

CLÉMENCE X. CLEMENTINE
AND ASSOCIATES FROM THE
INFINITE VENOM GIRL GANG

AGAINST THE COUPLE-FORM

“No more mothers, women and girls, let’s de-
stroy the families!” *was an invitation to
the gesture of breaking the expected chains of
events,
to release the compressed potentialities.
It was a blow to the fucked up love affairs, to
ordinary prostitution.
It was a call at overcoming the couple as elemen-
tary unit in the management of
alienation.*

— Tiqqun, “How to?”

Libidinal flows cut through the social world. Amorous and sexual relations do not exist in some domain safely taped off from the rest of society. Rather they are constituent elements of nearly every aspect of social life. Desire flows and circulates amongst places of employment, intellectual debates, political organizing, artistic circles, playgrounds, and cemeteries. The elderly patient grabs at the breast of a nurse hunched over him. A governmental official strips his newly hired intern down to her leopard print thong during an important briefing in his office. The incarcerated man holds his hand up to the glass of the visiting booth, attempting to touch his wife after twenty years of their bodily separation. These flows of libidinal desire operate within and amongst broader social mechanisms, such that they help animate the dynamics of economic and political life. Often a locus of politics, desire permeates the so-called “public” terrain. Patriarchy incessantly subjects these flows of desire to a system of organization, a logic that subverts the desiring flows against themselves. This channeling and organization of sex and amorous relations I will refer to as the logic of the couple — that which funnels, simplifies, and reduces amorous desire to the needs of patriarchy within the capitalist mode of production. This logic assumes that women have but a single site for the fulfillment of their social

and sexual desires, that being a romantic relationship with a man. The couple functions as the threshold, the admission fee, the golden key that allows a woman to participate in the social world. The couple promises that, upon entering its grasp, one will no longer suffer from alienation, from isolation, from boredom, from rootlessness. The couple grants a woman personhood and social visibility. She obtains a title, a temporality, a space through the couple. Marriage enshrines this logic and its perpetuation of the specific form assumed by patriarchy under capitalism.

The action and the discourse within patriarchal social relations emerge from a group of men interested in each other. In intellectual, political, or artistic circles, a cadre of men often monopolize the ability to participate in the production of events or ideas, which is not to say that they do anything particularly interesting. Patriarchy has systematically excluded women from *the action and the discourse*, consigning them as a class to perform the unwaged work of social reproduction. Rather than an essentialist concept, the category of woman stems from a gendered mode of exploitation and relegates certain types of labor to a private, unwaged sphere. While women busily work waged jobs in addition to performing domestic work, men create the sphere of public life in order to insulate themselves from coming to terms with their banality and superfluity.

Men grant women access to *the action and the discourse* by developing sexual relations with men from this circle. Un-coupled women, those loose dogs, remain on the periphery, always at a distance from the space where debates, projects, and events are played out. The couple acts as a social form that requires women, in order to participate in whatever practice or domain they desire, to attach themselves to men via

the couple mechanism. The couple-form often constitutes the single device that protects a woman from the misogyny of a group of men. *Who's that? Oh, I think it is Zach's girlfriend, Ben's ex.* Women become known for their relationships to men, not for their contributions to intellectual or political life. Women's lives diminish to their roles as the *wife of R* or the *mistress of J*, not poets, theorists, or revolutionaries in their own right.

Women choose different strategies when faced with patriarchal social relations and the logic of the couple. A woman who goes after a man with power in a certain milieu. A woman who always needs a man around and will take whatever she can get. A woman who revels in the confidence of being so-and-so's girlfriend. A woman who cheerfully sits on the "girlfriend couch" during band practice. A woman who is depressed during the stretches in between boyfriends. A woman who views the man she is with as a mirror of her own prowess. A woman who holds out for a man impressive enough to advance her. A woman whose intellectual labor is monopolized by staying up late writing apologetic emails to her boyfriend rather than drafting her own poems, theory, or architectural plans.

The logic of the couple mediates a woman's relationship to herself and her relationships to other women. In the production of herself as a woman, she remains constantly aware of the need to make herself desirable, to make herself worthy of a man's desire, to be fit for a man's love. The *go on, girl! You're worth it!* dimension of contemporary female subjectivation has coded women's individual servitude as their self-realization. Post-1950s waves of feminism have reconfigured women's position in capitalism and in relation to men without necessarily making it any less oppressive. The pseudo-empowerment of women to sleep around, wear lipstick, and buy themselves chocolate if they want to does not amount to any significant change to their structural exploitation. Do the femme fatale, the burlesque dancer, the woman executive have a man, or does a man have her? A woman may completely internalize the demands of the couple, reproducing herself as attractive, desired, and sought after - traits that must be produced - even while railing against the sexually predatory male. The logic of the couple has strengthened the single woman's direct relationship to the commodity, the imperative to produce herself

as a commodity. Just as in the sphere of circulation — where allegedly buyers and sellers exchange equivalents — the single woman trades hours of primping, toning, and plucking for the ability to be purchased by a man at the meat market. The couple mediates relations between women to the extent that they interact not to deepen their connection to each other, but to gossip about boys, to process their relationships with men, to trade technologies of femininity whereby they can improve their status with men. In this way, the couple-form haunts women when alone or with other women.

One must not dissociate the desire for a sexual relationship with a man from patriarchy's stacked deck. Who are these boyfriends? What does a woman think having one will get her? In short, everything. The couple stands in for desire itself, after enshrined, funneled, and reduced to a single object by patriarchy. Rather than sprouting yearnings for negation or overcoming, young girls plan their weddings while still in kindergarten. Why does a woman sell out for some wank? She gives herself over to the couple in the hope of mitigating her alienation and increasing her sense of "security," in the same way that a citizen gives herself over to a repressive state that she trusts to keep her secure. While perhaps not visible at the outset, the couple will further alienate and isolate her. She will have to answer to her husband in addition to her boss, entering into a relation of hyper-exploitation. Comrade Valerie Solanas heeds the atomizing function of the couple: "Our society is not a community, but merely a collection of isolated family units. Desperately insecure, fearing his woman will leave him if she is exposed to other men or to anything remotely resembling life, the male seeks to isolate her from other men and from what little civilization there is, so he moves her out to the suburbs, a collection of self-absorbed couples and their kids."¹ How much can a woman forgive? How much does she let slide? How long does she tolerate things being amiss, rotten, fucked up? She avoids breaking up at great costs because disobeying the logic of the couple will stymie her access to the precise mechanisms that supposedly save her from this contemptuous existence. The semblance of care and a promise of future

1 Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Verso Books, 2004) 48.