

## The Trials and Tribulations of Being a 'Slut' – Ethical, Psychological, and Political Thoughts on Polyamory

Christian Klesse in conversation with Dossie Easton

### Editors' words

Dossie Easton is a writer, therapist, poet, performer and feminist BDSM<sup>1</sup> activist. She is well known as the co-author of the book *The Ethical Slut* (1997), one of the most popular guide books on polyamory. Together with Janet W. Hardy (aka Catherine A. Liszt) she further wrote a range of advice books on BDSM and kinky sexuality, including the following titles *When Someone you Love is Kinky* (2000), *The New Bottoming Book* (2001) and *The New Topping Book* (2003, all published by Greenerly Press, California). Dossie works as a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in relationship issues and queer sexualities in San Francisco, USA. She was invited to hold the opening speech at the *International Conference on Polyamory and Mononormativity* that was organized by the Research Centre for Feminist and Queer Studies on 4–6 November 2005 at the University of Hamburg in Germany.<sup>2</sup> She also organized a workshop on how to manage jealousy in polyamorous relationships as part of the conference programme. Christian Klesse met with Dossie on the day after the conference for an interview about her work and to discuss some of the issues that emerged from the conference debates over the weekend. In the following we present a shortened and edited version of the interview transcript.

We think that Dossie's educational, professional and political work contains fruitful impulses for the development of progressive politics around non-monogamy and polyamory. In particular, we appreciate her commitment to encouraging people to explore their interest in non-mainstream sexual, erotic, and relational practices in spite of the hegemonic attempts to pathologize them. We are convinced that her writing and educational work contributes to the creation of alternative discourses that may help to come to terms with the attacks on people's sexual well-being

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(such as the ones manifested in domestic violence, sex negativity, SM-phobia, sexism, and homophobia) which flow from and are legitimized by hegemonic cultural beliefs on gender and sexuality.

That notwithstanding, we also have divergent views regarding some aspects of Dossie Easton's approach. We are wary that her appeal to a psychologistic individualism and liberal contractarianism may ultimately work to increase the 'sexual privileges'<sup>3</sup> of white, non-trans, middle-class people. We have further got reservations about a certain cultural relativism in her work that has got a tendency to represent 'pre-modern' cultures as an antipode to a sexually and spiritually bankrupt 'West'. Finally, we differ with regard to our approach to 'inclusion', which for us needs to go beyond a mere increase in minoritized faces and bodies and embrace real structural changes in poly discourse and scenes. These issues are explored in more detail elsewhere in this special issue (see, for example, Haritaworn *et al.* and Noël in this volume). Our editorial strategy in preparing this text was to bring forth in the interview the aspects that are in tune with the focus we have adapted in our call for contributions.<sup>4</sup>

Christian Klesse, Jin Haritaworn and Chin-ju Lin

## The Interview

*Christian:* You are co-author of a range of popular guide books that give advice to people who wish to practice BDSM or want to explore non-monogamy as a way of life. In particular your book *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* has gained an enormous popularity. It is frequently referred to (tongue in cheek) as the 'Bible of Polyamory'. What exactly do you mean, if you talk about being an 'ethical slut'?

*Dossie:* A slut is a person that celebrates sexual connection with a variety of partners. Why should that be an insult? Why should that not be a compliment? The ethical aspect is also very important to us. Being an 'ethical slut' means that we respect other people's rights and feelings, that we behave with honesty and integrity, that we are not selfish, but work for the whole community, that we don't exploit people, and that we don't treat people like objects.

*Christian:* The term 'slut' is usually assumed to be a derogatory term. In particular women are accused of being a 'slut', if they are assumed to have an 'unreasonable' number of sexual partners. The word 'slut' carries connotations similar to the ones associated with the term 'promiscuity'. In the course of my research into non-monogamy I spoke to women, who said that the term would activate reminiscences of painful experiences of stigmatization, which made it impossible for them to claim it as a positive identity

marker. Have you come across similar opinions in your workshops on non-monogamy?

*Dossie:* Certainly! But at the same time I am a person with a strong interest in reclaiming language. I call myself a dyke. I call my genitals my cunt. I like to question: Why is this an insult? Why would this be a derogatory term? Why can't we reclaim it as something that we like about someone?' I learnt a lot of what I understand about freedom in sexuality from gay men. They called each other sluts all the time. So I got used to that and it came in common usage in San Francisco at least among a whole group of people who were very sexually active. And I like it. I like reclaiming language. Why should I let the people who want to make all kinds of judgements against sex own the language?

*Christian:* Honesty, communication and negotiation are central values within polyamory. A practice of open negotiation is supposed to safeguard a democratic and egalitarian relationship practice. People frequently come up with rules and agreements in order to make their non-monogamous relationships work. In my understanding the ideal of negotiation is strongly dependent upon – or at least framed within – the logic of the contract. This logic, again, is based on the assumptions of liberal individualism. Material and emotional dependencies seem to be played down in this language. People do not necessarily enter relationships on an equal footing. In your opinion, how do social divisions such as class, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality complicate people's attempts to lead and develop alternative non-monogamous ways of life?

*Dossie:* First of all, let me say that what we call a legalistic approach to agreements is not what works. I say over and over again, these are agreements that may fit you, because they are about what protects your emotional reactions, not anything else. For some reason they may change. People who never let a partner go out for a date might have a very tight sense of what kind of agreements they may need. They want to feel safe the first time they do it. Six months later they might not need such tight agreements. The first time that might be: 'Two hours lunch, that's all I can bear' [laughs]. And eventually it might be that people are going off together for a weekend, because people develop skills of taking care of themselves. These contracts or agreements are not about what is right, but only about what fits and feels safe to the people involved, they are very subjective, they are very individual and they change over time. There is not one right way to do this. In terms of class, and gender, and orientation, there are so many factors. Probably the first one, the most basic one is financial security. Within our society, I also worry about sexism, because I am old enough. When I was born in 1944, there was no feminism when I was a teenager

– or not that I had access to. What I believed was that I was supposed to grow up to be somebody's wife. And in many ways I believed that it was wrong for me to be intelligent, wanting to create my own work, and to have my own destiny. I was told that I was supposed to be of service to my family and that this was the only fulfilment that was appropriate. So I do worry about sexism, which is all over the place where women and men have not re-examined the traditional gender roles. But it is interesting: I take hope that sex in itself is a way of grasping one's power. For example, I can tell you a frequent observation in the swinger and group sex party environments. Husbands want to go, they argue, browbeat, or even bully their wives into going – and then they get there and the wives are more desirable than the men. So the wives are there picking and choosing and the man is hoping to find someone, who is interested in him [laughs]. That is another imbalance in our society: we treat women as desirable objects, but we don't treat heterosexual men as desirable objects. So they get to the party and the woman is having a great time, everybody loves her, and the man is like: 'Ahh!' – Lost! And so suddenly the power changes.

*Christian:* At the conference you ran a workshop titled 'Managing Jealousy with Love' in which you suggested a range of strategies and techniques to control or unlearn jealousy. Your therapeutic advice is grounded in the understanding that jealousy is a socially constructed emotion. Beyond this constructionist insight, have you also got a specifically 'political' analysis of jealousy? Do you think the dominant cultural scripts available to us on how to deal with jealousy are bound up with power relations?

*Dossie:* Absolutely! You see, we are taught that jealousy is the one intolerable emotion. We are taught to manage anger, aggression, or sadness. As children we are taught: 'Don't cry so much! Don't feel sorry for yourself!' We are taught to contain all the other emotions – even grief. We have a notion of how much grief you are allowed to have, beyond which it is assumed to become pathological grief. But we say: 'Jealousy. Oh no, no, no!!! It is impossible to tolerate jealousy!' I look at how we deal with all the other difficult painful emotions and say: 'Okay, let's take the same approach. How do we take care of ourselves when we feel jealous?' That has worked for a lot of people. The way we tend to deal with jealousy is just another way in which a patriarchal culture enforces strictures on women's sexuality, so that women's sexuality can be owned. It is mostly women, heterosexual women, who are constrained by these models. But we are all taught emotionally that jealousy is some state where we would just explode. But this idea is a myth, it is not true. It doesn't have to be that way. And yet that is what we are told from childhood, even while we are taught to deal with

sibling rivalry. And by the way, the ways we are taught to deal with rivalry among brothers and sisters or small children is exactly the same stuff that works with jealousy, too. 'It is okay! You will get your turn! You will get your attention! It is alright!'

*Christian:* Would you say that jealousy is constructed in a way that justifies the control of women's bodies and sexuality and has the potential to legitimize all kind of male violence and atrocities?

*Dossie:* Yes, to the point of murder. I had a man in my office recently that I refused to work with. Some years ago, his wife was having an affair, and he found the man and broke both his legs, and made the man permanently disabled. He went to jail. He went to anger management classes. He is telling me about all this and he is there because he doesn't want to be so angry, because he worries that his new wife is cheating, and I say, 'Oh, then you are coming into therapy that you won't want to do that any more again'. And he said, 'Oh, no, I would do it again'. [Pause] I had to tell him I couldn't see him. I said, we have different goals, we are not working for the same thing, so I cannot work with you. And beyond that, I believe that he needs to be in a men's group, but he needs to want to change. The funny part is, he doesn't hit women . . . [laughs]. When I asked him that, he was horrified. 'Oh no, I am a nice person'. [laughs] . . .

*Christian:* As far as I understand you, you have got a politicized understanding of doing therapy and counselling, which is informed by your sex-positive ethics. In your keynote lecture for the conference you described some of your clients as 'refugees' of the psychological professional discipline, meaning people, who have got very bad experiences with therapists and counsellors, because of their non-mainstream sexuality and relationship life. What do you see as the major problems regarding the heteronormative and sex-negative bias within the profession. What does it mean for people, who are looking for therapy and who may be in a vulnerable situation?

*Dossie:* Ohh, yes!! Even in San Francisco, even in the Bay area – although there are exceptions now – we need to look at what a therapist is supposed to understand in training. Recently we have started doing training in cross-cultural understandings to see how different cultures within the larger culture raise their children, do relationships, and construct their emotional realities. It is very controversial even to have a course in lesbian and gay studies, and to have this required of therapists is almost unheard of. We say, well, what has a therapist to learn who works with people who are transgender, who are non-monogamous, who are gay and lesbian sluts, who are into SM, who are sex workers, or who are, for that matter, involved in any marginalized sexual practices or life styles.

I am working with groups that are trying to provide training for therapists in training. I am further training interns, although my interns come to me, because they share our life style, and they want to be trained to work with the people that I work with. Yet still, many of the straight therapists look at me as if I am crazy, when I say that they are pathologizing. They are treating as pathologies what I understand to be healthy behaviour. I then say, for instance, the following: 'Would you like to have some information about how sex workers keep their relationships healthy, or how a polyamorous couple supports a primary relationship, or how a single polyamorous parent introduces their lovers and their children? What would the family structures look like? How do we explain this to the children? How do we deal with our grandparents? What do we do at Christmas?' And nobody really wants to hear it! [laughs] They don't know how people do all this as part of a healthy life style. People come to therapy, because they are having a problem. Let's, for example, assume a couple coming in, because they are having a problem with jealousy. If they would be going to a straight therapist, the therapist would say: 'Ah! Well, I need to fix something wrong with your relationship. You won't want outside lovers, if you let me fix your relationship the way I think it ought to be.' And again, there is a lot of mythology in that, because one of the truths that drives polyamory is that most relationships quiet down sexually as they mature. Even people who are polyamorous or SM or transgender, who are coming for therapy for anxiety or depression, or because they are in graduate school and they are having a hard time, all of which are things that have nothing to do with their sexuality, get pathologized. This is the kind of information that I want to have out there. This is why I am working on training for therapists in training. I have actually got through to some therapists who were very prejudiced, but I would say: 'What information do you have? Where is your information coming from? Do you talk to people who do these things to find out if that what they are doing makes them less healthy? Do you talk to SM people to find out, if their lives are obsessed and self-destructive? If you talk to people you will find out that this is not true.' I am a masochist. I am a therapist. I write books, I have a very powerful personality on the stage. I have been bottoming for 30 years and I have not become a wimp, I have not become a disempowered woman by any means. And yet that is the myth. But people think that they have the right to strong opinions about SM, about gender, about sex work, about polyamory, about gay and lesbian people, when they have no information – zero!

*Christian:* In your book *The Ethical Slut* and in the workshops you seem to suggest that it is possible for us as individuals to deal constructively with jealousy and to manage the feelings of shame and guilt that

are often bound with pursuing non-mainstream or 'perverse' desires or claiming marginalized or 'queer' sexual identities. You appeal to your readers and listeners to reflect on their needs and their wants, to negotiate their wishes and boundaries, and to affirm their sense of self-worth – all this in a context of inimical societal conditions that have the tendency to pathologize people who stray from the major paths of heterosexual respectability. As common within the disciplines of counselling and psychotherapy, your main focus is on the individual. At the same time, you tend to emphasize the significance of the skills, the spaces, and resources provided by diverse sexual counter cultures. What exactly do you think is the role of social movements in transforming the dominant ideas on gender and sexuality?

*Dossie:* I believe that a great locus of control is within the individual: I find my sanity inside myself, if I learn to take care of my emotions, both inside myself and by getting support from others in a positive way. In our communities we start with our extended families, and then we go larger. For example, we have our internet lists, we have munches.<sup>5</sup> Often it is people that talk on an internet list and they get together once a week or once a month for a munch, for a brunch or a dinner. Sometimes there is 30, 40, 50 people. Restaurants need to book rooms sometimes. We have now in the Bay area a meeting called the 'Mahogany Munch', subtitled 'Pleasures of Darkness'. It is a group of people of colour into SM. People of colour are developing a voice or a series of voices and are starting to speak out from their perspectives. Our sexually liberated communities tend to be very white, very middle class. . . . We build queer communities partly because those are places where we are safe to move around and we can take off our disguises that we use to have at jobs and departments, in order not to get beaten up in the streets and to be with each other in a sense of community and safety. But our communities have also taken on political voices.

*Christian:* What do you think are the most urgent political aims of these movements in the current political situation in the USA?

*Dossie:* The issue a lot is organized around right now is the issue of gay marriage. I don't really approve of marriage. [laughs] I think we should have a pluralistic form of marriage. I think we should have marriages, where people make contracts to raise their children, and they agree on what each person's responsibility would be. But the community is very much organized around the campaign for same-sex marriage, because it is the way that our relationships get some recognition, that our relationships are acknowledged as being valid as everyone else's. And I think that our community works like all oppressed communities, we do a lot of mutual support. I think these things work in steps. We unite to do a

march, because some woman is losing her children, because she has got a lesbian partner. So we all unite, and we do a march to publicize the issue and take up collections for lawyers to keep fighting so that these women can have their children back. If we do that, we come together and we will quarrel with each other. There will be difficulties and we will struggle with them. But at least we come together and we struggle with the difficulties, so we take another step. And there are times when could really wind up fighting and you know say: 'I never do politics again! This is too awful!' And indeed, I don't do a lot of political activism. I work in communities on a much more personal level. My own path has always been working on the personal. That is why I am a therapist. The personal is political in many ways, but I am not the person that goes into court and screams at the government. That is once in a while. [laughs] So when you talk about political discourse, I keep going back to the personal, because that is where my political discourse is. If I say, I refuse to let the patriarchal society hegemony programme me, in places we are all impacted upon or programmed, or I challenge that programming, then yes, that is political, but I am not using a political methodology to approach it. What I am saying is: 'How do I change my felt reality, my perceived reality inside of me, so that I can start acting in a different way'. And then things start to change from the inside.

### Notes

1. BDSM stands for Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism.
2. For more information on the conference, see: <http://www.sozialwiss.uni-hamburg.de/publish/isoz/lehrende/pieper.html> (accessed 21 May 2006).
3. We owe the term sexual privilege to Sel Wahng (personal communication with Jinthana Haritaworn, spring 2006).
4. Editing decisions of this text have been subject to a group discussion. Jinthana Haritaworn provided very critical and insightful suggestions. We are grateful to her.
5. A munch is an informal gathering by people practising BDSM. The word was coined in the USA as an alternative to brunch or lunch.

### Biographical Note

See Introduction for notes on the authors.