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## There's an App for That? : The Unicorns of Speculative Design

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In this presentation, I want to go back to the roots of speculative design, speculative fiction. Science fiction/fantasy as a genre attempts to transcend the limits of our current society and reimagine worlds with radically different socio-technical and political realities. The magic of fiction is that it rarely stays put. We see it from our Star Trek-inspired cellphones and Gibson-inspired internet to cosplaying at fan conventions and online fan fiction. These imaginary worlds bleed into our own.

What if this could be done more intentionally? Imagine living on a commune where fiction becomes reality. A community where people could test fictional social and political rules and transform their findings into an open source software that could be downloaded, made into instructional manuals or programmed into apps and put into practice in mainstream society. It might even influence future court cases and legislation. If you were inspired by the free love religion in Robert Heinlein's 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* you could put it into practice. If you love Peter S Beagle's *Last Unicorn*, why not bring unicorns into the world?

This is not a thought experiment; it really happened, from the apps to the Unicorns that are made by surgically manipulating the the horn buds of baby goats. In a 2013 interview with Morning Glory Zell Ravenheart, the High Priestess of the Church of All Worlds, a church based on *Stranger in a Strange Land*, she says:

“I have done things no one has done in a very long time (raising unicorns); I even invented a word (polyamory) that lacked a satisfactory name for itself, and seen it adopted ---not only by mainstream movements but by the oxford english dictionary... I, and my brothers and sisters, have left legacies in the form of political and religious activism that will make it more difficult to prosecute people like us in the future.”

(<https://books.google.ca/books?id=GU6AAgAAQBAJ>)

What follows is the strange story of how a small American cult has influenced pop culture, app design, and even Canadian court cases and how this can illuminate some of the possible blinds spots in speculative design and anti-violence theorizing in Canada.

The church changed a lot since its founding by Oberon Zell, in 1962, transforming from a community based on Ayn Rand and Robert Heinlein into a neopagan religion that reproduces magic rituals from fantasy novels. One thing that remained constant throughout the church's long history was a belief in free love without institutional prescriptions and jealousy, just as Heinlein describes. The only rule: radical honesty between partners and mutually agreed on boundaries.

That is, until Morning Glory's husband Oberon became lovers with a young woman named Lisa in 1989. Morning Glory instantly disapproved of her. Whenever the two were in conflict Morning Glory would tell Lisa that what she was doing was against the rules. One day Lisa answered, essentially: “Oh yeah, where are these rules written down?” In response, Morning

Glory penned her now famous essay: "A Bouquet of Lovers: Strategies for responsible Open Relationships" and in May 1990 she published it in her magazine, the Green Egg, at the time the biggest NeoPagan magazine in the world. This essay was the first time the word 'polyamorous' was found in print.

In her piece there is plenty of discussion of ethics, honesty, openness, love and infinite possibility-- for couples. The rules are there to protect the married couple who are "primary partners" and have mutually agree to have satellite or secondary partners. Primary partners are paramount and may veto or approve secondary partners. "Nothing can break up a relationship faster than bringing in a new person who is hostile or inconsiderate to the other Primary partner." Primary partners must always put their spouse first, and when there are two women, the man should let the secondary know she is not to try and "cut the little filly right out of the herd." Morning Glory was subsequently featured in documentaries and interviews, and a sexuality conference at UC Berkeley.

This is where the very literal world building we've seen so far gets filtered into popular culture. Polyamory breaks free of the church of all worlds and becomes the general name for secular open relationships. In 1992, a woman named Jennifer Wesp, with no affiliation with the church, started an online newsgroup alt.polyamory. One of the first postings on this newsgroup was Morning Glory's rules of the road. These rules are divorced from context, and discussed as though they were ahistorical humanist ethical guidelines about sexual equality between married people. The couple-centric nature became naturalized, even invisibilized. The rules have reproduced into dozens of self-help guides, and online communities. Polyamory is now cast as the feminist secular and 'ethical' alternative to cheating or promiscuity. Over the past 20 years virtually every major news outlet has done a story on polyamory. These stories always assume a married couple and frame polyamory as a way to save your marriage.

In 2014, the *Poly Life* app was released. This is a real polyamorous app that also codes in a primary couple and secondary relationships, and allows primary partners to update relationship contracts and approve of secondary partners. (<http://www.thepolylife.com/>)

Strangely, even the unicorn makes a surprise appearance, divorced from its original context. In interviews, Morning Glory often mentions her unicorns and polyamory as both being examples of fiction coming to life. For some men in secular polyamory communities, "the unicorn" also refers to a bisexual woman who wants to date you and your wife, because she is beautiful and rare.

In British Columbia in 2011, there was a Supreme Court case about mormon polygamy that put the legality of this kind of relationship to the test. In preparation for the court case, the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association created a webpage that called themselves "the poly majority." (<http://polyadvocacy.ca/majority/>) They contrast themselves with muslim polygynists, who they claim are backwards, misogynist and an unrepresentative minority. In contrast, "We are the poly majority: modern, secular, egalitarian polyamory. We are NICE:

negotiated, individualized, consensual, and egalitarian.” Unlike muslims polygynists, they argue that they have “Canadian Values”:

“Like most Canadians, we do the best we can do for our kids and our communities. We spend hours in chilly arenas cheering on our budding Gretzkys... We volunteer for local community groups, sing in the choir, bake cookies for the bake sale and read to our kids’ classes.” (<http://polyadvocacy.ca/and-what-about-the-children/>)

The judge agreed. Justice Bauman explained that he was concerned that if polyamory were legal that Canada would become a destination for polygamous families from Africa, India, and the middle east, and that he was concerned that Indigenous Canadians might renew the practice (which had originally been adopted to protect young girls from residential schools through the marriage exemption) and that this may well overwhelm the European humanist values that makes Canada an egalitarian society. There were some Canadians who practice polyamory, however, who still have Canadian values. As long as they do not have a marriage ceremony, he opined that the law should not apply to them.

Bringing this back to the topic of our overarching panel, ahistoricized polyamory has been held up by academic theorists and advocates as a way of dismantling domestic violence by combating abusive patriarchal heteronormative relationship patterns and empowering women. Hillok and Mulé argue that while it is not yet perfect, polyamory “deliberately centers utopic possibilities for a more equitable future.” They argue that polyamorous communities have deep liberatory potential to “carve out space for loving, equitable relationships outside of a cissexist, and heterosexist structures” (197).

Utopian possibilities for whom? If communities of colour are policed, is this practice open to them? Elizabeth Sheff’s ethnographic studies find that polyamorous communities accidentally reproduced hegemonic masculinities and heteronormative structures. The communities are largely educated, middle class, and white. Gay men are marginalized or excluded, bisexual women are fetishized, a man with two women is idealized, and married women are shouldering the emotional labour and day to day physical organizational burdens that require poly scheduling apps. When the inspiration for design comes with stereotypical representations then these get built into the socio-technical matrix of our design. The optimistic futurity of the Church of All Worlds is the dystopian now.

This points to the limits of this kind of speculative design in practice. It matters who is doing the designing and the discourses and experiences they are bringing to their work. What gets lost in the speculative fictional musings is real histories. Lived practices and experiences are often stranger, more diverse, and more wonderful than fiction. Queer communities, especially working class and communities of colour, have long been negotiating radical and diverse solutions to relationships. As Samuel Delany argues, the institutions that were built to accommodate gay sex prior to stonewall produced a complex and dynamic set of socialsexual norms and cultures of consent that are radically different from heteronormative ones. Gender non-conforming people, and working class butches and femmes have long challenged

normative assumptions about relationships. Grassroots communities of sexual assault and domestic violence survivors have also found ways to invent and reinvent various sexual solutions outside of patriarchal monogamy, yet their stories rarely get traction in mainstream discourse because their stories of sexual agency do not match with the narratives of good and worthy victims. These communities point to multiple ways of being and knowing.

This is not to idealize these communities but to ground our theorizing about technosocial utopias back to the importance of representation. Science fiction and fantasy often suffers from failures of imagination. Writers can imagine orcs, dragons and space aliens in worlds entirely white and heterosexual. These white imaginary spaces are not informed by the real, diverse solutions to problems marginalized communities have created. Gayle Rubin reminds us that we discursively draw a line in the sand between what is considered good sex-- sex that is reproductive, confined to loving relationships, and private-- and bad sex-- public, promiscuous, non-reproductive. Only those on the good side to the line are afforded moral complexity. Yet being out of the spotlight of respectability allows for unlikely alliances and diverse practices to flourish. Poly advocates work to be considered ethical by pointing to their committed loving relationships and disavowal of casual sex and swinging on the one hand, and imagined muslim patriarchs on the other, throwing communities of colour and queer communities under the bus. Whiteness functions as a protective shield to allow some bodies to experiment outside of the prescribed monogamous norms and to demarcate which relationships are cast as egalitarian and ethical and which should be subject to state surveillance and policing. It is not an accident that this language is reproduced in the BC supreme court ruling.

Queer theory has long warned against unbridled optimistic futurity. As Lee Edelman says in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, "Our world building can't protect us against the worlds others build, which may or may not have room for us, or find us consistent with their survival. Nor can we be sure that the worlds we build don't work against our flourishing." He suggests thinking through optimistic futurity with ideas that counter it. Eve Sedgwick cautions against paranoid readings that can know in advance all of the dystopian challenges of the present and future. Sedgwick suggests a reparative reading practice, that allows for holding open the possibility of surprise, both wonderful and devastating, to discover that our past could have gone differently and our future is more open than we think. We need to find ways to hold open up the possibilities for complex and diverse representation, lived experiences and abjected knowledge now if we are going to make a more just future not hampered by majority blind spots.