Gender and Threeing, Ecology and Cyberspace

Paul Ryan

In Plato's symposium, the comic poet Aristophanes treats his fellows to a delightful fantasy of a human species with three sexes: male, female and hermaphrodite. All three sexes are spherical beings that walk upright either forwards or backwards. When they want to run they tumbled in a circle. Their strength and vigor makes them so formidable they threaten the gods. Zeus cuts every one of them in two. The severed males become homosexuals. The severed females become lesbians. The severed hermaphrodites become heterosexual couples. Weaken, each half longs for its other half. Aristophanes defines love as this longing to be a whole sphere again. (Plato p. 59 ff.)

Aristophanes dreamed of wholeness in Platonic geometric forms. I dream of wholeness in Peircean relational categories. As I will show, the three relational categories of the philosopher Charles Peirce can be take as roles that integrate our bisexual species. I write as an artist envisioning a healthy arrangement of sexual differences amid thriving ecosystems. I offer a feat of imagination, not scholarly argument.

My imaginative configuration will unfold in the following sequence. 1) A presentation of a practice called Threeing that balances the relationship among three people the way T'ai Chi or Yoga balances an individual. 2) An explanation of how Threeing solves a fundamental

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dilemma involving choice and relationships. 3) A consideration of the interconnection between dual gender roles and choice in baboons in the wild, traditional kinship systems, modern marriage and Threeing. 4) A consideration of four behaviors anomalous in terms of dual heterosexual gender roles. The anamolies are same-sex relationships, manage a trios, infidelity and transvestite behavior. 5) A discussion of these anamolous gender behaviors and experimental Threeing. 6) A discussion of liturgical Threeing and heterosexual monogamous couples. 7) A description of a cybernetic notational system for using Threeing in conjunction with Perice's phenomenology and semiotic system to construct an ecological canon based on electronic monitoring of ecosystems. 8) A suggestion that such a canon could ground our adventures in cyberspace.

My effort to present in one gestalt a combination of gender in terms of a three-person relational practice and an electronic eco-canon that would ground activity in cyberspace is occasioned by the publication of *Immersed in Technology.* This collection of essays and texts grew out of the Art and Virtual Environment Project conducted at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Canada in 1994. (Moser: 1996) Nine major cybernetic art projects were commission and eleven cultural theorists invited to write related essays. Taken together, this a serious assemblage of people from many quarters with valuable, insightful things to say. As acknowledged by the editor, the representation of complex cybernetic art projects in print is inevitably disappointing. One must imagine such things as dancing with a virtual dervish, an operatic narrative and involving oneself in virtual sliding on topological surfaces. Yet the effort is worth it. The art is provocative and the essays are strong. Theoretical discussion ranges from serious

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consideration of dying landscapes to the interpretation of cyberspace through acoustic space. Throughout the collection, there is concern with gender issues. Here is a sample quote:

'Virtual reality is no exception to the observation made by many feminists theorists that wherever dualistic hierarchies exist, the privileged term is identified with masculinity and the stigmatized term with femininity.'

(Hayles: 14-15)

Threeing

My approach to cyberspace grows out of years of immersion in video as an artist. (Ryan 1974, 1993) Out of this immersion I have developed a voluntary art of relating, called Threeing, in which three people take turns play three different roles. These three roles correspond to Peirce's three fundamental categories: initiator -- firstness; reactor -- secondness; mediator -- thirdness. Just as the practice of T'ai chi or yoga maintains individual well being, so the practice of *Threeing* maintains the balance of relationships among three people.

Threeing is based on the relational circuit. (footnote 1 The relational circuit is a transformation of a Klein bottle into a six-part figure that satisfies all the formal criteria for a cybernetic circuit. (Ryan) For the purposes of Threeing, a two dimensional version of the three dimensional relational circuit suffices. Like the positions on the surface of the radially symmetric sphere in Aristophanes fantasy, the positions

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in the relational circuit are organized without assigned direction, i.e., without orientation. By contrast , the bilaterally symmetric human does have orientation built into its front-to-back axis and its top-to-bottom axis.

In Threeing, this RELATIONAL circuit is outlined on the floor with an eight-foot diameter between the outer arcs. (See graphics Relational Circuit 2D and 3D available in the Additional Resources section of the Web site.)

In *Threeing*, this circuit is outlined on the floor with an eight-foot diameter between the outer arcs. Participants learn a simple flow pattern to coordinate their activity. As the circuit has only six positions and six of anything is perceptible without counting (McCulloch: 1965, 7), this flow pattern requires no act of counting that would abstract the participants from being immersed in the phenomenon of relating. Once participants learn this flow pattern, or choreography, they wordlessly use the choreography to take turns in the different positions according to their sense of what is going on. When the three participants are in the in-between positions on the outer ring, they interact face-to-face in symmetric fashion. When the three participants are in the interior positions they stand asymmetrically, front-to-back, facing from the third position to the first position. Interaction takes place with sound and movement. The person in the first position acts spontaneously without regard to the two others. The person in the second position, while being attentive to her own feelings, reacts to the person in the first position without thinking. The person in the third position attends

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to the feelings of all three participants; the reactions of the person in secondness as well as her own reactions and find a way to mediate between the two others. To date, Performers working with Threeing have only begun to draw on the range of relational nuances that become possible when Peirce's three categories become roles. (Footnote videotapes)

The Relational Dilemma and *Threeing*

My use of the word 'relational' privileges a certain etymological understanding. 'Relationship' and 'difference' come from separate parts of the same Latin verb: *fero (I carry), ferre (to carry), tuli (I carried), latus (to be carried)*. This verb was used to mean 'to bear' or 'to carry' a child. Our 'relatives' are those we differentiate ourselves from by referencing the experience of child bearing. My mother was carried by a woman (my grandmother) who carried a woman (my aunt) who carried my cousin. Etymology suggests that the question of how we relate to each other can be understood as a question of how we organize the differences among us.

The relational dilemma begins with our bilateral symmetry, i.e., Zeus cutting us into two halves. Unlike Aristophanes'' round beings with two faces, we cannot look into two pairs of eyes at once. If you look into Jack's face, you cannot, at the same time, look into Jill's face. Two tend to connect face-to-face and exclude any third. As the saying goes, 'Two's company, three's a crowd.' In parts of China this tendency of two to combine and exclude the third person is mitigated by an interesting custom. If a person asks another person a question

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in the presence of a third person, the person asked the question answer as if the third person had asked so as not to exclude the third. (Berg 1977)

Consider this simulation of normal three-person interaction done as an experiment at a research center in California. (Bateson: 1976) Three people are seated at a round table with partitions so they cannot see each other. In front of each is a two-minute timer. Each has two buttons on the table in front of him. Only one button will work at a time. Each button closes an electric circuit that includes getting time on the timer, a light, and being in touch with one other participant, if she is also closing the circuit. The objective for each participant is to be in contact with someone for more time than either of the other two parties is in contact with someone. A choice must be made between the other two in order to score. Only one dyadic combination can be scoring at any one time.

Scoring points is one thing, relating is another. In a dyad you can 'relate' one-to-one. With just one other person you can develop a deep understanding of him or her, and that person can develop a deep understanding of you. Understanding each other, however, is not the same as understanding the differences between you. Differences are themselves relational. The differences within a two-person relationship cannot really be understood *as differences*, unless there is another relationship available for comparison. This explains why love is blind. The two lovebirds see each other, but neither sees the relationship they are in *as a relationship*. Without a third person, the exhilarating play of differences between two lovers can easily go to extremes. Courtship can be very dramatic. In truth, while courting lovers do not

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want to see the relationship, they want only to see each other. They resist any third person in part because the very presence of a third person invites scrutiny of their relationship as well as questions about how their isolated two-person relationship fits with other relationships in their community.

In other words, for two people to understand the differences between them, to understand the relationship *as a relationship*, there needs to be a third person available for comparison. Relating to one person with no comparison available, you might say, 'You're no fun.' With a comparison available, you could say 'I have more fun with him than with you.' Of course, such a comparison is cruel because it implies that you will soon make a choice and leave the person you are with and go have fun with the third person. Here we have the fundamental relational dilemma. On one hand, it takes three people to understand and balance relationships as relationships; on the other hand, each person within a three-person relationship is constantly faced with a choice between the other two. *Acts of choice cut us off from relationships as relationships.* The choice of one person tends to break off the relationship with the other person. Yet choices that exclude a third person leave the two remaining people without a way to balance their relationships as a relationship. This is the relational dilemma. To say it succinctly another way: relationships are routinely subsumed by acts of choice.

The relational dilemma generates a cluster of partial solutions to relational balance for dyads, among them risking periodic interaction with an outsider that allows the parties in the dyad to renew their mutual choice of each other. In effect, they are saying that whatever

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ambiguity has grown up within out relationship, it is at least clear that each of us prefers the other to the third person.

Threeing resolves the relational dilemma by neutralizing the excluding effect of choice on relationships. Choice is exercised not between mutually exclusive partners but between unambiguous positions included in one figure of regulation for interaction called the relational circuit. There are six unambiguous positions and three participants. Following the choreography, any participant can choose to change his or her position anytime. A difference in position makes a difference in the relationship. Three people can use the circuit to balance their relationship by continually changing positions, continually rotating through the three roles and/or interacting symmetrically with each other on the outer arcs. No one is excluded. *Threeing* does not reinforce one two-person relationship at the expense of a third person. No one person is ever forced to choose between two others. Choice is exercised so as to balance relationships among three, not exclude. All choices serve to support the three-person relationship. In *Threeing*, the function of the triad is to reinforce the triad.

Sex, Gender and *Threeing*,

As anthropologist Gregory Bateson remarked, sex is 'a matter about which human beings are not only reticent and dishonest, but even totally unable to achieve an objective view of their own behavior or that of others.' (Page 38 A Scared Unity Bateson Donaldson) This artist/author claims no exemption from that description. What follows

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does not purport to be objective. In Peirce's terms, I am offering an abduction, a guess about a new way to organize gender roles. As with any abduction, this new organization invites critique.

Humans are born with a genetic status of either XX or XY chromosomes. This status determines their sexual identity as either male or female. Gender roles are the attitudes and behaviors that that a particular group considers appropriate for a male or a female on the basis of their sexual identity.

usually, there are two sexes and two 'normative' gender roles. Given the disjunction between the duality of gender roles and the three roles proper to *Threeing*, how can there be any synthesis between gender roles and *Threeing*? How can we translate back and forth between the roles proper to *Threeing* and the roles proper to gender relationships? To see how this translation might work, I will begin by discussing issues of choice and gender in four settings: baboons in the wild, the kinship system, modern marriage and *Threeing*.

While there is a virtual third, a potential offspring, in any heterosexual relationship, the actual relationship between male and female is dyadic. There are two sexual roles: male and female. Copulation is a two-party process. When a third party is on the scene, that party is a rival for one of the two roles in the relationship. We share this situation with other primates. An experimental study with baboons in the fields of Ethiopia indicates this dynamic clearly. There are no 'free' females in a baboon troop. Female baboons can compete to attract males, but they do choose their mates. The males possess the females and will fight to hold onto them if necessary. Much fighting is avoided,

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however, since seeing the male/ female pair generally inhibits the 'rival' male. When such a triad is put together in the wild, the social behavior of the rival is inhibited while the social behavior of the pair is enhanced. In the presence of the rival, the pair bond matures rapidly. The rival 'outsider' is extruded in the process. The function of the triad is to reinforce one dyad.

As with baboons, in traditional cultures, male humans compete for females. Like female baboons, female humans can compete to attract males, but choice remains with the males. Unlike baboons, humans in traditional cultures have made a transition from a situation in which rival males fought openly over females to a situation in which rival males can trade females. In the kinship system, the rival male becomes a trading partner. Exchange of women is the rule that organizes kinship system. (Levi-Strauss: 1969) A man takes a given woman away from a man in order to have a child. The man giving the female away, for example a brother giving away his sister, rightly expects to receive a woman in accord with whatever rules of kinship exchange exist in his culture. Again the dyadic nature of gendered roles is respected. The incest taboo insures that the 'exchanged goods' are completely for the groom. The giver does not partake of the gift. A virginal gift is a reliable sign that the relationship between the men will not revert to rivalry over females.

The traditional kinship system manages copulation among humans. Carnal love between a man and a woman is dyadic. _____ loves _____. Two blanks to fill in. He loves her. Or, she loves him. But exchange is triadic. _____ gives _____ to _____. Three blanks to fill in. The father gives the daughter to the other man.

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The kinship system requires these three roles be played: the father or brother of the bride, the bride, and the groom. Note that these roles are fixed. Note again, that for this triadic system to work, the roles in the gendered dyad must remain intact and exclusive.

In modern culture, marriage relationships are effectively arranged by negotiation between two people. Remnants of the kinship system persist, as in the custom where the father gives the bride away, but he has no real say in her choice of mate. Modern marriages are not arranged marriages. People court and choose their own partners. The role of the rival is given to the old boyfriend or old girl friend who was not chosen. At another level the role of the rival is institutionalized as justice of the peace, or religious minister who performs the ceremony. Later the role of institutionalized rival may become the marriage counselor.

Within the marriage the couple functions as a dyad. Obviously, many people find healthy ways to work out their marriage and live a relatively happy life. Judging by the divorce rate in modern society, however, many people do not. The play of differences in their relationship becomes played out, polarized, or hopelessly entangled. While there may be many reasons for this, in my perception, one critical reason is a failure to balance the relationship *qua* relationship. In kinship systems couples are not isolated, roles are clearly defined, and there are multiple third parties to reinforce the marriage bond. In modern marriage, couples are often isolated, roles are not clearly defined and a community of people to provide 'safe' third parties is not always available. Healthy families often make a significant difference, but modern families do not have the stability of kinship systems.

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Without a third party it is difficult to reference and negotiate a relationship as a relationship. The relationship, the ordering of differences, can become confused and the marriage dysfunctional. Gregory Bateson offers a cogent description of a confusion of differences which he called schizmogenesis, a term he coined to indicate the growth of a split. Schizmogenesis is a cumulative pattern of interaction between two people that becomes an unstoppable vicious cycle as each person continually reacts to the others reaction. (Bateson: 1958). Bateson has very perceptive and clear explanations of other pathologies in behavior including the double bind, and the 'sliding triad'. In a forthcoming book, I will detail how *Threeing* precludes these pathologies.

On the whole, modern women are free to negotiate their own marriage arrangement. Modern women want choice. The fight over abortion is framed as an issue of choice. This issue indicates how far modern women are from the kinship system. In the kinship system, the woman was given to a man to have a child. By demanding the right to exercise ultimate choice over their birthing body, women position themselves far from the authority of men who give and receive women as gifts for childbearing and signs of trust. The effect of 'not exchanging women' on the relationships between modern men is not clear. Yet in the modern world, both men and are often left without any stable network of relatives that can help them organize differences with their chosen mate. Kinship culture is a culture of relationships. Modern culture is a culture of choice. Relationships are subordinated to acts of choice.

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Based on the relational dilemma, we can say that there is no guarantee of success for anyone choosing a dyadic relationship for herself, particularly a romantic one. Dyads fail for formal reasons. In the modern world, a man or a woman can choose a partner. However, given the relational dilemma, that chosen relationship may not have the same probability of 'success' as a relationship arranged in accord with the terms of a kinship system. In the kinship system women have no choice but they have some stability in their marriages based on being the 'gift' in the triadic relationship of exchange between men. In modern marriage, men and women have freedom of choice but no system that secures long-term relationships. *Threeing* is a relational system that offers both men and women the same range of choices.

The main difference between the triad in the kinship system and the triad in *Threeing* is that the kinship triad is transitive and the *Threeing* triad is intransitive. Recall that 'transitive' and 'intransitive' are terms taken from grammar. Transitive simply means that the action moves from a subject to an object. 'I push the door' is transitive. 'I' is the subject, 'push' is the verb expressing action, and 'door' is the object. By contrast, an intransitive verb expresses action that does not require an object. For example, 'I yawn' or 'I run'.

In the kinship system, I give my sister to her new husband. The action is transitive. Without the object, the sister to give, the kinship system makes no sense. The man gives the woman away. The woman is not to be returned. It is understood as an irrevocable gift. In *Threeing* there is no gifting of an object called a woman. The relationships established are voluntary and intransitive. Intransitive relationships

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allow all three participants choice. Participants choose to participate with whomever they choose. The intransitive performance of the practice itself maintains the triadic relationships. In the novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison provides an example of an intransitive ceremony that is very much like *Threeing*. The grandmother preacher Baby Suggs orchestrates the ceremony in a clearing in the woods.

> After situation herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from trees. They knew she was ready when she put her sick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her.
> "Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods range. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.
> "Let your wives and children see you dance," she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.
> Finally, she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose.
> It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Woman stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, woman laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath." (p. 107 *Beloved* Toni Morrison 1987 reprint, NY: New American Library, Signet Classics, 1991)

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Where Morrison describes the roles of laughing, dancing and crying as getting 'mixed up' between the men, women and children spontaneously, in *Threeing* the three roles would remain clear and participants would change roles in accord with the choreography of the relational circuit. The relationship among the children, men and women is intransitive. The relationship is strengthened by the performance of the ceremony. Nothing is exchanged. Performance is all.

Gender Anomalies

In the disjuncture between the three intransitive roles proper to the practice of *Threeing* and the two roles proper to gender, there are clusters of sexual practices that are anomalous in terms of 'normative' two-person gender roles. These include same-sex relationships, the manage a trios, extra-marital affairs and transvestites. Discussing these anomalies will move us closer to a synthesis between the practice of *Threeing* and the two gender roles indexed to XX and XY chromosomes.

Regarding same-sex relationships, the triadic practice, in a formal sense, is indifferent. The triadic practice is based on having a front and a back as well as the fact that we can all move and make sounds, not on gender or sexual preferences. Unlike in our current society where heterosexual relationships are normative and same-sex relationships viewed as abnormal, in a triadic social order, same-sex relationships would not be abnormal. People in the midst of the discussion of same-sex relationships, who take the time to understand

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Threeing, would be better qualified that I am to discuss the interface between same-sex relationships and *Threeing*. Here I would only reiterate that *Threeing* is a voluntary practice. People choose to perform the practice or they do not. It is a consensual practice among adults. Within the practice, choice is likewise respected. Whatever ethical rules about gender participants might bring to the practice, from celibacy to polyamoury, perforce must be understood and respected by other voluntary participants. If another's ethics about sex are not in one's comfort zone, one simply does not agree to practice with that person. Without respect for one's own ethics and the ethics of others, the practice will not work.

A ménage a trios is a living arrangement in which two members of one gender sexually share a member of the other gender. To me, this seems to be a relationship in which there are still two basic roles, but two people are sharing one role. In a sense, the rival is made a subpartner in the two-person relationship.

Even with simultaneous sexual intimacy among the three, it appears that the morphology of the gendered human body, keyed to the penis and vagina- still necessitates three people taking turns playing two roles, variations on two roles or creating a supporting role for the third person. It may be that sexual practices exists, or could be invented, in which the gendered bodies of three people find figures of regulation that are truly triadic. I do not see the possibility myself.

Likewise, an extra-martial affair seems to be a situation in which the two-person gendered relationship is intact; however, one party is secretly having two such relationships simultaneously. It is possible to

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see the ménage a trios and affairs as attempts to deal with the relational dilemma. Realizing at some level that the two-person gendered relationship cannot be understood as a relationship without reference to a third person, another two-person relationship is generated by 'duplicating' the partner. It is an effort to neutralize the effect of the first choice by making a second choice without revoking the first choice. The chosen partners suffer the ambiguity. For the one who has two partners the duplication may help him or her differentiate and navigate the relationships, but there remain only two valid roles to play.

By analogy, reduplicative choices in sexual relationships remind me of Bateson's discussion of reduplicative limbs in the morphology of monsters. If a growing frog somehow does not get the genetic information needed to tell him to stop growing his front limb when it is complete, the frog will simply repeat the process of growing a limb, this time on top of the first limb. (Bateson: 1972) The absence of relational information to correct a two-person imbalance can result in the reduplication of the dyadic relationship. In Peirce's logic, such a reduplication of the dyad is a 'degenerate' triad. (Peirce)

Peirce took the term 'degenerate' from mathematics. He said he did not intend it as a judgmental term. He was distinguishing between 'genuine' triads and ones that were not genuine, so he called the 'disingenuous' triads 'degenerate' (Brunning, Jacqueline 252-270 Studies in the Logic of Charles Sanders Peirce, edited by Nathan Houser, Don D. Roberts and James Van Evra, Indiana University Press, Bloomington Indiana 1997) An assembly of three people does not necessarily make a genuine triad. Creating two pairs, as in the

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reduplicative patterns described above, does not make a genuine triad. Even if there are three pairings among the two roles. The three roles in *Threeing*, - initiating, reacting and mediating cannot be reduced to two roles. The three roles in *Threeing*, as organized by the relational circuit, are genuinely triadic.

Despite Aristophanes' fantasy, we are not a trisexual species. We are a bisexual species. Two genders mean two sexual roles and variations on those two roles. Genuine trisexuality is not possible for our two gendered species, even given the practice of *Threeing*. Nor is it accurate to say that *Threeing* reinforces the three dyads in a three-person relationship as dyads. The function of a genuine triad such as *Threeing* is to reinforce the triadic relationship. Period.

To participate in *Threeing* does not mean revoking one's gender. Behaviors vary from culture to culture. In a mixed gender workshop in upstate New York, the women were much more comfortable with their bodies and the physical contact involved in *Threeing* then were the men. In a mixed gender workshop in Istanbul, it was the Turkish men who were more comfortable with their bodies and the physical contact.

The manifestation of such gender differences in *Threeing* can occur because the practice is minimalist. All that is really provided is a self-evident circuit, a simple choreography and three broadly defined roles. The three roles are critical. You cannot put three people in two roles and maintain balance. When there are only two basic roles defined by gender, the tensions of interaction between genders can generate a switching of roles. Among the Iatmul people in New Guinea, for example, when the tension between genders becomes too volatile,

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people initiate a transvestite ceremony in which the men become women and the women become men. If the tension is not that severe, only the nephews and nieces will switch gender roles. If the tension is severe, everybody will switch (Bateson: 1958). Switching between two roles is not the same as rotating among three roles. The three roles in *Threeing* can accommodate tensions between mixed genders without flipping into a transvestite pattern.

Experimental *Threeing*

Out of these gendered anomalies, it might be possible to use the art of *Threeing* to construct nonmonogamous utopian possibilities that could eventually be implemented. It is worthwhile to note that in the nineteenth century one of the most successful utopian comminutes, Oneida, survived for thirty-one years without monogamy. By most reports it was a happy community. (Klaw) Of course, it included a charismatic leader named John Noyes, a thriving economy, and a rich theology of being guiltless. Interestingly enough, there was a rule of three. No one approached a potential sleeping partner directly. Every proposal for intimacy, every time, had to go through a third party. Evidently, Noyes' sister was a very skillful matchmaker, and very busy.

Yet this is not the nineteenth century. We are beginning the twenty-first. We don't trust charisma and we don't trust the gender arrangements we have. Trust between genders is hard to come by. We don't have anything like an informed consensus about the meaning of gender or sex and both terms are highly politicized. Ironically, the gender imbalance in a mixed group of three could provide a dynamic

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that would nurture enough trust between members of both genders to initiate triadic experiments.

Consider this scenario. One person asks another to three in an experimental mixed gender group. They both ask a third who agrees. This triad practices until each person sees fit to invite two new people to three. When the three new mixed gender triads are committed to start, the first triad ends its own practice. In a similar way, the nine then exfoliates into twenty-seven. Once the twenty-seven have had some ongoing experience of the trustworthiness of *Threeing* for organizing relationships, there might well be enough people willing to recombine for a more long-term commitment.

For example, a more long-term commitment might be played out for three unpartnered females and three unpartnered males with no intent to have children. An invitation process might move from female to female to female and then through the three males. With six people, each person can enter into ten different triadic combinations. Participants would move through all ten recombinations practicing at least once a week for ten weeks. The practice of *Threeing* itself would remain chaste so as to anchor and contain all the relationships in a shared emotional experience. The participants would determine rules of sexual engagement outside the practice of *Threeing*. Of course, respect for the right of each person to make his or her own choices throughout the process would have to be maintained.

Currently, there are no practitioners of *Threeing* now experimenting with issues of sex and gender. Consequently, any utopian scenario is a matter of dreamwork. As Gustave Tibon says, and I am

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paraphrasing from memory, "Woe to the human who cannot dream. Yes. But even more. Woe to the human who cannot die to here dreams.".

Liturgical *Threeing*

For the preponderance of the population, monogamous heterosexual couples, any thought of experimental *Threeing* with gender anamolies would be destabilizing and to be avoided. The very idea might trigger ambiguous desires and imaginings associated with these anomalies which can undercut the stability of their established heterosexual relationships. The actual practice of *Threeing*, without clear and prior resolution of these ambiguities, could be devastating. We come to the realm of ritual.

Rappaport defines ritual as 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.' (1999 p 24) Leaving aside the question of utterance, we can see *Threeing*, as a sequence of formal acts not encoded by the performers. To synthesize the disjunct between two gender roles based on our bisexual biology with the three roles in *Threeing*, it must be clear in the encoding of *Threeing* as a ritual practice that *Threeing* is chaste and intercourse is not part of the practice. As Rappaport argues, ritual relies heavily on indexical signs. (p 23-58) People show up or they do not. People perform the invariant sequences or they do not. Likewise intercourse is indexical. You do it or you don't. Indexicality disambiguates the continuous flow of feelings in firstness and allows feelings to take shape as the firstness of thirdness,

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thirdness being the form of the ritual experience. These newly shaped feelings, clearly indexed, form a basis for trust among participants. Rappaport argues effectively that ritual arose among humans as a response to the capacity to lie and structure alternatives provided by the invention of symbolic systems. By constructing heavily indexed experiences that were invariant and trustworthy, humans could offset the possibility of deception through symbolic systems. Rappaport also explains how ritual links participants to a canonical liturgical order. This order includes the lives of the participants, the social order and the cosmos. (P 105-106)

Based on my work with *Threeing*, video and the environment, I see the possibility of developing a canonical order proper to our ecological age. I see the possibility of using *Threeing* to link our lives, our social order and our ecological systems. The links would make full cybernetic use of Peirce' s phenomenology and semiotics. Such a canon could be a basis for trustworthy communication in cyberspace where digital technology exponentially increases the possibility of lying and the construction of alternatives by our symbolic making species. Such a canon would not be based on Sacred Scripture such as in the Jewish and Christian traditions as described by Peter Ochs. (199?) Rather the canon would grow from systematic shared perception of our environmental situation. It would combine the self-correcting intelligence of both pragmatism and cybernetics. The canon itself would be grounded in an ongoing monitoring of ecological systems, not in a master narrative.

In a fundamental way, we must recognize that relationships between genders are subcircuits of relationships between generations. The prime biological function of our differentiation into two genders is the

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propagation of our species. Gendered relationships imply generations. The potential third, the offspring of a heterosexual union, indicates the larger 'triadic' context for gendered couple. The prime evidence for circumscribing trust between genders within the larger circuit of trust between generations is the maintenance of the incest taboo. Without this taboo, the propagation of the human species would be jeopardized. Maintenance of the incest taboo allows children to propagate with the children of other parents and cultivate a diversity that strengthens the species. Parents generally observe the taboo and do not have intercourse with their children. Violation of the incest taboo remains a horrifying violation of trust, even in modern society. Trust between genders is a subcircuit of trust between generations.

Unfortunately, as we now know, trust between generations is now linked to both the maintenance of the incest taboo and to the maintenance of the environment.
Were this triadic canon to be actually created, it would make a contribution to the propagation of the species, not by regulating sexual activity directly, but indirectly through helping preserve the environment on which our species depends. The route of reference between gender and *Threeing* may well be through ecological concern.

Another argument for avoiding any direct link between *Threeing* and sexual activity is that *Threeing* is intransitive. An intransitive system would not serve to propagate the species the way a transitive system does. In other words the transitive system of kinship does work well to birth more and more humans of diverse genetic makeup. Perhaps the intransitive system of relationships made possible by *Threeing* can be used to create a network people, supported by a self correcting

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ecological canon, who can effectively counterbalance overpopulation by an ongoing reliable interpretation of environmental constrains.

In such an ecological context, *Threeing* could support mixed gender monogamous relationships by structuring a support system for raising families in the absence of the kinship system. The most elegant way to combine *Threeing* with gender is with six people: three males and three females. Both two and three divide into six as whole numbers. Nobody needs to be sliced in half. With six people you can maintain dyads and engage in the triadic practice. Moreover, six people are able to enact all the triadic combinations of two genders: three males, three females, two males and a female and two females and a male.

Let me present a scenario with three heterosexual couples: Al and Diane, Bob and Emily, and Carl and Francis. All three couples are far from family and want to set up a mutual support system for raising their own families. Al and Diane invite Bob and Emily to *Three*, with the understanding that they will maintain their monogamy. Bob and Emily agree. Both couples then invite Carl and Francis to *three* with them under the same terms. Carl and Francis agree.

With six people there are twenty different triadic combinations possible. Eighteen of those combinations are mixed gender. Six of the eighteen do not include any preformed heterosexual partnerships. These six combinations are appropriate for the nonverbal practice of *Threeing* by the three couples. Were their own heterosexual partner included in the ritual triad, there would be confusion between their dyadic dynamics and the dynamics of *Threeing*. The six partner-free, combinations are:

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1. Diane, Emily and Carl
2. Al, Bob, and Emily
3. Bob, Carl, and Diane
4. Emily, Francis, and Al
5. Diane, Francis and Bob
6. Al, Carl, and Emily

Note that any one person can only be part of three of the six combinations. If the practice of *Threeing* were ritualized on a regular basis, these six people could habitually experience a rich range of emotions in a crisis-proof setting. This range of emotions would correspond to the enormous expressive possibilities of Peirce's three categories and be linked by the canon to ecological systems. Having the secure experience of these emotions, the secure experience of difference in a ritual setting, each person can translate that emotional richness and stability into the play of differences within his or her heterosexual dyad. The couple can also use this recurring emotional experience to support the dynamics of child rearing.

In terms of childrearing, the practice of *Threeing* could help counteract what Dorothy Dinnerstein calls 'the female monopoly on early child care'. In her remarkable book *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, Dinnerstein traces the human malaise about sexual arrangements to the primacy of the female in child rearing. This malaise includes the infantilism of males, the childlessness of females, the separation of sensuality and sentiment, infidelity, ambivalence toward our flesh, the dominance of males based on a fear of female authority shared by both sexes, women being excluded from making history, woman serving as scapegoats for human resentment about the human condition, and pernicious forms of complicity between the sexes. Her book deserves to be read in full, and I am only highlighting here. To

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the extent that her argument makes sense, and I think in makes a good deal of sense; *Threeing* can help break the monopoly of women over early childcare. While that monopoly is slowly being changed, *Threeing* could speed the process and give it formal stability. The six-person arrangement of mixed genders described above could share child-rearing responsibilities without truncating the mother's part in any arbitrary way.

Obviously, setting up such a mutual support system would involve risk. In a certain sense, the ritualized practice of *Threeing* will restructure very primitive emotions. The emotions proper to this ritual are not appropriate for negotiating one's way in the world where two against one dynamics are the norm. A transitional space between the ritual experience and negotiating the world needs to be set up. Traditionally, church associations have managed this transition. While setting up a church may or may not be appropriate, some sort of formal association to protect the transition in and out of the ritual domain would be needed.

One interesting model for an association of six people comes from the game of 'Go'. Go is about controlling territory and capturing opponent's pieces. Security is established for one's own pieces only when six or more pieces are configured around two separate empty spaces. This secure formation appears as on the board as two open eyes. This double eye formation prevents any of the pieces from being captured. (pp. 14 ff. Lasker, Edward, *Go*, Dover, NYC, 1960)

Three people of mixed genders practicing *Threeing* is an unstable configuration. For the participants to be secure with each other in

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their relationships there must be at least two separate practices shared by six people. Participants can recombine with each other to maintain both practices. Both practices can remain genuinely triadic, and stable, as long as gendered dyads do not introduce two against one dynamics.

In a fully developed association of six people, one would be a member of three different sorts of triads: a ritual triad, an environmental triad and a work triad. The environmental triad would work on interpreting ecological systems. In terms of any association of practitioners making its way in the workplace, I have developed *Threeing* as a way to build the skill sets being called for in the new world of work (Ryan: 1998). Only the ritual triad would not include one's gender partner in order to preclude confusion between dyadic gendered intimacy and triadic ritual intimacy. In the work triad and in the environmental triad, the interaction is not so intense that dyadic patterns would disrupt the process. Just as in the ritual triad the group would rotate through six different combinations of people, so in the work triad and the environmental triad, the group would rotate through fourteen different combinations of people. Obviously, groups that were multiples of six would have a richer mix of differences to work with. More people make for more options in recombinations. Repetition of particular triadic partners could be minimized. In all triadic recombinations, participants should be precluded from recombining with the same partners as much as is reasonably possible. Otherwise, two people can subtly work to exclude a third party in order to recruit a 'better' third party.

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This scenario, and variations on this scenario, could be simulated in cyberspace and subjected to scrutiny, redesigned and redeployed. Whether such a scenario could eventually supply for modern couples what the kinship system supplies for tradition couples could only be known through the trial and error.

The initial effect of an innovative practice is usually to allow the conservation of a traditional pattern. The creatures that first learned to live on land were scurrying from dried up water holes to more viable water environments. (Rappaport) Land was an obstacle to their desired habitat, just as the deterioration of the biosphere is an obstacle to the perpetuation of family systems. In like manner, *Threeing* might initially be used to conserve the family pattern common to all men and women by linking families to ecological constraints. Perhaps after a few generations of using this practice to stabilize families and share perception of the sustaining environment a triadic social order could develop in its own right.

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