

Making Kin Not Population

Edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway

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Wu's work offers "a new way of telling our new reality," as feminist science fictionist Ursula Le Guin praised. Such work urges us to investigate new concepts, mindsets, and actions to revamp relations between population, economy, and environment while making new forms of kin. Ultra-low fertility can be regarded as a national security crisis, but it can also be a strong stimulant for a more en-connected new world.

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Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family

Kim TallBear

Sufficiency

At a give-away—we do them often at pow-wows—the family honors one of our own by thanking the People who jingle and shimmer in circle. They are with us. We give gifts in both generous show and as acts of faith in sufficiency. One does not future-board. We may lament incomplete colonial conversions, our too little bank savings. The circle, we hope, will sustain. We sustain it. Not so strange then that I decline to hoard love and another's body for myself? I cannot have faith in scarcity. I have tried. It cut me from the circle.

The Critical Polyamorist

It was not always so that the monogamous couple ideal reigned. In *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and Nation*, Nancy Cott argues that in the US the standard of lifelong monogamous marriage took hold in the 19th century. It was propped up by Christian moral arguments coupled with state structural enforcements

—the linking of marriage to property rights and notions of good citizenship.

In *Undoing Monogamy*, Angela Willey also shows how Christian mores regarding marriage and monogamy became secularized in late 19th-century scientific discourse. This is evident in the take-up of such standards by the US despite its stated commitment to a separation of church and state. Thus, marriage became central to supposedly secular US nation building that nonetheless assumed a culture of Christianity. In *The Importance of Being Monogamous*, Sarah Carter also shows how “marriage was part of the national agenda in Canada—the marriage ‘fortress’ was established to guard the [Canadian] way of life.”

Growing the white population through biologically reproductive heterosexual marriage—in addition to encouraging immigration from some places and not others—was crucial to settler-colonial nation-building. Anthropologists Paulla Ebron and Anna Tsing argue in “Feminism and the Anthropocene” that heteronormative marriage and family forged through particular intersections of race, class, and gender worked to increase certain human populations and not others during rapid post-World War II colonial and capitalist growth of the US. This “Great Acceleration” was extended globally and involved systematic ecological and social destruction. Ebron and Tsing write, “White nuclear families anchored imagined ‘safety’ while communities of color were made available for sacrifice.” Enclaves of white middle class spaces of safety were co-constituted with spaces of waste and ecological sacrifice, what Ebron and Tsing, after Traci Brynne Voyles, call “wastelanding.” Indeed, “Well-being was defined through the safety and security of well-ordered white families surrounded by specters of color, chaos

and communism.” In short, white bodies and white families in spaces of safety have been propagated in intimate co-constitution with the culling of black, red, and brown bodies and the wastelanding of their spaces. Who gets to have babies, and who does not? Whose babies get to live? Whose do not? Whose relatives, including other-than-humans, will thrive and whose will be laid to waste?

At the same time that the biologically reproductive monogamous white marriage and family were solidified as ideal and central to both US and Canadian nation building, Indigenous peoples who found themselves inside these two countries were being viciously restrained both conceptually and physically inside colonial borders and institutions that included residential schools, churches and missions all designed to “save the man and kill the Indian.” If Indians could not all be killed outright—and persistent attempts were made to do so—then the savages might also be eliminated by forced conversions to whiteness. That is the odd nature of red as a race category in the US. In efforts to reduce numbers of Indigenous peoples and free up land for settlement, red people were viewed as capable of being whitened. As part of efforts to eliminate/assimilate Indigenous peoples into the national body, both the church and the state evangelized marriage, nuclear family, and monogamy. These standards were simultaneously lorded over Indigenous peoples as an aspirational model and used to justify curtailing their biological reproduction and steal their children.

So marriage was yoked together with private property in settler coercions of Indigenous peoples. The breakup of Indigenous peoples’ collectively held-lands into privately-held allotments controlled by men as heads-of-household enabled the transfer of “surplus”

lands to the state and to mostly European or Euro-American settlers. Cree-Métis feminist, Kim Anderson writes that “one of the biggest targets of colonialism was the Indigenous family,” in which women had occupied positions of authority and controlled property. The colonial state targeted women’s power, tying land tenure rights to heterosexual, one-on-one, lifelong marriages, thus tying women’s economic well being to men who legally controlled the property. Indeed, women themselves became property.

Indigenous Relationality: e.g., Tiospaye, Oyate

One hundred and fifty-six years after the Dakota-US War of 1862, when my Dakota ancestors were brought under colonial control, the clearly unsustainable nuclear family is the most commonly idealized alternative to the tribal and extended family context in which I was raised. Prior to colonization, the fundamental social unit of my people was the extended kin group, including plural marriage. The Dakota word for extended family is *tiospaye*. The word for “tribe” or “people” (sometimes translated as “nation”) is *oyate*, and governance happens in ways that demonstrate the connections between the two.

With hindsight, I can see that my road to exploring open non-monogamy began early in my observations in tribal communities of mostly failed monogamy, extreme serial monogamy, and disruptions to nuclear family. Throughout my growing up I was subjected by both whites and Natives ourselves to narratives of shortcoming and failure—descriptions of Native American “broken families,” “teenage pregnancies,”

“unmarried mothers,” and other failed attempts to paint a white, nationalist, middle class veneer over our lives. I used to think it was the failures to live up to that ideal that turned me off emphasizing domesticity, and that’s why I ran for coastal cities and higher education, why I asserted from a very early age that I would never marry, nor birth children. Indeed, pregnancy was something I came to see as submitting to weakness that came with bleeding—with womanhood. It signified submission to men, What settler family did to my head!

But I was a happy child in those moments when I sat at my great-grandmother’s dining room table with four generations, and later in her life with five generations. We gathered in her small dining room with its burnt orange linoleum and ruffled curtains, at the table beside the antique china cabinet, people overflowing into the equally small living room—all the generations eating, laughing, playing cards, drinking coffee, talking tribal politics, and eating again. The children would run in and out. I would sit quietly next to my grandmothers hoping no one would notice me. I could then avoid playing children’s games and listen instead to the adults’ funny stories and wild tribal politics.

Couples and marriages and nuclear families got little play there. The matriarch of our family, my great-grandmother, was always laughing. She would cheat at cards and tell funny, poignant stories about our family, about families and individuals—both Natives and whites—in our small town throughout the 20th century. Aunts and uncles would contribute their childhood memories to build on her stories. My mother would bring the conversation back to tribal or national politics. A great-grandchild might be recognized for a creative, academic, or athletic accomplishment. The newest baby would be doted on as a newly arrived

human who chose our family. The Mom who might be 18 and unmarried would have help. As Kim Anderson explains in "Affirmations of an Indigenous Feminist":

Our traditional societies had been sustained by strong kin relations in which women had significant authority. There was no such thing as a single mother, because Native women and their children lived and worked in extended kin networks.

Despite colonial violence against our kin systems, we are in **everyday practice still quite adept at extended family. Beyond biological family, we also have ceremonies to adopt kin. And in my extended family we also engage in legal adoption. This is aided by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) that prioritizes the adoption of Native children by tribal families so children have a better chance of remaining inside tribal cultures. And it was Indigenous peoples ourselves who lobbied heavily for that legislation as one response to the colonial kidnapping of children of previous generations from Indigenous families who were impoverished by colonialism, and deemed unfit for not attaining the middle-class, nuclear family structures of white colonialists.**

Compulsory Settler Sex, Family, and Nation

I did eventually marry—both legally and in a Dakota neo-traditional ceremony—when I was nearly 30. Despite my youthful disavowals, even I didn't have the oppositional momentum to jump the tracks of the marriage railroad. Today, I am nearly 50 and I see that it was not my family's so-called failures that dampened my enthusiasm for coupled domesticity. Rather, I was suffocating all my life under the weight of the aspirational ideal of middle-class nuclear family, including (hetero)normative coupledness with its compulsory biological reproduction, even while I had, it turns out, contentedly *lived* a counter narrative to that settler ideal for some years.

Unsurprisingly, the feeling of suffocation intensified after marriage and the pressure I felt to constitute a normative middle-class family. My co-parent is an anti-racist, feminist, Indigenous-rights-supporting, cisgendered white male who has mostly been the primary caretaker of our now teenager. I do not blame him as an individual for my misery in the marriage and nuclear family system. He did the best he could to help make a livable space for me. While I had no trouble bonding with my child as an individual human being, I could not shake my feeling of unease with the settler family structure, including its oppressive pronatalism.

Of course, there were babies born into my extended Dakota family. People have sex. Bodies beget life. But I did not see in my community a kind of pronatalism co-constituted with nation (state) building—an overture necessarily aimed at dispossessing Indigenous peoples of our human and other-than-human relatives. Instead, and I have only just now put

words to this, I grew up with an implicit mandate that our tiospaye must caretake kin across the generations as part of caretaking the oyate, i.e. the “tribal nation” in 20th-century parlance. Some of our kin are born to us and some of them come to us in other ways. The roles of grandparents and aunties and uncles are revered as much as are mothers and fathers. I grew in a very pro-kinship world, but settler-state oppressions simultaneously sparked in me an explicit *nonnatalism* that is central to my rejection of the US nationalist project. If pronatalism involves reproducing the middle-class settler family structure, *no matter* the race or sexual orientation of the middle-class family, I lament it.

Kin-Making and Critical Nonmonogamy

Decolonization is not an individual choice. We must collectively oppose a system of compulsory settler sexuality and family that continues building a nation upon Indigenous genocide and that marks Indigenous and other marginalized relations as deviant. This includes opposing norms and policies that reward normative kinship ties (e.g., monogamous legal marriage, nuclear biological family) over other forms of kinship obligation. It includes living or supporting others in living within nonmonogamous and more-than-coupled bonds. It includes advocating policies that support a more expansive definition of family, and not rewarding normative family structures with social and financial benefits. Multiple scholars including Scott M. Morgensen and Katherine Franke show us how the present settler sexuality system attempts to railroad all of us into rigid relational forms established historically

to serve the patriarchal heteronormative and increasingly also homonormative imperial state and its unsustainable private property interests and institutions.

Present-past-future: I resist a lineal, progressive **representation** of movement *forward* to something **better**, or movement *back* to something purer. I bring voices and practices into conversation from across what is called, in English, time. There are many lively conversationalists at my table—both embodied and no longer embodied. I lean in to hear them all in order to try and grasp ways of relating that Dakota people and other Indigenous peoples practiced historically. From what it is possible to know after colonial disruption to **our ancestors’ practices** and **our memories of how they related**, marriage was different from **relatively recent** settler formations. Before settler-imposed monogamy, **marriages helped** to forge important Dakota **kinship alliances** but “**divorce**” for both **men and women** was possible. In addition, more than two genders were recognized, and there was an element of flexibility in gender identification. People we might call “genderqueer” today also entered into “traditional” Dakota marriages with partners who might be what we **today** consider “**cisgendered**.” As I **try to write** this, I **engage** in **essentially nonsensical conceptual time travel** with **categories** that will **lose** their integrity if I try to **teleport them** back or **forward** in time. **So** much has gone dormant—will go dormant. **So** much has been imposed onto Indigenous peoples, both heteronormative settler sexuality categories and now also “queer” categories.

The record is also clear that there was plural marriage for men. What were/are the spaces for plural **relations for and between women**? An **Indigenous feminist scholar from a people related to mine** has

confessed to me her suspicion that among our ancestors the multiple wives of one husband, if they were not sisters as they sometimes were, may have had what we today call “sexual” relations between them. She whispered this to me. As if we were blaspheming. But in a world before settler colonialism—outside of the particular biosocial assemblages that now structure settler notions of “gender,” “sex,” and “sexuality,” persons and the intimacies among them were no doubt worked out quite differently.

Nathan Rambukkana, in his 2015 book *Fraught Intimacies: Non/Monogamies in the Public Sphere*, notes the potential of “queer or queered sexual or intimate relationships between sister- or co-wives.” He cites a 2008 ethnography of a British Columbia Mormon community, Bountiful, in which two polygamist wives “married each other using Canada’s same-sex marriage legislation.” The two women “consider themselves life partners, although they have never explicitly discussed whether their relationship has a sexual component.”

Recognizing possibilities of other kinds of intimacies—not focused on biological reproduction and making population, but caretaking precious kin that come to us in diverse ways—is an important step to unsettling settler sex and family. So is looking for answers to questions about what intimacies were and are possible beyond the settler impositions we now live with. These are formidable tasks that will be met with resistance by many Indigenous people. Our shaming and victimization, including in “sexual” ways, has been extreme. The imposition of Christianity has ensured that speaking of and engaging in so-called sexual relations in the ways of our ancestors was severely curtailed. Our ancestors lied, omitted, were beaten,

locked up, raped, grew ashamed, suicidal, forgot. We have inherited all of that. And we have inherited Christian sexual mores, and settler state biopolitics that monitor, measure, and pathologize our bodies and our peoples, including forcibly sterilizing Indigenous women. Yet they’ve also promoted heteronormative biological reproduction (for some, not all) as the only way to make babies and kin.

With that history as the cliff looming above us, it is no small thing to ask Indigenous thinkers to turn their decolonial lenses towards a critique of normative marriage and family formations that many of us now aspire to. It is no small request to ask Indigenous people to consider the advantages of open nonmonogamy, with a community’s knowledge and partners’ consent as an important decolonial option. For now, few will have that choice. I suspect there are especially younger Indigenous people who might join me in thinking hard on the nonmonogamous arrangements of our ancestors. We are so keen to embrace other decolonizing projects—to consider the wisdom of our ancestors’ ways of thinking. Why should we not also consider nonmonogamous family forms in our communities?

I have had especially white feminists bristle at my refusal to condemn Dakota historical practices of plural marriage. How can I support “polygamy”—with that word for them meaning one man with several wives? It can also refer to one woman with multiple men. These women’s views on nonmonogamy are conditioned by their impressions of nonconsensual or not rigorously consensual forms of nonmonogamy in which men alone have multiple wives. They often cite Mormon or Muslim polygamies. I can’t speak with much expertise to the variety of nonmonogamous practices among those peoples, although I know that

there are varying levels of consent and not all polygamy should be painted with the same broad brush. But I ask us, as Indigenous people, to learn what we can about the role of nonmonogamy in our ancestors' practices, which, importantly, were not often attached to proselytizing religions, and which normatively featured greater autonomy for women. What I know of my ancestors is that women controlled household property. And marriage did not bind them to men economically in the harsh ways of settler marriage.

What were the values underlying our ancestors' nonmonogamy that might articulate with 21st-century Indigenous lives? Many Indigenous communities still exhibit a framework of extended kinship where responsibilities are more diffusely distributed, where we work as groups of women (or men, or other gendered people ideally) to share childcare, housing, and other resources. In my experience, our ways of relating often seem to contradict the monogamous couple and nuclear family. I am interested in seeing us not only implicitly but also explicitly de-center those family forms. Perhaps our allegiances and commitments are more strongly conditioned than we realize by a sense of community that *exceeds* rather than *fails to meet* the requirements of settler sex and family. The abuse and neglect in so many Indigenous families born of colonial kidnapping, incarceration, rape, and killing are all too real. But perhaps our relentless moves to caretake in *tiospaye* more than in normative settler family forms is not simply the best that we can do. Maybe it is the best way to heal?

I've seen sociological research under the label of Indigenous Masculinities—pro-Indigenous fatherhood research—that centers the normative two-parent, nuclear family form without question. Colonial notions

of family insidiously continue to stigmatize us as they represent the normative standard against which we are measured. Perhaps our kinship arrangements are actually culturally, emotionally, financially, and environmentally more sustainable than that nuclear family, two-parent model we are so good at failing at, and that's why we are "failing."

If we already often share children, economic sustenance, and housing, why must sex be reserved for the monogamous couple, or for making babies? Sexual monogamy can in one interpretation be seen as hoarding another person's body and desire, which seems at odds with the broader ethic of sharing that undergirds extended kinship. What if my colleague's suspicion is correct? Is it so uncomfortable to imagine women, in partnership also with the same husband (with everyone's gender identification more complex than biology alone)—sharing not only say daily work, but also, when the need or desire arose, sharing touch as a form of care, relating, or connection?

Disaggregating Sexuality and Spirituality: Reaggregating Relations

Sexuality is not “like” power...sexuality is a form of power: and, of the forms of power, sexuality in particular might prove uniquely efficacious in both individual and collective healing. Further, I will suggest that sexuality’s power might be forceful enough to soothe the pains of colonization and the scars of internal colonization.

David Delgado Shorter

In an essay entitled simply, “Sexuality,” Indigenous Studies scholar David Shorter focuses on *moreakamem*—healers, seers, powerful people among the Yoeme, an Indigenous people living on both sides of the Mexico/US border. He originally set out to understand the “spiritual” aspects of what they do—to examine *moreakamem* as powerful healers—but his research revealed entanglements of both “sexuality” and “spirituality.” During his fieldwork with southern Yoeme in Sonora, Mexico, an elder told Shorter that individuals who engage in nonmonogamous and/or non-heterosexual relationships are commonly also *moreakamem*. This is not always the case, but it is often the case. In fact, in northern Yoeme communities in Arizona, *moreakame* has come to be conflated with terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “two-spirit,” and other less positive terms. The healer or seer aspect of the word has by now been lost among Yoeme living in the US, who have much ethnic overlap with “Catholic Mexican American” communities.

Shorter found that he could not understand the powerful “spiritual” roles in community of *moreakamem* without also understanding their so-called

sexualities. Shorter explains that in many Indigenous contexts, there is an “interconnectedness in all aspects of life.” So following the connections between sex and spirit among the Yoeme was akin to “following a strand of a spider’s web.” In English we are accustomed to thinking of “spirituality” or “spirit,” “sexuality” or “sex” as things, and as assuredly separate things. With that ontological lens *moreakamem* become an object, a class of person defined along either sexual and/or “spiritual” lines. However, within their context, sexuality and spirituality can both be seen as actually constituted of “human relational activities.” They are sets of relations—through which power is acquired and exchanged in reciprocal fashion among persons, not all of them human. In describing how relations or the relational sharing of power become things in a non-Indigenous framework, Shorter uses the term “objectivating the intersubjective.” In another simply titled essay, “Spirituality,” he explains that “‘Intersubjective,’ like ‘related,’ emphasizes mutual connectivity, shared responsibility, and interdependent well-being.” So we might think of sexuality, spirituality, and nature too as not things at all, but as sets of relations in which power (and sometimes material sustenance?) circulates. We might resist objectivating the intersubjective. We might resist hardening relations into objects, which might make us more attuned to relating justly in practice.

To return to *moreakamem* and resisting a classification of them as gay, or nonmonogamous, we can see them instead as relating. They have reciprocity with and receive power in their encounters with spirits, ancestors, dreams, animals. And also in the human realm when they use their power to see for and heal other humans suffering from love or money problems, addictions, and other afflictions of mind and body.

Emphasizing relations and exchange, Shorter explains that the “social role of ‘moreakamem’” is not “a means for individual self-empowerment.” A *moreakamem* does not identify themselves as such. Although we do so identify them in order to refer to them. *Moreakamem* do not accentuate their pertinent personal characteristics and capacities, i.e., their “sexuality” or their power to heal. Shorter explains that *moreakamem* focus rather on their work in community, that they “work tirelessly and selflessly to maintain right relations.” They resist having their relational activities and power objectified.

Understanding *moreakamem* relationality in community helps us to understand their so-called sexuality (and ours too) as a form of reciprocity and power exchange. We can begin to unthread it from being an object like “gay” or “straight” that is “constituted once and unchanging.” So-called sexuality is one form of relating and sharing of power that is “reconstituted over and over based on the intersubjective dynamism of two or more persons.” Shorter encourages us to see that for *moreakamem*—and for all of us—“sexuality” can be understood “as a way of being that...directly and intentionally mediates social relations across the family, clan, pueblo, tribe, and other forms of relations including other-than-human persons.” With this understanding, sexuality beings to look “more like a type of power, particularly one capable of healing.”

David Shorter does not reveal the details of *moreakamem* sexual relations beyond noting their often non-normative sexualities. But his theoretical treatment of sexuality as relational power exchange is instructive for pondering how Indigenous people (and others) might find ways in collectivity to oppose settler sexuality and marriage. Given the goal of thinking relationally,

what might “indigenizing sexuality” mean? I hope it is clear by now that the question is actually oxymoronic. Rather, we might consider that the goal is to disaggregate so-called sexuality not back to tradition, not forward into progress, but into and back out into that spider’s web of relations. (Or any net visual that works for you.) That is a web or net in which relations exchange power, and power is in tension, thus holding the web or community together.

So this is my thought experiment: As part of decolonial efforts can we work ourselves into a web of relations (I am thinking in terms of space and not a time concept now). In small moments of possibility, can we resist naming “sex” between persons and “sexuality” as nameable objects? Can such disaggregation help us decolonize the ways in which we engage other bodies intimately—whether those are human bodies, bodies of water or land, the bodies of other living beings, and the vitality of our ancestors and other beings no longer or not yet embodied? By focusing on actual states of relation—on being in good relation-with, making kin—and with less monitoring and regulation of categories, might that spur more just interactions?

We could do the same thought experiment with “spirituality” too for it is also about relationality and engaging other bodies, maybe just not always material ones. We won’t escape the moments when “sex” or “sexuality,” “spirit” or “spirituality” are the best we can do with this limited English language. But can we lean toward disaggregating objects and instead focus on promiscuously reagggregating relations? Can we see ourselves as relating and exchanging power and reciprocity in support of a stronger *tiospaye* or extended kin network with both living relations and those whose bodies we come from, and whose bodies

will come in part from us? I am thinking of both the human and other-than-human bodies with whom we are co-constituted.

Many other scholars of "Native American" history or Indigenous Studies have written key texts that inform my evolving thinking on the issues discussed in this chapter. Influential historians include Philip Deloria, Theda Perdue, and Brian Dippie. Also influential are race scholars who do the rarer work of accounting for the intersections of race and Indigeneity. These include scholars such as Circe Sturm, Cheryl Harris, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Jenny Reardon, Eve Tuck, and Yael Ben-zvi. Their work is listed in the References and the online Sourcenes.

Conclusion

To return to the by now mundane topic of nonmonogamy, in relating with more than one partner in my life, I have come to regularly ponder how this serves kinship across my life. How do these relations serve others? What about our respective children? Multiple "romantic" relations can help raise and mentor children in community. How do our relations serve our other partners? I have found affectionate and supportive friendship with partners of my partners. This is a key benefit for me of open nonmonogamy. How does the different sustenance I gain from multiple lovers collectively fortify me and make me more available to contribute in the world? If I am richly fed, what and who am I able to feed? What is possible with a model in which *love* and *relations* are not considered scarce objects to be hoarded and protected, but which proliferate beyond the confines of the socially constituted couple and nuclear family?

What began as a personal political experiment in open nonmonogamy is turning to de-emphasizing monogamy *and* nonmonogamy as objectified forms of "sexuality." I am also indebted to fellow feminist science studies scholar, Angela Willey, for inspiring my newly established will to unsettle both concepts. I am caught up sometimes in objectivating the intersubjective, that is, when I identify myself as "nonmonogamous"—as a sort of form of sexuality. Let me be clear, that I view open nonmonogamy as but one step in a process of decolonizing from compulsory settler sexuality. It is a placeholder until I/we find other ways of framing and naming more diffuse, sustainable and intimate relations.

As an **Indigenous** thinker, I am constantly translating. I see **Indigenous** thinkers across the disciplines and outside of the academy doing similar work—combining our fundamental cultural orientations to the world with new possibilities and frameworks for living and relating. Our peoples have been doing this collectively in the Americas for over five centuries, translating, pushing back against colonial frameworks, and adapting them. We've done it with respect to syncretic forms of religion and ceremony, with dress, music, language, art and performance. Why should we not also articulate other ways to lust, love, and make kin? A de-objectified reconstituting of right relations, and nurturing, healing exchanges of power seem an important next step. Within the grand scheme of things, purposeful and open nonmonogamy, and reconceiving of more just intimacies with other-than-humans seem like important next steps.

In conclusion, I return to my *tiospaye* and to Indigenous peoples, I no longer see our failures at lasting monogamy and nuclear family as failure. From where I stand it looks like most of my extended family members have more security in our small town tribal community or in the "urban Indian" community in which I spent part of my childhood, than they do in Euro-centric traditions of nuclear family and marriage. I see us deep inside the shifting walls of this colonial edifice that took most of the world's resource to build, experimenting and working incrementally with tools and technologies that we did not craft. I see us combining these with Indigenous cultural templates in any open space we can find to build lives and communities of relations that make any sense to us at all. ■