

Queer-ing single-hood intimacy(ies): resisting populist heteronormative imaginations

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Dear friend-lover-partner...

There is an intimacy in belonging to these different relationships, hyphenated together. (un)belong you must, (un)break we would, love (distance and loneliness) may find me, you and us.

I have written letters to friends, lovers, partners, to relationships that have now become distant and lost. The letter gave space to feel, write, articulate, emote intimate love, **the ambiguity of feelings**, of absented needs, and somewhat held a safe articulable space to find expression for feelings, bodies and of embodying the affect.

I write this letter, as an expression, as a desire to find a language of intimacy and connection with the diverse relationships that have held me, kept me safe, gave me love, care, kisses. I write this to make sense of their significance **beyond the limits of hetero-normative imaginations of love, intimacy, connection in a digitized, capitalized world**. I write this to be able to accept genuine love that I hold and receive, across a spectrum of relationships and attempt to articulate this experience that refuses to hold borders across these relating spaces. I write this to **acknowledge movement** across fragmented queer spaces and relationalities.

I remember the friend (including many women friends), whom I have crushed upon at some point or other, confessed too, and some who got married and moved on, from a close deep friendship to now only a birthday wishing polite one;

one whom I found on a dating app and befriended on a video call because that builds on intimacy, they said, and now I only like their social media posts because after the call they 'ghosted' me;

the friend with whom I learnt about queerness, struggles around dating scenes, practiced sharing spaces together as queer bodies and now live in



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different continents in the nostalgia of our shared lives, unable to make sense of distance and changes that come with it;

the lover/partner met through a dating app, with whom bodies were unknotted sexually and intimately and now share an undefined intimate relationship, even as the lover keeps bringing up the hastiness of the normative and I continue to resist the monotony of it, with the desire to embrace the tenderness of all of it.

I also remember the sister who is a friend, sibling, confidante holding a relationship of awareness of our difficult familial patterns with efforts to move beyond them;

that one writer friend (among many) whom I e-meet occasionally and connect over processes of creating, making art and writing poems and

some of the many momentary, transient relationships; either lived through temporary shared spaces or social media lives, that have come to exist and have begun to belong, without necessarily the expectation of loss in the relationship and yet a connection.

Intimacy through these diverse relationships seemed to have brought a **different language** of relating, sharing and embodying. A movement is found in these connections of the intersecting, clashing branches and roots of the trees, pouring into and through each other, adapting, shifting, competing and evolving across different seasons and changes in climate.

Would it be okay to say that **there is belonging in each one of them**, even if some lines of relating have shifted, changed or hold sadness in un-belonging; even if some have begun to mean creative friendships albeit momentarily; even as queer bodies who are neither just friends with benefits, nor partners but somewhere in-between.

Would it be important to say that **there is 'romance' in these relationships**, resisting them from definitions of romantic love **VS** friendships? Not seeing romance in the sense of what pop culture or Bollywood songs have served us, unilaterally and uniformly, but through an expansion of imaginations of intimate selves.

Belonging, then, in ways **where queer intimacy takes us towards**,

in ways of holding related-ness across diverse relational spaces;

in ways of **flattening relationship hierarchy** (romantic **over** friendship; sexual **over** platonic);

and carrying around the messiness, multiple-ness of experiences, lives with belonging together, even if, temporarily and adjacently.

This is not easy or simple, at all.

There is a grandness to the capacious-ness of it all but there is also a single queer self that navigates through digital dating realms, continuing to un-define the question 'what are you looking for', refusing to be defined by the respectability of the hetero-normative conventions, holding refusal towards (un)neatly packaged anti-minority bumble profiles.

It **also comes with un-belongingness**, with feelings of loneliness, isolation, fatigue, disillusionment in a raging, dying, collapsing and an increasingly demanding 'capitalist productive' world. In a world that is ready to kill, invisibilize, and erase bodies that don't deem fit, that are minority, that do not fulfill the binary systems, that are queer, immigrant, disabled bodies.

An Instagram story by Vikramaditya Sahai (Vqueer) also tells us that queerness and loneliness are deeply tied together, because of the "inventiveness" of this work- of creating, building, sustaining diverse relational spaces. They add that like any other work, it produces alienation, disassociation, of existing in a capitalist, majoritarian world. But at the same time, it also holds joy and love of making these spaces for each other.

This is what makes sense, and this letter as if, wishes to become witness to an articulation of a 'coming OUT' story

what do ideas of intimacy, really mean

in existing,

doing rounds in my body,

of confusion, grief, exhaustion, desire too, unable in

making sense, of needs that did Not fit A box

romantic or friendship, sexual or platonic, only sexual or only non-sexual

what does the body need, what do you desire, what do you want – 'I want them all and none'

how is that even possible?

questions are haunting

add to this muddle, social media asks

oh what about the friendship breakup? they need attention too,

yet the binary- partner vs friend, sexual vs platonic, still exist,
because the majoritarian agendas remain the same,
intimacy, that is, joyous, grieving, pleasurable, saddening,
inconsistent, constantly changing, drifting, evolving,
doesn't hold me tight, or bound me in a box.

find joy in multiple spaces, networks, journeys

continues to be a desire

existing as a fantasy of make and break at tandem

The questions, words, thoughts have been visiting in encounters with separations, anxieties, in break-ups and patch ups, in relationship changes, in experiences with loneliness and singleness.

I have wanted to write on **contemplations around queer, singlehood intimacies found in diverse relationships and spaces**, with and sometimes without, the experiences of connections and freedoms, and trapped within the unchanging tight frameworks.

Yet, this also felt like a loop and I kept looping. Because my story doesn't decide to sit in a non-single, monogamous, heteronormative, neurotypical desire's neat container. It wanted to explode and yet be quiet, it was raging and also grieving, it **wanted to be everywhere and also nowhere**, and hold on to hope in hopelessness, sadness and death.

I began reading literature, articles, and more and more stories, letters, personal essays, visual narratives/maps across varied forms, art works. I surrounded myself with finished and unfinished thoughts, contemplations and struggles around meaning-making for pleasure, desire, intimacy, kink, friendships, partnerships. All of this seemed to open a gamut of **co-existing narratives of playfulness and joy**, of discovery and learnings around being and being present, in bodies, in in-betweens, in confusions, in grief. Attempts at co-existing amidst violation of desires, erasure of bodies and solidification of norms.

Nevertheless, I feel they were presenting to me **an archive of intimacy-ies**. The archive allowing meanings to exist with limitations, boundaries and yet promises, in taking queer chances, risks and making resistances. However, existing in **a world that is digital-hybrid-fascist**, continuing to be within the trope of the heteronormative and patriarchal possibilities, binaries, controls. With the tech-world being increasingly aligned with far-

right politics (the alliance of Donald Trump with Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg etc. to name a few), the illusion of digital intimate choices only proliferates desires based on the normative and binary fixated ideals (anti-trans, anti-queer, anti-immigrant narratives significantly run this digital show).

So in this archive, I opened up with the ideas around **techno-intimacy** (Geeta Patel) or/and **techno-sociality** (Escobar). In her book *Risky Bodies & Techno-Intimacy: Reflections on Sexuality, Media, Science, Finance* (2016), Patel explores the concept of “techno-intimacy”, examining how science and technology shape our daily intimate experiences. Similarly, techno-sociality (Escobar, 2018) also as an idea contends that technology is a social phenomenon, in a social-political context, in which technology shapes and manifests itself, leaning towards a debunking of the online VS offline existence.

This helped in **unpacking the neutrality** accorded to the tech and digital world and how it continues to shape our lives systemically, intimately and violently. The human connection that can now be deemed ‘intelligible’ with intermediations via layers of tech, colored with societal gendered norms and biases, are embedded in ways our intimacies are formed. I remember this one time; I had matched with a man on Bumble (a dating app) and just by looking at my digital photos on my profile (which are nowhere close to me as a person, my body, and my infinite desires, dreams, hopes) had said that “you look heavily busted, it must hurt your back, no”. In his apparent concern for my back, I could gauge the limited perception around a fat woman’s body that became embedded in this virtual encounter.

This was established when meeting with **digital intimacy** seemed to be taking away the binary between the online and the offline, the physical and the digital, through an intimate connection with the phone, laptop, internet, social media, apps etc. Bishakha Datta (2023) calls this blurring of the physical and digital as the “phygital”, something which has deliberated love across Indo-Pak borders, through social media or gaming platforms, landing people in prisons amid cross-border fundamentalist enmities.

But Smita V. (2022), also asks the question, “**who is afforded this intimacy**”. The question of access is significant, when the boundaries and norms of digital intimacy are laid out, on the terms of who can afford internet access, smartphone, data packs, or access to dating apps. Even with similar access norms, it can mean different things for different bodies. There is also presence of regulation, surveillance and violence that comes

from society, state, law especially for women, queer, trans bodies. The EROTICS study (2010) highlighted how women were negotiating risks to be on the internet, allowing themselves sexual expression but with self-imposed limits mediated through social and legal scrutiny.

Smita V. also highlights the tussle between intimacy and privacy, especially because of the amount of data being collected and therefore a constant negotiation of intimacy. For instance, on dating apps, there is an incessant negotiation of safety, of desires, of choices, that is conjured through the ticking of boxes (as if desires could so easily be boxed) and giving access to one's own data.

At the same time, talking about **reconfigurations**, an Inter-Asia research project across 4 metropolitan cities in Asia, tries to understand young women's experiences of intimacy amidst rapid expansion of digital technology. It talks about making of "zones of intimacy" and the digitally mediated rearrangement of relationships with public-private, inner-outer, self-social. Intimacies are being redefined across language, heteronormative institutions, expressions, with a recognition of diverse spectrum of intimacy (Niranjana, T. 2022). In the sharing of one or ten memes throughout the day, me and my friend(s) heart each other, laugh out loud, also cry and share our love and sadness with each other, all in emoji's and GIFs.

In other news, a campaign by Tinder (another dating app) called the "Single, Not Sorry", in Western countries (across several European countries, UK, USA) along with various initiatives in India, engaged with contemporary gender politics. Morris & Dobson (2023) analysis showed how these campaigns promote narratives of women's empowerment and autonomy, **tailoring it to different cultural contexts**. In Western contexts, the emphasis is on individualism and the celebration of single life, especially for women, whereas in India, the focus is on navigating traditional norms and embracing modern dating practices, keeping the patriarchal and heteronormative consensus in order.

This is quite clear by the **internet romance scandals** in India that have often involved emotional and financial scams, sextortion, and even murder, with women and queer individuals most at risk. This has only fueled further protectionist control and surveillance, especially by right-wing groups. Meanwhile the digital incel spaces, including Currycels (a subgroup of Indian and South Asian incels), perpetuated on the belief that men have sexual rights over women's bodies, have become thriving grounds for misogyny, hate crimes, racial and caste oppression, and

extremist views. This is the **dark populist reality of the digital intimate world**.

But then, love and desire are also ambiguously sought, **packaged in sanitized black and white boxes**. I should have my best sexy photos because attraction is a marketplace, where self-worth is measured by calculated engagement and accountability trends like 'ghosting' or 'breadcrumbing' are a hit. Imaginations of love relationships follow social media generated algorithm-ized standards, shadowing biases, limits, insecurities. A dating profile is apt capitalist technology to restrain and shrink spaces for art, protest, resistances, because why do you need to fight for rights, when you can find love by swiping right and left.

And also, the **status quo remains preserved**. Even as a queer person when I choose to see only women and non-binary folx on my Bumble account (the dating app that seemingly gives an option of choice, a representative illusion of the gender diverse spectrum), continues to show me only men and sometimes hetero couples except a few otherwise. The plot is clear-market the gender diverse in the name of inclusion, but the script continues to remain same-old.

Even if matches are found, and after deep conversations on Whatsapp and Instagram profile stalking, questions around a queer monogamous future ('Are you not looking for anything serious?') would be raised and then 'let's call it a day, we are on very different paths'. And a match is un-matched. Freedom found is betrayed in **the systemic and brahminical-patriarchal scheme** of 'one partner, one marriage, one love, one caste, one class'. And then "A Tinder Fatigue" follows, as named in #100 Tinder Tales, a curated crowd sourced project by artist Indu Harikumar, collecting Tinder stories through Facebook and Instagram.

So then, **how are digital/techno intimacies being queer-ed**. What is allowed and not allowed. What promises could hold potential and what are false and violent promises. What is being pushed and controlled by the systemic, radical forces. What queer representations in the digital/tech world serve primarily as marketing gimmicks and what would really help in finding dates and navigating desires. What adjustments, "affordances" and curations that we would do as queer folx to create "Queer publics", as Lauren Berlant (1995) would tell us. "Amalgamating politics and feeling", Berlant had said. In creating '**affective architectures**' as radically common and part of our everyday lives, queer lives, queer methodologies are attempting to shift the heteronormative narrative.

Sangya Project, based in India, might be one of the examples, for **opening up safe, creative, intimate dialogues** in the Indian and South Asian context, to build queer infrastructures of holding diversity, emotions, and complexity. It is founded by a queer and poly family, aiming to create destigmatized, trauma-informed, kink-affirmative education, conversations, and also products.

Is something/anything making sense? Do you think? Where do we go from here? I have been thinking about letters and how do we close letters. Do we close them at all? What do we leave behind, lingering? Maybe a **promise to write and receive again**. Maybe with the love of imagining futures and dreams together. In thinking of these, I thought, could we envision new scripts, **honoring learnings from existing systems of knowledge** and intentions that we would like to hold, towards freedom, pleasure and intimate forms of existence.

So as Anne Philpott and Paromita Vohra share in “Finding the cosmos of intimacies...” (2024) and the Pleasure manifesto by ‘Agents of Ishq’ (a multi-media platform on sex, love and desire), do you think we could **visualize a manifesto**, of sorts, to radically remember, record learnings; to imagine, create, curate visions; to hope, desire, name multiplicity and difference; and to curiously fall in love with varied maps of vulnerabilities and mediums of intimacies.

- ✦ Michel Foucault in ‘Friendship as a way of life’ (1997), talks about friendship as that inventive relationship that still continues to be **formless and without codes**, even though carrying unease. Doesn’t this sum up it all? The promise and love of friendship intimacies. Disclaimer: no need to ‘romanticize’ it though; it is not fix-it-all, just one-of-many and many.
- ✦ Anna Maria, in Queerbeat media (March 2024), shares about queer-disabled imaginations of intimacy, which is conceptualized as ‘**access intimacy**’. The phrase ‘access intimacy’ was coined by Mia Mingus, a queer disabled writer and educator, as an “elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else gets your access needs.” Creating suitable, comfortable environments, without a person laboring to explain and justify inclusion of their needs. Can this be possible to hope with thoughts of creating space across, digital mediated spaces and encounters? Important to remember this.
- ✦ In queer friendships, Shruti Sunderraman (May 2024) says, the blurring of the gender binary leaves room to **democratize care**. Also very importantly, the author recognizes the exclusions created by caste, on who you can and cannot love, desire, or be friend. Learning to **subvert**, dialogue, learn and

unlearn in friendships. Learning to create space, share space and take space.

- ✦ The epistolary work of 'The Breaks' (2021) by Julietta Singh, gives us forms of **radical dwelling**. The 'architecture' of a domestic space is flung to its head, in inhabiting a heterosexual nuclear queer platonic parenting model to her daughter, with a significant reorganizing and redefining of what could be the familial, inclusive of play, queerness and experimentation. 'The Breaks' is trying to teach us and **learn other modes of living**, diverse forms of expression and respecting different possibilities and futures. Alternate utopias continue to be a promising spatial reality.
- ✦ Ramazi Fawaz, in the book 'Queer Forms' (2022), is helping weave **the practices of 'forming'**, pushing us to find the courage of interpreting, reinventing and taking risks in "the continual practice of forming that leads to the constitution of new kinds of collectivity". Fluidity in forms and forming teaches us to move towards receiving, negotiating and responding to the world's diversity.
- ✦ The AOI's (Agents of Ishq) Manifesto on the **political power of pleasure** has become my most favorite. It is rooting for the '**sensual as knowledge**'; keeping space for ambivalences and maybes- across spaces, mediums, messages; questioning hierarchies and assumptions; opening the language of love, curiosity, art, seduction; recognizing difference; trusting kindness, being many and spontaneous things at one time and a non-linear slate. Could we learn to move towards non- hierarchical, sensual, emotional, experiential communications.
- ✦ And the promise of queering singlehood intimacies, offered by Tan Qian Hui's thesis (2021) on **queer artfulness** as a "liminal and promiscuous assembly of ideas/places/subjects/objects may serve to subvert such dichotomous alignments". They contend that it offers opportunity for elements/entities to be dis/re-assembled and be found in the interstitial spaces, encounters between, across and beyond the binaries. Let us find intimacy in the in-betweens.

I started writing this letter, when I have been lonely, when I have dreamt of our proximity, when I needed articulation. I have wanted to find expression to my messy, confused moments; of the conflictual sadnesses and of my changing, ambivalent relationships. I want to keep moving, signposting learnings and knowledges of our histories and decentering uniform intimacies, on my way. I want to desire, wish, embrace our love and care for each other. I want to embody our unsure feelings and emotions. I want the 'erotic' and raging movement to guide us to stand

against singular homogenized populist narratives and towards practices of love, play and difference.

This hope is my gift for you, for us.

with love always, g

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