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In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief

Pavithra Prasad

Queer loss may not count because *it precedes a relation of having*.

—Sara Ahmed, *Queer Feelings*¹

Queerness can certainly arise from the representation of bodies; however, it also exists through illegibility.

—Hentyle Yapp, *Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method*²

When I emigrated to the United States, my family as I knew it was already dying, although I did not know it at the time. Perhaps grief colors my memories with a utopic wash, but I mourn a queer world that quietly extinguished itself before I even knew to name queerness—before the caste-based patriarchy of India and later, the violent settler-colonialism of the United States, demanded I define myself using a language of exclusion and alienation. My family, despite its cisheteronormative exoskeleton, grew fleshy interiors that kept the queer daughter, the genderqueer cousin, the gay uncle, and the polyamorous folks close to the heart. This was the family that taught me to forge kinship outside our caste, class, and religion, to make others part of our family; to perform the caring labor of kinship for anyone who sought it. This is the family that dissolved in a series of traumatic breaks following the deaths of the people who raised me. The pain of my paternal grandparents’ deaths a few months apart from each other, during my first year in graduate school, still aches in my bones fifteen years later. The last time I saw them, it was for a year of caregiving, of needles, catheters, wheelchairs, as I helped care for them in the last stages of terminal illness. I had shaved off my long hair, and they said somewhat cautiously, *nallaa*

thaane irruku—“it’s nice only, no?” I loved them for that. I felt their loss as one related to the queerest parts of me, as I struggled to reforge family in the United States. Because ironically, or perhaps predictably, mourning my family of origin allowed me to begin my process of coming out.

Folded into my own mourning is a communal ache I carry with my chosen queer family (forged through collegiality, celebration, and caregiving) with whom I share the enduring pain of resisting, deflecting, or being unintelligible to cisheteronormative conceptions of family and kinship. I hold in the folds of my particular grief, space for those whose traumatic breaks from family are far more violent than mine. And when I see allies at Pride parades giving out “Free Mom Hugs” and “Free Dad Hugs,” I know intimately how that touch might recuperate us from the pain of losing blood family in myriad ways. Because as queer people, we know loss as an inevitable part of becoming queer. Queer kinship heals these wounds in ways that are immeasurable. We hold each other in relation not because we know the detailed contours of each other’s pain, but because we see in them an interstitial quality that mirrors our own. Perhaps that is why, when we face loss and grief, our chosen family can grieve with us without having had the same attachments or traumas. I share with my queer family, forms of grief that remain veiled; forms of grief that are minoritized, not just because they are the lived realities of queer minorities, but because they are made minor to queer people themselves. I think of queer grief as a response not just to death, but also to the violence of relational endings. For when we lose family as a queer person, for better or worse, we lose entire worlds that made us who we are.

The labor of queer kinship lives in these affective interstices, working to not only offer material and emotional support, but also to recalibrate our politics of queer relation. The very “minority” of this labor is devastating—because we cannot fully know the grief of others’ familial loss, we generate instead what Erin Manning names, “minor gestures,”³ ways of perceiving and being that defy translation into dominant catalogues of meaning. What other proof can there be of this embodied grief shared between chosen family? Rather than seek a language for these gestures, we might see them as ways of feeling down⁴—the kind of queer melancholia,⁵ which in recognizing the political valances of our abjection, recuperates and animates us once again. It makes life, and grief, not “good” but bearable.⁶ Cisheteronormative orientations desperately try to control and name this recuperative melancholia as a pathology of queerness—depression, anxiety, trauma, addiction, codependence. But that’s where it fails to recognize minoritarian affects as constitutive of queer healing. In the cisheteronormative archives of loss and grief, these queer affects emerge as what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls “minor threats,”⁷ which can only be catalogued as absences or intrusions. The negative spaces where narrative details are expected but do not appear, are

significant not only to honor issues of privacy, but also because their absence marks their political relation to the norm. The unknowability of queer kinship's affective terrain refutes the appetite of the hegemonic archive. It refuses the compulsion to reveal itself, to explain, to come out.

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We have a sense of collective communal grief that reflects how queer forms of kinship surpass normative formations of filial relations. The violence visited on queer and trans people is often felt as violence against us all.⁸ For, as Aaron C. Thomas writes, “when violence designed to end queer lives erupts, it seems clear to me that our kinships are based in blood after all.”⁹ Although public forms of mourning attempt to make the ephemerality of queer grief tangible,¹⁰ what of more interior grief that remains illegible in everyday life? Do we record them as fugues, absences, negative spaces?¹¹ How are intimate forms of queer loss rendered minor and perpetually marginal? Unlike death that can be memorialized in the homonationalist public sphere and brought into a field of public recognition, other forms of queer loss are unwelcome interlopers in the logic of shared mourning, hidden away because they are unintelligible *as queer loss*.

So how do we contend with the political potential of the minoriness of queer grief that subverts and resists cisheteronormative appropriation, even while it is relegated to the margins of legibility? How do we track it across our experiences of queer kinship? In complicating the perception of this minoriness beyond its relational identity as an affect of minoritarian subjectivity, I take up Hentyle Yapp's call to attend to the minor as a method, which, “functions by directing us to the major logics and foundations that construct how minor subjects are understood.”¹² A minor method therefore might point us not to the specifics of queer affects—how to name them, translate them, and record them—but to the specters of cisheteronormativity that pathologize or attempt to cure or control forms of queer grief that make up queer kinship. In my excavation of queer kinship in times of grief, what I dig up is not a mournable queer narrative, but the ways in which the interiority of queer affects evade perception in the forms afforded by scholarly inscription. What remains is this document—an artifact of legibility and disciplinarity, which remarks upon itself as a failed archive of queer experience. It is as one might say to an illegible queer subject, with acceptance if not understanding, *nallaa thaane irruku?*—“it's nice only, no?”

Under conditions of communal or personal duress, queer kinship itself is pathologized as the inability to assimilate to a cisheteronormative ideal. A paranoid inspection of queer affective bonds manifests as a kind of viral fear (fear of both, the pathogenic virus and the notion of queerness as contagion¹³). Cisheteronormative responses to absorbed pain between queer kin range from

the quotidian “why is that your problem?” and “maintain your boundaries,” to the more insidious “blood is thicker than cum” or “watch out, they’ll suck you dry.” In particular, queer kinship emerges in the cisheteronorm as a detriment to healing. Sometimes our own complicity in defaulting to cisheteronormative economies of care shows up in our resentment of exhaustion, in our anger towards institutions that were never designed to support emotional diversity. Or, when the melancholia of being single, or being in a partnership with a straight person, or separating from a polyamorous relationship, conjures the specter of homonormativity,¹⁴ without which these losses cannot be mourned.

Grieving the rupture of queer kinship itself is intelligible to the cishetero gaze, perhaps only when filtered through institutionalized cisheteronormative codes such as death, divorce, property loss, and monogamy. The death of a partner is mournable, but the death of a friend is not. A divorce is mournable, but the break-up of a polyamorous relationship is not. The sale of a house is mournable, but the loss of a queer home is not. A tragic event is mournable, but chronic depression from enduring microaggressions and erasures is not. The absence of “diversity” is mournable, but the departure of a queer person from an institution is not. I make these distinctions not to legitimize a strict binary of valid grief, but rather to point to intimately experienced forms of queer loss that evade detection under the cisheteronormative regime. These marginalized losses are certainly not exclusive to queer experience, but their illegibility *as queer loss*, has a vastly different impact on how queer folx’s emotional, professional, and collective needs are seen, understood, and supported in the dominant culture.

Queer identity binds us in various configurations of kinship because this kind of family helps us survive daily microaggressions, dismissals, or invalidation by hegemonic institutions. This kind of kinship tries to divert the inevitability of minoritarian struggle. However, cis-white-heteronormativity perpetuates irrational fears around professional and personal queer kinship systems. A queer person building kinship networks in the academy is read as a troublemaker, unproductive or unprofessional, and a “problem” person whose identity becomes a pathology. A phobia of identity-driven coalitional and decolonial work in the academy is thus cast as unmeritorious, unempirical, and intellectually deficient. Furthermore, whispered accusations of paranoia, politicking, mobbing, and tribalism eviscerate the intimate caring labor of queer kinship that rescues us from institutional sicknesses. It is ironic that the necessary labors of love that render us melancholic, also keep us bound in solidarity and kinship.

Queer melancholia is thus an invitation into kinship. In queer kinships, grief is shared not just in the moment of mourning, but deeply felt as a lasting melancholic bond forged under shared duress. When one’s involvement in another’s pain is illegible (*you don’t even know them!*), it occludes the recognition of queerness as

relational, epistemological, and also embodied. When queerness is always already imbued with unknowability—even in moments of celebration, joy, or affirmation (the nutrient on which queer life has learned to survive)—queer forms of kinship are ambiguously translated through cisheteronormatively shaped rituals and spaces.¹⁵ But when our birth families disown us, when our partners leave us, when our queer families dissolve, our pain is frequently portrayed as a minor bump on the road to ideal queerness—where the absence of cisheteronormative relational codes (such as avowed monogamous partnership, marriage, or legal adoption) presumes to ascribe to queerness, a sexual and emotional promiscuity that inoculates us against pain. So at this political moment, when queer subjects are variously mournable (and celebratable), I ask if minor forms of queer grief are still unimaginable. Can our allies understand them? Do cishomonormative and cisheteronormative institutions overwhelmingly mediate the intelligibility of queer grief? What specters reanimate in our journeys through queer grief? What happens when the recuperative potential of queer melancholia is denied intelligibility? What labors of queer kinship work in dark corners, tending to despair or shame deemed unacceptable to compulsorily joyful queer life?¹⁶

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Grieving with family is littered with mundane movements. You reach for the coffee in the same way, you drop your clothes into the growing pile in the bathtub the same way, you pick up used tissues from the same nooks. But in between these motions grows a heaviness, not a burden, but an ache. Another kind of emotional routine emerges in caring for your chosen family, settling in the cracks between intention and motion. It transforms your daily tasks into rituals of mourning. The familiarity of your adult life, spent mostly living alone, is infused with another kind of solitude—those drenched moments between movements that drip over your nose, your lips, your tongue, till they muffle the garbled words of comfort lodged in your throat. My loved one and I hold the throbbing pain of their loss of queer family between us. It permeates the space between them and me, like the cobwebs that slowly accumulate in corners of my apartment. Its webs reach out from both our bodies, entangling and knotting us together as my loved one sinks into refuge—and I sink with them. Our movements carry on, as we expand to contain the growing gossamer of a shared grief. My loved one is tender and I grow tender with them, as our routines continue expanding the spaces where aching lives.

In those spaces the loss also feels like a queer failure, not the spectacular or wry kind that Jack Halberstam spotlights,¹⁷ but the kind that is painful and humiliating. The kind that doesn't turn on the lights after dark. Despite José Muñoz's reminder that we are only ever perpetually approaching queerness,¹⁸

we mourn the death of a queer possibility, a practice of relationality that broke. We talk about what makes these “failures,” and we see, of course, that it is a contract with a ravenous cisheteronormativity that renders any practice of radical queerness dangerous to us. Failure only reveals itself in the excruciating details of the loss, e.g., paperwork, bills, wills—“happy objects” that promised the good life.¹⁹ We both joke seriously about being failed queers. I ask if there is any other way to be queer than to fail over and over. As I do. My own experience with a family model in which grief transforms every member, heightens my capacity to share pain, as it had so many times before in my life. Memories of old routines, of needles, catheters, wheelchairs, stretchers, come crawling back, competing with my queer kin for my strength. I shrivel even as I should remain strong, and in the depths of my own failure to adequately support them, my loved one, my sibling, my queer family, dives down to be with me. We sit together in the growing dusk, holding both our sorrows between us, and wait for some light to break.

NOTES

1. Emphasis in original. Sara Ahmed, “Queer Feelings,” *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 156.
2. Hentyle Yapp, “Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method: Anti-Oedipus, Affect, and Becoming in Yan Xing’s Kill (the) TV-Set,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5, no. 1 (2019): 167.
3. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
4. José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675–88.
5. Revising Freud’s pathologization of melancholia as the subject’s inability to complete or move on from mourning, Sara Ahmed reads queer melancholia as a recuperative modality when she writes, “the desire to maintain attachments with the lost other is enabling, rather than blocking new forms of attachment.” On the collective level this connects us via tragedies affecting people we don’t know, allowing us to form empathic attachments with them as extended kin. Public rituals of mourning extend networks of queer relationality to be virtually limitless. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 159.
6. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 120; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
7. Mimi Thi Nguyen, “Minor Threats,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015): 11–24.
8. For multiple responses to the Orlando Pulse shooting, see Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama, eds., “Queer Conversations,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 3 (2016): 95–173.

9. Aaron C. Thomas, "My Father's Pulse," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 3 (2016): 168–70.
10. As Ann Cvetkovich writes, the documentation of queer trauma "demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral." Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
11. Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, "Undoing the Alphabet: A Queer Fugue on Grief and Forgiveness," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 102–10.
12. Hentyle Yapp, "Beyond Minor Subjects toward the Minor as Method: Anti-Oedipus, Affect, and Becoming in Yan Xing's Kill (the) TV-Set," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5, no. 1 (2019): 154.
13. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Neel Ahuja, *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
14. Gust Yep, Karen Lovaas, and John Elia, "A Critical Appraisal of Assimilationist and Radical Ideologies Underlying Same-Sex Marriage in LGBT Communities in the United States," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 1 (2003): 45–64.
15. Dustin Bradley Goltz and Jason Zingsheim, "It's Not a Wedding, It's a Gayla: Queer Resistance and Normative Recuperation," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2010): 290–312.
16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
17. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
18. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
19. Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21–50.

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