affective self-doubt that is felt in relation to the experience of queer desires. I argue that the elicitation of such feelings of self-doubt is a crucial way in which a wider milieu of heterosexism is unjustly enforced. One could just as easily

speak of the epistemic, political, juridical, or medical enforcement of heterosexism, as one could focus instead on the affects of fear, shame, and disgust. Moreover, one could speak of other-directed rather than self-directed doubt. In narrowing the scope to *affective self-doubt,* this paper makes an original albeit modest contribution to the ever-expanding scholarship that seeks to thematize, unsettle, and ultimately undermine the paradigm of heterosexism we find ourselves in.

Heterosexism is the structural privileging of heteronormative gender expressions, relationship structures, and heteropatriarchal social norms (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). This privileging can be institutionalized through the distribution of goods, roles, opportunities, sanctions, and rights but also normalized through historical, cultural, and linguistic norms. These heteronormative ways of being are privileged to such an extent that they are effectively instituted as *compulsory* modes of being (Rich 1980; Ahmed 2006, 84). Central to heterosexism is the implicit and explicit presumption that one's sexual orientation is directed toward the opposite sex, but heterosexism is more expansive than this. Importantly, heterosexism also privileges cis gendered, white, able-bodied, and middle-class expressions of sexuality. This places heterosexism alongside, but also intermeshed with, other modes of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and so on (Ferguson 2004; J. Ward 2015; Eribon 2019; Smilges 2022). Following Gayle Rubin (2007), and the queer theoretical tradition more broadly, the heteronormativity at the heart of heterosexism also privileges certain sexual and romantic practices as normal, natural, and good, while pathologizing others as deviant and abnormal. Heterosexism thus not only demarcates *who* one may desire but *how* one faces the world and engages with it more generally (Ahmed 2006, 68). This paper will focus its discussion on cases of affective self-doubt that arise in relation to experiences of queer desire.

The sex one is assigned at birth informs the gendered role one is obliged to fulfil, which in turn dictates which bodies can become objects of desire and which remain beyond eroticization. The oppressive force of heterosexism can be explained largely by appealing to unjust structural arrangements, normative proscriptions, and material harms. But these cannot paint the whole picture as there is also an important and specifically *affective* component of heterosexism that is often left unthematized in structural and genealogical analyses.

To understand how heterosexism is affectively enforced, I propose—following recent discussions within philosophy of emotion—that heterosexism be conceptualized as an *affective milieu*. Most notably, I take my lead from Michelle Maiese's (2022) conceptualization of white supremacy as an affective milieu. Maiese demonstrates how anti-Black affective relations circulate and become habituated under the social structure of white supremacy—for example, how the racist historical institution of the figure of the Black male rapist has led to the naturalization of white fear and suspicion toward Black men (Maiese 2022, 909), or how the expression of

anger from Black people toward police brutality is invalidated while the racist emotional anxieties of white people are normalized and privileged (911). To ensure consistency with this recent conceptualization of affective milieus (Schuetze 2021; Maiese 2022), along with how it has been employed in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Sartre 1978; Scheler 1973), I proceed by understanding *milieu* to refer to the sociohistorical environment, surroundings, and setting one finds oneself in.[1]

The concept of an *affective* milieu is helpful in illuminating the ways in which social structures prescribe affective requirements and horizons of possibilities for their participants (Schuetze 2021; Maiese 2022; see also Scheler 1973, 105–8). When I attend a funeral, for example, affective experiences of joy, happiness, excitement, and so on, are typically not within my horizon of possibility as I have learned how I *ought* to feel at a funeral according to my milieu: sad and melancholic. While the "feeling rules" (Hochschild 2012) of one's milieu need not be reflectively salient, they become habituated into everyday practice such that we are rewarded with the experience of feeling "at home" and being affectively confident when one *feels* in line with the demands of the milieu (Maiese 2022, 912). Not only is the affective milieu something one learns, internalizes, and habituates into one's affective landscape, but it is also intersubjectively enforced and socio-materially scaffolded. My expression of joy at a funeral may be policed and chastised by others as it would likely be perceived not simply as an affective aberration but a normative transgression. We also see how our affective milieu is often scaffolded; the norms surrounding music, dress code, and social practices at a funeral are instantiated to further delimit the possible horizons of affective experience. There is thus a tendency to naturalize those feelings that can be considered "normative" by virtue of their alignment with one's affective milieu. In this sense, it is often taken for granted that one "naturally" feels a particular way because one ought to feel this way, despite the *ought* being historically contingent.

Elaborating on the normative force of the affective milieu, many theorists have begun to describe how social structures that operate in the background normatively guide one's ways of relating to one another at the most fundamental levels of embodied, perceptual, and affective habits (Ngo 2016; Yancy 2017; Maiese 2022). Similar to Maiese's approach to white supremacy, I take heterosexism to also be a sociocultural system that is internalized by subjects such that they act according to feeling rules that are embodied and reiterated in everyday practices to the extent

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[1] Although Schuetze (2021), following Roald, Levin, and Køppe (2018), claims to pursue a meaning of *affective milieu* different from that which Maurice Merleau-Ponty understands, this is not so apparent. Merleau-Ponty (2012) also compares a milieu to one's "homeland" (26), and his use of "social milieu" (160), "familial milieu" (163), and our "human milieu" (137) all carry meanings that I understand as being to some extent structurally analogous to one's "affective milieu."

that they can form an (heterosexist) affective habitus (Maiese 2022, 906; see also Hochschild 2012; Szanto 2017, 279). Processes of habituation need not be oppressive, coercive, or symptomatic of a regime of power. The habitual way of feeling at funerals in the Anglophone world, for example, is likely something many people would defend. Yet, when the affective milieu can be unveiled as being imposed from the outside in an imperialistic fashion that functions to marginalize large groups of people, then we may be unveiling an important but pernicious form of oppression.

To understand the oppressive character of an affective milieu, we can turn to Iris Marion Young's concept of cultural imperialism (Young 2011; see also Archer and Matheson 2023). Cultural imperialism is one face of oppression wherein oppressors are able to project their own values, experience, and perspective as normative and universal, whereas difference to the norm is construed as deviance and inferiority (Young 2011, 116–23). This imperialism can be understood in two senses. On the one hand, it is the imposition of heterosexual ways of being upon others within the same nation state. On the other hand, there are important histories of colonial and emotional imperialism in which heteronormative ways of being have been imposed upon foreign cultures (Levy 1973; Oyěwùmí 1997; Snorton 2017; Gill-Peterson 2024). Heteronormative culture—a particular set of ideas surrounding sexuality and how, what, and who one should desire; ways of feeling and forms of expression in relation to gendered embodiment; and ways of loving, having sex, and founding a family—is imposed upon everyone through educational, juridical, sociocultural, and disciplinary means.

In what follows, I draw on phenomenological resources to understand the affectivity of both erotic desire and self-doubt, before making normative claims regarding the injustice that can emerge at their intersections. To achieve these aims, the paper proceeds as follows. In section 2 I draw on classical and contemporary phenomenological work on desire, sexuality, and affective intentionality. I describe the affective-intentional structure of erotic desire and how it is a significant aspect of how one is orientated to one's world and its inhabitants. I then provide, in section 3, an account of affective self-doubt as something felt, alienating, and self-involving in an existentially significant way. With the affective-intentional structures of erotic desire and self-doubt laid out, section 4 shifts into a twofold normative discussion of existential and episodic feeling of self-doubt. In section 4.1 I examine the existential feelings of self-doubt in relation to queer desire and how this self-doubt can be self-alienating as it emerges from a "tragic relation of conflict" (Scheler 1973, 108) between two horizons of anticipation. In response to these experiences of self-doubt, section 4.2 demonstrates how one may suffer from emotional (dys)regulation when one actively doubts the nonnormative affects so as to regain a coherent sense of self. I conclude, in section 5, with a brief look at Audre Lorde's discussion of the importance of nurturing frank and open desires uninhibited by external forces. Ultimately, this

paper provides a phenomenological perspective on the ways in which heterosexism is unjustly enforced at the level of embodied affective intentionality.

2. The Affective Intentionality and Existential Significance of (Queer) Desire

In this section I clarify how we can understand erotic desires to be paradigmatic cases of embodied affective intentionality. Intentionality—our mind's capacity to be directed at something beyond itself—is rarely a cold, purely cognitive affair but is always embodied and imbued with feelings (Slaby 2008). Affective intentionality, more specifically, pertains to how we feel toward the world. What I understand here as "affective" is deliberately broad such that it encompasses episodic emotions such as anger and fear, more broad affective states or backgrounds such as a feeling of belonging or unsettledness, and finally a paradigmatic mode of embodied affective intentionality that falls messily in between and which this paper focuses on—namely, erotic desire.

When one experiences erotic desire for another person, this desire *feels* like something in a way that is often bodily yet not located (Bettcher 2014, 608; Salamon 2010, 51). Somewhat distinct from how we understand conventional episodic emotions, erotic desires have their own affective modes of comportment. While desire for a particular erotic object, act, or situation may arise sporadically and be experienced with accompanying emotional episodes such as joy, nervousness, shame, disgust, and so on, the desire itself is not reducible to these episodic emotions. Rather, I take erotic desires to consist of constituting an object as a source of pleasure, and I take this constitution to be affective, embodied, and to typically occur prereflectively. Thus, while I appreciate that desire can be understood in a broader sense of perceiving or judging something to be valuable, as I am interested in the experiential domain of sexuality, I limit the focus to feelings of desire that pertain to one's sexuality.[2]

Following the tradition of phenomenology, I understand *sexuality* not to simply pertain to *who* one has desires for but to encompass various interwoven aspects of sexual difference, sexual identity, gender identity, and experiences of erotic desire, pleasure, and pain (Salamon 2010, 49). To disentangle a phenomenological conception of sexuality from how *sexuality* is referred to in ordinary language—namely, the gender one is typically attracted to—it is helpful to emphasize the centrality of what can be referred to as an ambiguity of intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 194; Beauvoir 1972, 423; see also Diprose 2002, 116; Rodemeyer 2018, 73). In other words, sexuality is characterized by one's capacity to be both an (erotic) object for others and subject for oneself (Ward and

[2] In what follows any use of the term *desire* refers to erotic desire.

Anderson 2022), such that a crucial component of sexuality is one's experience of oneself as not only the desirer but also the desired.

Erotic desire can then refer to the sexual attraction toward another, erotic interest in a sexual act, or desire concerning one's sexed or gendered embodiment and/or presentation. Even in cases of desire explicitly directed toward an Other, the desire is typically accompanied with feelings directed at oneself as a sexual being. We see this, for example, in Edouard Louis's 2014 autobiographical novel, *The End of Eddy,* when the protagonist describes being—after a sexually tense encounter with other boys masturbating—"torn between the desire the other boys had provoked in me and the disgust I felt towards myself, towards my own desiring body" (Louis 2017, 127). The desire Eddy feels is on the one hand a "movement" (Beauvoir 1972) or "appetite" (Sartre 1978) toward the boys, but it also refers Eddy back to himself as an embodied being with certain desires that are interpreted as being constitutive of his wider sexuality. Following insights from trans philosophy, we can understand this as illustrating how a constitutive component of erotic desire is the eroticization of the self (Bettcher 2014, 606). This is what Talia Mae Bettcher (2014) proposes as an "interactional account" of sexual attraction and is particularly helpful in conceptualizing how the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation is blurred. On this account we can only make sense of erotic desire with an account of the eroticized self, and this means we must take seriously the role of a sexed or gendered self in how one's desires are directed toward others.

To make sense of the complex interactions involved in experiences of one's sexuality, we must appreciate the various ways in which desire is not explicitly other-directed. Just as I may desire to have sex with people of a particular gender, have sex in particular ways, I may also desire to change elements of my sexed body, dress in a different way, not have sex at all, or desire to act out a certain role or *be* a certain way during sexual acts. How one understands oneself as a sexual subject—and the ways this can be recoded—is particularly important and thematic for trans folk. Illustrations of this can be found, for example, throughout the posthumously published diaries of Lou Sullivan. As a trans man, Sullivan (2019, 331) often emphasizes how "it's not how others perceive me that matters to me; it's how I perceive myself." Here Sullivan is alluding to how others' experience of him as a particular (masculine) erotic object is not sufficient to realize his sexual expression. What more is needed is to also experience himself as an erotic *subject:* "to stop thinking of 'passing as a man' and start thinking of *being* a man" (331). In one passage, Sullivan describes the first time his (male) partner

> positioned his cock between my legs so it looked like mine. . . . He said, "There, now it's yours." I looked down and felt whole, like a man, I looked over my muscular arms, my flat chest as I imagine his cock mine

> and masturbated it. I was raised to incredible sexual highs. (Sullivan 2019, 291)

Such accounts of how subjects recode their sexed body in interaction with others, objects, and their environment illuminate how thoroughly embodied, affectively saturated, and self-involving erotic desires are.

Rather than every expression of existence being traced meaningfully back to one's sexuality and desire, a phenomenological approach appreciates the existential meaning of sexuality and desire, but without existence being collapsible into sexuality. As Gayle Salamon writes in her discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, desire and sexuality are of such significance because "through desire, my body comes alive by being intentionally directed toward another, and I myself come into being through that desire" (Salamon 2010, 50). Who and what I desire is a mode or style of intentionally relating to myself and others as erotic objects, acting on them, and being affected by them (Heinämaa 2018, 545). Moreover, because this form of intentionality is fundamentally *embodied* and *affective,* these experiences of desire are shot through with diffusedly localized bodily feelings and motivational relevances, and, as with emotional episodes, they are always in some way positively or negatively valenced. Experiences of "butterflies in the stomach," a "sinking feeling," or one's "heart dropping," are all commonplace ways in which our sexuality is experienced through bodily feelings without reducing it to the body as a site of erotogenesis. Experiences of desire typically pertain to others while also revealing to oneself aspects of one's own embodied (and affective) being.[3]

Having sketched out how we can understand the affective-intentional structure of (queer) desire, I turn now to Sara Ahmed to emphasize its existential significance. Queer desire is an expression of one's sexuality that deviates from the fatalistic "straightening devices" (Ahmed 2006, 23) of one's affective milieu. Queer desire need not be a sexual desire for someone of the same sex, but it describes how one orientates oneself to the objects and inhabitants of one's world more generally, in ways that do not cohere with what is deemed "normal" according to heteronormativity. Ahmed uses *queer* as an umbrella term for all nonstraight, nonnormative, and "oblique" sexualities (68, 161), and for this reason, in what follows *queer* is understood to denote a broader category of nonnormative sexual practices and expressions rather than to simply describe same-sex relations. This opens up

[3] As Jean-Paul Sartre (1978, 389) describes in *Being and Nothingness,* "It is in this sense that desire can be called the desire of one body for another body. It is in fact an appetite directed *toward* the Other's body, and it is lived as the vertigo of the For-itself before its own body. The being which desires is consciousness *making itself body*."

queer desire to denote innumerable nonnormative ways of engaging in romantic and sexual relations, even for people who are otherwise deemed "straight," such as nonmonogamous relationships, coparenting family structures, and deciding not to have children, get married, and so on. Importantly, queer desires are not simply nonnormative in the sense of being deviant but denote those forms of desire that resist, unsettle, and question norms that privilege heteronormativity. While I take the following discussion of affective self-doubt to be similarly elucidating for how normative family and relationship structures are enforced (via heteronormativity and homonormativity alike), for the sake of scope and simplicity, I hereon focus on desires that are queer because they do not assume or "inherit" (Ahmed 2006, 86) a straight line of desire to the opposite sex from what you were assigned at birth.[4]

Ahmed's distinction between desire and orientation is helpful in this regard. For Ahmed, one's orientation captures the more persistent ways in which one directs desires and inhabits different worlds (Ahmed 2006, 101). One's orientations direct one's desires, affect what one can do, where one can go, how one is perceived by others, and consequently how one understands oneself (101). Although these desires need not be incorporated into how one orientates oneself in the world, to incorporate queer desires into one's orientation can precisely provoke a feeling of *disorientation* (20). This is because reorienting one's desires (e.g., from masculine to feminine gender presentation, or from women to men as possible romantic partners), opens up a whole new orientation to the world. If, for example, I begin to not only act on my desires for same-sex relations but decide to grant them affective recognition and thus habitually reorient myself to the nonstraight world, then this allows for new objects and horizons of possibility to come into view as past horizons and familiar objects recede into the background. Part of what is disorientating, however, is that these desires come up against an affective milieu that precisely abnormalizes such a reorientation.

3. The Alienating Tension of Self-Doubt

To elucidate the ways heterosexism is affectively enforced, I turn now to what I call (heterosexist) self-doubt. In this paper I am interested in first describing how the experience of doubt can be affective: on the one hand, how self-doubt *feels;* on the other hand, how doubt can be directed at one's own affective states. I then argue that

[4] Moreover, I am only interested in those queer desires that are experienced in relation to consenting subjects. As a reviewer pointed out, what makes the self-doubt outlined in the following sections unjust is that it inhibits morally acceptable desires. To experience self-doubt in relation to desires that involve an expressly nonconsenting subject, for example, would rather be a defensible outcome of one's affective milieu.

this affective self-doubt can be a site of injustice. Beginning with the former, I am interested in doubt as an embodied feeling which at times can entail "an all-enveloping sense of uncertainty" and "feeling[s] of dissatisfaction, tension, unsettledness, or unease" (Ratcliffe 2008, 257–58). A key feature of the experience of what Matthew Ratcliffe (2008) calls "felt doubts" is the feeling of tension that arises from being confronted with two conflicting horizons of anticipation; be they opportunities for action, feelings, beliefs, interpretations, or, what will be the focus of this essay, a conflict of desire.[5] These feelings of tension that characterize self-doubt are also often accompanied by feelings of uneasiness, unsettledness, and uncertainty that pertain (implicitly or explicitly) to an unresolved conflict.

In her paper "Bodily Doubt," Havi Carel (2013, 179) characterizes doubt as the negation of an "ongoing tacit certainty" when suffering from mental and somatic disorders. Like Carel, I want to keep in view precisely what is taken-for-granted in moments free from doubt—namely, the (bodily) tacit certainty that denotes a feeling of "I can" that pervades our actions (Carel 2013, 181).[6] In these experiential episodes within which one's actions flow from an implicit "I can," one's desires (and their manifestation in actions) are experienced without resistance (Husserl 1989, 270). From the "I can" one takes the possibilities for action not simply as the possibilities for *someone* but rather as *your* possibilities (Young 1980, 147). When one's bodily intentionality meets resistance, however, then one is confronted with the experience of tension in the form of "I cannot." In such cases one experiences one's bodily or motor intentionality to be *inhibited* as the possibilities for action become mere possibilities "out there." Alia Al-Saji (2014, 139) discusses the "I cannot" within the context of racializing vision and explores how social-cultural horizons institute a racializing inability to see otherwise—as seeing people as anything other than raced. Young discusses female bodily comportment in a somewhat similar way, arguing that girls are socialized to habituate an "I cannot" when it comes to bodily motility, and that this habituation is both privative and positive. What Young means by this, Al-Saji writes, is that girls both lack practice with regard to certain actions (*privative*), but this habituation is also *positive* as girls learn to navigate the world *like a girl,* by learning a style "of acting that is hesitant, fragile, and constantly self-referred" (Al-Saji 2014, 151; citing Young 1980). Within the heterosexist milieu, I take a similar sense of "I

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[5] This two-mindedness or double-sidedness of doubt is also etymologically rooted in the Proto-Indo European *dwo-*, meaning "two," from which *doubt* stems (Harper, n.d.).

[6] For discussions of the phenomenological "I can," see Husserl (1989); Merleau-Ponty (2012, 139–40); Al-Saji (2014); Young (1980); Roberts and Osler (2024).

cannot" to be habituated with regard to queer desires, resulting in inhibited affective intentionality.[7]

Within the heterosexist milieu, nonnormative sexualities are privatively marked as beyond our field of possibilities, while at the same time we are positively socialized into *becoming* straight. The tacit certainty of the "I can" is an achievement of one's being situated within what Rubin (2007) calls the natural and normal "charmed circle" compared to the abnormal and unnatural "outer limits." Typically, robust binarisms are instituted such that one feels one must fall either side of, for example, the heterosexual/homosexual and cis male/cis female borders. We not only learn to act and move through the world like girls and boys, but we also habituate styles of acting as *heterosexual* girls and boys. Desires that threaten to cross or straddle these binaries are, according to Judith Butler (1997, 147), "proscribed from the start." In other words, they are marked with the doubt-inducing impossibility of the "I cannot." To experience a privileged tacit certainty with one's orientation to the world is often precisely a *privilege* afforded to those who comfortably inherit "straight" aspects of sexuality.

What I have briefly outlined above certainly elucidates how heterosexism forecloses possibly ways of being, seeing, doing, and feeling for the sake of reproducing and perpetuating a heteronormative social-cultural horizon. But what does this have to do with *self*-doubt?

First of all, I take self-doubt to be a particular feeling of doubt that is harmful because it involves an experience of *alienation* from an aspect of oneself—for example, from one's memories, bodily capacities, cognitive or epistemic ability, or as I will focus on in this paper, one's affect-laden desires. I want to maintain that this alienating form of self-doubt is distinct from other productive, just, and even emancipatory modes of doubting, which fall beyond the scope of this paper. Oftentimes one's ongoing tacit certainty is not rationally justified as it is rarely made the object of explicit scrutiny (Carel 2013, 179–80), and this is the reason that doubt

[7] While Young speaks of differences of sexed embodiment, and Al-Saji of racializing perception, heteronormativity also installs heteronormalizing perceptual schemata. A telling anecdote that displays how racializing and heterosexualizing perception can overlap, but also be at odds with one another, is in Sara Ahmed's (2006, 95) encounter with her neighbor: "A neighbor calls out to me. I look up somewhat nervously because I have yet to establish 'good relations' with the neighbors. I haven't lived in this place very long and the semipublic of the street does not yet feel easy. The neighbor mumbles some words, which I cannot hear, and then asks: "Is that your sister, or your husband?" I rush into the house without offering a response. The neighbor's utterance is quite extraordinary. There are two women, living together, a couple of people alone in a house. So what do you see?"

is an integral feature in any form of productive critical inquiry. I do not contest this; however, I want to make a distinction between this enacted, productive, and even emancipatory form of doubt that is reflective, and a form of self-doubt that is alienating, often prereflective, and that arises by virtue of one's heterosexist milieu.

To clarify the self-involving nature of *affective* self-doubt, I turn to what Thomas Szanto (2017) terms "emotional self-alienation." Szanto outlines both wide and narrow conceptualizations of emotional self-alienation, both of which are relevant for this study. The narrower form, for Szanto, is an alienation from your own emotions, such that the sensitivity and personal import of the emotion can be diminished or even vanish completely (Szanto 2017, 272). The wider form of emotional self-alienation does not involve being alienated from one's emotion. Rather, in experiencing a particular emotion or affective state "one feels momentarily or robustly alienated from prior life-projects, from one's own 'self'" (Szanto 2017, 264; see also Thomason 2023).[8] In either case, the experience of alienation can entail a broad range of phenomena including inauthenticity, role-playing, lack of identification, lack of self-mastery, or feelings of being dominated by some Other, whether it be a person, thing, or system (Szanto 2017, 263). By returning to Edouard Louis's protagonist, Eddy, I show below how such a framework of emotional self-alienation can help us make sense of the function of self-doubt for the enforcement of heterosexism.

Emotional self-alienation can arise when one experiences a tension between two affective experiences: one that coheres with your self-image, self-narrative, and/or self-understanding,[9] and one that undermines or disrupts these senses of self. If one has lived one's life developing life-projects and constructing a self-image of oneself as straight or cis, for example, then one may struggle to identify with the affective-intentional force of a desire that is at odds with these senses of self. We see this alienation resulting from the tension of self-doubt in the case of Eddy introduced above. Not only does Eddy describe being "torn" between two affective states (desire and disgust), but he is also expressing a feeling of momentary alienation from his embodied self, his "own desiring body," which he now refers to from a distance (Louis 2017, 127). The internalization of heterosexism's most violent cultural norms force

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[8] While I do not think it is necessary to commit myself here to a particular conception of selfhood, this essay is undoubtedly interested in a socially situated (rather than minimal) self. This means a sense of self that develops over time in interaction with others and as affected by sociohistorical structures rather than a core sense of self that is prediscursive and ahistorical.

[9] In this paper I use these terms interchangeably to refer to the general ways one relates to oneself as a person in the world with a personal identity that persists over time.

Eddy into a space saturated with feelings of doubt as he suffers from the alienating tension between both desiring other boys as erotic objects and finding such a desire to be itself "disgusting."

In an earlier passage, after secretly trying on his sister's dress, Eddy again describes feeling "idiotic, sullied . . . disgusted with myself, stunned by the momentary madness" (Louis 2017, 16). Not only do we see here feelings of inauthenticity and a felt lack of self-mastery over his desires, but we also see how this self-doubt can be accompanied by a plethora of related feelings, such as fear, unsettledness, disorientation, and shame. These feelings bring into relief how much one can be dominated by a system that aims to marginalize and pathologize such deviant affects. Eddy is "stunned by the momentary madness" as if the desire came from outside himself. The experience of such an incoherent affect threatens to motivate an existential shift—or reorientation—of Eddy's self-understanding. In his response to this self-alienation, we see another form of affective self-doubt—namely, the doubting of the salience, significance, legitimacy, or even presence of these proscribed and impossible feelings of desire. By doubting the existential significance, legitimacy, or mere sobriety of one's queer desire, one resists the motivation to incorporate it into one's orientation to the world. It is in this sense that queer desires, especially when they first arise, are so often interpreted as inconsequential moments of madness, as being "just a phase."

In the above, we see how affective self-doubt can characterize both the more existential feelings of tension and "tragic conflict" (Scheler 1973, 108) that arise when the tacit certainty of the "I can" is lost and the more episodic acts of doubt toward one's affects as a response to this alienating "I cannot." In other words, self-doubt can be a background feeling that orients oneself to the world, shaping one's experiences, thoughts, and possibilities (Ratcliffe 2008, 259), but it can also be the episodic agential attempts to resolve the tragic conflict by doubting the affective experience that does not cohere with one's self-understanding. The existential significance of affective self-doubt is in its self-involving and self-alienating character. In cases wherein one experiences alienating desires, one not only comes to doubt the legitimacy, coherence, and personal importance of these affective desires but may also come to doubt one's sense of self, to such an extent that one is in two minds as to *who one is*. This more agential form of self-doubt is enacted with the aim of resolving the conflict and securing once more the comfort of the "I can" that heterosexual desires are typically accompanied by. In the following section, I address the injustices of these two forms of what I now term existential and episodic self-doubt.

4. The Harms of Affective Self-Doubt

4.1. Existential Self-Doubt

I begin with the more existential feelings of self-doubt that are better described as happening *to* rather than being enacted *by* the subject. In Xavier Dolan's (2019) film *Matthias & Maxime*, the eponymous two best friends experience desire for one another, which is circumstantially brought to the surface and acted upon when they are coaxed into enacting a kiss for their friend's film project. Given both characters' publicly self-avowed straight orientations, the desires they experience and suppress throughout the rest of the film stand clearly in tension with not only how they present themselves to others but, more importantly, with their self-interpretations. We bear witness to this as Dolan illuminates in multiple scenes the inner turmoil both men face when trying to reconcile their felt queer desires with their habituated heterosexual orientations to the world.[10]

As can be seen in *Matthias & Maxime*, the experience of self-alienation provokes feelings of shame and fear as the felt reality of the erotic desire threatens to force a reorientation to the world, thus leaving behind the familiar, comfortable, and habituated heterosexual ways of being. Matthias is particularly affected by the tension that arises as a result of his nonnormative desires. We see this evidenced by his gradual decline into a socially isolated, agitated, and depressive mood. The tacit certainty of the heterosexual "I can" is lost, and a hesitant and uncertain "I cannot" takes its place. We can understand this as the possibility of nonheterosexuality presenting itself as what Young (2011, 146) describes as a kind of permeable "border anxiety." This border is constantly policed and leads straight subjects who act on their queer desires to have their desires accompanied by "shame, secrecy, homophobia, and disavowal[s] of queerness" (J. Ward 2015, 20). Given the sociocultural salience of this border, perhaps more than the presence of *only* queer desires, the *copresence* of both straight and queer desires within a sociocultural horizon of heterosexism is experienced within the "I cannot." Matthias's sexuality no longer forms a prereflective backdrop that puts him in relation to others but becomes foregrounded as a source of self-alienation.

In addition to suffering from alienation, in such cases we can understand the subject as suffering from what has recently been termed an "affect-related hermeneutic injustice" (Gallegos 2022), which harms the subject by inflicting a "hermeneutic gloom" (Fricker 2007, 149). What Miranda Fricker means by hermeneutic gloom, and what Francisco Gallegos reappropriates for affect-related

[10] This felt existential tension is also captured by James Baldwin in his 1956 novel, *Giovanni's Room.* Here, when the protagonist first embraces his same-sex lover, Giovanni, he describes: "With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes*" (Baldwin 2007, 56).

intents, is that "a person or group's ability to interpret their own and others' affective experiences and emotional responses is unfairly constrained or undermined" (Gallegos 2022, 10). This leads to a significant area of one's social experience being obscured from both self-understanding and collective understanding (Fricker 2007, 155). The inability to interpret affective experiences can be caused either by a lack of hermeneutical resources or by being constrained and/or undermined by others. This is typically quite pronounced in cis male subjects who identify as heterosexual, as they are overreliant on the hermeneutic labor of women, especially within the context of romantic situations (Anderson 2023). Hermeneutic labor, according to Ellie Anderson (2023, 179), is the burdensome activity of interpreting the behavior of others, being sensitive to conflicting desires, thought patterns, and communicative strategies. As heteropatriarchal societies allocate this labor disproportionately to women, it is not difficult to see why men not only harm others in their refusal to engage in hermeneutic labor but also how this can lead them into spaces saturated with unsettledness and unease when experiencing their own conflicting desires.

Due to this hermeneutic gloom, subjects often lack the appropriate affective resources and opportunities to aptly understand, explore, and interpret their desires. In *Matthias & Maxime,* both men are clearly unable to experience any tacit certainty with regard to their queer desire.[11] By having their desires confronted by a socially prescribed "I cannot," their affective intentionality becomes inhibited as their intentional object of desire is colored by associations with disgust, shame, fear, and impossibility. The associations of negative affects present the subject with an all-encompassing feeling of doubt toward what would otherwise be an experience of naturalized desire. In the case of queer desire, by internalizing heterosexist attitudes from one's milieu, the intensity and frequency at which one experiences *queer* desires may be causally affected (Díaz-León 2017, 242). In other words, the normative scripts and "feeling rules" of heterosexism unjustly impede one's freedom to feel certain ways toward objects which veer "off line."

We can understand this feeling of self-doubt to be existentially significant as it disrupts one's sense of *who one is.* Another example of this can be found in Butler's description of "gender anxiety." Butler writes:

> The fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity, that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman. . . . Or in a man, the terror of homosexual desire may

[11] Analyzing this through the lens of affective injustice, we can understand this as being denied "affective recognition" or "affective freedom" (Gallegos 2022). For related discussions on affective injustice, see Srinivasan (2018); Whitney (2018); Bailey (2018); Archer and Mills (2019); Pismenny, Eickers, and Prinz (2024).

> lead to a terror of being construed as feminine, feminized, of no longer being properly a man. (Butler 1997, 136)

Here we see how feelings of self-doubt pertain not only to the other-directed desires themselves but also to the implications one's desires have for one's orientation and social identity at large. By experiencing nonnormative desires, the subject may begin to feel uncertain about their own sexual "style" (Heinämaa 2003) as they no longer inhabit the comfortable certainty toward their masculine or feminine comportment. In lieu of certainty, the subject instead experiences an alienating feeling of doubt as their orientation becomes threatened by incoherence.

4.2. Episodic Self-Doubt

The second form of self-doubt is a more agential attempt to resolve the self-alienation one feels in the former instances of existential self-doubt. In order to resolve the self-alienation and regain a coherent sense of self, subjects may doubt the alienating affects (in this case, queer desires) for the sake of restoring to prominence the self-endorsed affects (normative desires). In other words, these episodic acts of self-doubt function as a form of bad faith (Wilkerson 2009, 102) as they aim to regain a tacit certainty by restoring an inauthentic "mark of impossibility" (Butler 1997, 147) to one's queer attachments and desires. It is thus a more active and episodic form of self-doubt as it typically emerges *in response* to the former more existential feelings of self-doubt.

Such episodic self-doubt typically manifests in forms of intrinsic emotional (dys)regulation. I speak of "(dys)regulation" here as the intent is usually to regulate, suppress, or negatively connotate the queer desire such that one's familiar and normative desire takes precedent. This, however, can be emotionally *dysregulating* as such strategies may prevent the subject from identifying and adequately making sense of a particular affective experience (D'Agostino et al. 2017), or it may lead to inappropriate and harmful reactions when one experiences the alienating queer desire.

A recurring theme in *Matthias & Maxime* is not only the emotional self-alienation Matthias suffers from but also the strategies of (dys)regulatory self-doubt he invokes to try and resolve this self-alienation. The main strategies we witness take the form of internalized emotion-regulatory processes that Matthias employs to try to suppress his desire and reestablish his self-conception as a (masculine) straight male.[12] Matthias wants to regulate his desire but finds he is unable to do so and thus

[12] For example, in the morning after Matthias and Maxime's first kiss, Matthias swims out from shore in an almost suicidal act of exhausting himself and diverting his

resorts to rather dysregulatory and affectively (and to some extent physically and socially) harmful measures. These actions can be read as reactions to the alienating self-doubt that Matthias experiences as described above. Matthias is harmed not only in his "capacity as an affective being" (Archer and Mills 2019, 76) but also in his capacity to maintain a coherent sense of self.

Returning to *The End of Eddy,* we see a similar twofold experience of both existential and episodic doubt. Later in the book, Eddy states, "Becoming a different person meant thinking of myself as a different person, believing I was something I wasn't so that gradually, step by step, I could become it." (Louis 2017, 143). Eddy makes a concerted effort to doubt the significance of his own desires in a futile bid to realign himself with his milieu and resolve the existentially alienating turmoil he suffers from. Instead of allowing himself to feel joy and euphoria, Eddy instead interprets the acts which gave rise to this deviant pleasure as resulting from "madness," "inebriation," "disinhibition," and being "foolish" rather than from a meaningful aspect of his self (Louis 2017, 16). We find a similar anecdote of euphoria (in relation to nonnormative gender expressions) shattered by crippling self-doubt in Torrey Peters's (2021) novel *Detransition, Baby.* There, the euphoria the main character Amy (a trans woman) experiences when trying on women's clothes for the first time is cut short

> as the light fades when a heavy cloud crosses the sun, then winked out completely. . . . Everything on the racks shrugged off their previous disguises to reveal themselves as tawdry and desperate. Inwardly, she disavowed the space. This store did not reflect her. She did not truly belong here. (Peters 2021, 144)

We see here the constitutive force of doubt and how it can drastically and suddenly modify the way in which an object is given in experience (Rodemeyer 2017, 320). Suddenly, Amy doubts whether the possibilities of a feminine sexual existence are possibilities *for her*. In a later passage, after feeling ashamed for asking her mother if it is ok for her to wear a bra (as a boy), the narrator describes how Amy

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attention. In another instance, after the second time they kiss, Matthias immediately leaves the house visibly agitated and runs through the torrential rain to meet an acquaintance from work in a poignantly heteronormative and masculine-coded space—namely, a strip club. This latter instance especially could be fruitfully analyzed as an example of dysregulatory form of "affective scaffolding" (Krueger and Osler 2019).

> should have felt happy, but she didn't. Instead, she felt as if she had given in to an urge that ought to be turned away from. As when people shut their eyes in horror at the possibility of an apparition. *Don't even acknowledge it—it'll fuck up everything you know about the world*. (Peters 2021, 148–49)

Both passages bear staggering similarities with the examples of Eddy and Matthias, but with the distinct focus that self-doubt is rather experienced in relation to one's self-directed (as opposed to other-directed) desire and eroticized self. It would be insufficient to describe Amy as doubting her desire to simply wear a bra or to try on women's clothes. A crucial part of why these desires are so existentially significant, why they have the capacity to "*fuck up everything you know about the world,*" is precisely because they illuminate Amy's desire to alter her gendered being-in-the-world, her sexual "style." But the overwhelming feelings of existential doubt are met with episodic attempts to turn away from these disorientating desires, instead doubting whether these objects of desire really "reflect her" or whether that space was one in which she "truly belonged."

In addition to the self-alienation provoked by feelings of self-doubt, these episodic iterations of self-doubt can hamper one's ability to aptly interpret one's desires as existentially significant expressions of being. In other words, just as in other cases of affective injustice, the systematic encouraging of doubt means one can be denied goods of affective recognition and emotional aptness (Gallegos 2022). My aim here is not to advocate for a compulsory reification of desires into coherent sexual or gender identities. I rather want to demonstrate how heterosexism unjustly facilitates a tacit certainty toward one's desires that "align," while simultaneously encouraging subjects to doubt the significance of "off line" desires. Oftentimes these desires cannot be ignored, but sometimes we refuse to acknowledge them due to the frighteningly dizzying reorientation their recognition motivates (Ahmed 2006, 20).

Part of the problem is the contemporary collapsing of erotic interest into identity, as critics of "the sexual imperative" have warned (Przybylo 2014, 228). It is not that all desires *must* be incorporated into our self-narrative but rather that *only* heteronormative desires have historically escaped having their existential significance systematically doubted. Thus, it is important to clarify that my claim is not that *only* queer desires are inhibited by (self-)doubt, or that all desires inhibited by self-doubt are thereby sites of injustice. Many reorientations away from the patrilineal status quo are precisely motivated by an emergent doubt one feels toward one's normative desires or wider investment in heteronormativity. Or with respect to certain queer spaces, people often suffer from a self-doubt as to whether they are "queer enough." There are innumerable ways in which self-doubt is elicited as an effective means of disciplinary subjectification; my claim is only that one of the most historically and

systematically instituted sites in which we see this is in the enforcement of hierarchical binaries pertaining to sexuality.

In her study of how heterosexual people engage in homosexual acts, Jane Ward (2015) describes how people are encouraged to interpret their desires in drastically different ways (according to the vectors of race, gender, and class), but always with the purpose of maintaining a robust border between heterosexuality on one side and abject homosexuality on the other. Ward describes how women more than men are afforded the freedom to explore and act on their same-sex desires—Ward refers to this as the cultural trope of "straight girls kissing"—yet unlike men, these expressions of desire are far less likely to be interpreted as meaningful for their sexuality. Citing multiple cases of public figures who have acted on queer desires, and how these deviations from their heterosexual fate been interpreted, Ward (2015, 19) highlights the ways in which women's same-sex desires are often interpreted "as unusual but ultimately harmless detour[s] in their otherwise heterosexual lives," whereas the men who act on homosexual desires are almost always interpreted as "closeted gay men." Ward goes on to write:

> This is all to say that when straight-identified women have sex with women, the broader culture waits in anticipation for them to return to what is likely their natural, heterosexual state; when straight-identified men have sex with men, the culture waits in anticipation for them to admit that they are gay. (Ward 2015, 20)

Although men and women may to some extent experience their self-doubt toward their desires in significantly different ways, in any case the subject suffers from affect-related hermeneutical injustices as a result.

Ward shows how this construction and policing of a border between gay and straight is more violently felt by men of color than white men, as the sexuality of men of color is constantly subjected to heightened surveillance and misrepresentation. White straight men, on the other hand, do not have their sexual practices racialized as being particular to white culture, and are often (when not presumed to be gay) afforded the privilege of having their homosexual acts labelled by society as "inconsequential and nonsexual" (J. Ward 2015, 24).[13] In any case, either one is encouraged to doubt that one's queer (in this case, same-sex) desires are anything

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[13] Ward's (2015) study is devoted to precisely these homoerotic acts between white heterosexual men. Obvious examples include fraternity houses, the military, and public toilets. These are all spaces and contexts wherein white men can often enact their privilege to engage in homosexual acts without it being considered part of their orientation.

but inconsequential, or that the slightest presence of a queer desire should motivate one to doubt the legitimacy of one's heterosexual self-interpretation.

5. Uninhibited Desires

By way of conclusion, I turn briefly to Audre Lorde's discussion of the erotic and what it tells us about uninhibited desires. Lorde's (2019) essay "Uses of the Erotic" stretches beyond claims of mere sexual interconnectedness and highlights the ways in which subjects are oppressed at the affective level of embodied desire. Lorde (2019, 47) writes that "we have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings." To raise above this suspicion we feel toward our desires, we must acknowledge the strength of the erotic and the power of the phrase "it feels right to me" (46). Interestingly, in another work Lorde provides a first-personal account of the experience of a time when self-doubt is finally overcome and the "I can" within erotic experience is reclaimed. Lorde writes:

> Ginger's breath warmed my neck and started to quicken. My hands moved down over her round body, silky and fragrant, waiting. Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire. (Lorde 1982, 138–39)

In this erotic encounter we see how Lorde "finally" grants the recognition and significance to her queer desires that her heterosexual counterparts have long been afforded. For Lorde, this overcoming of self-doubt has significant epistemic and political ramifications as it helps sensitize our experiences to Others previously considered out of reach (Lorde 2019, 47). It is thus important to be careful, as Caleb Ward (2023) forewarns, to not collapse Lorde's insights into claims of only sexual connectedness.

Instead, the erotic must be understood as an epistemic tool of resistance and self-understanding as it raises affective experience to the level of knowledge. The erotic, for Lorde, "facilitates an interpretive knowledge of one's life and the world that might counter distorting images and norms" (C. Ward 2023, 901) that are rooted in racist, sexist, and heteronormative oppression. Although it requires further elaboration—to a degree not accommodated within the confines of this paper—a potentially productive line of inquiry would be to examine the erotic in light of Anderson's (2023) notion of hermeneutic labor. Just as Lorde speaks of an "interpretive knowledge," it seems like hermeneutic labor might be what is needed in many cases of existential self-doubt, especially when concerned with the realm of desire and sexuality. The erotic is a means of critically engaging with the oppressive

affective milieu we otherwise find ourselves in and reimagining how things *could be* and what transformations are required to get there. As Lorde writes:

> When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. (Lorde 2019, 48).

Whether or not Lorde's erotic is the most appropriate means to overcoming self-doubt and disrupting the milieu of heterosexism is a discussion still to be had. What can certainly be gained from her account, however, is an awareness of the importance of "frank and open" desires that are uninhibited by the external forces of one's milieu.

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