



# Belonging

A Queer Manifesto

Caffyn Jesse and Max Tea

# Belonging: A Queer Manifesto

## A Conspiracy of Kindness

Queer community is an ephemeral web of belonging that can hold and inspire us. Community is sometimes a springboard to jump from, and simultaneously a safety net into which we fall. The people and places that invite, support and celebrate our queerness are rare and precious.

In a world of increasing social violence, economic uncertainty and environmental emergency, the most vulnerable among us struggle for survival, and the most privileged among us feel the looming threats. How do we go on imagining and co-creating queer community? “We are everywhere”, and so queer community is bound to unconsciously replicate the strata of privilege and oppression that exist in the larger culture. We each arrive with our own awful, intimate experiences of “not belonging” that can make us frightening, fierce or fragile. How can we offer each other grace, compassion, economic and social support, and sustaining erotic pleasures? How can we find ways to honour economic, social and cultural differences, acknowledge harmful impacts, and go on building the web of queer connection and community? How can we co-create commitment to an ongoing weaving of the web, and its continual repair?

Through our process of writing together we, Caffyn and Max, found an

unexpected delight. We felt a conspiracy of kindness emerge between us, as we explored the weave of our queer voices. We felt a conspiracy of kindness emerge around us, as we reached out to friends and colleagues for guidance and comment. We witnessed a conspiracy of kindness that is ever-emerging, in the ways transformative queer history and community shape our world. The conspiracy of kindness seemed to better hold and inspire us, in our queerness, as we found ways to witness and embody it.

As co-conspirators, we breathe together, and offer our manifesto on queer belonging. This is not a program to join, or list of things to do. Rather, we want to make an invitation that you also begin to notice, contribute to, and co-create a queer conspiracy of kindness and deep delight.

## Where we start from

In the weaving of this manifesto we bring together many threads. We bring our experiences as individual humans, genderqueer queers, community organisers, facilitators of queer group spaces, and as white people learning how to contribute meaningfully in the fight for racial justice. We bring the alchemy between us as dear friends, former colleagues in somatic sex education, and fellow queers who have celebrated and supported each other in the ongoing evolution of our queerness for a decade. We are both perennial misfits. We also bring our profound differentness of experiences and choices: one of us rural living, the other urban; one of us widowed and single, the other partnered and parenting; one of us more rule-breaking, the other more cautious and risk-mitigating. And we bring our shared influences and deeply aligned hearts' cries. This collection of threads is the material for the vision we seek to give texture to: a queer community belonging that celebrates wildness as well as safety, supports individuation, practices kindness, is prepared to challenge and be challenged, is skilled in the power of history, and is grounded in the body. The deep belonging we imagine is a vision of what could be; it is also here and now. We are actually living it, in our friendship with one another,

and in the counternormative communities we inhabit, where we are resourced by practises and understandings we share here. We invite you to weave your own jewels in with ours as you read and feel and dream. Co-creation is key. Welcome.

## Humble pride

In our courageous, fabulous, queer communities of resistance, we have right and reason to be proud. In the last 50 years of celebrating Pride and advocating for civil rights, we have won something very precious. In the countries where we live, Canada and the United Kingdom, we dwell in an historical moment of relative safety. We have civil rights; there are few legal discriminations. We have the freedom now to vote, to marry, to fight and die for our countries, to pursue most careers, and to seek legal protections against discrimination. To an extent, we are even celebrated. Who could have imagined during the intense debates on equal marriage that same-sex wedding cards would become standard greeting card stock, or that Pride celebrations would become a top social outing in the calendars of queer people and straight people alike? Those of our community who wanted us to be accepted and normalised can feel satisfied at the huge progress that means we can now participate in mainstream life.

We also have reason to be humble. While our movement for queer liberation has achieved more space for us to love in and live our lives, it has failed to transform the dominant culture at any structural level. We have been granted access to the full citizenship of societies that are patriarchal, hierarchical and racist: driven by the power of economies based on inequity, and cultures dismissive of the land on which we live and the peoples robbed. Our hearts' cries for belonging may appear to have been met, but it is a conditional inclusion that requires us to exile the queerest parts of ourselves and the alternative cultures we have (or could have) created. Fitting in carries a cost to us all. We write to share a longing for, and to invite, a deeper level of

queer liberation. We write to recognise the radical work and play that meets our longing, and invites more longing. We write to invite conversation and community that is shaped by passionate, proud and also humble enquiry into what we can be and become, in the next fifty years – in our wild queer souls, our counternormative communities, and in the world.

## The limits of acceptance

Queer ‘acceptance’ in the dominant culture means acceptance within a system of normative belonging. People with wealth and social power, who conform to more valued social norms, are more likely to be heard. Those who don’t fit in are marginalised and punished. The very structure of belonging seems characterised by a pushing out and away of the unwanted. Communities are defined by the boundaries built to defend against all that is ‘other’. The edges of belonging are aggressively staked out and defended with acts of scapegoating and exclusion. In this paradigm, we are all, inevitably, unacceptable for one reason or another. We are all faced with the decision to splinter ourselves in order to hold onto the slivers of belonging offered only to our accepted parts.

Within queer community now, the belonging we manifest is partial and provisional. Indeed, the same patterns of intra-community violence that characterize dominant culture are repeated in queer communities. It is common to find queers from different generations, and with different gender experiences, acting as if we are each others’ enemies, as if all our perspectives, experiences and wisdoms are not needed or welcome. People end up fighting each other, instead of learning from each other and directing amplified queer rage towards injustice and inequity. Lesbian feminist actions against trans women, and explicit or casual sexism in the queer community are just two of many ways we act venomously towards one another. There continues to be overt racism, racial fetishism and romantic racism in white-dominated queer culture. The economic and other segregations of queer community

have worked to reinforce white advantage and the oppression of black and indigenous people and other people of colour (BIPOC). In the face of these inequities, queer BIPOC have always organised and resisted, while enduring the danger of conflicted queer belonging. Racism collapses the liberatory potential of queerness, as does any unexamined intertwining of prejudice and power. Finding kind, creative and effective ways to liberate queer social and sexual culture from unconscious and conscious racism is foundational.

We have also witnessed communities and relationships made dangerous by intimate partner violence, financial abuse of vulnerable elders, and sexual abuse of vulnerable youth. We've seen queer community belonging withdrawn over seeming trivialities: personality differences; gossip; bad breakups; mis-managed arguments. The meaning and revolutionary potential of queerness is lost in our failure to overturn normative paradigms of belonging. Do we need to mimic dominant culture patterns of creating community by denying belonging to some, or can we co-create communities that structurally and passionately want and welcome difference?

Welcoming differences does not mean accepting what is toxic and harmful. There is wisdom in ongoing discernment. Protecting the integrity of deeply-held values fundamentally requires of us a willingness to bottom out the difficult divergences, even as we explore ever-new emergences. We need ongoing, careful and negotiable discernments, so we can be fierce in queer commitments to equity, and resist both intra-community violence and absorption by the overculture. We can use the full force of our ferocity well - for impassioned resistance against a dominant culture that is destroying the planet; for fierce commitment to justice; for respect and self-respect.

An ongoing inquiry into how we might resist any and all embodiment of prejudicial paradigms can be a way to deepen our queerness and strengthen our collective power. How much more effective - how much more queer - might we become, if we could welcome the excitement, and better manage the anxiety, of all our differences? This is not an invitation to shame and punish

wrongdoers: it's an opportunity to ignite delight in becoming more and more fabulous through radical, counternormative, queer cultural reform. If we proceed from a shared commitment to equity and justice, and an enthusiasm for the life-long learning of how to live that commitment more skilfully, we will thrill to the work and play of it.

### Trauma-informed relationships

Most queer people still alive as adults have had to navigate extended experiences of not belonging in our families of origin and adolescent social worlds. Critical neural learning periods for secure attachment and social reward often close, without us ever feeling deeply cared for. As we feel the exhilaration of finding and forging queer community, and as we go on weaving our chosen families, early life experience of non-belonging can leave queer nervous systems deeply vulnerable. There can be such a traumatic impact if we find that the queer belonging we discovered and co-created was only temporary and provisional. We can be profoundly destabilized, when queer community hasn't space enough to forgive our failures, or sustain the evolution of more diversity, and the ongoing unfolding of our queer souls.

We know how danger impacts our bodies and relational world. It is the reason that outrage, panic, collapse and appeasement can characterise everyday intimacies and interactions. People who are chronically traumatised have nervous systems awash with weathering neurochemistry. Adverse childhood experiences have profound health impacts throughout life. Many marginalised peoples have described the effects of living under sustained oppression and fear. Spikes in cortisol and adrenaline empower us to resist immediate danger through the palette of responses available to the hyper-aroused nervous system: flight, fight, freeze, appease, dissociate. But, unprocessed and/or ongoing trauma can keep this corrosive neurochemistry roiling in us, profoundly impacting our relationships. We may be hypervigilant or dissociated, or cycle unpredictably between these states, manifesting more

and more danger.

In these circumstances, how do we co-create safe-enough, brave-enough spaces where love can flourish – in our own bodies, and in the intimate and social relationships of queer being? We believe that a commitment to doing so, and the daily practice of choosing so, is imperative. With a deep breath, a step back, a sustainable pace, a kind inquiry, and a commitment to right relationship, we can resource our individual and group nervous systems to heal from the trauma we experience personally and collectively. In caring, connected spaces we co-create between us, we can practice new forms of community; we can build a queer belonging that becomes big enough to resist systemic oppressions. We can mobilise our experience of violence, oppression and ongoing danger, along with our experience of relative freedom and pride, to help empower all the human and non-human world that is targeted by oppressive systems.

As queer people we have something important to contribute to the reshaping of a fear-based world. We have found our way to counternormative desires, identities and community; we have a personal and collective experience of courage. We know how to make space enough inside our souls and relationships to survive the traumatic shaping of the dominant culture. We have managed – at least in part – to find our way home to who and how we want to be, and to the love we share and celebrate. Our personal and collective journey of choosing integrity and honing courage in the face of trauma can be a beacon of hope, guiding ourselves and others. We know how to expand the safe-enough, brave-enough capacity of our individual nervous systems, and generate co-regulation through counternormative communities.

Individually and collectively, we can breathe into all the fear-based reactivity of our autonomic nervous systems, and slow down. We can acknowledge the violence, capitulation, paralysis and evacuation this neurochemistry could ignite, and be guided instead by our longing for something truer and better. We can mobilise our inner resources, and stand in the danger, feeling all the



discomfort, charge, and neurological stir within and around us. All the first responder impulses of our own nervous systems – to appease, to scapegoat, to punish and to leave the whole mess behind us forever – have to be endured. Yet with understanding, pacing, a commitment to repair, and whatever help we can mobilise, we know how to keep on living and choosing something braver, safer, and far more trustworthy. We can keep being guided by a longing for more authentic, erotic, life-giving love. Let's find enough in this enormous, well-practised longing, to offer ourselves and each other forgiveness, curiosity, and a willingness to keep on learning.

Somatic practises to heal our nervous systems – breath, sound, movement, imagination, safe and wanted touch, plus understanding attachment wounding, and how to co-create a healing holding environment – all help us rebalance our cells and souls. With trauma-informed relationships, we can co-create better belonging in which to amplify queer activism.

### The strength of queer difference and “power-with” approaches

Community nurtures us as we build it, and we need community more than ever. The world is burning, with fascism on the rise, climate change catastrophes unfolding, and a global pandemic threatening life and liberty. The brutality of racism continues to viciously assault BIPOC, as white supremacist systems privilege those with pale skins. Is ongoing attention to queer liberation a distraction from more pressing emergencies? Or can we mobilize queerness, with its particular meanings and magic, in ways that contribute to the global struggle against exploitation and violence? Can we make queer protest big enough to challenge all structural injustices and inequities?

When we weave queer community in ways that truly cherish differences, we generate new paradigms of belonging and empowerment that can potentially be transforming. We expand the meaning and impact of queer activism when we honour the parts of us that know how to love expansively, experience our

genders as galaxies, advocate for deep and transformative justice, and weep for a planet catastrophically damaged by the ravaging of our resource-hungry human economies. As we tend individual, intimate traumas through creative, community-based processes, we leverage queer cultural practices in ways that can have relevance for large-scale healing and well-being. These are just some of the ways we locate queer belonging inside global struggles for systemic change.

Tending to our individual and collective traumas, we grow capacity to hold, connect with, and celebrate differences. So, trauma work is inherently political, resourcing, and at the heart of our vision. As we heal, we gain embodied capacities for belonging to ourselves and others simultaneously. With patient practice, for the sake of the new world we want to help manifest, we may find queerness empowers a new paradigm for belonging: instead of comprising a cluster of 'the same', we can belong in ways that welcome and celebrate the extraordinary richness of human diversity.

A queerer form of belonging complicates the binaries of normative belonging. The dominant culture offers people either/or choices like male or female, cis or trans, wild or domesticated, subtle or strong, but our community includes those with lived experiences of deepening into both sides of such binaries simultaneously. We imagine weaving a resilient web of belonging for diverse people and perspectives, while growing evermore complex, compelling social movements. We imagine people and practices that hold powerful and empowering contradictions as generative dialectics, rather than either/or choices.

We cannot imagine deep, transformative change without confronting the issue of scale. Systems of oppression are intricately intertwined and global in scope. Advocates of diversity and inclusion who fail to address the material structures in which oppressions are embedded resign themselves to superficiality. But the overwhelming scale of oppression, its entanglement in every aspect of life, and the urgency of the need for change can all conspire to defeat our longing

for a just and joyful world, as we face the enormity of change required. Even here, we have queer history and culture to guide us. Our understanding of necessary, profound, systemic change can be resourced by the excitement, joy and comradeship of radical practice.

We have been educated by power-over paradigms to understand power as control and dominance. We cannot really describe gender oppression without understanding how it fosters inequitable distribution of wealth and power. Race and class are intertwined in the everyday workings of a global financial system grounded in colonization and slavery. Ongoing, systemic inequities are reinforced by state-sponsored violence, carceral systems, education and language. Capitalist delivery systems for food, healthcare, justice, and other basic human needs render ever-accumulating deficits and displacements. Power is conceived and practised as power-over other humans, land, labour and resources. But queer history provides us with other paradigms for power, fostering our awareness and experiences of power-with and power-within. The incremental social change over time, that has yielded the present degrees of freedom we celebrate, comes as consequence of brave actions over decades, with multiple foci, resourced by different communities of courageous lovers and friends. We owe this space we have for breath to trans sex workers resisting police brutality, queer leaders in Black liberation movements over decades, feminist-separatists creating land-based communities, gay men surviving bathhouse raids, policy wonks in suits launching legal challenges, and the many, many other courageous, vulnerable ways queers have found to describe and advocate for freedom, joy and counternormative belonging.

Seemingly antipathic groups of queers have come together through the decades, in unpredictable alliances based on love and need. These convergences have empowered the creation of new culture. In the late 1960s and 1970s, working class and middle class understandings of homosexuality met and merged, fueling liberatory imaginings and a profusion of pride. Homeless queer youth, Black trans sex workers, radical faeries, and middle class white activists found common cause. Gay liberation and lesbian feminism sourced

meaning and magic in anti-capitalism. In the 1980s, lesbians and gay men, Hollywood stars and street people came together during the crisis of HIV/AIDS, fueling the emergence of queer activism in the 1990s. Today trans and cisgender queer women work and play together in somatics, anti-poverty groups and anti-racist alliances, empowering new understandings of the weave of racism, capitalism, sexism, and gendered violence. Even with the reality of factions and dispute, queers have nonetheless navigated complexities. We have specific co-created experiences of progress made through power-with approaches that we can draw from and build upon.

## Body-based practices and the power of The Erotic

Both of us have worked and studied in somatic sex education, a field that is grounded in queer erotic culture. We both experientially know in our very beings the profound resourcing potential of The Erotic. With the term “The Erotic”, we refer in the broadest way to the realm of experience that produces a deep sense of connection - to the self, to other beings, and beyond to ‘All That Is’. The sexual is a sub-set of The Erotic, one key part of a larger whole. The *gestalt* of The Erotic is a connected aliveness and shared pleasure that is wrought from embodied awareness of what is happening in a given moment. It can arise through sensation in the body, the thrill of an enlivening discussion, indeed an experience of any kind in which there is sparkle and flow in that sharing. The rareness of our connections still deemed as ‘other’ by mainstream culture make our experiences of The Erotic all the sweeter.

Queer community has a powerful and precious erotic seam underpinning it, that defies definition and disregards the standard rules set by the overcultures of which we are also a part. We understand The Erotic not as an unruly force to be controlled but as a creative force to be cultivated and gloried in. With fewer prohibitions on The Erotic, queer community is uniquely placed to reach for the resourcing of our shared Erotic, including growing self-acceptance, joy in our bodies, and resilience in our beings and relationships.

We can cultivate this resource through erotic practice, both solo and collective. To do so invites the beauty and brilliance of sustained arousal and pleasure, and the nourishment it can give to our whole selves and to our network of connections. We can bring the full force of our queer and beautiful selves to solo erotic practice that taps into expansive pleasure and altered states, whether explored in flutters of sensation and nascent arousal as delicate as butterfly wings, or expressed in full-body orgasms that shake the ground. We can bring the contribution of our embodied selves to collective practice - in person or virtually - to connect queer people across the globe in profound moments of shared embodiment and arousal in the presence of loving community. Witnessing one another and co-creation of pleasure states can be a powerful source of acceptance and celebration - of the diversity of our bodies, our desires, and our genders. We can support one another in all our diverse erotic and sexual identities and expressions, including not being sexual at all.

The Erotic is a profound resource for our communities. Through practicing, cultivating and celebrating The Erotic, alone and together, we amplify our individual and collective nervous system capacity and resilience.

### Reaching for a bigger container

What would it mean – what would it feel like - to co-create queer belonging in counternormative cultures of trustworthy respect? Where power could emerge with each other's power, instead of needing to be contested and usurped? Where vulnerabilities and mistakes could be met with courageous discernment and appropriate accountability? Where boundaries could be expressed and challenged by fertile disagreement? Where delicious divergences could emerge through decisive differentiations? Where lineage could be honoured, even as traditions evolve in the ongoing and necessary decision-making about what is right for now and for what's next? We have the knowledge and practises that can make it so.

We see examples of this happening everywhere around us. In our own field of somatic sex education, queer culture that was mobilized in the 1970s and 1980s manifested teachings that supported us in our role as teachers, as we evolved them. Activists focused on stopping climate chaos are building on the perspectives of queer ecologists, and are guiding us to new ways of seeing, experiencing and defending the non-human world. They are dismantling separations between climate justice, disability justice, and queer liberation organizing. In transformative justice, Black Lives Matter, and generative somatics, there are queer BIPOC leaders whose work is radically transforming dominant culture paradigms. In indigenous rights movements and anticolonial struggles around the world, openly queer folk are in leadership roles. Young queer people are bravely living counternormative paradigms of family and enduring love. There are houses, land cooperatives, recovery rooms, festivals, workshops and place-based communities where old queers are cherished and young queers are supported with home, ritual, care and belonging. Queer people are exploring and inventing gender galaxies, envisioning the limitless.

This is the global, symbiotic web of radical queerness that we want to feel held in and to weave with you. Some of the people in the web hold their queerness quietly and some announce it with great voice. There is room for us all, and we are all needed. We have such rich resource in our queer culture. We have experience in our individual and collective queer history to draw from. At a time of significant political and social polarisation, we needn't join in the polarising. We have more to offer to - and through - expanding belonging in queer communities.

There are so many ways queer community can - and already does - create deep, radical queer belonging. We can reach for each other through a wealth of organisations and initiatives that already exist, and we will go on reaching, in new ways we invent and discover. In all our manifesting, we can be guided by liberatory principles, trauma-informed practices, and a big vision of unity *in* difference and unity *of* differents. We can be resourced by our longing for even

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more queer belonging, and our lived experiences of co-creating community.

To conclude, we share with you our hearts' enquiries, of ourselves and our communities:

- Shall we heal and regulate our nervous systems interactively, through practising kindness and active listening?
- Shall we cultivate embodied and living ethics together, that deeply value our diverse manifestations of queerness?
- Shall we re-connect to The Erotic on a world scale, resourcing ourselves and our communities through solo and shared practice?
- Shall we continue to practice and hone the articulation of our boundaries and limits, using the wealth of tools already available to us?
- Shall we continue to learn about trauma patterns that signal needs and longings, even if dysfunctionally expressed, and develop our awareness and practice of personal and community accountability?
- Shall we increase queer community collaboration on practices for increasing integrity, intimacy and ecstasy, and the connections between them?
- Shall we feel and share our unmet longings, failures and vulnerabilities in communities we have made, in ways that enable these conversations to invite and enrich belonging?

We start where we are - with more tools, wisdom, resilience and creativity than we may have imagined. Across oceans, our queer souls reach out to hold hands, as we share this vision of deeper and kinder queer belonging with you.

## Epilogue

This is the best manifesto that we, Max and Caffyn, could write, in March 2022 - and we know it is as limited as it is resourced by our particular life experiences, identities and learnings. We offer it with humility, and with our longing for the emergence of a queer belonging we cannot imagine alone. How does your longing respond to our words? What is the alternate *Queer Manifesto* that only you can write? What is the image, dance or song? We hope to spark debate, participate in ongoing co-creation, and receive your messages of fierce, indignant love.