

# THE ONTOLOGY OF THE COUPLE

## or, What Queer Theory Knows about Numbers

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The couple *is*; the couple rarely *are*: this grammatical technicality would suggest that when we ask “what is a couple?” we are talking about two ones that have become a new one and thus should be addressed as an ontological unity. And yet, as the long history of feminist and queer accounts of the couple teaches us, to paraphrase Luce Irigaray, *ce couple n'en est pas un*. Haunted always by shadowy thirds—the affair, the ex, the second husband, the sister-in-law, the child, the coeditor—the couple, it would seem, far from merging into one, easily multiplies into three or more. Indeed, the very origins of queer theory might be traced to its capacious theorization of the third—whether through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reinterpretation of the erotic triangle of structural anthropology (in which the bond between same-sex rivals is observed to be stronger than that between lover and beloved), or Judith Butler’s reimagining of the oedipal triangle of psychoanalysis (in which the child’s gender and sexual identity arises through a complex interplay of desire and identification with the two parents). These two queer triangles can be seen to converge in one of the most influential, if controversial, texts of recent queer theory, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). What Edelman calls “reproductive futurism” describes the logic according to which the two figures—the Queer and the Child—perform a strange dance around the Couple, oscillating in and out of the position of the Couple’s third to perpetuate its neat symmetry.<sup>1</sup> In *No Future*, as in much of queer theory, the Queer is a shadowy third that simultaneously troubles and constitutes the Couple. The Queer’s positive antipode, the Child, offers the Couple salvation from the Queer’s negation by promising hope and the restoration of meaning through its positivization of *nothing* into *something*.

In the following pages, we turn to four integers—*one*, *two*, *three*, and *zero*—to comprehend the shifting relationship between the Couple and the Queer.

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Taking cues from Edelman as well as recent Afro-pessimist scholarship, we approach the Couple not as a sociological category, but as a *structure of being*, and the Queer, not as an identitarian category but as a (*non*)*ontological position*. Surveying a series of key moments in the history of queer theory's often implicit philosophizing about the couple, we construct a queer numerology that attends to the numerical patterns that characterize coupled relationality in different historical moments. As we propose, what feminist and queer theorists have historically taken to be ethically specious about the couple form has concerned its metaphysical tendency to either synthesize into one (thus eliminating the threat of difference) or produce queer thirds upon whose difference its sanctity depends.

More than any other queer theorist perhaps, Edelman has worked to elucidate the ontology of the couple. The distinctly ontological impulse of his work can be said to inhere in his description of the libidinal economy through which historically contingent subjects come to occupy the (*non*)ontological position of the Queer in order that the Couple can perpetuate itself into the future.<sup>2</sup> Thus, importantly, “queer” in Edelman’s (2017: 133) Lacanian schema does not name an identity a person has (or could) claim but a condition of “ontological negation” foisted on “the Other” in order that the Couple perpetuate itself through a fantasy of relation and meaning. Our thinking in what follows is indebted to Edelman’s conception of queerness as a kind of “zero degree” for the Couple’s coherence: it is the projection of what we call *the zero*—nonbeing, nothingness, void—outside the Couple onto others that is necessary for the Couple to dialectically consolidate into *One* (*ibid.*: 157).<sup>3</sup>

Recent Afro-pessimist scholarship has likewise turned to the ontological in order to reveal the violent ways that nonbeing is projected onto the Other in order for relationality itself to cohere. Building on Frantz Fanon’s ([1952] 1967: 7) theorization of blackness as a “zone of nonbeing,” Frank B. Wilderson III (2010: 11) has argued that the Black under slavery, stripped of both kin and humanity, emerges as “a being outside of relationality,” becoming the very “position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity.” Wilderson, along with Jared Sexton and various other scholars working at the intersection of African American and queer studies, have demonstrated how blackness is fundamentally excluded from relational frameworks that presume the fundamental humanity of their terms.<sup>4</sup> While a proper engagement with the philosophical and political implications of Afro-pessimist thought is outside the purview of this project, what we want to point out by way of introduction is the way that in theorizing blackness as a “null status” (Sexton 2015), a (*non*)*ontological position* rather than a social identity or experience, these scholars reveal the

urgency of a structural analysis that would comprehend how empirical subjects are forced into the position of ontological negation that we call *the zero*—that integer *below* the numerical scale that allows one, two, three, and so on to relate as numbers. Zero, in this ontological schema, is the condition of possibility for being to emerge through the negative projection of *what it is not*.

Writing in the wake of black and queer negativity—two lineages of thought that draw attention to the violence through which subjects are stripped of their claim to being—in what follows, we conceive of ontology not, as it was conceived by the earliest metaphysicians, as neutral description of “*what constitutes reality*” but as the ethically charged study of “*how reality comes to us*” (Nichols 2014: 13). To ask how reality comes to us is a value-laden question, and we draw here on Robert Nichols’s helpful distinction between metaphysics and ontology to point out that to think ontology *in processual terms* (as a *how* rather than a *what*) is to draw attention to the ethical and political implications of “the horizon of intelligibility that governs our engagement with the world” (ibid.). Thus, when we invoke the term *ontology* in what follows, we do not indicate a neutral and unchanging structure of reality. Rather, drawing also on feminist materialists who insist on the inseparability of ontology from ethics, we understand ontology to be *the adjudication of being and nonbeing that affects (and is affected by) the lives of historically contingent subjects*. Such a conception of ontology informs our approach to the couple not as a sociological category but as a *structure of being* that shapes both how subjects know and how they interact with each other. Indeed, as feminist scholars especially have taught us to observe, *ontological* claims about the nature of reality are always entangled with *epistemological* claims about how we know what we think we know, as well as with *normative* claims about the possible actions one might take in response to knowledge.<sup>5</sup> And the reverse, we want to stress here, holds true too: to cultivate an ethics of the couple—to cultivate an ethics *against* the couple—is also to put forth an implicit theory of what the couple is. Thus, if queer theory would seem to not have already developed an explicit *ontology* of the couple, this does not mean that it has not developed a theory of its being.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the skepticism that queer theory has historically displayed toward the couple form—both as a (dualist) metaphysical concept and as a (heteronormative) relational structure—relies on a particular set of assumptions about what coupling entails, or so we shall argue. The two sections that follow elaborate what queer studies, building on feminist theory, already knows about the couple—or, put otherwise, what these fields have historically taken the couple to be. Tracing the ontology of the couple as it transforms from second-wave feminism to more recent queer theory, we produce a series of mathematical equations that delineate

the notions of the couple that inform particular historico-critical moments. The structuralist methodology we employ, while reductive by nature, aspires like most structuralisms to draw attention to basic patterns and widely held beliefs.

Section 1 explores through early queer and feminist theory what we call the couple's *anthropophagic one*—the risk that the couple sublates into One, negating or eliminating one or both component parts into a singular One. We name the couple's frustrating, and sometimes violent, tendency to consolidate itself into One the *one-tology of the couple*. As we shall see, the one-tology of the couple insists simultaneously on the too much and too little of the One. On the one hand, the couple always threatens to consume all ones into a singular One—the cannibalistic devouring of the other, or anyone who would complain, "I feel like my sense of self is totally lost in this relationship!" The grave cannot become a rectum. On the other hand, the couple always contains multiple ones, almost a baroque pluri-singular as one unfurls into two, unfurls into three, ad infinitum. In the section that follows—the queerly numbered section 3—we turn to more recent work in queer theory to confront what we call the couple's *abiogenic three*—the couple's tendency to spontaneously generate into three or more. Constituted by the many thirds that orbit it, as various queer theorists have argued, the couple often relies on the defining proximity of (at least) three. Flickering between the *abiogenic three* and the *anthropophagic one*, thus, the couple, the history of queer theory teaches, is never *just two*.

Building on the insights of our brief and limited history of queer theoretical conceptions of the couple, our final section—section 2—then shifts gears to theorize the couple in terms differently than it has previously appeared: not as one or three but, rather, as *two*. Weaving together philosophy, with feminist and queer theory, and a bastardized psychoanalytic methodology tainted with the (Daoist) East, we attempt to circumvent the one-tology of the couple—if but for just a moment—to think the couple as *two and two only*. Before we begin, however, a disclaimer: the analysis of the couple we offer in what follows is not a call to arms but a call to thought. Our aim is neither to alleviate nor to exacerbate the creeping sense of guilt that in many queer circles seems to accompany the revelation of one's coupled existence. Nor, moreover, is it to call for the destruction of the couple in the effort to bring new forms of noncoupled relationality into being—to herald a utopian future, that is, of less, more, or better couples. Rather, in attempting to describe what can and does happen in the singular and power-laden differential encounter between two, we attempt to reveal something already there, a radical twoness beneath the couple we thought we knew.

## 1. Two Merge into One

“The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Sutured to her counterpart in a violent logic of complementarity, woman, Simone de Beauvoir proposed in 1949, “is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another” ([1949] 1956: 9). In twentieth-century French feminism, the troubling binarism of the couple arises from the singular difference of sex. If man is *one*, then woman is always *two*. As Luce Irigaray ([1977] 2010: 207) puts it, “In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn’t that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one. Let’s leave one to them: their oneness, with its prerogatives, its domination, its solipsism: And the strange way they divide up their couples, with the other as the image of the one.” This is a logic of the count: first, there is a one; next comes two, *ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*. The second one is a one that is not one. If sexual difference is the difference through which two become one, this is because the second one is actually *none*. It is only with another one—rather, when one is devoured by the other one—that the two can become One. The history of the couple is the history of this anthropophagic One—the one “that founds society as heterosexual,” as Monique Wittig (1992: 5) has remarked. We thus transcribe the couple of this critical moment as  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ , an equation that describes the one-tology of the couple as it emerges, historically, in inextricable relation to heterosexuality. Here, the feminine one, the *second* one, is not a real one but a *zero* whose sublation into the male one ensures the perpetuation of the one. The zero in brackets ensures that the feminine one multiplies into zero, the number assigned to what constitutes the antithesis of being—its negative projection—its lack and absence, that “*woman*” who for Jacques Lacan (1998: 7) infamously “does not exist.”<sup>7</sup>

Though its critique originates there, the logic through which the ontology of the couple is described by the equation  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  persists well beyond difference feminism and its often cis-gendered and heteronormative account of the sexual relation. Indeed, the equation  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  might be said to describe the version of the couple one discovers in gay, lesbian, and trans theory of the 1980s and 1990s, which develops new critical weapons against its oppressive asymmetry. Having inherited this equation from feminist theory, that is, queer theory might be said to emerge out of an attempt to think outside the hetero-complementarity of the couple form—to reconfigure, reinterpret, and imagine alternatives to this

equation both for and in response to queer life. We turn here to two prominent attempts to think beyond the dialectical logic of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ : early theorizations of the butch-femme relationships and sadomasochism, both of which rely on some version of the performativity thesis, that is, that the *performance* of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  has the potential to subvert the power imbalance between the one and the (sex that is) not one. These two distinct yet mutually informed attempts to envision a *queer two* that would subvert rather than affirm  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  are key moments in the history of the ontology of the couple—an ontology, however, as we shall see, so agile that it seems to transform in the face of its critiques.

In 1998 Jack Halberstam argued that the conception of butch-femme as a co-constitutive unit according to which the butch “lends queerness the femme and the femme is rendered completely butch-dependent . . . privileges the couple form and establishes gender as the primary indeed the only, dynamic of difference at work” (1998a: 60).<sup>8</sup> Where much early queer theorizing might be said to think around or beyond the couple, theorists of the butch-femme dyad throughout the 1980s and 1990s like Halberstam, Lillian Faderman, and Sue-Ellen Case were forced to confront the couple head-on. When pushed to explain why butch-femme dynamics did not merely reproduce the heteronormative logic of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ , these feminist scholars argued that to perform femininity or masculinity was not necessarily to perpetuate, but also can be seen to subvert, heterosexual power relations. Halberstam’s (1998b: 127) suggestion in *Female Masculinity* that “butch-femme gender dynamics . . . have little if anything to do with ‘ancient’ heterosexual arrangements,” for instance, takes clear cues from Butler’s influential account of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), in which Butler famously argued that butch-femme couples subvert the heterosexual dyad by exposing the constructed nature of gender. Such attempts to trouble the hegemony of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  work like this: evacuating the first two terms of the equation—1 and 1(0)—of any stable meaning, they propose that the formula is *purely symbolic*, and thus to run the operation is to reveal the arbitrariness of its signifiers. For Butler, for example, not only do *butch* and *femme* reveal the inherently empty nature of the categories male and female, but they shake the very foundations of heterosexual coupledness, which relies on the stability of these terms. For Halberstam (1998b: 139), similarly, the performance of butchness or femmeness “reveals a variety of queer genders . . . that challenge once and for all the stability and accuracy of binary sex-gender systems.”

The post-structuralist claim that the queer performance of heterosexual coupledness rendered  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  does not affirm the validity of the equation but evacuates its signifiers as well as pluralizes their possible referents is likewise

central to various accounts of the subversive potential of gay sex of the 1980s and 1990s, some of which build directly on Butler's work and others of which historically precede it.<sup>9</sup> Anticipating Butler's gender performativity, for example, is Michel Foucault's account of the subversive potential of homosexuality as a set of practices that could produce more egalitarian relational structures. As a kind of emblem of the new queer egalitarianism, Foucault offers the image of two men walking together hand in hand after a night of sex. It is the happiness of this gay couple, according to Foucault ([1978] 2011: 393), that society cannot bear: "I believe that two homosexuals, no, two boys who are seen leaving together to go sleep in the same bed are tolerated. But if they wake up the next morning with a smile on their faces, if they hold hands and kiss each other tenderly and thereby affirm their happiness, then no one will forgive them. What's unbearable is not leaving in search of pleasure but waking up happy."<sup>10</sup> While this might perhaps be one of Foucault's most unfortunate blunders—Western societies, as we have witnessed over the past decade especially, have indeed not only accepted but increasingly promoted and instrumentalized the picture of this gay couple happily walking together (and in so doing, have produced yet more queer others, as we shall discuss later)—it offers a telling portrait of the desired outcome of the "technologies of the self" celebrated by the late Foucault: an ontology of the couple defined not by the inequality of  $1 + 1(0)$  but by the seemingly more symmetrical  $1 + 1$ .

One practice that Foucault felt had the potential to transform the power imbalance of the heterosexual couple was that of S/M. The practice of S/M is transformative, he argues in an interview from 1982, because it allows for the development of "a new economy of bodily pleasures" in which the subject can freely inhabit one role or the other, taking pleasure from power dynamics freely chosen: the sadist can become a masochist, the masochist can become a sadist—*one can become zero, and zero can become one*. What would seem to give rise to this equality is—as it is in Butler's account—that one and zero are treated as empty signifiers whose play, because evacuated of any stable meaning, destabilizes the hierarchies initially attached to them. Foucault ([1982] 1989: 264) did not believe that any sexual act could be "by its very nature . . . liberating." And yet, because subjectivity is for Foucault constituted not through identity but through practices, he holds that the sexual acts that one engages in have the capacity to transform the self and its relations over time.

What we want to flag about Foucault's math here is the way that it reveals a redemptive faith (might we call it magical thinking?) that "the homosexual mode of life," and S/M as a practice, has the potential to *transform* the couple historically conceived as  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  into more egalitarian equations. Indeed, as he argues,

one of the more positive outcomes of S/M is that it has “helped to alleviate” the feeling that “being the passive partner in a love relationship” is “in some way demeaning” (Foucault [1983] 1988: 300). In presenting the bottom position as a problem that requires solving, however, Foucault seems curiously to validate the assumption of the heterosexist logic of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ , according to which the second term can only be understood as a one that is not one, and thus can be affirmed only when it transforms itself into one. The problem for Foucault here seems to be that while the relationship between sadist and masochist is free from any *actual* power imbalance—one and zero are *performed* and can be at any time reversed through consent—the top-bottom dyad uncomfortably participates in a power dynamic that is all too real, and thus must be “alleviated” through the elimination of the zero that haunts the first equation. The solution Foucault proposes to the troubling equation  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  is thus to turn the zero into a one, to positivize its negativity, or negate its negation: what must disappear in any case in order to produce the happy image of the gay couple holding hands, for Foucault, is the zero.

Foucault’s attempt to imagine a queer couple that could live outside the power imbalance of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  raises a few questions about the performativity thesis and the normative claim that so often follows from it: that dualistic hierarchies *can* and *should* be eliminated through the empowerment of both parties—a desire to turn zero into one that one might argue also animates accounts of gender performativity such as that of Butler just discussed. But turning zero into one is certainly not the only way to revise  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ . What if, instead of advocating for the “passive partner” to be granted the power he or she apparently ultimately seeks, Foucault had asked how powerlessness—along with passivity, subordination, and other negative positions—might be valued as other than the subversive reclamation of power that the performativity thesis posits as its ideal? Put in terms of our queer numerology, what if, rather than assume that the zero should become one, we instead turned our attention to the possibility that *the zero might stay a zero*? More radically perhaps, what would it mean to ask for the one to become (or recognize within itself) the zero, producing a new equality of  $1(0) + 1(0)$ ? Such a reversal of the very assumption of what is wrong with the logic of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  in the first place might open the door to yet more possibilities for reconfiguring its structure than the performativity thesis—with insistence that zeros be converted into ones—would seem to suppose.

In a compelling engagement with Foucault’s account of sadomasochism in *Homos* (1995), Leo Bersani proposed that what makes S/M interesting is not only the possibility of the *reclamation* of power by subordinated individuals and groups but also the possibility of the *relinquishment* of power by those in possession of it.

“The reversibility of roles in S/M,” Bersani argued there, “does more than disrupt the assignment of fixed positions of power and powerlessness”; rather, he contends, it also reveals that acts of “hyperbolic self-assertion” are “inseparable from an impulse of self-dissolution,” suggesting that “perhaps inherent in the very exercise of power is the temptation of its renunciation” (ibid.: 96). While Foucault, in other words, privileges the positive side of the equation, asking how power can be restored, Bersani emphasizes its negative side in highlighting the potential of all sexual acts to break up the one, allowing one to experience, if just for a moment, a temporary conversion to zero.

Bersani’s career-long exploration of the appeal of the relinquishment of power and subjectivity is one among many critical resources for imagining what it might be like to *stay with the zero* rather than negate its troubling negation.<sup>11</sup> Where Bersani, who writes self-consciously from a white gay male perspective, however, famously calls for the evacuation of the one through a refusal to *claim* power, scholars in black queer studies have asked what happens when one does not have access to such power in the first place. Drawing attention to complex ways that race and gender intersect pornography featuring black women, in her essay “Black Anality,” to give one powerful example, Jennifer Nash (2014: 441) shows how such pornography often links black women’s sexuality to a more literal zero—the anus—presenting the anal opening as a site of access for white men and other voyeurs to “filthy spaces” like the ghetto. Interestingly for our purposes is Nash’s attention throughout the essay not only to the way that “anal ideologies constrain and violate black female bodies” but to “the pleasures black subjects can take *in* blackness”—even, indeed, especially, when the black sexuality is tied to waste, toxicity, and nonproductivity (ibid.: 439). Nash’s refusal to turn the zero into a one by advocating, say, for a disassociation of black femininity from the anus builds on an important tradition of black queer scholarship that explores what Darieck Scott (2010: 259) has described as “the special intimacy of blackness with abjection, humiliation, defeat,” yet does not seek to rescue or “positivize” blackness according to the terms of pleasure, consciousness, power, or agency as they are defined by a white-heterosexist society.<sup>12</sup> *To stay with the zero* thus names for us a (distinctly black, queer) methodology that in refusing to positivize zero into one has the potential to overthrow the one-tology of the couple by destabilizing the totality of the One with which  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  ends. Read through Chinese queer vernacular, moreover, where the bottom position is often signified with the number zero (“1, 0?” is a typical first question on online sex platforms, a phrase roughly equivalent to “top or bottom?”) to *stay with the zero* might also be understood as a kind of bottom ethics—an ethics of passivity in which passivity

is not understood as the privation or negation of an activity that is always deemed more desirable.

In our final section we look to the anus not as the privileged site of gay male sexuality but as a site of a profound corporeal sameness, a more basic and fundamental zero that, in and through its repression as a site of bodily pleasure, gives rise to the genital-focused sexual difference on which the equation  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  turns. In their shared interest in uncovering a repressed sameness between all bodies, both Bersani and Nash help us to see something that the transcription of the couple as  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  in late twentieth-century feminist and queer theory occludes: that the zero does not merely belong to one party. This more totalizing, much more pervasive zero—the shadowy third that haunts the couple—is what Edelman has called *queerness*, the void or cut in being that, in order to maintain the one-tology of the couple, must be constantly positivized into one. It is to this other, more troubling zero that we now turn. As the following section argues in conversation with Edelman's *No Future* and other recent work in queer theory, the positivization of zeros into ones—while it might seem like a plausible corrective to the power imbalance instituted by couple as it emerges in connection to heterosexuality—is actually key to the operation of the one-tology of the couple.

### 3. The Shadowy Third

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
 When I count, there are only you and I together  
 But when I look ahead up the white road  
 There is always another one walking beside you  
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
 I do not know whether a man or a woman  
 —But who is that on the other side of you?  
 — T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

If queer theory had a favorite number, it would probably be three: three is the three of the oedipal triangle that psychoanalytically engaged queer theorists from Judith Butler to David Eng have theorized beyond its heterosexual and white origins; three is also the number of the erotic triangle in Sedgwick's foundational *Between Men*, the text that revealed to us how, underneath the apparent solidity of the heterosexual couple, the threat of a third element lurks—the bond “between men” that allows heteropatriarchy to cohere through a pact between misogyny and homosexual repression; and three is also the number that haunts Edelman's *No*

*Future* as the number that, in different configurations, informs the logic of reproductive futurism, wherein the Child “allows for the Couple’s dialectical survival in the ‘third’” (2004: 63). Unclear “whether a man or a woman” (Eliot [1992] 1998: l. 364)—a lover or a child—three, we argue throughout this section, appears throughout the history of queer theory as both the *queerest* and also *the least queer* of all numbers.

The above-cited triangular conceptions of the couple all operate according to a post-structuralist logic in which the third is understood to be not only the couple’s threatening other but its very condition of possibility. This post-structuralist logic—not unlike that of the performativity thesis discussed in section 1—can be traced, among other places, to Foucault’s work. In volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault ([1976] 1978: 38–39) put forth the counterintuitive thesis that “modern society,” far from reducing “sexuality to the couple—the heterosexual and, insofar as possible, legitimate couple,” produced a host of perverse sexual others (the homosexual, the hysterical woman, the masturbating child), “peripheral sexualities” that actually constitute the very “legitimate couple” they at first seem to undermine. Indeed, as Foucault goes on to argue, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, one witnesses a “centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy” (ibid.: 38). The couple, he claims, is in this period “spoken of less and less,” and eventually comes “to occupy a space of almost total and utter discursive silence” (ibid.). At the same time, there is an “incitement to discourse” with regard to the couple’s many others—abiogenic thirds necessary to the perpetuation of the fantasy of the couple as both social norm and ethical ideal (ibid.: 34).

Working through various post-structuralist conceptions of what we call the “shadowy third”—thirds that haunt the couple, either threatening or perpetuating its neat parallelism—we trace the revision of the initial equation of the couple as  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  to new, more complex formulas that seek to account for the role of negative third terms in both disrupting and sustaining the couple form. While the couple’s shadowy thirds might at first seem “peripheral,” as psychoanalytic theorists working in a queer and deconstructive vein will insist, the third is as much *outside* as *inside* the couple. Beginning with the triangular account of relationality that arises in *No Future*, we trace the abiogenic three of the couple forward to other perhaps unlikely bedfellows in queer studies such as Jasbir Puar and Eng, who, in their shared attempt to think the couple as three, ask whether it might be possible to destabilize the oppressive totality of the One that perpetuates the one-tology of the couple. The destabilization of the One, however, as we shall see, is no easy task. This is because, even when faced with the zero of queerness, as Edelman

shows, the couple almost always generates another one in its stead, producing and reproducing thirds that only momentarily disrupt, and ultimately only perpetuate, the totality of the One.

What are the mechanisms through which the couple manages always to reconstitute itself into One? How does it always manage to overcome the threat posed by its other, more shadowy third—the zero of queerness? Such questions motivate Edelman's *No Future*, in which the Couple is an imaginary One that coalesces through its dialectical production of a third, the Child. In what we take to be one of the most sustained and rigorous analyses of the one-tology of the couple, *No Future* narrates the strange partner dance that the Queer and the Child perform around the Couple in order to perpetuate its neat parallelism. Edelman's triangular account of relationality works like this: at the base of the oedipal triangle are the two parents, the Couple, who stand together in (non)relation; at the vertex of the triangle sits enthroned the Child, who is born out of the encounter of the two of the Couple with the void of the Real. But the Child is a Janus-faced figure. On the "other side" of the Child is another, shadowy third, the Queer, who, to return to Eliot's suggestive phrasing in our epigraph, "walks always beside" ([1922] 1998: l. 359) the Couple, threatening to collapse its fantasy of futurity and meaning. The negation to the Child's affirmation, the dark to its light, the Queer refuses "any backdoor hope for dialectical access to meaning"—meaning that the Child, its (always only temporary) positivization of the zero of the Queer into one, is thought to provide. In *No Future*, the third, one might say, both negates and affirms: manifest as the Queer, the third term threatens to nullify the Couple; positivized into the Child, it sustains and perpetuates hetero-reproductivity. What Edelman's analysis helps us to see is that—despite its constant displacement onto queer others like the woman or the homosexual—the zero is never actually the sole property of any single subject, as the transcription of the couple form as  $1 + 1(0) = 1$  would have us believe. Rather, the Couple in Edelman's schema is haunted always by a more totalizing zero that it displaces onto others in order to dialectically cohere itself into One.<sup>13</sup> Unable to face the nothing at its heart, Edelman (2017: 140) argues in a more recent article linking queerness to the number zero, the Couple constantly "substantializes the zero, putting *something* in *nothing's* place" by forcing queer others to bear the stain of social death while still alive. "Woman, Black, Brown, Trans, Subaltern, and Terrorist," these among other identities, Edelman emphasizes, are called on to occupy the space of ontological negation in order that the One of being cohere (ibid.).

While Edelman (2004: 60) might be said to occupy a "queer" position in queer theory itself, the ontology of the couple delineated in *No Future* resounds

across a host of other queer-theoretical projects that reveal how the Couple, although it operates “the banner of openness to the difference of the Other,” ultimately seeks to subsume the other into its totalizing One. As Edelman insists, long after “the homosexual” himself exits the position of the Other, queerness endures, merely transferred onto others who come to occupy the zero of the Queer. Such a claim links *No Future* to the rich tradition of scholarship that seeks to theorize the motility of queerness beyond homosexual identity, showing how when the homosexual, at least symbolically, enters the socially sanctioned and legitimized space of the Couple, new queer identities erupt against whom the Couple will always define and protect itself. Such a logic can be seen to animate Jin Haritaworn’s recent study, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (2015), which traces how within a rapidly gentrifying Berlin the white homosexual couple—“queer lovers” in Haritaworn’s phrase—gains increasing space at the cost of the displacement of new “hateful others” like the so-called homophobic Muslim, as well as Puar’s influential *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), which reveals how the emergence of a new class of economically and geographically mobile homosexual subjects has given rise to the production of “queerly racialized ‘terrorist populations’” increasingly targeted for removal, segregation, and death (xii). These two studies undoubtedly respond to the recent inclusion of the homosexual—once a queer third—into the “charmed circle” of the Couple’s legitimated sexuality (to invoke Gayle Rubin’s [(1984) 2006: 153] ever-relevant phrase) and track the ensuing transference of the mark of queerness onto new perverse outsiders. One need only resist the temptation to interpret Edelman’s “Child” too literally to see how what Puar (2007: 3) calls the “folding of homosexuals into the reproductive valorization of living” that fuels homonationalism operates according to a logic similar to that of reproductive futurism. Here, however, it is the terrorist—the ultimate threat to the futurity of the state—who occupies the position of the Queer in Edelman’s understanding of the term (i.e., as a form of ontological negation displaced onto the body of the other). While Puar takes issue with *No Future* for centering biological reproduction in its account of futurity, preferring the term *regenerativity*, these two projects share much.<sup>14</sup> Most essentially, perhaps, both launch a forceful critique of so-called progressive rights discourses that ultimately seek to subsume the other into their totalizing vision of a future sustained by the same violent equations: one must remain one, indeed, no matter how many thirds it must subsume in order to return again, dialectically, to the all-encompassing One.

In suggesting that a shared ontology (though not a shared politics) undergirds these seemingly incommensurable projects, we want to signal what might

look like an antagonistic binary—the so-called antisocial thesis criticized by José Esteban Muñoz (2006: 825) as “the gay white man’s last stand” and the account of “the ascendancy of whiteness” (Puar 2007: xxiv) through the machinations of empire—are not as radically opposed as they might first appear. In both of these projects, to reiterate, the perpetuation of the totalizing One of the couple (gay or straight) depends on the production of shadowy thirds—queer figures understood to threaten (but, in their positivization, ultimately also sustain) the anthropophagic One of the couple. What both Puar and Edelman reveal is the violent logic through which *One remains One* by displacing queerness outward onto sexualized and racialized others in order to perpetuate itself dialectically into the future. Conceived of structurally, what we call the Queer thus might look something like what Eliot ([1992] 1998) in the epigraph to this section numerically denotes as “the third”—that negative entity that, “gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded” (l. 363), forever haunts the two of the Couple, the one that, disturbingly (not) “another one,” must be eliminated in order for the Couple to remain One (ibid.: l. 362).

The violence through which the Couple assimilates and subsumes all into its global empire of One, relegating all those negatively defined subjects to the past in order to forward its liberal vision of futurity and progress, is also what Eng (2010), in his critique of the recent spate of appeals by gays and lesbians to the intimacy and privacy of the couple before the law, has called “queer liberalism.” With its commitment to an understanding of the individual as an abstract and equal one, liberalism is founded on a denial of the power differential at work between 1 and 1(0), and Eng’s work, along with that of Lisa Duggan (2003) and Roderick Ferguson (2005), among others, has revealed how a liberal notion of the individual has been fully incorporated into so-called queer politics over the past two decades. The fiction of independence and the totality of the One that liberalism perpetuates obscures the dependency of subjects on each other and on the state for support, creating a fantasy of equal capacity and access to resources. As such, and as Eng (2010: 75) shows, it relegates racial and colonial subjects, as well as others who do not conform to liberalism’s mandate, to what he, borrowing from Dipesh Chakrabarty, calls “the waiting room of history.”

Drawing on Eng, one might argue that what liberalism, in its tendency to absorb everything into a homogeneous and all-encompassing one, seems unequipped to deal with is the *two*—a two that does not presume the prior existence of two autonomous and independent ones. In his analysis of Wong Kar-wai’s 1997 film *Happy Together*, Eng (2010: 84) shows how Ho and Lai, two Hong-Kongese service workers in Buenos Aires, live their coupled relation outside the gay-identitarian

framework dominant in the West, thus revealing “a (post)structure of queer feeling” that “opens upon another terrain of social and psychic relations” beyond that of the Western couple. As the symbol of this alternative coupled bond, Eng offers an image of their aborted tango dance, which ratifies the impossibility of them being an actual couple (indeed, toward the end of the film Ho and Lai break up) at the same time that it demonstrates the way that Ho and Lai *are a couple* precisely in their refusal to synthesize into one. Borrowing from Eng, whose decolonial approach to kinship and relationality opens the door to other ways of conceiving coupled relationality beyond its one-tology, we read Ho and Lai’s aborted tango—their abandonment of this heterosexualized partner dance in which zero must follow one—as a figure for the rejection of the one-tological couple, that is, a refusal to be synthesized into a singular unit, to remain two and only two. In Ho and Lai’s dance, one discovers the possibility of a couple in which *two* remain suspended through the dynamic tension between the one and the other before abandoning the relationship altogether.

If the couple within the history of queer theory almost never appeared *as two*, this might be because the tools of analysis we have to theorize it have prevented us from observing it. To conceive of a *two that remains two*, we shall propose in our final section, demands moving not *beyond* but *below* tripartite conceptions of the couple that posit a third term in order to conceive of the relation between one and not-one—to stop the dialectical synthesis into One that defines the one-tology of the couple. What lies below—indeed, what might be said to constitute *the repressed underbelly of the dialectical two* of 1 and 1(0)—we shall argue, is another, more totalizing zero, a zero that, when faced, allows the couple to remain two and only two.

## 2. The Zero and the Two

What was invoked was the possibility (largely lost) of a “dyadic” logic in which everything coexisted and was not “overcome.”

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio*

Across the past two sections we have seen the ontology of the couple transform from the equation inherited from difference feminism—that of  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ —to more complicated equations emergent in queer theory over the past three decades that account for the couple’s dynamic ability to reconstitute itself into One in the face of shadowy thirds: zeros that haunt the One of the couple and must thus always be converted into one. As we hope to have shown, such thirds are necessary to this

reconstitution of the couple as One because they offer the couple salvation from the threat of queerness. Queerness might thus be said to name that zero which, always *inside* the couple, is constantly thrust *outside*.

Is it possible to think of a couple that does not depend, for its very existence, on the expulsion of the zero? To ask this question is to rephrase that with which we opened the special issue—can one be queer and coupled?—but in a way that intentionally decenters the concern (key to those queer theorizations of the couple discussed in section 1) as to whether LGBTQ couples actively affirm or subvert heteronormative power structures in their performance of them. It is also to suspend for a moment the claim, convincingly made by Edelman and other scholars discussed in section 3, that the Couple depends on the ontological negation of queerness. In what follows, we attempt to delineate an ontology of the couple that would operate otherwise. If queer theory has hitherto been reluctant to think about the couple, we propose, this is because, ironically, it has been unable to think the couple as *two*, a two that, rather than expel the zero, *stays with it*. In our final section we draw from a diverse archive of texts from 1970s Italian feminism to Daoism to early psychoanalytic theories of the anus in order to delineate a figure we call the *ontocouple*—a model for thinking twoness as a relation between one and zero in which the latter is not the dialectical negation of the former. We thus shift gears from the more descriptive and narrative tenor of the previous two sections in order to theorize an ontological structure that, operating *beneath* identity categories as we experience them, determines coupled relationality from below. In so doing, we take a step back from the post-structuralist logic that has animated queer studies since its inception, developing a structuralist methodology that insists on the non-arbitrariness and ontological necessity of the position of the *zero*.

To even begin perceiving this bottomed ontology, we insist, requires the abandonment of dialectical models in which the negative must always be positivized. Theodor W. Adorno ([2003] 2008: 18) once gave the name “positive dialectics” to dialectical systems in which the synthesis coincides with the draining or the impairment of the “negative” element in the effort to capacitate the “positive” one. The problem with positive dialectics, Adorno points out, “is the conviction that the positive is intrinsically positive *in itself*, without anyone pausing to ask *what* is to be regarded as positive or whether it is a fallacy that something that exists and is ‘positive’ in the sense that it has been postulated” (ibid.). Adorno teaches us that in order to avoid merely capitulating to the terms of the one—in order for *two to remain two*—we must throw a wrench into the dialectical machine by refusing “the negation of the negation” (ibid.: 12–21). As an alternative to positive dialectics, Adorno offers the possibility of a “negative dialectic” that would break the

triadic model of affirmation-negation-synthesis by focusing on the moment, prior to synthesis, when affirmation and negation remain held in antagonistic opposition ([1966] 1973, [2003] 2008). With his concept of “negative dialectics” Adorno postulated a “dyadic” principle according to which, to return to our epigraph from Pasolini, “everything coexisted and was not “overcome.” But Adorno’s—and Pasolini’s—lesson only gets us so far.

Just five years later, the Italian feminist Carla Lonzi advocated for the abandonment of dialectics entirely, drawing attention to a larger, more totalizing zero—a zero on whose repression the dialectic between 1 and 1(0) itself depends. In her 1970 manifesto “Let’s Spit on Hegel!” Lonzi controversially advocated for a divorce between the feminist struggle and Marxist revolution, arguing that the master-slave dialectic was founded on a fundamental expulsion of the woman. Writing as part of the collective Female Revolt (*Rivolta Femminile* 2018), Lonzi contends: “The servant-master dialectic is a settling of account between groups of men: it does not foresee the liberation of women, the great oppressed by the patriarchal civilization” (*ibid.*: 229). The reason for this oversight, Lonzi argues, is that the subordination of the second term (slave) to the first (master) is the result of a *primary exclusion* of woman from the dialectic. According to Lonzi, woman does not—indeed cannot—occupy the position of the slave in the Hegelian dialectic; rather, she occupies a position *below* the dialectic between master and slave. The zero degree upon which the dialectical machine can operate, woman, she points out, is not a subordinate of man; rather, she is that *not-man* that allows the identities of master and slave—ultimately male terms—to interact and relate. While compelling, Lonzi’s argument here, like that of many white feminists of her generation, overlooks the operation of race in the determination of its terms. Black feminist scholars have argued that the notion of sexual difference itself is founded on a fundamental exclusion of blackness, a fungible position *below* the category of the human that the attribution of gender to a body presumes. As Hortense Spillers (1987: 68) has written, under slavery the captive body emerges as pure “flesh,” matter both dehumanized and “ungendered.”<sup>15</sup> In Spillers’s terms, the Black under slavery is a yet more fundamental zero, “the zero degree of social conceptualization” that allows “woman” and “man” to interact and relate as terms (*ibid.*: 67).

Intersectional feminists have shown how faith in the stability and singularity of identity categories such as “woman” or “black” not only relies on a false separation of terms but also occludes the complex ways that gender and race intersect to oppress subjects who always inhabit more than one subject position.<sup>16</sup> In highlighting, via the work of Lonzi and Spillers, the way that both womanness

and blackness can be perceived as inhabiting the space of ontological negation at different historical moments and geographic sites, we in no way seek to produce a false distinction between these two terms or universally analogize “woman” and “black” as social or cultural identities. Rather, we build on these two feminists’ efforts to think structurally about the mechanisms of ontological exclusion that give rise to dialectical relation, and to ask whether it is possible to conceptualize a *two* that does not operate dialectically—that is, that does not only demand the negation of the negation with the aim of synthesis (Adorno) but that is not founded on the ontological exclusion of nonbeing in the first place (Lonzi, Spillers).

Christina Sharpe (2016: 14) has recently offered the metaphor of staying “in the wake” for the cultivation of “a form of *consciousness*” that, rather than “seeking a resolution to blackness’s ongoing and irresolvable abjection,” would instead attempt to grasp the mechanisms through which that abjection occurs.<sup>17</sup> In Sharpe’s wake, we propose that Lonzi’s and Spillers’s observation that the binary relation between 1 and 1(0) relies on the exclusion and repression of a more totalizing zero pushes us to move yet farther *below* the dialectic in order to comprehend this fundamentally excluded term, and to cultivate a form of *consciousness*—that is to say, a mode of thought and of receptivity, rather than activity—that would be adequate to the perception of this zero without positivizing it into one. In the previous section we followed Edelman in referring to this fundamental zero as *queerness*, and we return here to the opening question of our introduction—can one be queer and coupled?—in order to ask whether it is in the nature of coupling itself to institute a violent cut between being and nonbeing, one and none, that ultimately always demands the negation of the negation. Another way to pose this question would be to ask whether it is indeed possible to conceive of a couple that would not project *queerness* onto the other, as Edelman has it, but one in which queerness remains within—precisely in and through the refusal to turn zero into one.

In our attempt to answer this question, we look to two, perhaps unexpected, places: the Daoist philosophical concept of the yinyang (陰陽); and the theory of the anus proposed by the Russian-born psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salomé—two sites of negation, one cosmic, one bodily, two zeros out of which being itself can be seen to emerge. We turn to a nonmodern cosmology and the forgotten work of a woman psychoanalyst as two rich and complicated (though certainly not unproblematic or clean) sites for theorizing what we call the *ontocouple*, a model for thinking twoness as a relation between being and nonbeing—one and none—wherein the latter is not the negative projection of the former. These are two models, we argue, in which the zero is not “positivized” into one, and thus two models in which the *two remain two*, rather than sublimate into one or synthesize into a third.

We argue that a decolonized and queer approach to yinyang, especially when conceived in relation to the zero immanent to the Dao of Chinese philosophy, offers a model for thinking the couple that does not rely on an expulsion of the zero for its very coherence. Likewise, in our analysis of Salomé's forgotten theory of the anus, we show how the emergence of the genital area as the proper site of sexuality through a dialectic between "man" and "woman" is predicated on the prohibition of the anus as a site of potential sexual sameness.

The ontocouple first appears to us in a reading of the cosmological couple yinyang through Dao. The yinyang has often been understood to institute a gender binary, and with it, the logic of hierarchical hetero-complementarity; however, as we shall contend, *even if* one is to interpret yinyang as having something to do with "masculine" and "feminine" principles, the *two* that one finds there operates according to a logic other than that of sexual difference, at least as it has been conceived in the West.<sup>18</sup> This is because, in presenting nonbeing as primary—indeed, in insisting that nonbeing is more than a fantasy projected onto others—what we refer to as the ontocouple of the yinyang does not depend on the expulsion of the zero but is founded on the very assumption that it is shared by all beings. As such, the yinyang can be seen to harbor a one and a zero that relate to each other differently than the logic of the count, which, as Wittig showed us in section 1, introduces a hierarchy of terms in its privileging the positivity of the first term (those linked with being and "one"), projecting nonbeing ("zero") onto those terms defined always negatively, and secondarily against the first (as "two").

In the *Dao Dejing*, the central text of Daoism, yinyang names the perpetual interbecoming of being (有 *you*) and nonbeing (無 *wu*). Here, the yinyang is deeply entangled with Dao, the unnamable universal origin, cosmic order and "the way" (another meaning of *Dao*) in which all of reality partakes. In the *Book of Changes* (otherwise known as the *I Ching*) an open line \_ \_ is used to connote yin, a full line \_\_\_ to connote yang, a lexical rendering allows for a numerological translation of yin as 0 and yang as 1. As we stress, however, this zero and one are a zero and one that do not and can *never combine* to produce One, as yin and yang—never synthesized—*remain always together separately*. The Confucian commentary on the *Book of Changes*, "Commentary on the Appended Phrases" (繫辭), articulates the relationship between yinyang and Dao as follows: "One yin and one yang, this is called Dao" (Wang 2011). Does this mean that one yin and one yang added together equals Dao? Or does it mean that yin and yang unite to form Dao? The answers to both questions are firmly no. Yin and yang neither sublimate into the one of Dao nor synthesize into a third one that is Dao:  $1 + 1(0) \neq 1$ . The first reason for this is that yin and yang must be simultaneously present *in their difference* in order

to be Dao. The second reason is that both yin and yang are themselves Dao, which in turn ensures their differentiating sameness. Indeed, yin and yang's strangeness lies in the way in which they are "either different *and* the same" (Xiang 2018b: 428). They are constantly becoming each other as the shifting sides of the same mountain (etymologically speaking<sup>19</sup>) as well as being and nonbeing that interbecome as the same Dao (philosophically speaking). As such, they operate together according to a relation that is not dualistic but "transdualistic" as "both discernibly different and porously one" (ibid.: 436). The two conjured in the ontocouple of the yinyang, in other words, connotes an intimate togetherness between being and nonbeing, or rather (if we follow the lexical order implied by the yinyang in which yin always comes first) between *nonbeing* (0) and *being* (1).

In the Daoist conception of the yinyang, we discover a model for the couple that stays with the zero, rather than positivizes its threatening negativity. Here the nondialectical and nongendered *two* of the primordial, cosmo-philosophical couple—yin (and) yang—is not predicated on the exclusion of, but rather guaranteed, queerly, by the fundamental *zero* of Dao. Indeed, primacy of yin (0) over yang (1) is inscribed not only lexically but cosmologically within Daoist philosophy. The *Dao Dejing* offers a well-known numerology to illustrate its cosmology: "Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, three generates ten thousand things." Notice how the phrase "Dao generates one" implies that there is something *before* one: Dao, a *not-one* that is primary.<sup>20</sup> In the general cosmology of the *Dao Dejing*, moreover, as chapter 40 explains, "All things under heaven are generated from being, and being is generated from nonbeing (天下萬物生於有, 有生於無)."<sup>21</sup> While these lines might appear to suggest that what one witnesses in the cosmology of *Dao Dejing* is a kind of *creatio ex nihilo* through which something is created out of nothing, what we think of as Daoist creativity (rather than creation) consists not in the sudden appearance of the one out of the void but in simultaneity of yin (and) yang guaranteed by the generative "zero" of the Dao—that which the *Dao Dejing* figures as a dark hole/whole (*xuanpin*, 玄牝).<sup>22</sup>

In a powerful reading of the Dao's figuration in the *Dao Dejing* as *xuanpin* (玄牝)—a kind of dark/mysterious (*xuan*) womb/female animal (*pin*)—Kyoo Lee (2014: 69) reads the Dao as a *hole* that is also a *whole*, a site of universal emptiness and potentiality simultaneously. Building on Lee's reading of the Dao, we interpret Dao as both zero and one and therefore also two ("one yin and one yang"), and we stress the implications of this simultaneity for our envisioning of a couple that would not expel the zero (a zero that, although shared by all, is often projected onto one term of the equation).<sup>23</sup> Distancing the notion of *xuanpin* from any biological notion of femininity, Lee (2014: 69–70) proposes that while

the notion of xuanpin is “gyno-oriented,” it is not “gyno-centric”; as she explains, “xuanpin is freely transsexual, gender-bending: female and not female at once.” One might here approach the hole/whole of xuanpin and the Dao that it figures as a much more universalizable hole/whole, which in closing we link to the anus—a bodily site whose threatening negativity, when negated, produces us as (sexually and racially) differentiated subjects. We thus double back to weave the Daoist cosmology we have just outlined together with the Western European psychoanalytic conceptions of sexuality that we have been tarrying with throughout the piece in order to further sketch our notion of the ontocouple. In another foundational text of Daoism, Zhuangzi, a Daoist philosopher, is asked where Dao is to be found: “It is in the piss and shit!” he responds, to the great surprise of his interlocutor. Following Zhuangzi, we close by transitioning from the cosmical to the corporeal in order to explore the dialectical mechanism through which early twentieth-century psychoanalysis understood the gendered sexual subject to emerge: the repression of a fundamental zero—the anus, a hole that, disturbingly *not nothing*, must be negated in order to produce the very ontological difference figured in  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ .

Before we do so, however, let us remark that in no way do we want to nor could we romanticize a “Daoist queer theory” that would disrupt, in its alleged ancient purity, modern, colonial, and/or Western conceptions of gender and sexuality: one need only consider the fact that in China a “yinyang person” (yinyang ren, 陰陽人) is a pathologizing medical euphemism for intersex person, as well as a derogatory term for queers and especially for effeminate men, to see how the coexistence of yinyang posits as much a threat to the heteronormative Chinese society as to a Western one. If the yinyang can in any way be said to be “queer,” then, this is because of the frightening way it bodies forth the zero, the way that “yinyang ren” indexes a *sameness* indifferent to heterosexual difference. Similarly, in turning to the anus as a site of corporeal sameness, we are not interested in endorsing anal sexuality as ethically or politically more valuable than genital sex (thus turning a zero into a one); rather, we are interested in tracing the mechanisms through which difference emerges through the negation, albeit unsuccessful and incomplete, of a primal “zero” that is in fact shared by all bodies that enter the one-tological machine.

In 1916 Andreas-Salomé offered one of the most compelling theories of anality in her essay “Anal und Sexual,” which explained how anal pleasure—due to the association of the anus with dirt, stench, and death—must be repressed in order for the genital area to be affirmed as the site of reproduction, futurity, and life. Building on Sigmund Freud’s ([1905] 2016) account of the anal stage in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Andreas-Salomé (1916: 260) shows how

“anal area” is transformed from a neutral physical zone to “the symbol of everything that must be rejected and expelled, of everything that must be eliminated from life.” This transformation occurs when the body of the infant is territorialized by the parents, who teach it to distinguish between good and bad sensations by assigning value to sensations that emerge from particular areas of the body. Thus the anus emerges as the ethically charged site—a zero so disturbing in its negation that it must itself be negated—against which a genital-focused subjectivity is affirmed. As Andreas-Salomé argues, it is through the repression of the anus—an orifice that all bodies have no matter their sex or gender—that the infant’s body is territorialized by the binary two of sex. Not only is the individual body cut into two—into an orifice of death and a site of life—that is, but sexual difference itself erupts as a binary and dialectical two through the repression of the sameness of the anus and the valorization of the coupled difference of the genitals.

One of Andreas-Salomé’s most original contributions to the psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality—something that Freud himself would never be able to fully come to terms with—is that the repression of the anus is for everyone a process that is never properly accomplished. Thus, while Freud explains the overcoming of the anal stage in terms of its sublimation into character traits that will therefore be considered *anal* (avarice, pedantry, stubbornness, etc.), Andreas-Salomé shows how the necessity to obey this “first repression” constitutes an open wound on the psychic structure of all subjects that will keep on bleeding, opening the door to the possibility of a nonpathologized relation to anal pleasure. What we want to emphasize at this point is how Andreas-Salomé’s reading of anal repression as a psychic wound helps us to see that the production of the dialectical difference of sex—of 1 and 1(0)—relies on the repression of a fundamental zero that is projected only onto one term—the vagina—but in all actuality *is possessed by all bodies*. Moving *below* the dialectic, she shows how the repression of a more fundamental zero, a site of possible penetration and thus vulnerability to the other, allows for the dialectical production of two binary terms, one defined always as the negation or lack of the other. Indeed, while the anus and the genitals come to be understood, respectively, as sites of death and life, what is ultimately the difference between these two “types” of bodily orifices? Andreas-Salomé (1916: 259) provocatively remarks: “There are so many affinities between anal and genital processes, not only at an early stage but at the adult stage too—as the case of those who regress to anal eroticism so clearly demonstrates. Not uncoincidentally, the genital apparatus is located very close to rectum (and in women is, so to speak, only on lease [*nur abgemietet*] from it).” What does Andreas-Salomé mean when

she implies, in this strange turn of phrase, that the vagina (assumed here to be the property of the woman) is “on lease” from the anus? As she begins by pointing out, the anal and the vaginal orifices lie in clear proximity to each other. But more than proximity, what the vagina and the anus seem to share is also an inward profundity as well as a potentially infinite capacity for pleasure. What is “leased” to the vagina thus seems to be at least two things: (1) the possibility of nonreproductive and unlimited pleasure—a distinctly anal capacity—which the anus will be prohibited, and thus which must be transferred to the vagina, and (2) a secondary prohibition on this pleasure for the vagina, such that the vagina will become an instrument of reproduction, at the same time that the penis will emerge as the most legitimate and least abject site of sexual pleasure. At every step, a negation of the negation occurs such that the negative is turned into one, and another zero, having erupted in its stead, is displaced onto another.

In her devalorization of any fundamental difference between anal and genital areas, Andreas-Salomé can be seen to depart from a classical psychoanalytic approach in which sexual difference is the difference that makes a difference. In her largely nonpathologizing approach to anal eroticism, moreover, she implicitly suggests that the ontological difference instituted through the repression of the anus might to some extent be deactivated, opening up the possibility of an ontocouple in which being and nonbeing, one and zero, are understood to be interpenetrative rather than dialectically opposed. Indeed, her emphasis on the sameness of the anal and genital orifices in the pregenital phase bears an interesting similarity to the “body of orifices” in traditional Chinese medicine, wherein the anus and the genitals (including the penis) are all presented as penetrable orifices. In the medical classic *Huangdi Neijing* (黃帝內經, or *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon*), for example, the anus and genitalia are described as “two yin orifices” (二陰).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, are not anus, vagina, penis, as well as other bodily orifices like the mouth, all possible sites of penetration, exchange of fluids, and, in general, zeros, that is, places in which we open out in our vulnerability to the other?

Andreas-Salomé’s analysis allows for a reading of the anus—a site of ungendered corporeal sameness—as the locus of the first corporeal projection of nonbeing, a phantasmic projection that needs to be enacted in order for sexual (and, we would add, racial difference) to emerge. Richard Fung, David Eng, and Nguyen Tan Hoang have traced the social and psychic mechanisms through which, in Fung’s (1998: 121) words, “Asian and anus are conflated” when Asianness enters into dialectical relation to a white masculinity that can only ever conceive itself as phallic. Darieck Scott and Kathryn Bond Stockton have stressed

how the bottom position takes on racial connotations when it becomes conflated with the historical realities of the subordination, abjection, and enslavement of black subjects. And Edelman (2011: 102) has demonstrated how “an Oedipalizing logic entangles, for the modern West, an anti-black racism and homophobia” when a disgust with the anus is transferred onto lived subject positions. Through these examples, we can see how a psychic forgetting of the vulnerability of all bodies—what we think of as the fundamental porosity *figured* by (but not consolidated in) the anal zero—allows for the production of sexual and racial binaries according to which 1 and 1(0), a binary that indexes a difference as fantastical as it is lived, can emerge. As these scholars demonstrate, this is a process through which one term is posited as vulnerable/penetrable and the other as invulnerable/impenetrable in a psychic forgetting of the vulnerability and penetrability of all bodies. In her analysis of pornography that fetishizes the black female anus, Nash (2014: 452) has argued that such videos, while they might be expected to emphasize black difference, surprisingly “reveal not the ‘secret’ of black interiority but a kind of profound corporeal sameness, a sameness that is all the more surprising because it is laid bare in a genre that incessantly promises the distinctiveness of black bodies.” Looking to Andreas-Salomé, we might begin to understand why: the anus bodies forth a zero shared by all, the forgetting of which is necessary to the production of the binary difference of 1 + 1(0).

In an age of reductive identity politics on both sides of the political spectrum, it might be undesirable and indeed unfashionable to think about sameness (a sameness that emerges not despite difference but because of it). However, our analysis of Andreas-Salomé’s theory of the anus as well as the concept of yinyang as it is entangled with the Dao can be seen to demonstrate that it is only through the repression of a fundamental sameness—a *shared zero*—that the two of the couple can emerge as a dialectical and binary two, a two that synthesizes into One. This thesis follows from Edelman’s suggestion, discussed in the previous section, that the “One of the Couple” coheres in and through the phantasmic projection of queerness onto shifting and historically contingent “others.” And yet, as our reading of the yinyang and the anus in this section should make clear, queerness, in our view, is not exactly *nothing*; it is not merely a *fantasy* of nonbeing catachrestically projected onto stigmatized subjects in the social order. Rather, as an anus, a Dao that precedes, generates, and indeed guarantees being itself, it is “a negation that doesn’t quite negate,” a nothing that is not no-thing and thus might not only be perceived but affirmed in its negation (Dolar 2012). In conceptualizing the zero as a whole/hole whose forgetting gives rise to a dialectical and binary conception of

the couple as  $1 + 1(0)$ , we not only make an ontological claim but gesture toward a distinctly ethical possibility: that the zero, indeed, might be affirmed and shared, and that this affirmation—or better put, refusal to negate the negation—would allow the two of the couple (again, not only the sociological couple, but the *one and the other*) to remain two and only two. These two, like the yinyang guaranteed by the zero of the Dao, are a two that do not synthesize into one but that remain united in their difference and different in their sameness. The ontocouple that emerges out of the hole/whole of the Dao and the anus, in other words, bodies forth a *two* that coexist without synthesizing into a *third* element, a *two* that share (the pleasure and the burden of) the *zero* without positivizing it into *one*.

Throughout this essay our aim has been to offer not a call to arms but a call to thought. We have aimed neither to defend the couple as socially or politically viable nor to call for couples everywhere to throw off its shackles. Instead, we have attempted to elucidate something difficult to perceive: a twoness that is not predicated on the preexistence of autonomous, self-enclosed individual ones but is borne of the porosity, dependency, and interpenetrability of beings, that is, an ontocouple that is both *zero* and *two*. Far from a neutral description of reality, our elucidation of the ontocouple carries within it an ethical injunction. To see the couple the way we have seen it, to describe the couple as we have described it, entails *staying with the zero*. To *stay with the zero* of the ontocouple, however, importantly, is for us not a call to mobilize queer against straight sexuality, nor the anus against the penis or vagina.<sup>25</sup> It is first and foremost an attempt to glimpse below such binaries, to the zero that haunts them. In a historical moment that has seen attempts to purge all signs of otherness through the institution of a “White nation” and “Fortress Europe”—two among many totalizing Ones that in their attempt to institute and perpetuate the one as one, literally let the other die at the border, demonizing her as a threatening zero—we insist on the ethical and political significance of ushering the zero in. While the one-tology of the couple dialectically ensures the elimination of the traces of a pulsating corporeal sameness, and with it our shared penetrability, attention to the ontocouple reveals a hole that is there and will continue to be, disrupting attempts to displace it, transform it, and coerce it into one.

## Notes

Our gratitude goes to Daniel Colucciello Barber, David Eng, Grace Lavery, Kyoo Lee, and Tavia Nyong'o for their timely and critical feedback on this piece.

1. Though Edelman does not do so, we capitalize *queer* throughout this essay when we refer to the figure of “the Queer” as distinct from self-identified queer people, echoing Edelman’s own capitalization of Child to differentiate between the figure of the Child and actual children.
2. Although the word *ontology* itself does not appear within the pages of *No Future*, in his more recent work Edelman (2017: 133) has taken up the concept in order to describe the position of the Queer as one of “ontological negation.” Conceived as the philosophical study of the nature of being, ontology, it could be argued, necessarily excludes nonbeing from its purview. The following pages, however, conceive of an ontology that entails thinking the mutually constitutive relation between being and nonbeing. To develop a theory of the former, we hold, necessarily entails a theory of the latter.
3. The historian of mathematics Georges Ifra (2000: xviii) has shown how the invention of the number zero was “the last major invention in the story of numbers,” pointing out that most of the earliest human societies only contained the concepts of *one*, *two*, and *many*. In a recent essay, Edelman exploits the historical fact that zero was invented to provide a kind of ground for arithmetical knowledge in order to argue that the very coherence of the One—the One of the Child, but also the One of the Couple—requires the backward projection of a zero. Like the zero, which, in its very inscription, “positivizes” nothing into a *negative one*, Edelman proposes, the term *queer* gives a positive name to that nothing which threatens to undo the social order.
4. See here the work of Christina Sharpe (2016), Calvin L. Warren (2018), and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2011). It was along such lines that at our 2016 symposium Rinaldo Walcott thus revised our opening question—“Can one be queer and coupled?”—to “Can one be black and coupled?” and intimated that the answer was no. As Walcott (2016) proposed, the socially viable and politically recognizable form of “the couple” is not merely withheld from, but constituted through the exclusion of, blackness: “Black thingification, Black-being, yes its ontology,” he argued, marks “the impossibility of the couple for us—that is The Black (as a typology)—given our marked status as always that which sits outside of modernity animating all of its claims for freedom in the midst of our unfreedom.”
5. See especially Haraway 1988 and Barad 2007.
6. As Nichols (2014: 58) reminds us, “Knowledge claims about the world are also interpretations of what sorts of entities there are to be known and, simultaneously, a certain ethical positioning of the subject of knowledge in relation to the world so interpreted . . .

a thesis on freedom always contains within it an implicitly or explicitly held understanding of the fundamental framework or field of conditions within which meaningful actions may be actualized, an understanding of the kinds of entities that exist and act within this field, and the range of possibilities within which they operate.”

7. “From that time on,” as Wittig (1992: 42) narrates in her historico-philosophical analysis of the heterosexual couple from antiquity to modernity, “male and female, the heterosexual relationship has been the parameter of all hierarchical relations.” Wittig’s critique of dialectical thought in her essay “On the Social Contract” (1989) is one prominent attempt to think beyond the “straight mind, for which homosexual is nothing but heterosexual” (ibid.: 28). Here Wittig shows how Western metaphysics relies on a dialectical model according to which a multiple and secondary *nonbeing* is constantly projected as the opposite of the primary one-ness of *being*. Dialectical thought is straight, Wittig implies, because it cannot think the two as other than a binary two—a one and a not-one. Defined always in relation to one, the second one is always projected as none. As she goes on to argue, through a reading of dialectical terms in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, binary pairs such as man/woman, straight/curved, or light/dark institute an ontological hierarchy not simply because they are coupled but because the first term of the dyad is considered primary, and the second conceived only in relation to (and thus as a negation of) the first. It is the primacy of light that, when darkness is paired with it, institutes a moralized binary.
8. As Halberstam points out, the production of butchness and femmeness also relies on racial and class signifiers, which intersect with those more obviously gendered in complex ways. Halberstam (1998a: 58) thus proposes to “uncouple” butch from femme in order to address the complexity of each on their own terms, rather than treat them as two halves of a dialectical unity bound to gender binarism.
9. See, for example, Patrick D. Hopkins (1994), who turns Butler against herself, contesting Butler’s 1982 claim that S/M does nothing more than affirm heterosexual power dynamics by using her theory of gender performativity to theorize the subversion of power in S/M.
10. In another interview conducted a few years later, in *Gai Pied*, Foucault ([1981] 1989: 205) makes a similar point, this time focusing on what he takes to be the entirely unthreatening image of two gay men cruising: “One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease.”
11. Most famously, perhaps, in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani ([1987] 2010: 15) asks his reader to celebrate homosexual sex not for its parody or subversion of straight sex but for its deactivation of phallic power via its “nearly mad identification with it.” Gay men’s simultaneous desire for and identification with the very men who oppress them,

Bersani argued there, violates masculinity precisely because it does not attempt to subvert power but to abdicate it.

12. See also in this vein, Sharpe 2009, especially chapter 3, and Stockton 2006.
13. One might transcribe the iterative logic of reproductive futurism into the following, only seemingly complex, equation:  $[1 + 1(0)] * 0 + 1 = 1$ . Here, the Couple still takes on its classic form at the beginning of the equation:  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ . Queerness, on the other hand, is both inside and outside the Couple. It sustains the  $1 + 1(0)$  from inside as the zero that allows for synthesis into One; and it threatens it from the outside in the zero that would risk annihilating the whole equation altogether:  $[1 + 1(0)] * 0$ . Put otherwise, where the first zero (that *within* the Couple rendered  $1 + 1(0) = 1$ ) figures the queerness of the second one (the one that is not one), the second zero—that which the couple encounters in the much more totalizing zero (rendered  $*0$ )—figures a queerness so menacing that it threatens to collapse the entire structure:  $[1 + 1(0)] * 0 = 0$ . How might the Couple escape from the threat of nullification? The answer is simple: the addition of another one—such that  $[1 + 1(0)] * 0 + 1 = 1$ . This one—the Child—is the one that allows the Couple to remain forever One.
14. In *Terrorist Assemblages* Puar (2007: 211) argues, against Edelman, that it is not the “ability to reproduce, but the capacity to *regenerate*” that renders certain bodies valuable in the eyes of the state. To us this terminological distinction seems to point less to an irreconcilable conflict in framework than to a difference in methodology: where Edelman’s commitment to psychoanalytic theory, specifically that of Lacan, leads him to center sex and the question of (non)reproduction, Puar’s more Deleuzian framework yields the more capacious if less-sexualized concept of non/regenerativity.
15. Building on Spillers’s work, Frank Wilderson (2010: 9) has written that “Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and psychoanalysis.” Here, Wilderson draws attention to the limits of relational models of subjectivity for comprehending the nonrelationality of blackness as it emerges, historically, under slavery. Even the master-slave dialectic, it is implied, despite its nominal invocation of slavery, can be seen to be premised on a fundamental exclusion of the Black, who, void of relationality, is that on whose exclusion from the dialectic, the very relation between the two terms, depends. As Daniel Colucciello Barber (2016) has recently argued in conversation with Wilderson’s work, “Anti-black racial ontology is the condition of possibility for the Marxist demand.” This is because, as Barber contends, “the exploited and the exploiter, despite their asymmetry, share a being that is made through the denial of blackness, which is positioned as the slave” (ibid.).
16. See Crenshaw’s (1991) foundational theory of intersectionality.
17. Along similar lines, Wilderson (2014: 18) has invoked Saidiya Hartman to propose that staying “‘in the hold of the ship,’ that is, to stay in a state of pure analysis, . . . we can learn more about the totality and the totalizing nature of Black oppression.”
18. While a gendered reading of yinyang has some basis in later texts, the earliest known

theorizations of the concept do not collapse the relationship between yin and yang to masculine-feminine complementarity. Even in the Confucian philosopher Dong Zhongshu's hierarchization of yinyang in the second century BC, sexual differences are just only one aspect, albeit important, of yinyang, not its essence. See Wang 2005. In the context of psychoanalysis, the Lacanian theorists Alenka Zupančič (2017) and Mladen Dolar (2012) list the yinyang as one of many sexual ontologies that operate according to the logic of hetero-complementarity. Positioning Lacan's non-relational conception of sexual difference as a corrective to the two of yinyang, they argue that the two of sex can "neither be numerically counted two nor squeezed into a binary opposition" (Dolar 2012). While drawn to the nondialectical two these thinkers conjure, we depart both from their interpretation of yinyang as bound to sexual difference as well as in their investment in sexual difference—however reconceived—as a two that matters.

19. The *Shuowen Jiezi*, one of the earliest works to offer a structural analysis of Chinese characters, explains the yin as "the northern side of the mountain" and yang as the southern side, the side that is "high and bright." What this image demonstrates, among other things, is that the distinction between yin and yang is not absolute, but shifts as space and time interact. As Xiang (2018b: 427) has explained, "The boundary between the northern side and the southern side of the mountain also depends on the movement of the sun. Since the sun's movement changes (according to an unchangeable route), the boundary between yin and yang and also their differences are very clear yet difficult to demarcate, although it is by no means random or unpredictable."
20. By contrast, in the dialectic, as Wittig has helped us see, one is always primary, and thus what comes after is always defined in the negative (the two that is not one).
21. All quotations of *Dao Dejing* are from Chen 2008.
22. The difference to be noted here is that in Daoism there is no creator who allegedly created *ex nihilo* (out of nothingness). Even within Christian theology, as Catherine Keller has convincingly argued through a close reading of Genesis, *creatio ex nihilo* is textually unsustainable, as the creation of the world is preceded by the existence of feminized primordial deep *tehom* (demonized as chaos), that haunts creation as its for-bearer. The myth of *creatio ex nihilo* represses the *tehom*, thus leading Keller (2003: 62) to give the insightful name *tehomophobia* to this fear and hatred of the deep, the feminized and arguably also queer "chaos-aka-nothing."
23. Indeed, in *Dao Dejing*'s apophatic formulation, the Dao's being is acquired through its own negation. As the enigmatic beginning lines of the *Dao Dejing* announces, "The Dao that can be dao-ed, is not the constant Dao (道可道,非常道)." These lines indicate Dao's fundamental *twoness*: Dao is both there ("the dao") and not there ("un-dao-able").
24. The "frontal yin orifice(s)" (前陰) only attain sexual difference as penis and vagina

- when put together. See Furth 1999; Unschuld, Tessenow, and Zheng 2011; and Xiang 2018a.
25. In his 2009 text “Terror Anal,” for example, Paul Preciado envisions an “anal utopia” in which “the anus (and its other extreme, the mouth) establishes the basis for an inalienable sexual equality” to come (2009: 171). While sympathetic with Preciado’s identification of the anus as the locus from which to launch a critique of sexual difference, we do not here champion the act of anal sex over the act of genital sex. To do so, we argue, would be to merely turn the anus into a kind of phallus, to transform zero into one by activating and capacitating it.

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