

The book cover is a vibrant yellow. It features a large, faint, brown footprint pattern that forms a path across the cover. Scattered around this path are five cartoonish shoes. Each shoe is white with a black outline and a small black mark on the side. The shoes are positioned at various points: one in the top left, one in the top right, one on the left side, one on the right side, and one at the bottom center. The title 'On Sociality & Idiocy' is written in a red, outlined, sans-serif font in the center. Below it, the author's name 'Doggerland' is written in a black, sans-serif font.

*On Sociality
& Idiocy*

Doggerland

Madeleine Stack

IS THREE POSSIBLE? DID TWO EVER EXIST?

AS A CHILD, I perpetually drew 3 backwards: ε.

Exasperated, my mother told me: *do it like you don't think it's supposed to be done*. So I learned in reverse. Three is uneasy. What I am interested in, is this thing that is being-in three, a collaborative threesome, a romantic trio, triangularly entangled in art and life.

Two is, we can agree, halfway to three.

Envision this triangulation: there is an apparatus that comes between two bodies, two lovers. The apparatus is necessary, it is what allows the encounter to occur. The apparatus translates desire from one body to another. Triangulating the relation: there's always something coming between us. The third is a proxy for enabling dialogue between the other two, the third completes the triangle, the third is a void that allows the channel of communication to open. But what if the apparatus is somebody else? This document came from a desire to recuperate the lost story of threes, the story of how difficult it is to maintain a group of three. In particular, from conversations dissecting the ways that these groups of three invite or erupt into erotic, romantic, and domestic settings. How collaborations can be hijacked by liberal ideas of what constitutes success, because of

Madeleine Stack

institutional structures that favour communication as a reciprocal gift economy. Basically, how life spills over into what we now sometimes call work.

Triangulation is considered holy because it vibrates. All three factors go *bounce bounce* off each other. There is an occluded narrative of finding a different symmetry, one that is asymmetrical.

Adding one person triples the number of relations that exist in the same space. You suddenly have three relationships rather than one. It's not economical! So, to work in three requires a workaround. It is not an established mode, there is no scaffolding erected around this option.

To start with, a sense of opening. There are certain architectures that allow this opening of the mechanism to happen, inside a human body. Being inside a small place that opens into a large place. Being above the level of the ground. Being in a space that is open to the air. Being in a room that is penetrable by whatever is outside. And so on.

The third element can open a window, causing the two, who had been gazing at one another, to look out.

A window is not only a metaphor: it is impossible to consider human relationships without a consideration of where they live and sleep. People, disproportionately women, remain in couples because of the economic burden of other modes of living. How much of our romantic arrangements are because of built space? How would we arrange our lives if rent was not a factor? This impulse might look like trying to make the environment and the time that you inhabit particularly itself. You make the space. And by making it you unmake the scenario that is forced upon you by the world. You own time.

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

There is a violence embedded in uses of the 'we'. We liked it, we hated it, we want you to stay over tonight, we think your contribution to the text lacked nuance. How to imagine an expansive 'we', used in the spirit of the ungendered pronoun, a 'we' that can stand in for everyone rather than seeking to exclude. The available world is marked by desires for ends; for perimeters. For the enclosure of what is precious and the exclusion of all else. These excluded parts are on the other side of screens, filtered. This is a protection against contagion.

~

Conversation with X, one of three, in love and in work which is a politics:

We always have these really intense conversations, don't we, like –

I need to talk like this with you, in a floating – a way that allows air in.

Maybe it will all turn out to be what we've been planning to write together?

Maybe – you mean about the three and the two?
I don't know if I can do it any more. It's too close, it makes an ache. When I think about it.

I think it's something that I would like to know. What is so intense about three. The starting point is always something I would like to know about.

I don't want it to be like, *this* situation is a symbol for a greater problem. I just think there's something there.

Madeleine Stack

Maybe it can stretch outways a little bit, and be like, what is the theory of three? Of a threesome? Where is the political framework of –

But of course it's a symbol of a greater problem! It's about care, who gets care, and who needs to be cared for. Who is outside of the framework of care.

Well, also, also the three - isn't the moment when two become three...

(singing) *When two become three-ee...*

...isn't when two become three the moment it becomes a network?

Is it? The moment when two become a group?

From a technology standpoint, like, the message isn't just bouncing back and forth anymore, is that what you mean? No longer bidirectional but networked?

I was thinking about – the day the internet was invented was the day that two became three!!!

Because in the original theories of communication is the idea that communication is a message passed between two subjects, already formed.

Problem number one! That's so hetero!

Any liberal idea of communication is that the act of speaking is not talked about as something that produces the subject. It's this thing where the condition is the content.

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?



I want - stupidly - to slip the bounds of whatever I have tied myself with, a gesture I repeat: tying myself up and then eliding the knots like a party trick.

On someone else's trio, she says: It's hard to see something permanent punctuating something that from the outside looks like passing fluid on the surface, not totally sunk in, or like choppy waters trying to gain the quality of elastic.

What three means is the transition from the binary into a spreading form, the space before eruption into the world. To be in romantic-individual love but to turn your gaze outward to the world – the third can be the end of that gaze, or just a threshold to pass through, a doorway: Δ . In various spiritualities, the triangle is made up of a parent, a child, and an extra thing – something that makes the others vibrate. If you were so inclined you could name that thing the spirit.

What is different about a three, as opposed to any other number or configuration? It presents as the midpoint between romantic and communal love. Three constantly vibrates between being a couple and being the whole world, offering no safe harbour in either category. But maybe what we want is less categories, less names. Because the supposedly natural categories of the community and the couple hide their own instability, the three and its ilk, the non-traditional configurations, can be assumed to have been hiding in plain sight. There's a sticking point; it is where individual subjectivity tips into the realm of the multiple.



Madeleine Stack

I like that you're using X for everyone rather than separating them into pseudonyms. It mimics the toppling feeling of trying to disentangle who belongs to who, where everybody's loyalty and attention lies, which is a constantly shifting field. Which makes life exciting!

Like, X is dating X and they're both dating X who lives with X and their kid, and works with X and X, and they are the ex of –

Oh my god, and then everyone's exes! (both laugh)

So how do you two feel about X now? Do you feel ok about that situation?

I feel really bad about it, but I don't think that the process of the threesome necessarily breaks down evenly, but rather that two become much stronger and eclipse the third.

The harmony can't be heard anymore.

When you make a collective of three people, it's almost like three becomes two again, if you're going to be a hermetically sealed romantic-ish unit for a short period of time. It presents as three.

It works if it becomes harmony.

The threesome doesn't break, but two get stronger and the third becomes ballast. The one who's about to 'break' the collaboration suddenly becomes too light, can no longer connect with or keep up with the direction that the other two are going in.

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

I'm not stressed about her anymore because I'm no longer interested in her, in what she has to say, in her work. However the other person in the trio, I find extremely interesting, I think that we have grown in a complementary direction by chance.

But at the time, it felt balanced. It felt like everyone was contributing something really necessary. The necessity of the third person starts to disintegrate. Suddenly one person's ideas are not useful anymore. Which is a harsh feeling to feel, for someone that you thought you were making a life with.

I still feel like I hold anger toward X for her complete uselessness. It's an awful thing to say and I feel a lot of shame about it. I became annoyed with her for her incapacity to be present, and contribute to the work of the group, which I felt was very important. And I find it difficult to separate my own feelings from X's feelings, who realised it earlier than I did, who saw that what we were doing wasn't sustainable. The three broke into two pairs. Then one person has to choose, usually.

X is very mainstream-successful at having her boring opinions. Which is very annoying. And the two 'remaining' people of the threesome are very unsuccessful at having their antisocial opinions. So all of this is, of course, also about money and power.

A push that I thought was all of us doing something together turned out to be us pushing her towards something that she could exploit by showing the most simple facade of seeming political.

Madeleine Stack

The thing is, is that she could have said anything after it all broke down. She could have said worse things than I can imagine.

So really what happened was that she dissolved back into the wider community. She became a player in a larger field, again, suddenly.

She became embarrassed about us.

This is a charged narrative.

Those kind of people are very good at getting institutional recognition because they present a sanitised version of a radical moment.

But you were becoming stronger in relation to other people? Outside of the trio?

I guess. But only inasmuch as...

There was a choice made about what someone was willing to do? The break happened because I just really love one of these people much more than the other one.

That is the major problem.

They're not the beloved, so you don't forgive them what you forgive the beloved.

There were loads of times, politically, when I should have taken X's side, because she was probably in the right. But I didn't, I took X's side, even though she normally had the most antisocial position, a position that I would find hard to defend publicly, but because you love one of those

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

people and not the other, the decision isn't rational.

Have you been the unbeloved one of a three?

Yes. Romantically, yes.

It's brutal. And we've both also been in the
golden pair.

How does one remain in a three when two people are
loving each other more?

It can destroy you. Their prior commitment trumps any
claim you have. It has made me bitter, in the past.
I felt that nothing I could do would make us equals.

Well, with X and X, it became devastating and unstable,
I was too in love with them and it was making me sick.
I would shrivel when I didn't get that attention. And then,
as you know, X suggested we write together and it was
completely insane – the best thing ever. All that energy
flowing finally into something that had an end. So it felt
like the artwork became the channel through which all this
unrequited romantic longing could pass, it became the
third instead.

I hardly ever work alone now, always with others, and
for it to function on a real level there has to be some kind
of entanglement, some kind of flirt or crush or irrational
loyalty, even if it's platonic.

But then – I don't know if I agree with what I just said,
because I don't want it to be such a productivity thing!

Madeleine Stack

As if obsession is just there to be channelled into something productive, like a 'real' relationship or a working collaboration. Gross. Maybe it's more about needing to stop imagining that when something ends, it means it's failed?

Yeah, because looking back when I've been that person, the third – isn't it weird that you can always identify the third?

And it's not always the last person to enter the relationship. When I've been that person and it's been good, it's been like – high. Everything between you all multiplies, becomes extremely powerful and encompassing.

Is it different now? Being the supposedly stable couple, with another lover?

X approached us – she said, I would like to be with a couple for a while. She had been in some long relationships and suggested this arrangement.

So I don't feel bad about that part of it. But to be honest, it's rare that it happens that way.

I feel like now I want to be careful of how I use my words, because I don't want to frame this as exciting because it's generative of, like more productivity or something!

But something can be generative in a non-productive way.

It can be the first step in looking away from one person and into the whole world. Being mutually responsible for another person, but not owning each other.

Maybe it's just a way we live and always has been, but because it doesn't necessarily serve a purpose in society, it

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

has never been commodified. I like it even more when I think of it as wasted time. Time wasted in a relationship that's not anchored, not oriented to the future. Unrecorded life – I would like to make space for that.

~

Around the same time I learned to write three, I learned to swim. Bilateral breathing is the practice of taking strokes in odd numbers, meaning that the head turns to breathe first to the left and then to the right, in a system of asymmetrical balance.

Two people can meet face to face, can agree by 'seeing eye-to-eye'. X said, as if I was being obtuse: *Three is hard because we don't have a face on each side of the head.* Obvious! Three's breath syncs jagged like something that can't be recorded, a record skip. I am not interested in talking about the codified structures of polyamory, as popularly imagined by the hordes of straight couples searching for the fulfilment of their bisexual fantasy. I saw her once described on the apps by one such couple: 'open-minded and obedient'. *That* third is imagined to have no agency.

So these are kind of elided conversations between and about 'women', whatever that category means. That's why it feels so slippery, because it's not designed to show, or be representable. I think that's the problem with framing in terms of mainstream polyamory discourse, which often doesn't acknowledge the inherent hierarchy in relationships between men and women. Saying this while holding all of these terms loosely in the hand, not in order to exclude but rather to try to point to different groups who have grappled with the same questions.

What is an acceptable kinship structure, according to who is in power? How does this impact on border controls, family narratives,

Madeleine Stack

and the distribution of care and affection? What does a productive or reproductive grouping consist of? What kinds of domestic groupings are seen by the state, and which move un surveilled?

An artistic collaboration between three is not the same as a romantic trio – the main difference being that the former is generally formed of all three agreeing at once to work together, while the latter is often made up of a pair with existing commitments plus another.

This was supposed to be about collaborations between three. Not just love! But how else does the work get done? You share life, raise a child, have arguments, earn and share money from various institutions. The various economic and cultural privileges make and break political and artistic collaborations because categories stick to each other. In a wild mood, three vibrates like nothing else. Magnets go haywire.

There is the way that the construction of the family is questioned or brought into doubt at a border or an encounter with the state, where kinship networks have to fit into a strictly circumscribed pattern to be accepted. And the hyper-specificity of those levels of access that just cannot encompass the lived reality of being 'family'.

The structures have existed, and do exist. Like kinship, that trendy word. Everyone says: we've been doing that forever. X defines it as: 'who would you go to hospital for?' Whose kid would you adopt, who would you give a kidney to, whatever it may be. A common refrain in traditional modes of romantic love is that it is in effect 'til death'. The premium of the last touch, last person, last kiss = what is that? The actual limits of kinship structures are only truly visible in moments of crisis or edges to 'normal' life. There's a debt we owe to one another that doesn't have a name. It requires these unlabelled love-configurations to spread the weight of care, when needed.

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

~

Conversation with x, who never claps at the end, and no longer loves-works-lives with two others:

What about a collection of projects for not clapping?

How do you get out of the clap at the end of a performance? It's disgusting to me.

The clap is related to the problem with threes.

Is it about trying to clap with three hands?

The clap is an STI. Infectious.

The clap is the thing – I am the subject and the audience is the other subject, and you've given me this thing and I need to say thank you.

It's related to generosity, generosity as a gift, communication as a gift. When it's not, it's generative. And when the communication is vibrating between three it can't be read as a gift.

Of the separation, if you're halving what you're giving, then there's always the imbalance.

If I halve my 'gift', that is, my communication, between the two recipients, I double the response I get back. More hands clapping.

It's the difference, you're not clapping for yourself.

Madeleine Stack

There's something that happens in a performance when it suddenly feels like it's between two entities, the audience and the performer, and it's not like that. That's the problem.

The clap of the audience is the disgusting sound that says we are not in this together, we are divided into two states, watcher and watched.

It's the transformation of a network back into two.

And what was a communal activity that everyone in the room was equally involved in, again becomes a two way response system - and why?

That's why it's especially visible when it's in a political or artistic thing where the idea is to be building a community, but the community that is being proposed breaks as soon as the clapping begins. The people in the room are divided again into two groups.

What would it look like for a threesome of clapping - the third party becomes the unknown, because in a two-person relationship one is giving and one is taking, even if those are happening in different ways simultaneously. Then the third person becomes this problematic factor that can't be equalised. Or it can be, but how? I wonder whether the fact that the three breaks down, in the context of working together, of collaboration, what does it break down into? Does it break into two? Not necessarily, if the point is that you're always in a network bigger than the three.

~

Is three possible? Did two ever exist?

The management of time and capital is at the heart of clapping. The entertainment has to end so we can go back to work. We cannot remain in the endless feedback loop, we must put our coats on and return home. Similarly, the three can seem to function as a way-station on the way to, or as an entertainment from, the productive pair form. The monolith of the couple is a pure fiction, an expensive fiction, in that it flattens and conveniently forgets the myriad networks that allow us to be alive. It's seductive by design. Like the metaphor of applause, it erases from view the complicated network extending out from audience and performer, lover and beloved. Not as an extra limb opening from the couple form, but rather as an already existing relation. Who has time to be constantly in love, constantly obsessed? A we says, we do.

It is like the sound of its instrumental namesake, the triangle – it goes ting! And keeps resounding til it's tamped down. There are all of these ripples outward. X says: Well then, maybe you don't want or need to rehabilitate the three. Maybe it's better left alone, surfacing here and there in each newly necessary configuration.

Madeleine Stack

Madeleine Stack is an artist and writer. Her work has been published in BOMB, aqnb, Another Gaze, Salt, Leste, and Eyeline. Recent exhibitions and performances include *The Mouth Takes a Bite of This Cruel Summer* at LUX Moving Image, *How are you still clean?* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and *Fatal Softness* at The Koppel Project. She is co-editor, with Bjørk Grue Lidin, of Canal.