



Horizons: Conference on Non-Monogamies and Polyamory

Welcome Address

As I am sure you can imagine, growing up on the coast of England meant that I spent a considerable amount of my childhood being cold and damp. I have rather fond memories of waking up in the mornings, showering, and then spending the next forty-five minutes of my life pressed up against a radiator, all in the hopes of warming my bones. Although a considerable amount of my youth may have been spent jumping from radiator to radiator, there were, of course, other adventures to be had. One of my favourites was that of our weekly trip to the town centre. During the summer, the centre would be filled with fragrant flowers, and in the winter dazzling lights of various colours littered the streets, in anticipation of the festivities soon to come. I loved every moment of these outings. But, most of all, I loved the view when we headed into town – the view of the sea disappearing into the sky.

Like a siren's song, the horizon would reach into my soul, filling it with a sense of wonder and intrigue for what awaited me in that great beyond. I would dream, not of daring exploits like those of my favourite adventurers, but of those worlds, societies, and cultures that would challenge my understandings of what it meant to be in that place, to be a part of that family, and most of all, what it meant to be "me". I longed to trace the contours of these understandings, observing the overlaps with other "local knowledges" (to use Clifford Geertz's term), and to chart the points of their radical departure. This is the horizon that breathed life into PolyamQ's inaugural conference on non-monogamies and polyamory. The horizon that has brought us all here, today.

When we orient ourselves to family life in Canada, it is certainly clear that remarkable transformations have occurred over the last seventy years. Depictions of Dorothy Smith's (1993) standard North American family, consisting of a breadwinning father, a caregiving mother, and children all living under a single roof, are giving way to multiple structures of family life, including dual-earners, the blended or reconstituted, the cohabitating, the lone-parent female-headed, and the queer. It is now almost impossible to speak of the family as if it were a singular monolithic category of subjectivities.

These changes are not met without their criticisms. Writing in the latter part of the 20th century, David Popenoe argues that families have lost their "functions, power, and authority, [and]

that familism as a cultural value has diminished”, with people less willing to “invest time, money, and energy in family, turning instead to investments in themselves” (1993: 527). Popenoe believes these changes have spelt the end of the nuclear family, and, along with it, the two principal functions that they have been charged with: (1) childrearing and (2) the provision to its members of affection and companionship (1993: 539). Childrearing is one of the principal focuses of Cere and Farrow’s (2004) edited collection, *Divorcing Marriage*, which argues that queer families detract from the “biological social realities” necessary for the healthy development of children. Writing from within this collection, McGill ethicist Margaret Sommerville claims that “accepting same-sex marriage necessarily means accepting that the social institution of marriage is intended primarily for the benefit of the partners to the marriage, and only secondarily for the children to it.” Such discussions would seem to forget that the bio-conjugal model which Canadian marriage law addresses, is neither a universal nor naturalized expression of family life; and, if the nation-state, institutions, or societies confer benefits, services, and resources through marriage in support of Canadian families, it should not be confined to the reproductive family.

Today, when we venture into the horizon together, I look forward to the pull of those discourses that move discussions of Canadian families beyond mononormative ideals. I look forward to hearing about those families who have prioritized healthy investments in themselves, so that they might then have the capacity to (re)invest time, energy, and resources into their loved ones, with the potential to see greater gains. I look forward to those challenges that would seek to contain intimacies to dyadic formulations; and, I look forward to those that de-centre sex, sexuality, and romanticism, in favour for a re-orientation towards a greater recognition of the multiplicity of caring (familial) relationships that The Law Commission recognized Canadians undertaking, in 2001.

Yet, even in moments of these contemplations, Newton’s Third Law cannot be discounted, and although I look into the horizon and feel its pull, I also feel a push. In these moments of “push”, I feel the horizon asking us to contemplate and reflect upon what it is that can be said to be *known*, and how it is that one has come to know *it*.

Anthropologists are intimately familiar with the harms that come when the push of the horizon is not observed. After all, the very foundations upon which our discipline is built are frequently noted to have sourced their mortar out of the Victorian intellectual’s desire to cement their own sense of superiority (e.g. Parker and Stone 2004). Such individuals, when looking out into their own horizons sought, not what could be challenged about their own positionality, but

rather, what could be affirmed. Knowledge was stripped from the horizons, disciplined into recognizable forms for the eyes of Western imperialists, and then exported back to the horizon wholesale. Instead of being a source of new orientations, the horizons quickly became integrated into the colonial order of things.

When one speaks of family, one must be cognizant of the historical particularities that led to the rise and proliferation of its nuclear form. Although, as Phillips rightly claims, painting this picture would require us to “jump about a bit: between continents, time periods and types of [settler-states]” (2009: 241), which, admittedly, is a bit beyond the scope of a “Welcome Address”. But, I would like to take a moment to narrow the focus and develop a working narrative.

Sarah Carter’s text, *The Importance of Being Monogamous*, reflects on the anxieties of the Canadian colonial administration about the “state of marriage, family, and home: all perceived to be the cornerstones of the social order” (2008: 4). The extended kin networks of both Indigenous and immigrant populations, and their diverse forms of family life, such as monogamy, polygamy, same-sex marriage, and the ease of access to the means of divorce, were believed to pose a threat to the ideals of the nuclear monogamous family, and thus the social order of the burgeoning Canadian nation-state. As a result, a range of institutions, legislature, discourses, systems of licenses, and residential schools were developed to mediate and condition the possible structures of extant family life. Monogamous, Christian marriage had to be made the only option available. Although this colonial project never completely eradicated the customs and practices that came before it – our deepest intimacies are after all the sources of our greatest strengths – the entrenchment of monogamy as an ideological form became well-housed throughout state-apparatuses.

The material structure of family life was not the only concern of colonial administrators. Reading *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler examines the “fault lines and ragged edges of colonialism’s archival genres” (53) to bring light to the anxieties colonial administrators had regarding the affective register of denizens. Sentiments, private feelings, and the intimacies of those living in the colonial periphery were believed to require management, so that only appropriate mothers, fathers, children would emerge from the kiln, subjectivities that recognized their place, and their allegiance to the metropole.

The reverberations of these colonial projects remain with us today. In *Reference re: Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada*, the monogamous family is held to be of fundamental importance to Canada’s self-image, with a mononormative rhetoric that shrouds dyadic conjugal

families as the height of civilizational progress. These same progressivisms find their resonances in the political rhetoric that defends Canada's *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act*. In their defence of the act, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Costas Menegakis, hailed the millions of women and children throughout the world who are left to suffer at the hands of multi-partner kinship. These rhetorical practices are problematic for at least two reasons: (1) they seek out generalizable statements about social and cultural patterns through specific or singular incidents; and, (2) they operate through a form of amnesia that purposefully seeks to forget that there were (and still are) millions of women and children that suffer at the hands of colonial monogamy, far closer to home. Upholding these legal provision against plural unions, and engaging in rhetoric that continues to distance multi-partner kinship practices (whether polyamorous or polygamous) not only hinders the ability of polyamorous persons to seek out and maintain the equal rights, benefits, and privileges for all of their partners, but also maintains a tool that is (continually) deployed against racialized bodies for the supremacy of a white regime.

When venturing into the horizons, I look forward to feeling their pushes. Their calls to reflect both inwards and outwards. To not only think about where we are going, but where we have been. As a community, I look forward to making spaces for those that have been forgotten, dismissed, or cast out. I turn to the new horizons opening up in Canada, created by pathfinders such as Chief Justice Fowler – in their extension of legal parenthood beyond dyadic partners – with the same wide-eyed wonderment and intrigue as I had for the Channel, all those years ago. So, I invite you all to cast your sails and chart your courses, and may you feel the push and pull of the horizons today, and for the years to come.

Thank You,

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