

Chapter 8

Being Trans, Being Loved Clashing Identities and the Limits of Love

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INTRO

Jake: You okay?

Margot: Did you hear what that lady said to me at the bakery?

Jake: About our kids?

Margot: Yeah, she thought we were straight, Jake!

Jake: So? She thought we were straight.

Margot: You're excited!

Jake: No I'm not.

Margot: You're passing and you're excited.ⁱ

(Tales of the City, 2019: season 1, episode 1)

In the television series *Tales of the City* (2019), one of the first scenes shows a young couple in a bakery, picking up a cake they ordered for a birthday. One of them, Margot, starts talking to two children who are fascinated by the cakes on display. The mother of the children then approaches the couple asking if they had children of their own. Margot is obviously uncomfortable being asked this question, and abruptly says “not yet”.

The couple portrayed is Margot and Jake. Margot is a cis woman, Jake is a passing trans man.ⁱⁱ Margot ascribes excitement to Jake about being perceived as a heterosexual couple. As it turns out in the scene described as well as throughout the episode, Margot is not content with being perceived as heterosexual. Later in the series it becomes clear that Margot identifies as lesbian. As is apparent from the dialogue, the couple is facing an issue: since Margot is a woman who is into women, and Jake is a trans man, their sexual and gender identities do not seem to match. Margot and Jake had been together for

a while when Jake came out as trans. That is, initially, the relationship was based on the belief that Jake was a woman and that the two were in a lesbian relationship. When Jake came out as a trans man, this belief turned out to be wrong.

Tales of the City (2019) here depicts a narrative many trans people have experienced: being romantically involved with someone when coming out as trans. Sometimes, this presents the individuals in love with a challenge. Their sexual and gender identities now clash.ⁱⁱⁱ If, for example, a trans woman comes out to her heterosexual cis wife, the wife might not be able to adapt, and the trans woman might not be able to cope. That is, the heterosexual wife is into men and thus might not feel attracted to her wife any longer after she comes out, and the trans woman might not want to be with a heterosexual woman since that makes her feel like she will be perceived as a man. These are the kinds of examples I focus on in this chapter. The examples and arguments do not intend to state, however, that all romantic love between a trans person and other people (trans or cis) is doomed to fail. There are, of course, cases where someone's being trans is not an issue to the romantic love in question, for example, when a cis partner does not understand their sexual identity as rigid or definable in only one way, and the romantic love therefore remain unimpeded by one partner coming out as trans (see e.g., Morris, 1974). But in this chapter, I want to shed light on the specific complications trans people face when in love, falling in love, or being loved. This chapter considers those complications to delineate the limits of romantic love. There are normative restrictions to who and how we love, and those are the ultimate limit of romantic love for some of us – for example, for trans people. Some of the restrictions I frame as normative here include psychological responses such as sexual attraction. I consider sexual attraction to be influenced by norms, and thus possibly limited by normative restrictions, too. In this sense, a limit to romantic love means that the identity clashes I present in this chapter are (perceived to be) insurmountable obstacles to love. The obstacles are insurmountable insofar as they present challenges to the people in question that make them (a) no longer feel romantic love or (b) unable to consider (the exhibition of) romantic love to be an option. These include different cases, such as: not being open to falling in love with certain genders, not being open or able to adjust one's own sexual identity when a partner comes out as trans, not being open or able to deal with the identity struggles a partner might have after coming out as trans.

The ethics and politics around trans love are complicated.^{iv} This chapter argues that when it comes to trans love, analyzing what love is and looking at the moral psychology and philosophy of love requires considering different aspects of gender and sexual identity than when considering love between only cis people (which is the default in the moral psychology and philosophy of love

literature). If we theorize romantic love without considering trans narratives, then the issue of clashing gender and sexual identities remains unaddressed, occluding our attention to the specific kinds of restrictions that can play a role in love for trans people specifically.

First, this chapter does some brief terminological work around the terms ‘trans’ (including an insight into how this chapter conceives of gender) and ‘love’. In doing the terminological work, the chapter will already start highlighting issues in trans love. The core ideas and arguments will be presented in section 4 and 5, where I analyze the issue of identity clashes, and discuss the limits of love through such clashes. Overall, the chapter aims to provide descriptive insights rather than formulate prescriptive claims. The conclusions I draw are as follows: Romantic love is not equally accessible to everyone. Trans people face specific challenges when it comes to romantic love. In romantic love relationships, they often have to deal with their gender identity clashing with their partner’s sexual identity.^v Such identity clashes are commonly perceived as insurmountable obstacles to romantic love. The identity clashes illuminate normative restrictions of romantic love that often remain un(der)examined in theorizing about love.

BEING TRANS

Let me first clarify a few basic concepts surrounding gender and trans identities and point out the commitments I make in this chapter. I do not intend to argue for or against metaphysical claims about gender here. Some of the explications of gender I rely on are typically considered to be derivative of (social) constructionist theories about gender that are widely accepted in both community-based literature and practical guides (e.g., Altadonna, 2011; Hill-Meyer & Scarborough, 2014) and in trans theory (e.g., Hamm, 2020; Bettcher, 2007; 2012).

Gender or gender identity is the gender a person identifies as, for example, being a man, a woman, or non-binary. There are, in addition, gender roles, or behaviors that are associated with gender identities. These are said to be ‘performed’ in the sense that they are not instincts, but rather socially and culturally informed, and (often unconsciously) enacted through conditioned behaviors and bodily responses (see e.g., Butler, 1988).^{vi} It used to be common to distinguish gender from sex, which was associated with “biology” (and often used synonymously with “genitals”) but, depending on where we look in the discourse, that distinction is no longer regarded as tenable, since biological differences are themselves contingent on social and cultural classification schemes and biology is heavily impacted by social factors (for example, behavioral norms, life experiences, skills, diet, hormones, etc.) (see Ásta, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 2000a; 2000b; Serano, 2007).^{vii} In this sense, gender

encompasses sex. This is not to say that all physical characteristics are sufficiently explained by gender since, for example, the specific functions of reproductive organs could not be sufficiently explained by gender categories and it would not be inclusive or conceptually correct to do so – for example, calling all people who give birth “women” is a conceptual and ethical error. However, constructing a separate category – sex – as an umbrella category under which physical and biological characteristics get taxonomized does not do justice to the variety of bodies and embodiments that exist.

In short, being trans means not identifying with the gender/sex one was assigned at birth.^{viii} Sex, in this respect, refers to the medical category we get assigned at birth (typically ‘male’ or ‘female’) and gender is the social analogue (typically ‘man’ or ‘woman’) we get implicitly assigned.^{ix} Being trans can be understood as a move away from the gender/sex one was assigned – be that move social, performative, or embodied. Transitioning can be social – for example, performing gender differently via clothing or behavior, using a different name or pronouns –, and legal – for example, changing one’s gender category on the ID, official name changes, and medical – for example, undergoing hormone replacement therapy or other gender-affirming medical care like surgeries. Transitioning can encompass all or any combination of these aspects. There are different ways to be trans and to live as a trans person. Being trans is often contrasted with being cis – ‘cis’ refers to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, for example, a woman who was assigned ‘female/woman’ at birth and identifies as a female/woman is a cis woman.

Talia Mae Bettcher (2017) explains trans identities via sex/gender categories and the way one deals with the sex/gender category one was assigned: “Many trans people do not self-identify with the sex and gender categories assigned to them at birth. Consequently, they may wish to change various things about themselves and their lives. They may decide to transition from one sex/gender category to another” (Bettcher, 2017: 120). Transition does not necessarily mean moving from one binary gender category to another but includes many other possibilities, for example non-binary and gender-nonconforming identities.

There are, of course, certain characteristics and functions bodies have that are not changeable per se – for example, if your body is not equipped with a uterus, you are not able to conceive. But understanding bodies as non-fixed entities is central to understanding trans identities (and to understanding gender in general). Certain bodily limitations might need to be accepted (e.g., not everyone can grow a beard, no matter the amount of testosterone in their blood), however, those limitations are far fewer than what is typically portrayed in cis-hetero-normative societies and literature. Consider how trans people embody their identities: some trans people reinterpret and rename their genitals in ways

that are gender-affirming (see Hamm, 2020). For example, a trans man might refer to his genitals as ‘boypussy’ or ‘t dick’ (see also Bauer, 2015). Also, external devices that are typically referred to as sex toys are often considered detachable parts of one’s body instead of sex toys. Bauer (2015) describes trans-masculine people who reinterpret and rename dildos as their ‘cocks’. These are not to be understood as replacements but rather as integral to people’s bodies and body images (see Bauer, 2015; Hamm, 2020).

It becomes clear that the emphasis here is on identities determined via self-identification. I consider this to be integral to understanding trans realities. Focusing on self-identification provides us with the opportunity to look at the struggles trans people face; and relying on trans narratives will bring us closer to understanding how love can be experienced and approached by trans people. In this paper, I aim to explore trans love from the viewpoint of different trans identities in order to explore the many different identity clashes trans people can face when in love. What might be some issues here? Let me point them out briefly. Morty Diamond describes the issues with loving while being trans as follows:

Transgender people maneuver in a world that seemingly offers little hope of finding love...or even good sex. If they aren’t ignored and rendered invisible by mainstream narratives of romance, trans and gender-variant folks are consistently portrayed as deviants unsuitable to love. (Diamond, 2011: 7)

The reasons for why trans people face difficulties and challenges with love are manifold. What Diamond describes revolves around finding love. Finding love as a trans person is complicated. A trans person who is out as trans, in transition, and not living stealth, for example, might face trans-exclusion and trans-fetishizing in dating (see Blair & Hoskin, 2018).^x Often, the reasons for why trans people face difficulties accessing romantic love boil down to transphobia. Transphobia has a broad scope that ranges from more subtle, everyday cases (like access to romantic love) to more obvious and explicit cases (e.g., bathroom bills targeting trans people). The understanding of transphobia this chapter relies on and makes use of is Bettcher’s understanding. She explains transphobia as a basic denial of authenticity, meaning that trans people’s self-identifications are not recognized (Bettcher, 2006). She argues that this understanding of transphobia can account for the variety of inappropriate behavior trans people have to endure on a daily basis; for example, being asked questions about surgeries, pointing to a misalignment between someone’s gender and sex, and even violence.

Furthermore, there can be psychological burdens for trans people that arise from knowing about the negative or otherwise problematic attitudes

towards dating trans people. Knowing about transphobia can make it harder for trans people to establish a willingness to date, and to trust enough to love. Second, when coming out as trans while being in love or being about to fall in love, one might face the issue of a clash between one's (new) gender identity and the partner's sexual identity.^{xi}

Before I dive deeper into what a clash of identities means for romantic love, let me first take a look at how this chapter conceives of romantic love.

BEING LOVED (ROMANTICALLY)

Romantic love is among the trickiest concepts in emotion theory. The debate about whether romantic love can even be considered an emotion is not settled (Pismenny & Prinz, 2017). This chapter does not aim at establishing what love is, or at providing insights into the question whether love is a basic emotion (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011), or a social emotion (Hareli & Parkinson, 2008), or an emotion at all (Pismenny & Prinz, 2017). Rather, this chapter aims to illuminate aspects of romantic love through a more practical lens, through the narratives of the lived experiences of people who have faced difficulties with romantic love due to their identity and the struggles this identity seems to evoke and provoke. That is why I regard it as appropriate to consider romantic love within frameworks that place emphasis on normative entanglements that come with being in love or falling in love. In what follows, I will discuss Averill's (1985) account of love, which emphasizes social norms. I will provide a brief summary of this account, and spell out why I think it can help elucidate how identity and love hang together, and the ways in which love might be limited in that respect.

Averill (1985) conceives of emotions in general “as socially constituted syndromes (transitory social roles) that include a person's appraisal of the situation and that are interpreted as passions rather than as actions” (Averill, 1985: 98). Syndromes, according to Averill, are accumulations of behavioral, cognitive and physiological reactions. The components syndromes consist of are neither fixed nor arbitrary: “the component processes that make up an emotional syndrome are constrained (...) by the prototypic features of the paradigm” (Averill, 1985: 98). That is, we are not necessarily sad every time we feel unwell – feeling unwell is a component that needs to be put in context in order to be understood as sadness or otherwise. For example, we might feel unwell after someone stepped on our feet or we might feel unwell after having experienced the loss of a loved one – these are different contexts that provide our phenomenological experience with different objects. “The object of an emotion”, in turn, “is dependent on an individual's appraisal of the situation” (Averill, 1980: 310). Emotional appraisals, according to Averill, are individuals

– i.e., the instances in which your friends get angry might differ from the instances in which you get angry.

Romantic love, according to Averill, consists of the following components (where no component on its own is necessary or sufficient): romantic idealization, sudden onset, physiological arousal, commitment. These components are certainly debatable, but I want to look at one of those aspects – idealization – in a little more detail. Looking at what Averill means by romantic idealization can first help clarify constructionist views on love, and second help us understand why considering gender identities matters for understanding romantic love.^{xiii} A consideration of love as consisting of many different components might help to think about love through a trans narrative. Gender identity can be considered one of the components contributing to establishing a love relationship. In this sense, it is not surprising that when the gender of one partner seems to shift, the entire relationship and the way the love is understood shift too. Before analyzing Averill’s notion of romantic idealization, let me briefly explain the other components.

When defining the components of love, Averill draws on folk usages of romantic love terminology and thereby explains how romantic love is socially constructed. First, according to Averill, “a person does not enter into love gradually but “falls”, “tumbles”, or is “struck” by love” (Averill, 1985: 102). Averill also states that most instances of romantic love do not actually feature a sudden onset; this point emphasizes that there seems to be a folk belief about sudden onset of romantic love. Second, the category ‘physiological arousal’ seems to be structured similarly, according to Averill. Averill criticizes many theories of love naturalizing love by defining it through physiological arousal but points out that this seems to be a further folk belief about romantic love that plays into how love manifests through its social constructions (cf. Averill, 1985: 103). A third component of love, according to Averill, is a “commitment to the welfare of the other” (Averill, 1985: 104). He explains that when we declare our love to someone, we are not describing how we feel about the other person just for the sake of communicating; rather, we express our commitment: we express that the bond we share comes with obligations and norms that should not be violated (Averill, 1985: 105).

Having explored three of Averill’s components of romantic love, I now turn to Averill’s fourth component: romantic idealization. A consideration of Averill’s notion of romantic idealization opens up to a broader discussion about the role of norms for romantic love. When speaking about romantic idealization, a lot of people take idealization in romantic love to mean casting the beloved in the most favorable light or perceiving them as the most exciting, interesting, awesome, or even perfect person. This might be a feature of love and a part of its phenomenology. Averill, however, does not only consider an individual’s

psyche and their tendencies to idealize someone romantically, but also societal aspects that contribute to romantic idealization. These societal aspects are typically about the social status or looks of a person that render the person lovable in society's eyes (Averill, 1980; 1985).

It is this rendering someone lovable that comes into play when thinking about how gender identities influence who we consider to be someone we could fall in love with. First, think of how sexual identities are conceptualized. Sexual identities come with rules, so to speak, about who we can fall in love with (Sedgwick, 1990; Foucault, 1990). Hall points out that, "following Foucault, the categorization of erotic acts and desires into discrete sexualities that form the foundation of sexual identities is an historical occurrence rather than an innate (and thus inevitable) characteristic of human nature" (Hall, 2017: 243). Hall and Foucault both challenge the 'born this way' narrative, according to which people's sexual identities are innately given.^{xiii} These perspectives clarify how sexual identities can be considered to come with rules and norms about who we can fall in love with. In more practical terms, think of it this way: If I conceive of myself as a heterosexual woman, it is unlikely that I will fall in love with a woman. If I do fall in love with a woman, I might quickly realize that heterosexuality is not the right concept to elucidate my sexual identity. This gets more complicated in the case of trans identities since, often, trans people are excluded from people's sexual identities. Being trans is often considered to be 'an extra gender' rather than an umbrella category for a variety of different genders (i.e., people often fail to differentiate between trans men and trans women and thus fail to recognize them as women or men).^{xiv} This view also ignores a very basic truth mentioned in earlier: trans people can inhabit all sorts of sexual identities, be it queer, straight, gay, homosexual, heterosexual, asexual, bisexual, or pansexual.

In this sense, falling in love cannot be conceived of in terms of having the possibility to fall in love with just anyone. Falling in love and being in love come with normative restrictions – to formulate it less pessimistically: with normative entanglements. Someone understanding themselves to be straight but experiencing queer desires for the first time might struggle with accepting or exploring these desires (Sedgwick, 1990). This does not only concern desires but might also concern someone realizing they fell in love or are about to fall in love with a person of the same gender/to fall in queer love.

Framing the phenomenon of love through Averill's account helps to focus on the normative entanglements that come with love since the account is built on an understanding of love that incorporates norms and context. The account of love summarized here points to how social aspects of identity contribute to how we conceive of romantic love and to how those aspects shape our loving and being loved. This is why they are especially useful for

understanding romantic love through a gender identity lens. By emphasizing different components of love and the norms enabling them, the account of love considered here also shows us that understanding and recognizing someone for who they are might be pivotal to romantic love. Recognizing someone for who they are, as Averill suggests, enables us to render someone as lovable.

In the following section, I will look at different cases of trans love and clashing identities and thereby analyze the normative entanglements of love. This will enable me to argue that clashing identities in love connections are often perceived to be insurmountable obstacles, i.e., limits to love.

CLASHING IDENTITIES

As noted, trans people often face exclusion in dating. Trans-exclusion can manifest on different levels: some people might get rejected for being trans early on (e.g., when trying to flirt with someone in a bar or online), and others might get rejected for being trans later on (e.g., when a relationship was about to be established). While some of the examples we are able to imagine here can be applied to marginalized people in general (e.g., exclusion before starting to date someone on the grounds of a specific social identity like race or disability), others are specifically about trans identities (e.g., breaking up a romantic relationship because the partner comes out as trans). Both factors contribute to trans people having a more limited access to romantic love than cis people. Let me give some more insights and examples here to clarify what it means to have (limited) access to romantic love.

Flirting might be experienced as stressful by trans people because we often have to worry about being categorized as a gender we do not identify with or about having to come out as trans to the person we're flirting with. One aspect we can look at more closely here is that of passing. Passing, again, is understood to mean that you are being read as the gender you identify as (cf. Bettcher 2017). The concept of passing is strongly intertwined with many trans people's identities, especially when sexuality and love enter the picture. Dating as a gay trans man, for example, is easier if you pass and if you are, therefore, more likely to be considered desirable (since many cis gay men don't date trans gay men). Passing, thus, might give trans people a glimpse of access to being desired for who they are (e.g., a trans man being desired for his being a man) – I am speaking of a glimpse here since that desirability might change once one's being trans is brought to the table. If a trans man passes as a man and is flirting in a bar, for example, there might be a moment (spanning from seconds to hours) that allows them to experience what it is like to be desired as a man, and what it's like to be considered a potential romantic partner. But that moment might be over once the trans man comes out as trans, depending on the reaction of the person they are flirting with.^{xv} I'd also like to add that passing, in the sense I

describe here, is not an option for many trans people, especially gender nonconforming or non-binary people. Passing depends on whether being perceived as a binary gender is affirming or invalidating for a trans person. Passing will not solve the problems trans people face in dating and pursuing romantic love relationships. Whether you pass or not, once it is known you are a trans person, the pool of people willing to date you, that is, the pool of people thinking of you as desirable and as lovable will shrink considerably (see Blair & Hoskin, 2018).

The reasons for trans-exclusion in dating are multifold but eventually share a common variable: transphobia. For example, someone might not date trans people because they are afraid of the stigma they might face when dating a trans person. But fears of stigma are central parts of phobias: think of men over-performing masculinity because they are afraid of being perceived as gay: this is typically classified as internalized homophobia. Likewise, fear of facing stigma when dating a trans person seems to be rooted in transphobia. Another possible reason is someone being confused about their sexual identity or sexual orientation. As pointed out in an earlier section, often, trans people are excluded from people's sexual identities because people have an incorrect understanding of trans identities. I consider this to be a case of clashing identities since trans people, here, are not conceived of in terms of who they are, since their identities (as men or women, for example) including their sexual identities are not fully seen and recognized. As a consequence, trans people are not considered as lovable as cis people. Thus, trans identity comes with limited access to romantic love.

In what follows, I want to look at three specific examples of trans love that portray clashes between gender and sexual identities. The examples all revolve around romantic love relationships and thus explore a trans-specific perspective on the limits of love (rather than a more general take on the limits of love). I will first look at the examples and describe the kind of identity clash I consider them to display. After having discussed each, I will turn to a more optimistic outlook on trans love.

Let me first consider the case of an already established romantic love relationship:

I came out as a trans woman while I was in a gay relationship with a cis man. While he was supportive of my identity, at some point I started questioning whether I really wanted to be in a relationship with a gay man. We began discussing and he would not move away from identifying as gay, even as I asked him how he thinks that goes together with me being a woman. Eventually, I decided our identities did not match and ended the relationship. Being with a gay man who was supportive but did not reflect

upon his own sexuality while attempting to stay with me after my coming out did not feel affirmative of my gender. (Anonymous Personal Report)

In this case, a trans woman came out while being in an already established romantic love relationship. This example presents an identity clash between someone's gender identity (A) and another person's sexual identity (B) because A is a (trans) woman and B is a (cis) gay man. In the example, this clash led to the end of the romantic love relationship.

First, it might seem like B fails to recognize the trans woman as a woman because he insists on identifying as gay despite being with her.^{xvi} If the trans person in question is not recognized for who they are, this presents a limit of love. However, B might indeed recognize A's gender but is staying with her anyways. As reflected in A's thoughts depicted above, this is not the kind of relationship A imagines for herself since she has a desire for being represented through her relationship. B might also recognize A's gender and recognize that A's gender does not fit his sexual identity. Both these options lead to the trans person not being able to continue a relationship and thus present limits to love.

Let me consider another example that portrays a romantic love relationship that seems about to be established rather than being already in place. The example is told by a gay trans man and is about an experience of falling in love with a gay cis man. The cis man is seemingly in love with the trans man as well. However, the cis man cannot imagine being with a gay trans man who has not had particular gender-affirming surgeries:

When I finally ended up in his bed, still fully clothed, he lost the courage (and with that the physical ability) to go through with it. I had fallen for him so hard that when he turned his own impotency into my issue I totally took that on. I felt disgusting. And when he told me that he believed he could love me if only I were different, I owned that, too. And lastly, as he cried and said he wished I would go away, have surgery, and then come back to him so we could be together, I held him. I stayed there and held him all night long. (Hero, 2011: 28)

This example, too, might be considered to be a failure to recognize the trans man for what he is (i.e., a man) since the only aspect the cis man is not content with in his potential partner is the genitals.^{xvii} One might also say that the cis man does see the trans man as a man but nevertheless is unable to represent and express that via his sexual identity. Even if the cis gay man can't change his attraction, this still limits the access of the trans person in question to love: if he were not trans, the issue discussed wouldn't be present. Either way, the cis man seems unable to overcome his binary and cis-normative understanding of sex and gender, even in the face of romantic love. In this case, romantic love is not

enough to bring them together even though the gender and sexual identities seem to match. However, the cis man's sexual identity is entangled with cis-normative ideals (i.e., his partner having cis male genitalia) and thus clashing with the reality of the person he is in love with (i.e., the person being trans and not having undergone specific gender-affirming surgeries). Love, in this case, is experienced as limited since both the cis man and the trans man seem confronted with obstacles they are not able to overcome: for the cis man, the obstacle is the genitals of the trans man; for the trans man, it is the resulting negative feelings of the cis man rejecting him because of his genitals.

Let me turn to a third example. Transitioning can also mean, for somebody involved in romantic love, that the love relationship starts being perceived differently by other people and by society. That is, if a trans woman who is, for the first time, in a relationship with another woman, she might find herself suddenly being a member of another marginalized group since she has a history of being perceived as straight. Altadonna describes this as follows:

Suddenly becoming a member of a minority, straight culture seemed to be everywhere. It was a little overwhelming to stand outside the heterosexual matrix and look in. Once people started perceiving me as female, there was the concern of how affectionate we ought to be in public or amongst our families. This was something we never thought about when we were perceived as straight. (Altadonna, 2011: 40)

It is possible, of course, for relationships to shift from being conceived of as a straight relationship to being conceived of as a queer/gay/lesbian relationship or the other way around. However, what needs to be kept in mind here is that this is an identity shift (in terms of sexual identities) that can come with different forms of hardship. First, as described, society will react differently depending on whether they perceive the romantic love to be of the straight or of the queer kind. When shifting to being perceived as involved in queer love, one might be subject to experiencing a kind of discrimination one has not experienced before (e.g., one might be stared at in public). When shifting to being perceived as involved in straight love, one might have to adapt to not being discriminated against anymore because of sexual identity and to not being perceived as queer anymore. People in trans love relationships might also conceive of themselves as queer despite their straight-passing, and might experience frustration with being perceived as straight (consider the scene from *Tales of the City* again where one of the characters continued to understand the relationship as queer). When one of those involved in a romantic relationship transitions, and the relationship nevertheless holds, the people around them have to transition to a certain extent too. They have to adjust to the new sexual and gender identities those involved in the love relationship might inhabit, and to the new roles that

get assigned to those involved through societal norms. For example, when the partner of a straight cis man transitions and starts being perceived as a man by other people, the couple will be perceived differently (i.e., as gay/homosexual/queer). That might be something they have not experienced before, thus they (both) have to adjust to being perceived differently. In that sense, the partner of someone transitioning may experience a transition too.

In addition, outsiders might fail to understand how their friend or family member can be with a trans person or how they can be in a queer/straight relationship. In cases where romantic love seems to transition along the transition of the involved trans person, love might explore its social limits through being confronted with conformity to social norms (e.g., being perceived as performing queer love now instead of straight love).

None of the three examples portrayed here mean to suggest that trans love is always limited through identity clashes and is thus not possible. When considering the fluidity of sexual identities, we are given the chance to look at trans love more optimistically. For many, including trans people who might decide to end a relationship due to an identity clash, adjusting one's sexual identity is not an option. This inability to adjust need not be rooted in problematic attitudes regarding gender or sexual identities but can merely be due to the person's strong identification with a particular (sexual) identity (e.g., a trans woman who identifies as lesbian has good reasons not to pursue love with a heterosexual woman or a man). The ability of some people to conceive of their sexual identity as fluid nevertheless presents a more optimistic example when looking at trans love. Trans love is not always limited. There are many examples where the relationship is able to adapt to a new identity, where partners of trans people are able to question their own sexual identity and not conceive of gender and sexuality as something rigid. Trans love can be liberating, in a sense, when identity clashes are not perceived as insurmountable obstacles but rather as something one can work through. This is not meant to suggest that any trans person should adjust their gender identity – whatever that would look like – but rather meant to describe a reality: there are trans women, for example, who are happy to date gay men or even keep identifying as gay after coming out as trans. There are also trans men and trans masculine and nonbinary people who keep identifying as lesbians after coming out as trans. My claim here is that neither gender, nor sexual identity *inherently* presents us with any limits regarding how and who we love; rather, the limits depend on the individual and often come with good reasons. That is, the limits are largely socially imposed or structured (and thereby influence individuals), and partly stem from the (unjust) hermeneutical exclusion of trans identities from theories of love and sexuality. However, how individuals deal with these imposed limits will differ; as shown, not all individuals are able to question their sexual identity.

LIMITS OF LOVE?

Do the described identity clashes limit love? In this section, I will provide concluding thoughts on the normative entanglements and limits of love.

This chapter has established that there are normative restrictions for trans people when it comes to romantic love. I have pointed out that ‘limits of love’ are meant to address issues that are considered to be insurmountable obstacles by those in love. I argued that the obstacles are sometimes insurmountable since they present challenges to the people in question that make them (a) no longer feel romantic love or (b) unable to consider (the exhibition of) romantic love to be an option.

In section 4, I presented different example cases of trans love – each of which comes with limits that are due to normative entanglements (i.e., expectations and norms around how and who we love). These entanglements present differently in different individuals. While one person might be able and willing to conceive of their gender and sexual identity as something fluid, another person might not be able to do so.

As pointed out in section 3 and 4, romantic love is not accessible to the same extent to everyone. This is a factor we also need to keep in mind when researching romantic love since it enables us to think about how romantic love and social identities interact and intertwine. Depending on factors such as being trans, someone’s ability to access love or someone’s possibilities for love can be limited. As mentioned, trans people can face exclusion from other people’s dating pools that’s specifically related to their trans identities, and moreover, trans people can also face limits of love that are due to clashes of gender and sexual identities in romantic love relationships.

Behrensen (2018) describes trans people (and other marginalized people) as often subject to being sexually desired but not considered lovable. But the rejection of trans people might even start at desirability and not only at lovability. This is especially obvious in the example where a trans man is falling in love with a cis man and the cis man seems to reciprocate loving feelings but cannot conceive of being with a trans man who has not had particular gender-affirming surgeries (he might also not want to be with a trans man after those surgeries; the example rather suggests he wants the person he is falling for to be a cis man). Examples like this illustrate how clashes between one person’s gender identity and another person’s sexual identity limit the possibility of romantic love for the involved individuals and that sometimes this is due to trans people not being considered desirable or trans people being excluded from consideration as a potential partner by someone’s conception of their own sexual identity. This also shows how narrow conceptualizations of sexual identity can interfere with romantic love. If society’s understandings of gender and sexuality were more expansive, and more inclusive of trans gender identities, to begin

with, perhaps we would not have to think about the limits identity struggles and clashes present to romantic love.

But we need not confuse understanding sexual identities as trans-inclusive with the claim that trans identities are or trans love is inherently queer. I think that, on the surface, this seems to make sense since being trans questions expectations prevalent in certain societies about gender and about gendered bodies. But embracing trans identities also means creating and keeping space for trans individuals who do not identify as queer or who want to achieve cis- and straight-passing. I do not think the desire for cis- and straight-passing and one's legitimate self-conception as straight or not-queer needs any justification, especially since that is what cis people have been doing since the dawn of time.

Trans people can inhabit all sorts of sexual identities, be it queer, straight, gay, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or pansexual.^{xviii} For that, it does not matter whether the trans person in question is a binary or a non-binary trans person. There are non-binary folks who are gay, just like there are non-binary folks who are straight (i.e., many non-binary people have strong ties to a sexual identity – such as lesbian, gay, straight – and continue to embrace that identity; also, some non-binary people might additionally be trans-masculine or trans-feminine and thus embrace a sexual identity that reflects this part of their gender). Sexual identity need not necessarily reflect one's own gender, from an observer's perspective, even though it often does.

Requiring all non-binary people to describe their sexual orientation as queer, likewise, ignores the fact that the category 'non-binary' contains multitudes and cannot be boiled down to one particular essence. Some non-binary people are agender, some are trans men/women, some are simply non-binary. If someone describes their gender identity as a non-binary trans man, this might seem like a contradiction, as "non-binary" seems to reject the categories "man" and "woman". However, identifying as a non-binary trans man/woman might mean that the person in question rejects the social norms associated with being a man/woman or that their gender identity depends on the social contexts they are part of (meaning: perhaps in some contexts they are non-binary, and in other they are a man/woman). In this sense, phrasing trans identities as "inherently queer" and "taking us beyond the binary" actually misrecognizes the variety of trans identities.

Finally, let me reconsider the normative entanglements of romantic love presented in section 2. In section 2, I spelled out how Averill's account of love (1985) makes sense of how societal aspects, mostly social norms, play into our understanding of romantic love and our practicing romantic love. Norms, as pointed to, guide us not only in terms of how our relationships are supposed to look (e.g., a monogamous relationship vs. a non-monogamous relationship) but also tell us what kind of people we are supposed to find desirable and lovable

(Bunning & McKeever, 2020; Sedgwick, 1990; Behrens, 2018). Social norms affect our gender identities and also our sexual identities, both of which are central to romantic love. Bringing together these theoretical considerations about the normative entanglements of romantic love with some of the examples portrayed earlier in this chapter, one might arrive at a rather pessimistic conclusion: namely, that romantic love is not accessible and thus not possible for some of us, i.e., that the limits these normative restrictions present to who and how we love are the ultimate limit of romantic love for some of us (e.g., trans people). But we have also considered more optimistic examples in this chapter, where those in love were ready and willing to commit to a transition of their sexual identity that goes along with the gender transition of the person they are in love with.

Further optimistic examples include trans for trans (t4t) relationships. Malatino (2019) offers a vivid analysis of t4t love:

It is cynical, skeptical; t4t is set up to fail, about aiming high and taking what one can get. It embraces ethical imperfection and complexity. It dwells in difficulty without the expectation that such difficulties will cease by and through a t4t praxis of love. It is about being with and bearing with; about witnessing one another, being mirrors for one another that avoid some of the not-so-funhouse effects of cisnormative perceptive habits that frame trans folk as too much, not enough, failed, or not yet realized. (Malatino, 2019: 656)

T4t can be considered a strategy that's empowering by way of being cynical: the term t4t critically refers to the often transphobic or, at the very least trans-exclusive, attitudes trans people have to encounter in dating: "it sequesters trans folks from Ms and Ws (as in M4M, W4W), partaking of the kind of trans-exclusionary (not to mention cisnormative (...)) logic that misconstrues trans as a sexualized gender category unto itself." (Malatino, 2019: 653). Many of the specific challenges with romantic love discussed in this chapter are rooted in transphobia (e.g., trans-exclusion on the basis of (assumed) genitals, trans-fetishization). This is one of the reasons many trans people prefer or at least desire t4t relationships. Trans people loving each other romantically, t4t, is one way we can expand the limits of love or move beyond the limits of love. Romantic love can be liberating when it occurs between trans people who aren't constrained by narrow conceptions of body parts determining sexual identity and gender identity. As Malatino points out, t4t is a way to invest in self-love by investing in one's own community and freeing oneself from cis-hetero-normative norms (cf. Malatino, 2019: 654) since, in t4t, we no longer have to rely on cis people and their approval of our genders and how we embody them.

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ⁱ Passing is defined by Bettcher as “passing as a member of the gender category one has transitioned into and fading into the mainstream” as a non-trans person (2017, 122). See section 4 in this paper for a more detailed exploration of ‘passing’.

ⁱⁱ “trans” means not identifying with the gender assigned at birth; “cis” means identifying with the gender assigned at birth. More in section 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout the chapter, when I use the word ‘love’ I will be referring to romantic love specifically. The definition of romantic love I am using here includes both cases of ‘infatuation’ and cases of ‘being in love’ as well as forms of love we can subsume under ‘companionate love’; that is, love that is experienced by partners who have been together for a while and that is phenomenologically different than passionate, newly inflamed love. The definition of romantic love this chapter relies on focuses on *that* the people involved feel love rather than *how* exactly the love manifests or what it feels like.

^{iv} I will use the term ‘trans love’ throughout this chapter to refer to romantic love between at least one trans person and other (possibly, but not necessarily trans) people.

^v I’m using the term ‘sexual identity’ here in the ‘sexual and romantic orientation’ sense. I’m referring to ‘identity’ and not ‘orientation’ since, for this paper, it is central to look at how the person has identified in their life rather than wondering whether they misunderstand their own sexual orientation. See also Bettcher (2017): “By sexual identity I mean how a person conceives of themselves with respect to their sexual orientation. So sexual orientation and sexual identity are not the same thing. A man could be sexually oriented to men, but he might not have come out to himself yet; he might not yet (or ever) self-identity as gay. His sexual identity would be “straight” while his sexual orientation would not” (Bettcher, 2017, 120).

^{vi} When talking about gender roles, we think of certain behaviors we consider to be typical for certain genders: for example, it used to be (more) common to think that women were the only people wearing make-up, and that men were the only people being technicians. Gender roles come with an array of expectations that often carry heavy normative demands; consider for example how damaging the make-up example is for young boys who like to dress up (e.g., they might suppress that desire as a consequence and develop shame around that desire).

^{vii} For a discussion on the ‘natural attitude about sex’ and the transphobia resulting from it see Bettcher (2012). For a discussion on the naturalization of bodies and sex see Gregor (2015).

^{viii} While I rely on Bettcher’s understanding of trans identities, one could also make use of Serano’s understanding (2007), or the understandings other scholars have provided (e.g., Hale, 1998; Salamon, 2010).

^{ix} I want to point out here that trans experiences are diverse; some may describe their trans identities in terms of being ‘trans’, others in terms of being ‘transgender’, and

others in terms of being ‘transsexual’. In theory, most positions nowadays provide understandings of trans identities that are inclusive of the variety of experiences.

^x Living stealth as a trans person means not disclosing one’s being trans. Some people (can) choose to be stealth in certain contexts, but not in others. Not every trans person is able to live stealth and some are only able to do so in some contexts; that is why trans people who usually live stealth might still face exclusion and fetishizing in dating upon coming out.

^{xi} While the second point is the prime example of this paper and the narrative through which the arguments in this paper are told, the first point need not be omitted. The point about finding love as a trans person ultimately plays into how we conceive of trans love. For trans people who belong to multiple social identities that are sexually marginalized (e.g., disabled, fat, racialized etc.) the challenges of finding love can be further compounded by multiple aspects of discrimination and sexual/gender-based violence.

^{xii} For a discussion of the role of idealization and ideals in romantic love see Sternberg in this volume.

^{xiii} For a detailed discussion of the social construction of sexual orientation and identity, see Hall (2017) and Foucault (1990).

^{xiv} This might be due to cis people not having the proper hermeneutic equipment to "see" transness beyond the stereotypes/ rigid cis-normative concepts (see e.g., Fricker & Jenkins 2017).

^{xv} I want to add here that I do not think there is any obligation for trans people to out themselves. However, especially considering one’s status of medical transition, it might not be possible to not come out as trans at some point.

^{xvi} The claim about the refusal or impossibility to adjust one’s sexual identity I make here is descriptive, not prescriptive. I have no intention of implying that everyone involved in trans love ought to question their sexual identity.

^{xvii} See also Bettcher (2012) for work on genital fixation.

^{xviii} See, for example, Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski (2012) for an online survey for trans people about gender identity and sexual orientation. In this survey, 14% of the participants said they were heterosexual.