cultural geographies of love and catastrophe

edited by
paul harrison
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Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe

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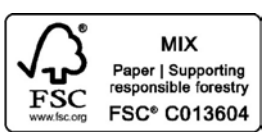

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For Charlotte and Sadie – PH

For Josh and Cole – AJS

For Nuutti, Kaapo, and Tiina – MJ

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Series editors' preface

What's love to got to do, got to do with geographical theorising? So far, it's been an ungeneralisable no-one-thing strewn across geographical writings. Geographers' love letters have swayed like daisies across fuzzy themes and mottled subfields: from asexuality to state-sponsored coupledom to online infidelity to pet love. We can't lament like Saint Augustine of Hippo and sigh, 'late has geography loved love'. We've been around the block with love for quite a while and several times.

It's been a messy affair. As Anna Secor, Paul Harrison and Mikko Joronen note in their electrifying editorial introduction to *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe*, whilst there's no neat and tidy geography of love, it has vibed with the 'negative turn' in cultural geography. That's partly why love has always been never-generalisable, not-one, a negativity of sorts, something that counters geographers' hegemonizing tendency toward the 'annulment of space to explaining it away, to mastering its play' (p. 13) and that reaches toward 'an understanding of distance, of spacing – indeed, of geography – not as something that we inhabit but as something we ourselves unfold in and through the event of loving' (p. 15). This move, which undulates between the covers of this unprecedented book, takes seriously the impasses, the irresolvable, the irreparable as prerequisites for any knowledge. To get into the groove of love, crucially, the book's abiding theme is how catastrophe intrinsically constitutes the broken heart that is love. This devotion to catastrophe, however, is not about patching up the abyss between love and knowledge. Nor is it about trying to resolve love's problems, release its tensions, or demystify its practices. This volume is all about pumping up love *through* its catastrophes.

From disease and ruin to fungi and diamonds, from William Shakespeare to James Baldwin, from love's communal liberations to its feminist geo-erotics, from iconography to poetry and from Australian mines and Svalbard to the Brazilian metropole, this breathtaking collection exemplifies cultural geography's singular desire for promiscuous philosophising. After thirteen spangling sapiosexual chapters lit up by that camp lamp on the book cover, we get the editors' Coda: unsettling as it is unsettled, looping us into love's repetitions and the aporia of its geo-graphy. Nothing will be the same for love and geography after this book. Because love. Love will tear geography apart. Again.

Paul Kingsbury and Arun Saldanha

Notes on contributors

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Introduction: love's ruins

Anna Secor, Paul Harrison, and Mikko Joronen[1]

Speaking of love

What *do* we speak about when we speak about love? The language of love seems to never end and yet, at the same time, to have never quite got underway. A disorder from the outset. Elusive and everywhere, rebellious and banal, solitary and communal, difficult and graceful, a wellspring of generosity, hope, and passion, a boundless source of cruelty, jealousy, and loss. To love, to be loved, to speak of love, is both a promise and a threat. Each time unique, but the most common thing. It can only be betrayed. Cluttering aphrodisiac pharmakon, invaluable value, always outbidding and always sacrificed, love puts all comprehension to its fire. Foam born and star-crossed, it marks the twilight zone between reality and fantasy, between pleasure and pain, passivity and action, domination and submission, subject and object, self and others – between proposition, poem, and prayer. A sigh, a meteorite, its event marks the passionate confusion of language, the stellar catastrophe of thought: "To speak of love is in itself a jouissance."[2]

What do *we* speak about when we speak about love? Over thirteen chapters *Love and Catastrophe* seeks to betray love *well*. To give thirteen accounts of love's *taking place*, of its differential inappearance; of the strange new attachments, alliances, and economies it makes possible and those it destroys, prohibits, and abjects. Most theoretical and critical engagements with love have avoided the catastrophe by quickly substituting talk of love for something else, finding therein some other motive force or structure. Making sense of love, they show that it is merely a cover, a strategy, a ruse, an ideology. Love's spindrift mutability and its sheer ambivalence all too easily cast it as a veil to be cut, as a dreamy sugar coating for the bitter tragedy of the real. As if tragedy could occur without love, as if love were not already in mourning, as if the catastrophe had not already happened, well before any fatal blow.

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1 Mikko Joronen's research has been funded by the European Research Council (ERC, HOMCRI, 101087950).

2 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore: 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Norton, 2011), p. 83.

Let's play the tape backwards, reverse the love plot. Perhaps love's critics are onto something but have missed the pivotal point. Love is not simply or not only a tragically self-deceiving compensation for losses elsewhere, as steely-eyed cynics maintain, but rather it is the very sign – the *jouissance – of* catastrophe. In the hazy small hours of *The Symposium*, in a half-heard ill-remembered conversation, Socrates suggests that tragedy and comedy have the same origin.[3] That, in parallax as it were, they are responding to the same event. If love is just some absurd fairy tale, it is one incessantly told and retold *because there is nothing else to say*. Love *is* absurd, unwarranted, even ridiculous. Its lack of foresight is infamous, its foolishness unmatched. One falls in and out of love in an endless pratfall into the abyss. Love is a useless supplement, most surplus of surplus values; it is what is added to the irreparable *without* repairing, what compensates *without* tangible return. Laughably, it adds nothing to nothing; 'I love you' is what is said *when there is nothing else left to say*. So, in one respect the critics are right, and they can feel satisfied in their cynicism.

But, and here's the pivot point, the plot twist: Whoever said otherwise?

While this may always be disavowed, any discourse on love *always* begins from acknowledging and revealing to us some wound or crack, a separation, a distance. As we shall come to, in various ways, *love always begins from and as a spacing*, from a question, problem, or event of geography. For all the many hymns, plays, poems, songs and more dedicated to the 'power of love', love is always the first witness of its own impotence. All sing its superfluity. This is what love's critics miss and get wrong by, ironically enough, themselves investing in its fantasies while failing to hear love's passion, failing to hear its *want*. Love's condition *is* catastrophe. It has never been otherwise. Love may well always end in tragedy, sometimes devastatingly so, but this was always the openly acknowledged secret from the start. Catastrophe and love are not opposed, one doesn't overcome the other, rather they inscribe each other; each countersigns and witnesses the other in its transience and finitude. And in innumerable ways. And they will continue to do so. There is no love plot to plot, nothing to be cynical about, nothing to critique, without this fact. The most ardent critic, cynic, or pessimist, burns too. To accuse and despair so much they must be madly in love with something, someone, somewhere, somehow.[4] A disguised confession, their passions betray them. Perhaps, then, it is no wonder that today we seem not to be able to stop writing the end of the world. Our need to touch the world's wound – to produce, anticipate, or imagine its catastrophe – is a confession of our love.

A possible motto for this book then, to be read however you desire: 'To love in ruins!' For after all we have little choice: as Jacques Derrida asks, "How can one love otherwise than in this finitude?"[5] In the rest of this introduction, we pick through

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3 Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (Penguin Books – Great Ideas, 1999).

4 Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 113.

5 Jacques Derrida, 'Force of law: The "Mystical foundation of authority"', trans. Boris Belay, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Routledge, 2001), pp. 230–308, p. 278.

the rubble, finding and losing the thread of love over and over again. In the following section ('Love and Geography'), we begin with the question of love and geographic knowledge. We argue that the philosophical, ethical, and even empirical problem of what love *is* and how we *know* it revolves around an impasse. This impasse reveals itself in the convergence of love's ambivalence – at once ecstatic and agonising, eternal and fleeting, universal and particular, reactionary and revolutionary – with its multiplicity: the non-unity of love as a field of expression, sociality, and feeling. In what follows, we argue that it is this ambivalence and disjunctive multiplicity of love that at once subverts any attempt to name a 'geography of love' and keeps love on the tips of our tongues. If 'to speak of love is in itself a [cultural geographer's] *jouissance*', this is precisely because love doesn't resolve its own contradictions, does not yield to the diminishment of knowledge or become exhausted (or fulfilled) in its actualisation. It is in recognising the impossibility of grounding or fixing love that we begin to bring into focus what a cultural geography of love might do, or fail to do. In conversation with negative geographies, we bring love into questions of (non)relation, distance, and vulnerability.[6] Having thus entered love's impasse, the next section ('Love's Catastrophe') takes this argument further to suggest how love folds back upon its own and the world's 'catastrophe'. We begin by dismantling the concept of catastrophe and putting its components to work: the turn, the downturn, the denouement, the end. We show how it is possible to understand love as at once laying waste to the world and the self and offering the possibility of redemption, restoration, even transcendence. The world – indeed, as some of our chapters show, the 'geo-' itself – is what is at stake in love's catastrophe. In full view of historical and ongoing world-devastation, we conclude this section with a return to what is both impossible and endlessly open in love. We then present the arc of the collection ('The Arc of *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe*'), and the individual chapters. Finally ('Conclusion'), we insist that *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* cannot fix or ground love; it is not by territorialising that we perform our 'geography'. Instead, what this volume introduces is a cultural-geographical of spacing, of an opening from which our flickering capacities – for love, for cultural geography – might emanate.

Love and geography

> I don't think our project has been specified properly, Phaedrus, in that we've been told simply to praise Love. If Love were a single thing, this would be fine, but in fact it isn't; and since it isn't, it's better to define in advance which type we should praise. (Pausanias).[7]

6 See David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison (eds), *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); see also footnote 21 below.

7 Plato, *The Symposium*, p. 13.

Most treatments of love begin with some form of the question, 'What is love?' Many never get past it. Indeed, the question of love's essence has a demonstrated capacity to swallow the entire discourse on love, like a snake eating its tail. The difficulty of converting love into knowledge of love is as ancient as the twists and turns of Plato's Socratic dialogue, *The Symposium*, and continues to bedevil. Consider, for example, the third sentence of bell hooks' *All About Love*: "If our society had a commonly held understanding of the meaning of love, the act of loving would not be so mystifying."[8] Without knowledge of love, without some understanding of what love *is*, how do we love?

In the name of conceptual clarity or even for the sake of love itself, so much writing on love begins with an attempt to 'fix' love. To repair the hole in knowledge by trimming love down to a 'single thing', to resolve its messiness with a clean conceptual cut. For hooks, this means recuperating love from its ambiguity, ambivalence, and violence; in her words, love is "the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth" such that "love and abuse cannot coexist".[9] In this solution to the enigma of love, the essence of love is fixed to its goodness. In this solution, insofar as there is non-correspondence between love and the good we are no longer talking about love. At the same time as this definitional cut reduces the field of love to what is properly good, hooks expands love by opening it towards *care*. Indeed, hooks' definition of love as the will to nurture the self and others comes quite close to Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's well-circulated feminist formulation of caring as "a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible".[10] This idea of nurturing love has wide ripples, finding articulation more recently in Sophie Lewis' "definition of love": "to love a person is to struggle for their autonomy as well as their immersion in care, insofar as such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital".[11]

Steering love towards care provides a route around what remains unassimilable (even unknowable) in love. Indeed hooks' distillation of love to the apotheosis of spiritual nurture has precedence within a long tradition (Greek, Christian, Islamic, and Western-secular). Across these traditions, knowledge is shored up against the catastrophe of love's unknowability by enacting an ontological cut: a differentiation between romantic or erotic love and a (more proper, be it Godly or secular) love *without* condition or finitude.[12] While the denigration of erotic love relative to

8 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (HarperCollins, 2016), p. 3.

9 Ibid., *All About Love*, p. 6.

10 Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, 'Toward a feminist theory of caring', in Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (eds), *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives* (State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 35–62, p. 40.

11 Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022), p. 2.

12 Simon May, *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

a more elevated (indeed, Platonic) love is at least as old as Socrates (or Diotima, the female voice in Plato's *Symposium*), the problem of love's knowledge, and the cut as its solution, is still common today, as in this example from a prominent philosopher of love:

> So, what is love? The conception of love I propose does not aim at encompassing every feature of the hopelessly disorderly set of conditions which people commonly think of as instances of love. The phenomena I have in mind include only what is, for my purposes, philosophically indispensable. Most especially, it is not to be confused with romantic passion, infatuation, dependency, lust, or similar varieties of psychic turbulence.[13]

For love to become (geographic) knowledge – indeed to become love *of* (geo-) knowledge – it seems as though love needs to be corralled, which often means that its messiness, pain, and darkness must be cordoned off, removed from the *(im) proper* field of love, from what love names. Love, in this context, is good only when it can be used to tame what is wild or unruly, when it dissolves its own enigmas, as Lauren Berlant points out in her critique of 'romance ideology'.[14] Yet is it not precisely the 'psychic turbulence' and the 'vicissitudes of love' – its excesses and illusions, its contingency and withdrawal – that we endlessly speak of when we speak about love in geography?[15] Between these two versions of love – the ontologically mapped and knowable love, and the spatialising and temporalising instances of loving – the tension is, as Alain Badiou puts it, "almost unbearable".[16]

The gap between love's disorderly field and how we seek to 'praise' or 'know' love may be the reason there is no 'geography of love' – only geographies, only loves. Love as no-one-thing proliferates across geography. For example, love plays an important role in studies of geopolitics that consider how kinship and romantic bonds are deeply affected by and sometimes able to counter the violence of borders, war, and displacement.[17] More broadly, along with sociologists and anthropologists,

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13 Harry Frankfurt, 'Moral normativity and the necessities of love', in A. M. Martin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 333–343, p. 336. On Diotima, see Mary Ellen Waithe, 'Diotima of Mantinea', in Mary Ellen Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), pp. 83–117.

14 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Punctum Books, 2012), p. 110; see also Anna J. Secor, Derek Ruez, and Daniel Cockayne. 'Love and work: Affect and Ideology beyond "the great resignation"', *New Formations*, 2024, 112, pp. 94–112.

15 Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII* (Polity Press, 2016); André Green and Gregorio Kohon, *Love and its Vicissitudes* (Routledge, 2015); Juan-David Nasio, *The Book of Love and Pain: Thinking at the Limit with Freud and Lacan* (SUNY Press, 2012).

16 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (The New Press, 2012), p. 15.

17 Griffiths, M., and Joronen, M., 'Marriage under occupation: Israel's spousal visa restrictions in the West Bank', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2019, 26(2), pp.153–172. David J. Marshall, 'Love stories of the occupation: Storytelling and the counter-geopolitics of intimacy', *Area*, 2014, 46(4), pp. 349–351; Natalie Oswin and Eric Olund, 'Governing intimacy', *Environment*

geographers have contributed understandings of the lived experiences of romance, marriage, childrearing, and sex across a wide range of contexts.[18] Cary-Ann Morrison, Lynda Johnson, and Robyn Longhurst's review in *Progress in Human Geography*, for example, includes a description of sixteen presentations on 'Geographies of Love' at the AAG in NYC in 2012.[19] Papers addressed: online infidelity; households; love in Ho Chi Minh City, Mumbai and Taipei; asexuality; lesbian parenting and mobility; family and friendship; love of (white-dominated) places; soldiers' love-bonds and therapeutic spaces; state-sponsored coupledom; migration; childcare spaces; pets and population change; sex work; and Christian youth volunteering in South America. The range of topics collected here attests to the fact that 'love' does not anchor a specific field of enquiry in the discipline, but instead arises across areas of geographical scholarship that are grounded in different subfields and have different aims. For all that such work has illuminated the political, social, and geographical significance of bonds of love demonstrated here, there is little potential to generalise *a specifically geographical* approach to love. Indeed, given what a large umbrella is required to cover all manner of geographical work on love, and how little can be meaningfully said of it as a whole – that is, anything beyond or more specific than Morrison et al.'s offering that love is "spatial, relational, and political" – it is not at all clear that it is even desirable to do so.[20]

If *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* does not offer a single 'geography of love', it does nonetheless, and perhaps counterintuitively, sit alongside and continue the trajectory of what has been loosely termed the 'negative turn' in cultural geography.[21] Across two 2021 volumes of collected essays in cultural geography,

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and Planning D: Society and Space, 2010, 28(1), pp. 60–67; Rachel Pain, 'Intimate war', *Political Geography* 2015, 44, pp. 64–73; Geraldine Pratt, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labour and Love* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Sara Smith, *Intimate Geopolitics: Love, Territory, and the Future on India's Northern Threshold* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

18 See for example, Sabiha Allouche, 'Love, Lebanese style: Toward an either/and analytic framework of kinship', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 2019, 15(2), pp. 157–178; Ruth Evans, 'Critical geographies of love and loss: Relational responses to the death of a spouse in Senegal', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2021, 39; Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex. Geographies of Sexualities* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); Regan Koch and Sam Miles, 'Inviting the stranger in: Intimacy, digital technology and new geographies of encounter', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(6), pp. 1379–1401.

19 Carey-Ann Morrison, Lynda Johnston, and Robyn Longhurst. 'Critical geographies of love as spatial, relational and political', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2013, 37(4), pp. 505–521, p. 513.

20 Ibid., 'Critical geographies of love', p. 505 *passim*.

21 Without by any means suggesting that 'negative geographies' is one thing, a single synchronised turn, we provide the following touchstones for those who might be intrigued by this loosely named moment: Thomas Dekeyser, Anna J. Secor, Mitch Rose, David Bissell, Vickie Zhang, and José Luis Romanillos, 'Negativity: Space, politics and affects,' *cultural geographies*, 2022, 29(1), pp. 5–21; Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*; Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (eds), *A Place More Void* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); Friederike Landau,

Negative Geographies and *A Place More Void*, we find glints of love, pinpricks in the void, as Chris Philo suggests in his chapter in the first of these volumes.[22] Love in fact was always there, in the rethinking of *relation* that is at the heart of this 'negative turn' and its precursors.[23] Indeed, one such forerunner is explicitly dedicated to the topic love: John Wylie's 'Landscape, absence and the geographies of love'.[24] While Wylie notes that "[l]ove may commonly be conceived in terms of fusion, of self with other, with self, even with place and landscape", his concern is with the fact that "far from being a gathering, the geographies of love might instead describe a separation or rupture", not a repairing or a resolution, but a different "articulation of distance, absence, dispersal".[25] Thus, for Wylie, love both marks and is marked by the interval, by spacing. And also for us in the present collection.

'Distance, absence, dispersal' – certainly this approach risks pathos. Risks setting off, as Vickie Zhang describes in her chapter dedicated to love in *Negative Geographies*, "a pessimistic domino show" that can only record failure after failure.[26] Or, as Paul Harrison puts it in the same volume, in another chapter which concerns love, attending to the interval of non-relation can provoke a fascination with non-accomplishment and dissolution.[27] And yet, all involved insist that while such outcomes are always possible, pessimism is not the goal. As Philo writes, it is only in the articulations of distance that chances flash up.[28] What links all these examples, and links them in turn to the wider genre of 'negative geographies', is the insistence that every relation is always a non-relation; that disjointing is not

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Lucas Pohl, and Nikolai Roskamm (Eeds), *[Un]Grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies*, Vol. 34 (Transcript Verlag, 2021); Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (University of Westminster Press, 2023); David Chandler and Jonathon Pugh, 'Critique beyond relation: The stakes of working with the negative, the void and the abyss', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2024, p.e12724.

22 Bissel, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*; Kingsbury and Secor, *Void*; Chris Philo, 'Negativism Again: "Everything . . . Less Than the Universe Is Subject to Suffering"', in Bissell, Rose, and Harrison (eds), *Negative Geographies*, pp. 39–66.

23 See for example, David Bissell, 'Obdurate pains. Transient Intensities: Affect and the chronically pained body', *Environment and Planning A*, 2009, 41(4), pp. 911–928; Paul Harrison, 'How shall i say it? Relating the non-relational', *Environment and Planning A*, 2007a, 39(3), pp. 590–608; Paul Harrison, 'Corporeal remains: Vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world', *Environment and Planning A*, 2008, 40(2), pp. 423–445; Paul Harrison, 'After affirmation, or, being a loser. On vitalism, sacrifice and cinders', *GeoHumanities*, 2015, 1(2), pp. 285–306; Mitch Rose, 'Negative governance: Vulnerability, biopolitics and the origins of government', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2013, 39(2), pp. 209–223.

24 John Wylie, 'Landscape, absence and the geographies of love', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2009, 34(3), pp. 275–289.

25 Ibid., 'Landscape, absence', p. 284.

26 Vickie Zhang, 'Ethics for the unaffirmable: Hesitant love of a cultural translator', in Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*, pp. 92–118, p. 111.

27 Paul Harrison, 'A love whereof non- shall speak; reflections on naming; of non-representational theory', in Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*, pp. 189–205.

28 Philo, 'Negativism'.

secondary, that every recognition is a misrecognition, that voids are not contingent mistakes to be filled in, that bodily immersion in atmospheric worlds ultimately reveals incapacity and vulnerability, that sociality never culminates in communion.[29]

Perhaps it is no surprise, given how unnerving such ungroundedness and separation might feel, that so much thought and theory in geography has been dedicated to the *annulment* of space, to explaining it away, to mastering its play. Geographers have variously insisted that space *is* landscape, that space *is* a production, that space *is* a construction, that space *is* an assemblage, that space *is* a relation. Echoing the discussion of love and knowledge above, we could say that geographers have often been dedicated to turning the *event of space* into a knowable, manageable *effect*. It is all too easy to forget that all such claims, no matter how important and insightful – and no doubt they are – are themselves responses or reactions to *spacing*, and *not* vice versa: each account a cut into this event. As Mitch Rose puts it:

> This is how ontologies work. Their seductive compositional power provides a luminous spectacle of security and possibility. But in focusing on the systems that appear, we miss the infinite darkness in which those systems sit, the soft tissue that marks our exposure to a dimension of living over which we have no power, no capacity, no prerogative. This is the wound that is the origin of every ontological order – of every desire to claim.[30]

This is how it works. The annulment of space (like the 'fixing' of love) may provide some comfort (the promise: 'you are not alone') or some security (the claim: 'love is . . .'), but in the end these are acts of attempted mastery that, by papering over separation and distance, only arrest the potential of what love and geography set in motion. A brush with negative geographies, in a kind of reversal, dislodges us from our stuckness and sends us spinning in another direction. Our hope with this volume is that, pirouetting around the edges of the void, we might find our way into an understanding of distance, of spacing – indeed, of geography – not as something that we inhabit but as something we ourselves unfold in and through

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29 See, respectively, John Wylie, 'Dislocation: Disorientation: Disappearance: Distance', in Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*, pp. 189–205; Harrison, 'A love whereof non-'; Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor, 'Introduction: Into the void', in Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (eds), *A Place More Void* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), pp. 1–28; Mikko Joronen, 'Atmospheric negations: Weaponising breathing, attuning irreducible bodies', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2023, 41(5), pp. 765–783; Friederike Landau-Donnelly and Lucas Pohl, 'Towards a post-foundational geography: Spaces of negativity, contingency, and antagonism', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2023, 47(4), pp. 481–499.

30 Mitch Rose, *Dreams of Presence* (University of Toronto Press, 2025), p. 150; see also Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies. The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Paul Harrison, 'The space between us: Opening remarks on the concept of dwelling', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2007b, 25(4), pp. 625–647; Mikko Joronen and Mitch Rose, 'Vulnerability and its politics: Precarity and the woundedness of power', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(6), pp. 1402–1418.

the event of loving. It is perhaps not too much to say that all discourses on love are the first practical science and ethics of distances; if every 'love plot', every attachment, is inscribed from beginning to end by exposure to separation, ungroundedness and non-identity, then every love is a geographical experiment with the opening of space.[31]

Love's catastrophe

The question of love and geographical knowledge invited us into an impasse. Alive with the ache of its own irresolvability, love is entangled with its own catastrophe – but also, it turns out, with the world's. Catastrophe in its Greek etymology combines κατά (kata) down + στρέφειν (strophein) to turn: a downturn, an overturning, a sudden turn, a denouement. To fall (down) in love is to make such a sudden turn. After love, nothing is the same again. One could say therefore that love is always catastrophic, the end of the (a) world – though this does not mean it is always tragic. Perhaps the end of the world is what we have been waiting for, the condition of possibility for a better one. But also, to fall in love is comic. While the star-crossed lover may lift a fist to the cosmos, 'a fool in love' is prone to the ridiculous. Falling in and out of love, the fool takes endless pratfalls into a tiny abyss, into the 'minimal difference' between the sublime and the banal. As Alenka Zupančič puts it, "to love someone 'for what he is' [. . .] always means to find oneself with a 'ridiculous object'".[32]

We brush ourselves off and begin again. Perhaps love is what we have (or more precisely, what happens) *after* the catastrophe, in the denouement. In our dystopian imaginaries, it is love that blooms at last in its full ferment in the time and space of the post-apocalypse. Love in the time of ruination entwines with loss: of the Earth, of 'humanity', of what once was (or is imagined to have once been). Love appears after all has been lost; it is both a consolation for the destroyed world and what now at last can flourish in the clearing. It seems as though it is only under the shadow of what is coming to destroy our world(s), or by entering the wasteland of its devastation, that we may be able to love at last. As Jack Halberstram writes of "unworlding": "Worlds break apart and we must resist the urge to put them back together", to repair, smooth over, to undo undoing, "to form the facsimiles of unbroken life" and instead "embrace the unravelling".[33] No wonder today we are riveted to the catastrophe and, within this, all that it may promise.

But why should we be compelled, even imaginatively, to drain the world of colour to find what is vital in it? This affinity between love and ruination is not simply

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31 On the 'love plot', see Berlant, *Desire/Love*. On attachment, see Ben Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2022, 13(3), pp. 392–409.

32 Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (The MIT Press, 2003), p. 174.

33 Jack Halberstam, 'Unworlding', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2024, 78(2), pp. 272–276, p. 276, p. 272.

fantastical. It is this same dynamic – in which love seems to thrive on or even require depletion – that led Freud to take "being most intensely in love" as a cipher for psychic devastation.[34] How better than through the relatively common experience of falling in love to understand what it means for the subject to fall under "the shadow of the object", to be overwhelmed by it?[35] Consumed by love, the subject "seems to give up his own personality".[36] Not only is the subject depleted relative to the object, but the world itself becomes drained of interest except for at the points where it relates to what Freud calls the 'overvalued' love object. Thus, for Freud, falling in love creates a loss of 'world' akin to what happens in mourning: a "loss of interest in the outside world" and a "turning away from every active effort" that is not connected with thoughts of the beloved.[37] But love also provides Freud with a parallel to melancholia. He writes, "In the two opposed situations of being most intensely in love and of suicide the ego is overwhelmed by the object, though in totally different ways."[38] While in mourning "the world becomes poor and empty" and "in melancholia it is the ego itself" that suffers so, for the lover *all* is void except what emanates from the loved object.[39] It is in this sense that love draws near to the end the world, to the point at which the world no longer holds anything of value.

This is well expressed in the opening passage of Annie Ernaux's essay, *Simple Passion*, documenting her affair with a married man. Ernaux describes this period of her life and the aftermath of the love affair in clinical, spare prose.

> From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place. I would go to the supermarket, the cinema, take my clothes to the dry cleaner's, read books and mark essays [. . .] In fact, I have only vague memories of the things I did, the films I saw, the people I met. I behaved in an artificial manner. The only actions involving willpower, desire and what I take to be human intelligence [. . .] were all related to this man [. . .] In the course of conversation, the only subjects that escaped my indifference were those related to this man, his work, the country he came from, and the places he'd been.[40]

While on the one hand Ernaux's essay is about a 'simple passion', on the other hand it is about a draining away of affect and investment from all but a tiny sliver of

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34 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume 14* (Hogarth Press, 1917), pp. 237–258, p. 252.

35 Ibid., 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 249.

36 Sigmund Freud, 'On narcissism: An introduction', trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume 14* (Hogarth Press, 1914), pp. 67–102, p. 76.

37 Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 244.

38 Ibid., 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 252.

39 Ibid., 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 246.

40 Annie Ernaux, *Simple Passion*, trans. Tanya Leslie (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 1991), p. 12.

Ernaux's life, the part concerning this intermittent man. Work, social life, her sons – nothing of it leaves a trace on her: "I had no future other than the telephone call fixing our next appointment [. . .] When I realized it wasn't him, I felt so utterly dejected that I began to loathe the person who was on the line."[41] But while such moments of disappointment are filled with irritation, otherwise she finds herself anaesthetised to the inconveniences of daily life. Traffic, waiting, and cancellations do not particularly perturb her; these inconveniences are flattened into the plane of her disenchantment. Perhaps this phenomenon of affective withdrawal is what allows love to become a carte blanche for destruction, the abandonment of balance and proportion. 'All is fair in love and war' because the world and the Self have both been abandoned in the play of excess and emptiness.

The sudden turn of love flips the world on its head, sends the subject skittering. But behind these many worlds (psychic, metaphorical, experiential) that end for, in, or in spite of love, there looms another. This is the world that will definitely end, whose finitude is a fact of the universe, its destiny to be immolated by the sun in several billion years, boiled and burnt long before that, perhaps made desolate much, much sooner. As Lucas Pohl asks in his recent paper, "what is left after the apocalypse" – after the death of the sun, the end of the earth – of the discipline invested in "writing the earth" (geo-graphy)?[42] To love this singular world is always (has always been) to enter its denouement, its catastrophe. To fall under the shadow of our own planet, to be overwhelmed by it, is to enter into the catastrophes we have already endured and the ones still to come: catastrophes of love, of love's end, and the long denouement of the geo. Not as a privileged segment of survivors or saviours (a move Claire Colebrook critiques in relation to post-apocalyptic cinema).[43] Not for the sake of the singular lover or the child of the future – which is to say, not in the name of the 'love plot' that Berlant has critiqued, or reproductive futurity, in Lee Edelman's terms.[44] But perhaps as mourners, in Jonathan Lear's sense: as those who are capable of loving what is not only transient and finite, but already lost.[45]

Love's catastrophe multiplies, fragments into uncountable losses. Of all the many worlds that have already ended, who has survived to mourn? And which losses register, while "other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable"?[46] As Elisabeth Povinelli points out, when "the different toxic accumulations of racial and

41 Ibid., *Simple Passion*, p. 13.

42 Lucas Pohl, 'Apocalyptic nothingness: Lacks, holes, and the limits of the geographical imagination', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2024, pp. 1–17, p. 1.

43 Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

44 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2020).

45 Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

46 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (Verso, 2004), p. xiv.

colonial catastrophes are refigured as a coming catastrophe for humanity", the projection of the end of the world into the future acts as a shield against the horror of what has already happened, the irreversible damage upon which the present moment rests.[47] For many, the end of the world is happening *now*. Speaking of the Gazans who are living through the most unimaginable catastrophes, Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian describes "how there is so much love" in "togetherness" (in the crying, screaming, laughing, hugging, and kissing, as she describes) "against the hardship" that emerges amidst the ruination of Gaza, but also through the fraternity of global solidarities.[48] Similar loving *amid* the brutalising and dehumanising colonial world takes much of the space in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, showing how the shared struggle against suffocating subordinations – laughing, crying, shouting – allows love to emerge alongside grief and through the anger with the gift of offering oneself to others.[49] Love emerges in the midst of the catastrophe, redirecting political energies and weaving connections across distances between those who give and live for the freedom of others.[50] Against the politics of making lives ungrievable, a love emerges that mourns, shares, and connects – like a hand reaching out of the fire, out of the catastrophe. Love in catastrophe, as catastrophe.

It is with this sense of love's catastrophe that we return to what we have left open in our discussion so far: the naming of the ontology of love. The impossibility of providing the ontological stance to ground the '*is*' in 'what love is' has led us to emphasise not the impossibility of understanding love, but the need to acknowledge what appears at the centre of thinking love; namely, the catastrophe of love. And yet, we cannot help ourselves, responding to catastrophic love thought continues ontologising. Love's catastrophe 'is' its im/possible 'ontological condition': love opens worlds and yet none of these worlds can hold together, can secure, what brought them into being. Love's cracks continue to be repaired, and its wounds stitched, propositions suggested, prayers offered, poems composed; yet no repair can ever unwrite the 'original' catastrophe – the distance, the wound, the crack, the separation – with which love is bound up. With tears, cries, or sighs, love remarks a distance, a *spacing*. To fix the *being* of love once and for all would require setting aside the element of love that resists coming to being. This element that escapes, negates, withdraws, undoes, cracks, wounds, and dissimulates any 'itself', in and as love's taking-place: this is, perhaps, love's catastrophe. It is impossible to offer

47 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2021), p. 16.

48 Makdisi Street, 'There is so much love in Palestine', with Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2024), n.p.: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cw3Y-6GqytM; Khalid Dader and Mikko Joronen, 'Fitful infrastructures: Dwelling with infrastructural elimination in Gaza', *Antipode*, 2025, 57(3), pp. 886–906.

49 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 1986 [1952]).

50 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008).

a definitive answer to what love *is* because love only comes to thought in responding to the catastrophe that it cannot (but try to) overwrite. A wounded performative, gathering and unspooling at the same time, in the same act; the language of love seems to never end and yet, at the same time, to have never quite got underway.

Catastrophe hence cannot provide a novel name – a new ontology – for love either. It cannot empty love by wedding it to one of the many suggested nominators, as it names precisely the impossibility of doing so, a negative element in love. Yet, as will be shown in the pages of this book, love and catastrophe can be thought through the forms that show us their entanglement with wounds, distances, ruptures, separations, nonarrivals, losses, displacements, multiplications, de-compositions, erotics, and more. Catastrophe points to an indefinable element that lingers in love, making possible, shaking, tearing down – indeed 'down-turning' – but which itself withdraws its full name. Catastrophe is what keeps love turning, a torsion that makes love appear to us as ontologically impossible and yet open: an abyss of love. Every love is a geographical experiment with the abyssal opening of space. An encounter with *spacing*. *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* dives into this breach.

Arc of *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe*

It was never advisable to declare it. But nonetheless we have fallen into *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe*. How did this happen? In truth, it feels like we three editors have been caught on a hook, pulled by a thread. The thread ran through our own work (on nonrelationality, on generative voids, on vulnerability, politics and ontology). The thread spliced worlds, it ran over and under, inside and out, it tangled us up and it lured us – a piece of red thread that led us not to safety, but out of it. In the online literary-intellectual magazine *Berfrois*, Lauren Berlant wrote with some wonder, "I am a love theorist, how did that happen? I was doing ideology critique and fell down the rabbit hole, the donut hole, the pipette."[51] Perhaps we are likewise down a hole, underground, unable to see our hands in front of our faces. We tug on the thread with the sense that somewhere, something is unravelling.

The contributors to *Love and Catastrophe* do not share one theoretical orientation or approach to love. On the question of love, we could try to stay sober and discourse all night, but still we would not all agree. This said, in one way or another all begin by questioning the presumption of unity as the aim or telos of love. That is, all begin from the interval, from the fact of separation, from the *event of space*, and then make their own way. Un-ravel their own threads. Playing with the way these thirteen chapters separate from and pull close to one another, we have arranged them into three sections.

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51 Lauren Berlant, 'The Book of Love is long and boring, no one can lift the damn thing . . .', *Berfois*, 2014, n.p.: https://www.berfrois.com/2014/05/lauren-berlants-love-theory/

The first section, *Love's Distance*, includes four chapters that attune to love's withdrawal and its entanglement with loss. Across these chapters, the notion of love as *spacing* plays out in different ways. In a classic vein, the section opens with the perennially star-crossed lovers of *Romeo and Juliet*. But in Paul Harrison's deconstructive Chapter 1, 'Juliet's analysis: on love amiss', it is Juliet who conducts the analysis, Juliet who provokes the chance of love – not as a suture but as a bursting open, a *dehiscence*. In Harrison's reading, which draws inspiration from Derrida and Lacan, it is Juliet who proliferates "the distance, the *spacing*, between name and object, between name and subject, between name and name, between them and between us". By opening this interval (the interval of the play, the play of the interval), Juliet sets in motion the missed encounter with love. Continuing in the vein of tragic love, Chapter 2, 'After love: on love and finitude' takes Aleem Khan's 2022 film *After Love* as its entry point into questions of loss and love. Anna Secor weaves Khan's story of a widow who discovers that her husband had another family with psychoanalytically-inflected meditations on loss, mourning, and betrayal. Secor toys with the limit(s) of love, finding in love's finitude – its distance and transience – the force of love's world-making capacity.

Continuing with themes of mourning and loss, Chapter 3, 'Enduring love: three meditations on wounding', by Raine Aiava, Noora Pyyry, and Mikko Joronen, presents three intimate vignettes that open the wounds of (different) loves: the presence/absence of a mother with Alzheimer's, the accidentally recovered trace of past relationship, and the flashes of distance and love that emit from a grown child. The authors explore how love involves an openness to alterity and unknowability – not a gathering up or absorption of the other but "a fundamental distance and separation". In Chapter 4, 'I die you: impersonal love and the annihilation of the subject', Thomas Dekeyser takes us further into the (dis)identifications of death-driven love through the enigmatic love stories of Clarice Lispector, the mid-twentieth-century Ukrainian-born Brazilian novelist and short story writer, and the 'inhumanism' of thinkers such as Eugene Thacker. Dekeyser finds inspiration in Lispector's work for an understanding of how love opens up the problem of inhumanity and depersonalisation; love, he suggests, involves a slipping towards disintegration through a confrontation with Derrida's 'abyss of the unshareable'. This is what Dekeyser calls "the negative labour of love" – a concept with implications (of de-naming, of mourning, and separating) that one might see as linking all four chapters in this first section.

The second section, *Love's Im/possible Futures*, includes four chapters that contemplate, in different ways, the political potential of love and its cultural geographies. As we have suggested in this introduction already, love is often called forth as that which can repair the broken world. But is love revolutionary or reactionary? Will love set us free or will it keep us tethered to a destructive planetary trajectory? Might we find the courage for a transformational politics in love – or, on the contrary, is love what resists, what is always estranged, from the realm of politics? In Chapter 5, 'The revolutionary love plot: on love, im/possibility, and the

common', Eleanor Wilkinson critiques the promise that love can save the world, recuperating us from the ravages of capitalism, neoliberalism, and colonialism. For Wilkinson, such a fantasy relies on a sanitised idea of love that turns away from its ambivalence, incoherence, and proximity to loss. Drawing inspiration from Lauren Berlant and Gargi Bhattacharyya, Wilkinson takes the opportunity to consider what might be necessary for a "properly political" conception of love that would "hold together the messy ambivalence and incommensurability of love". Chapter 6, 'A coal miner's apprenticeship: transforming industrial identity and rebuilding postindustrial worlds with love', moves forward with an idea of love as at once a stabilising and destabilising force. Drawing inspiration from Deleuze and affect theory (and especially Berlant), Vickie Zhang unfolds the story of one couple navigating life in postindustrial Australia with a reflection on "love as enacting an apprenticeship in the other": an ongoing, unfinished business that transforms identities, relations, and the world. For Zhang, love is not an end or closure, but instead unfolds durationally, infusing life with the possibility of surprise, renewal, and transformation.

The idea of love as an event that is at once contingent and transformative carries through but enters a different register in Chapter 7, 'Love in times of impossibilisation: making space for Alain Badiou', in which Arun Saldanha takes on the question of love and revolution through the work of Badiou. Saldanha argues for a Badouian conception of love as a contingent encounter that demands a reordering of a life – but while Badiou hives politics off from love, Saldanha opens up an avenue for thinking of love and communism as sharing a common future. The question of the place of love in politics is at the heart of Chapter 8, '"In politics, love is a stranger": Baldwin, Arendt, and the geographies of liberation'. Derek Ruez begins from a one-sided exchange between Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin in order to centre the possibility of learning from the disjuncture between them. He argues that the *strangeness* of love in politics that troubles Arendt ultimately makes love a productive starting point to foster, with Baldwin, becoming "estranged from the normative orderings of a racial-colonial capitalist world". Following this route, Ruez suggests that love offers an opportunity to rethink the meaning and practice of politics – a possibility that we find lodged at the navel of love's catastrophe.

The third section, *Geophilia*, culminates the collection with a proliferation of love across sensoriums and species, the earth and its elements. With original drawings, images, and poetry, the chapters in this section draw inspiration from love's contingency and non-resolution, its catastrophe and spacing, finding here not only a spur to creative experimentation and expression, but to the writing of the earth, to geo-graphy, itself. We thus open this section with Chapter 9, 'The iconographic landscape and the materiality of love', by Mitch Rose. Rose's argument for landscape as a materialisation of love takes the idea of love as spacing beyond the negative to suggest that love is that which calls forth geography itself. Rethinking the cultural-geographic trope of landscape as icon by drawing on medieval

Christian theology, Rose develops his argument from the premise that love, as a spiritual practice of iconography, involves making something elusive and transcendent appear in the world. Landscape, Rose argues, is "how humans materialise their love" for nation, heritage, and identity. In this sense, for Rose, geography is what allows love to 'take place'.

The dream of geo-love continues in a different vein with Chapter 10, 'Letters to a glacier: love and mourning in a time of climate catastrophe', an epistolary exploration of love and ecological loss by LuLing Osofsky. Osofsky explores the feelings and possibilities of love, loss, and mourning under conditions of planetary crisis. Interspersed with photographs and poetry, Osofsky's letters to Nordenskiöldbreen, a dying glacier in Spitsbergen, Svalbard, are in turns intimate, passionate, and reflective. As an experiment with "an other-than-human, intersubjective and dialogic love in a time of climate crisis", Osofsky's chapter brings together readings of Levinas and posthumanism to make visceral a broken-hearted geophilia that retains a fragile hopefulness through the possibility of collective, public grieving. While Osofsky's letters to a glacier probe the possibilities of dyadic love, the queer/trans-ecological experiment with love in Chapter 11, 'Eating (each other's) (hearts) out: mycelial love and the forest as queer con/figuration' unfurls an alternative, promiscuous imagination of loving as committing "to an ecosystem of individual and collective affective capacities, contributing to a distributed cycle of growth and decay". As a collective, authors Sage Brice, Kate Marston, Richard Wright, and Scarlet Hall draw upon queer theory, mycology, and creative geographies to engage in an open-ended exploration of mycelial love – a love which, like the heart-rot fungi that flourishes in the decaying core of oaks and other trees, entangles entities in mutuality, vulnerability, and transformation. At the (de)composing heart of the chapter is a graphic exchange in which contributors playfully concatenate drawing and text without flattening the queer polyvocality of their entangled multiplicity.

The erotics of geo-love come into full bloom in Chapter 12, 'Eros, orgasms, eco/geopoetics, and geophilosophy: some creative reflections on loving and the climate catastrophe'. Here Sarah de Leeuw unfolds a "feminist erotic eco/geopoetics": a poetic merging of the ecological, the erotic-orgasmic, and the cultural that takes inspiration from Deleuzian, feminist, queer, and posthuman theory. For de Leeuw, this means poetically and philosophically exploring how a body responds to landscape, to earth, and to ecological catastrophe. In the process, de Leeuw critiques the prioritising of 'philia' over 'eros' in much work on love (including this book!), thereby adding a welcome frisson to this volume. Finally, in Chapter 13, 'Lithic "I love yous"', engaging and complicating Lauren Berlant's critique of the 'love plot', Harriet Hawkins, Long Ly Vouch, and Flora Parrott's chapter enrols us in "seven stony expressions of the phrase 'I love you'". As we traverse the lithic landscape from diamond-avowals to gemstone mining and love-scarred cliffs, the authors ask us to consider what we can we learn about love's "depths, durations and durabilities" from its mineralogical entanglements, attachments, and promises. Indeed, with the incantation of these seven 'I love yous', the lithic "emerges as a force of

unsettling ambiguity and even disruption", by turns supporting and undermining love's plots. In this sense, our final contribution returns us to questions of love's ambivalence, endurance, and political potential that weave through the volume as a whole.

Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe concludes, after thirteen (un)lucky chapters, with a *Coda* written by the editors. More unsettling than settling, the coda loops the volume into love's repetitions and the aporia of its geo-graphy.

Conclusion

In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare's observer makes a series of apparently unflattering comparisons concerning his 'mistress'. The opening line: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun".[52] The sonnet continues in this vein; her lips are not as red as coral, her cheeks lack colour, perfumes smell sweeter than she. One could come away with the impression that it is an early example of 'negging', but Shakespeare is making fun of the enraptured idealisation which typified most sonnets of the time, mocking the authors of stock comparisons and well-rehearsed tropes with an apparent dose of realism. However, if the sonnet's purpose is not denigration, neither is it some kind of naturalistic vérité. In the closing lines we can read a further twist beyond ironic reversal: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false comparison".[53] In the end, his mistress, his love, cannot be 'like' anything at all, she is incomparable. Yet, unlike Venus, she "walks on the ground" and the writer's only access to her is via comparison.[54]

Playfully, the sonnet enacts a version of the impasse at stake throughout this introduction: the irreplaceability of the loved one denies any substitutability, any exchange, but, at the same time, provokes it. And so, to approach the singularity of the loved – to approach 'her' – the sonnet must proceed *negatively*, via subtraction, via an un-doing of inherited clichés. An un-doing that makes tangible the work of all such figures and so that, in turn, challenges the sureties of *any* positive saying, knowing, grasping, comprehending. Impossibly, the incomparable can only ever be compared. How can one love anything but the impossible? Sonnet 130's playfulness, its little flash of *jouissance* as it speaks of love, is to make this *play* of in-comparability apparent; to name by un-naming, to name by not naming and, eventually, by simply the play of naming and knowing.

Above we outlined how the inspiration for this volume lies in so-called 'negative geographies'. It is easy to think, understandably, that negative geographies are necessarily, by design and by circumstance, somewhat dismal, pessimistic, even melancholic. Do they not insist, to give just a few examples, that "bad feelings are

52 William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 130', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 641, l.1.

53 Ibid., 'Sonnet 130', p. 641, l.13–14.

54 Ibid., 'Sonnet 130', p. 641, l.12.

everywhere"?[55] That everything is beyond redemption?[56] That the most important lesson life has to teach is to learn to be a loser?[57] Beyond such slogans or axioms, 'negative geographies' seem preoccupied by depletion, lessening, exhaustion of all kinds, be it via entropic wind-down, sudden failure, or slow violence. Preoccupied with, in short, ruination. This is the red thread we all followed, drawn along by some impulse, none of us too sure where it would lead us or leave us. Limping along via the negative and falling into pits and crevices, we stumbled upon the most meteoric of chances: we found love. A love of spacing.

What is this book, then? Here, at the end, let us risk a proposition, a mission statement of sorts. Perhaps in distinction to the negative geographies to date (as well as to, we could add, though for different reasons, much critical geography, recent waves of affirmative geography, and of relational geography) *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* attempts a series of *joyful negations*. Just for a moment, to not feel the weight of the negative, but its lightness; *the chance to be un-done with love*. A threat beyond any threat, but also a promise beyond any promise.

We have tracked such un-doing above. It should be clear by now that we don't for a second think this always ends well. Love is a threat as much as it is a promise. Indeed, something we have insisted on above is not to attempt to *purify* love. *Not* to turn it simply into a mask for, or symptom of, something else, *not* to attempt to partition the good chances found in its name from the bad, and, perhaps most instantly, most impulsively, as if driven thereto, *not* to settle on knowing what it *is*. Irreducible to any formula, to any diagram, to any thing, but inextricable from their appearing, love is the *prenom* of everything. It is the 'for' in Doreen Massey's *For Space*, for example: the 'for' which is always ahead of and comes be-fore any thing and any knowing.[58] There can be *no last word* on love; "Each time unique, but the most common thing. It can only be betrayed. Cluttering aphrodisiac pharmakon . . .".

And so, the purpose of *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* is not to fill the abyss between love and (geographical) knowledge. Neither do we aim to resolve love's problems, release its tensions, nor demystify its practices. Instead, across the chapters of this volume, love's catastrophe ramifies. Staged as tragedy or comedy, it replays and enters into circuits of repetition and interpretation. 'Love plots' abound, in which the subject finds themself inhabiting the aporia of love's knowledge – variously swept up by love's promises and affirmations, let

55 Thomas Dekeyser, Vickie Zhang, and David Bissell, 'What should we do with bad feelings? Negative affects, impotential responses', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2024, 48(2), pp. 190–205.

56 Leila Dawney and Thomas Jellis, 'Endurance, exhaustion and the lure of redemption', *cultural geographies*, 2024, 31(2), pp. 153–166.

57 Paul Harrison, 'After affirmation, or, being a loser', pp. 285–306.

58 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Sage, 2005); see Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say . . .*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 87 *passim*.

down by its failures and betrayals, and oppressed by its dominant narratives and institutionalised forms.[59] Love marks, in knowledge, the catastrophe of knowing: the passionate confession of exposure. This can happen as tragedy, but also as comedy. It can happen as persecution, but also as liberation.

To repeat the motto given above, 'To love in ruins!' Read this according to your desire, for there is *always something else* to say about love. Something more. And this encore of love, of love's encore, most surplus of surplus values, useless supplement, is a *jouissance*. Once more, but each time anew. The *pro*legomenon, perhaps, not just an edited collection, but of everything.[60]

59 Berlant, *Desire/Love*.

60 Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p. 87 *passim*.

PART ONE

Love's Distance

1 Juliet's analysis: on love amiss

Paul Harrison

Love, a miss

Romeo and Juliet is a fast play. Relentless. Opening on a Sunday morning and closing Wednesday night into early Thursday, the action is condensed into less than week. Five days. Everything moves swiftly. Words and passions, all "gallop apace".[1] In one twenty-four-hour period, for example, Romeo will see his closest companion die, kill someone, be banished from the city, get married, and, we assume, have sex, each for the first time. From the Chorus' opening speech, which tells us the conclusion and declares the runtime at 'two hours', the play has the speed of a sprung trap.

At the same time, it is a play made up of delays. Of premonitions, anticipations, of realisations come too late, of missed rendezvous. Of, most famously, a letter not arriving on time, which leads to the play's final act.[2] But also, less noticed, of another letter going astray in the first act, which sets everything in motion.[3] Throughout the play the ill-timed nature of Romeo and Juliet's love is remarked upon by many. The lovers are always too late or too early, their love too fast or too slow. Or, rather, too early *and* too late, too fast *and* too slow. Their love is mistimed. Their love is amiss, it is a miss. On the threshold of the Capulet feast where Romeo and Juliet will chance upon each other for the first time, we have this exchange;

BENVOLIO
This wind you talk of blows us from ourselves.
Supper is done, and we shall come too late.
ROMEO
I fear too early.[4]

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1 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. T.J.W. Spencer (Penguin Random House, 2005), 3.2.1.
2 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.2.1–22.
3 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.2.1–100.
4 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.104–106.

Or, as Juliet says after the feast on learning Romeo's name, in lines which give the most succinct summary of the temporality of vulnerability, of exposure, of *afterwardness*, that I have ever read: "Too early seen unknown, and known too late!"[5]

If the lovers can find no time to call their own, can they find a space? The geography of *Romeo and Juliet* is one distantly lacking in privacy. The city of Verona intrudes everywhere. The streets shift with violence, "the mad blood stirring", parents, nurses, servants walk freely into bedchambers to give instructions, tombs become crowded with the living as much as the dead.[6] The machinations, jealousy, and authority of the families and the city imposes itself at every point. A claustrophobic haze, a ligature. As Adrian Poole asks, "is there no escape from the violence of Verona, outside and in, except the grave? No world elsewhere?"[7] His reply: "Apparently not."[8]

So, they meet between dusk and dawn, at twilight or at night, in secret. With no space or time of their own, they trespass. Opening intervals or counter-times to that of the city, the families, the fathers, Romeo and Juliet meet four times in the play. At least in the common understanding of the word 'meet'. For the sake of brevity, and noting their ephemerality, we can list them all. Sunday evening (Act 1 Scene 5), Romeo and Juliet meet at the Capulet feast; Sunday night (Act 2 Scene 2), the so-called 'balcony scene', which takes place on Capulet grounds; Monday afternoon (Act 2 Scene 6), Romeo and Juliet meet in secret in the liminality of Friar Laurence's cell to arrange the wedding; Tuesday dawn (Act 3 Scene 5), after spending the night together, Romeo and Juliet say their farewells, he departs for Mantua, she stays to be told by her mother that she is to marry Paris. In their fifth scene together in the Capulet family tomb (Wednesday night through to Thursday morning), they do not meet but miss each other. Impossibly, each dies before the other and each outlives the other.

It is important to note that what may be considered their most intimate moments – the marriage and the following night – while shown in many interpretations, are not shown by Shakespeare. Taking place between the end of Act 2 and start of Act 3, today often in the literal interval of the play, these moments remain without a witness, off-stage, secret. We do not hear their marriage vows, we do not know what they promise to each other or how, and we do not see, to use the Friar's words, 'two' 'incorporated' 'in one'.[9] While easily overlooked and frequently retconned out of inexistence, it is difficult to underestimate the effect of this gap or hole in the play. This night *within* the night, this secrecy at the heart of the play, or at its navel. This interval, let us call it that, outlines a missing rendezvous. It is an interval onto which

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5 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.139.

6 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.1.4.

7 Adrian Poole, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Penguin Random House, 2005), p. xlix.

8 Ibid., 'Introduction', p. xlix.

9 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.6.35–37.

so much will be projected, around which so many interpretations will turn. So, four times, that's it. Until we get to Act 5 Scene 3 (Wednesday night into Thursday), where, as a terrible positive image of the negative just described, in the tomb Romeo and Juliet are together but do not meet.

A proposition, axiom, or aphorism for the play then, and perhaps for us: *The lovers; they who do not stop not-meeting*. For 'two hours', at least.

Love at first double-take

To turn to an all too brief example to think through our axiom.

Act 1 Scene 5, the Capulet feast. Perhaps the most famous example of love at first sight in the Western canon. Do they meet? Pausing here, on the cusp, let us hear Gillian Rose's question concerning the potential uncanniness of 'love at first sight':

> Does 'love at first sight' mean that you fall in love that instant you meet someone, or does *the first sight* occur when you suddenly fall in love with someone you may or may not have known for any amount of time?[10]

As if love at first sight were always already a double-take. As in classic cartoon animations; a widening of the eyes, a turning away and exaggerated blink, a shake of the head as if to be rid of something, then a snapback and a riveted second look. We will come back to the question of what this second sight sees and, perhaps more importantly, what it does not.

The Capulet feast. Romeo sees Juliet for the first time, and we have this exchange:

> ROMEO (*to Servingman*)
> What lady's that, which doth enrich the hand
> Of yonder knight?
> SERVINGMAN
> I know not, sir.[11]

This is a surprising answer from a servant of the Capulet household. Does he really not know or not recognise the daughter of the house? Does the play's conceit of anonymity extend this far? Or is he simply too busy to answer? Whichever, we may add this exchange to the list of miscommunications, errant messages, and detours that recur at crucial moments in the play between, *as* the between, of Romeo *and* Juliet. The 'and' of which– Romeo *and* Juliet – is not, we may start to suspect, operating as it normally should, as a simple conjunction, but may be posing a question. Outlining a problem as much as giving a description.

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10 Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (Vintage, 1995), p. 60, original emphasis.

11 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.43–45.

Returning to the scene. It is as if this meeting is already doubled. That, impossible as it may sound, they meet for the first time twice. And so do not quite meet. At least not in any normal or given sense of the term. Once, at the feast, a meeting, if we are to call it that, which takes place, can only take place, in ignorance of each other. And then again, after this event, in retrospect. Romeo to Benvolio: "is she a Capulet?"; the Nurse to Juliet: "His name is Romeo, and a Montague."[12] Double-take. From the start, in place of the start, their love is marked by an *après-coup*.

Lauren Berlant suggests that "love is the misrecognition you like, can bear, and will try to keep consenting to".[13] Perhaps in distinction to some readings of this line, this chapter is concerned with the prefix, the *mis-* in misrecognition, the opening it contains, and what 'consenting to' it could involve. We have already started to give some thought to the time and space of the *mis-*, to the mistimed and misplaced nature of our protagonists' love. My gambit: this may well be tragic, catastrophic even, but it is also perhaps their, and our, and love's only chance.

The stitch-up

Circling the feast, a third to our two, Tybalt, the Prince of Cats, Juliet's maternal cousin. I imagine him as a kind of doppelgänger for Juliet and a stand-in for the families and the city. Her opposite in drive and desire, with Romeo as the meditating object. At the feast Tybalt tries to force a meeting, a rendezvous, but is restrained by the host. Of interest here is how Tybalt *identifies* Romeo in an instant. He links Romeo's voice to his name without hesitation and without hesitation is enraged; "This, by his voice, should be a Montague. / Fetch me my rapier, boy".[14] What an ear Tybalt has! To be able to overhear across a crowded room, in the cadence of a voice, the surname. And then, without pausing, to pin and immobilise that modulation to a name. It is as if he is not listening at all. No double-take for him. Famously, Tybalt does not miss. He is "the very butcher of [the] silken button" and with his blade he calculates, he orders, he "keeps time, distance, and proportion".[15]

At the feast, Tybalt continues; "Now, by stock and honour of my kin, / To strike him dead I hold it not a sin".[16] 'By stock and honour of my kin': Tybalt acts under authorisation of the father's name, his ready violence legitimised by and keeping watch over the city's symbolic economy of 'honour'. Did not the Prince inform us

12 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.117, 1.5.136.

13 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (puncture books, 2012), p. 106.

14 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.54–55.

15 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.4.23, 2.4.21–22. Though both Benvolio and Mercutio mock Tybalt's fighting style; Benvolio commenting how, in an early encounter, Tybalt swung his sword "about his head and cut the winds, / Who nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn" (ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.111–112). As if he – Tybalt – were trying to do battle with 'airy words' themselves.

16 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.58–59.

that the three recent "civil brawls" between the families were "bred of an airy word"?[17] The 'ancient grudge', it seems, has its roots in a violent jealousy over names, over their inheritance, their unity, their proper meaning.[18] A proper meaning and so an order of names that Tybalt constantly seeks to reaffirm and re-produce by eliminating anything amiss – 'time, distance, and proportion'. His desire is to pin, stitch, quilt, suture.[19] To protect and bring order, to reinstate the status quo and so the state. He tries to make the whole with a calculated and calculating violence. Tybalt, then, as the embodiment of the violence of the inherited symbolic order, as the deniable sword-hand of the apparently peacemaking and reasonable Prince.

Later the same night Juliet will perform a similar act to Tybalt. Act 2 Scene 2, Capulet grounds, the 'balcony scene'. When Romeo eventually speaks she identifies him quickly by his voice: 'I know the sound. / Art thou Romeo, and a Montague?"[20] But her ear is different, more subtle. She initiates a dialogue, not a statement but a question: 'Art thou Romeo, and a Montague?' In the night, trespassing, he answers: "Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike".[21] A tremor. A double-take. Recognition starts to slide into misrecognition. Things apparently well-settled and stitched up start to unravel.

Juliet's analysis: the dehiscence of the name

To Juliet's famous soliloquy.

It begins with the name and it begins, like an encore, with repetition. Repetition from the start; "O Romeo, Romeo! – wherefore art thou Romeo?"[22] This famous line and those that follow are most often heard or read wistfully or desirously, as plaintive or urgent, or both. Yet it is, I think, too simple, makes Juliet too simple, makes love too simple, to consider her speech as simply one of romantic idealisation. Her words may be those of desire yet they have a precise analytic edge. As do perhaps all such words.

She is speaking in his absence. He is not there, not yet, but hidden in the dark below. We should wonder, as she is doing and as he will, who or what she is and is not addressing. As Derrida observes: "she seems to be addressing *him*, *himself*, Romeo bearer of the name Romeo" but, at the same time, she is also addressing

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17 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.89.

18 Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', trans. Joseph E. Gordon, in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elisabeth Rottenburg (Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 191–225.

19 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III. The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Norton and Company, 1993); Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Dossier suture: Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', *Screen*, 1977, 18(4), pp. 24–34.

20 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.58–60.

21 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.61.

22 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.33.

"the one who is not Romeo [. . .] to call him beyond his name".[23] "'Tis not to me she speaks", Romeo murmurs to himself from his hiding place.[24] Love's double-take is at work, its second sight. What does it see? Let us follow her.

Juliet analyses. She picks out parts of him: "What's Montague? It is not hand nor foot / Nor arm nor face nor any other part / Belonging to a man".[25] Foot, arm, face – a veritable inventory, a blazon, of possible fetishes on which one may fixate. Each a potential synecdoche for him, himself, each a potential quilting point via which to attach name to thing. Each offering something to pinch.[26] And yet she does not settle. Rather, possibilities are suggested and discarded – 'nor . . . nor . . . nor . . .' – and this listing could continue, with ever finer grain divisions, ever more denuding, indefinitely. "Nakedness", as Derrida suggests, "gives rise to substitutes".[27] She knows this, so her analysis shifts from synecdoche to metaphor:

> [JULIET]
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other word would smell as sweet.
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title.[28]

For Catherine Belsey, Juliet is, as "lovers are prone to" do, identifying "a 'self', a presence which subsists beyond the symbolic order, the 'dear perfection' of the loved one independent of the public and external name".[29] In the shift of register from the naively empirical to the symbolic Juliet is expressing – according to Belsey – her "desires to transcend the signifier".[30] And so Juliet's demand: that "he [Romeo] should be named differently and finally that he should simply remove his name, as if it were extrinsic, separable from identity".[31] Given this, it is not

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23 Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism countertime', trans. Nicholas Royle, in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other. Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elisabeth Rottenburg (Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 127–142, p. 134, original emphasis.

24 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.14.

25 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.40–41.

26 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Norton and Company, 1998). My thanks to Harriet Hawkins for conversations about literary blazons.

27 Jacques Derrida, 'The purveyor of truth', trans. Alan Bass, in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Letter. Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 173–212, p. 175.

28 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.43–47.

29 Catherine Belsey, 'The name of the rose in "Romeo and Juliet"', *The Yearbook in English Studies*, 1993, 23, pp. 126–142, p. 134.

30 Ibid., 'The name of the rose', p. 133.

31 Ibid., 'The name of the rose', p. 133.

surprising that Belsey finds a Platonic motif at work in Juliet's words.[32] That Juliet's idealisation of Romeo, which in Belsey's reading culminates with the rose, tells of the "longing to escape the confines of the signifier, to encounter directly, im-mediately, the rose that exists beyond its name".[33] Importantly, for Belsey the play is not so naive as to accept such idealisation. Their love is naive, the play is not: "This move to transcend the signifier, however, the play at once makes clear, is precisely a contradiction."[34] Hence the play's cruelty, their fate, the tragedy. But is this what Juliet's demands, what she wants? Despite the perspicuity of Belsey's analysis, to which I am indebted and the subtleties of which I can only indicate here, I am less sure.

Juliet neither starts nor ends her analysis of the name and of love with the rose. Certainly, she entertains the idea that Romeo should abandon his name. She imagines him for a moment, as we may, like a rose, natural, given, and so 'without genealogy', without a 'why'.[35] A Romeo freed from his inheritance and so absent from any context. Belsey is not wrong; idealisation is at work here in the fantasy of Romeo beyond the name. Of a Romeo – if that will be his name – reborn whole, unalienated, returned to 'him, himself'. A Romeo "new baptized", as he will soon interrupt to suggest, unable to contain himself.[36] But Juliet's analysis does not end on the rose. Rather, having moved her questioning from synecdoche to metaphor, from the apparently empirical to the symbolic, she has discovered neither the thing itself nor his true name nor its absence, but a *strategy*. The strategy of flowering, of *dehiscence*.

Dehiscence, a splitting or bursting open by divergence, commonly of seeds and flowers, but also of stitched wounds. Touched by her words, by her analysis, love unravels them. As soliloquy turns to dialogue, she will, with great seriousness and great irony, start to tease him out of himself. Not by a process of ever more idealisation, which is to say ever more purification, but by names *multiplied*. Her negative operations – 'nor . . . nor . . . nor . . .' – will be repeated, not to stop, not to arrive or bring to an end, but each time to provoke yet more words and each time to continue by differing and deferring: "O, be some other name".[37] To provoke yet more words so that each time the distance, the *spacing*, between name and object, between name and subject, between name and name, between them and between us, may make itself appear by not appearing. Each time, again and again and again, to touch the wound of words with her words. Not as a tragic act of mourning for what could never be, which is what all idealisation amounts to,

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32 Ibid., 'The name of the rose', pp. 141–142.

33 Ibid., 'The name of the rose', p. 141.

34 Ibid., 'The name of the rose', p. 133.

35 Derrida, 'Aphorism countertime', p. 137. For the source of the famous epigram 'The rose is without a why', see Angelus Silesius [1624–1677] *Sacred Epigrams from 'The Cherubinic Pilgrim'*, trans. Anthony Mortimer (AMS Press Inc, 2013).

36 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.50.

37 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.40.

but as their chance. Love; without rendezvous. Love; a miss, amiss, a *mis-*. They keep not-meeting.

Again "O Romeo, Romeo! – wherefore art thou Romeo?" *and again* "The Name: there is yet the Name [. . .] My name at every thrust returns me not to myself, but to the root of you flush in me" *and again*:

> The very movement of this fabulous repetition can, through a crossing of chance and necessity, produce the new of an event [. . .] to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening of this dehiscence.[38]

They are conversing now, she above him below. She asks; "O gentle Romeo, / If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully" and, as he attempts to swear his love she, with a keen Socratic irony, declines each of Romeo's avowals in turn.[39] He attempts to swear three times. First, why not, Romeo suggests, in the name of love: "Call me but love".[40] She ignores the suggestion when it is first made, giving her reason a little later: "At lovers' perjuries, / They say Jove laughs".[41] Her prognosis is clear; promises made in the name of love are famously fickle, all too often the result of a self-interested seduction. Second, why not in his name? This one is already off the table. As Juliet has demonstrated and as he accepts, his name says nothing essential about him: "By a name / I know not how to tell you who I am".[42] Third, he is casting around now, searching for an anchor, why not by the moon? "Lady, by yonder blesséd moon I vow".[43] Juliet responds: "O, swear not by the moon, th'inconsistent moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb".[44] The moon is changeable, it waxes and wanes, as do infatuations, and so is unsuitable for such a vow "Less that thy love prove likewise variable".[45] Given all of this, we can easily imagine the somewhat exasperated, dumbfounded tone of Romeo's question, "What shall I swear by?"[46] For if he is not to swear in the name of love nor in his name nor by the moon above, then what? What does she – Juliet – want?

A little backstory on our Romeo, for if either of our two is prone to idealisation it is not her but him. A quick flashback to the feast earlier the same evening, Act 1 Scene 5. They have fourteen lines together, a shared sonnet, before they kiss (twice). The imagery of their sonnet is traditional, religious. Populated by pilgrims, prayers,

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38 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.33; Rose, *Love's Work*, p. 64; Jacques Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', trans. Catherine Porter, in Derrida, *Psyche. Volume I*, pp. 1–47, p. 44.

39 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.93–94.

40 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.50.

41 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.92–93.

42 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.54–55.

43 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.97.

44 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.99–100.

45 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.111.

46 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.112.

and saints, it is articulated via conventional tropes that spiritualise and so idealise the object of desire. We may read them as making use of such language in lieu of any other available lexicon, even as they make it border on blasphemy – "Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged! / Give me my sin again".[47] Shakespeare's innovation here is making the sonnet shared. Rather than being the sole prerogative of an infatuated (masculine) 'sonnet lover', whose versification seeks to demonstrate the profundity of the speakers' feelings and the agility of their wit to an apotheosised silent beloved (or, perhaps more precisely, to demonstrate them narcissistically and somewhat onanistically to themselves), we have a dialogue. To focus on Juliet's last words to Romeo in this scene; "You kiss by th'book".[48] A compliment? It seems unlikely. Later, when Romeo is discussing his new love for Juliet with the Friar, the Friar will echo Juliet's words by describing Romeo's earlier 'doting' over Rosaline thus: "Thy love did read by rote, that could not spell".[49] Indeed, throughout the early stages of the play Romeo acts and speaks like a fairly typical sonnet lover, taking himself off by himself and generally moping about the place. 'You kiss by th'book'. She is making fun of him. The implication is that Romeo thought he knew how to love but now he must unlearn. Like the words of their sonnet, the kiss is too conventional. She is ahead of him. She knows that they must unlearn how to love if they are to love.

Back to the 'balcony scene' and Romeo bamboozled: "What shall I swear by?"[50] Almost directly, their conversation turns to questions of satisfaction. Romeo: "O, whilst thou leave me so unsatisfied?"[51] Juliet: "What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?"[52] Romeo replies he wants a transaction, a trade, "Th'exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine".[53] He has been bartering as if to seal a deal, trying to find the right token to exchange, the correct expression, the felicitous word. As if to annul her want via a trade-off. She declines once again but this time disarmingly, confusingly, as irony breaks to sincerity: "I gave thee mine before thou didst request it".[54] In the night all proportion trembles, time and space unhinge, spiral. As response comes before the request, any exchange, any economy, is undone, overflowed by the *mis-* that comes before any recognition. Romeo is still confused, why does she play with him so? He asks, "wouldst thou withdraw it? For what purpose, love?"[55] Juliet: "But to be frank and give it again. / And yet I wish but for the thing I have".[56] What does she have to give?

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47 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.108–109.
48 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.110.
49 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.85.
50 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.112.
51 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.125.
52 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.126.
53 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.127.
54 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.128.
55 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.130.
56 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.131–132.

Love, one would think. But what has she already given? Nothing, only irony and negation. Moreover, what *can* she give? As Derrida points out, the demand that is made of Romeo, that he 'be some other name', is never made of her: "He [Romeo] does not request that she who is secretly to be his wife renounce her name or disown her father."[57] Why so? Because her name is not, was never, will never, be her own. As her parents make clear throughout, to her and others, she is simply a token to be exchanged, to circulate, to be owned. As her father tells Paris, "she will be ruled / In all respects by me".[58] She knows this. She knows the *contingency* of the name. Further, as we have seen, she knows that *replacing* the name – 'Romeo' – with another 'better' name *or* attempting to eradicate the name will simply repeat the structure within which they are caught.[59] She knows that all such "[b]reaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably, be undone".[60] She knows love's chance, that their chance, can only survive "by protesting against one's name, protesting one's non-identity with one's proper name".[61] By inviting catastrophe. Hence the sincerity of her irony and negation. What, then, does she have to give?

She gives the thing which she already has, which is *nothing*. Invoking Echo, who has no language of her own but who through repetition articulates *and* disarticulates Narcissus, Juliet gives the strange gift of non-identity, of alienation, of dis-identification, of *dehiscence*.[62] Rose: "The Name: The Name. A rose is [not] a rose is [not] a rose is [not] a rose".[63] This is her impossible offer, her impossible

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57 Derrida, 'Aphorism countertime', p. 138.

58 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 4.3.13–14.

59 See Jacques Lacan, 'The signification of the phallus', trans. Bruce Fink, in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English* (Norton and Company, 2006), pp. 575–594; Todd McGowan, 'The signification of the phallus', in Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, (eds), *Reading Lacan's Écrits: 'From Signification of the Phallus' to 'Metaphor of the Subject'* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–20.

60 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 24. This line, from Derrida's interview with Julia Kristeva, occurs in the context of discussing the relationship between 'semiology' and 'structure', as he is about to discuss his 'neographism' différance. The imperative – the 'must' – that the line contains is, in context, explicitly political as much as it is unavoidable. The 'undoing', deforming, dividing, spacing, or deconstruction of inherited structures is, at once, "not an accident or contingency; it is essential, systematic, and theoretical", they deconstruct themselves, and, at the same time, a strategic aim, one which aims to "transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains" (ibid., *Positions*, p. 24). The 'must' thus denotes a necessity and a task, one of un-working. A task that Juliet is affirming in her negations, in her un-stitching; a task of reading, kissing, and loving, beyond 'th'book'.

61 Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 39.

62 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.62–63; Patricia DeArmitt, 'Resonances of echo: A Derridean allegory', *Mosaic*, 2009, 42(2), pp. 89–100.

63 Rose, *Love's Work*, p. 37, square brackets in original; see Gertrude Stein, 'Sacred Emily', in Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903–1932: Q.E.D.: Three Lives: Portraits and Other Short Works: The*

exchange, which makes all economic reason tremble: "And, for thy name, which is no part of thee / Take all myself".[64] 'Take all of myself', which is to say, welcome, in these 'airy words', my and their non-identity. My and their impossibility.

And so, what does the double-take see? It sees, or tries to, again and again and again, the non-identity of the thing. It sees, or tries to, the no-thing of the thing. It sees, or tries to, the blind spot, the non-relation, the split that joins, the dis-jointing.[65] This is where her analysis, an analysis which is joyful in its interminable negation, leads. It is what she is teaching him, and us.

Juliet's "terrible lucidity" consists in knowing that their names condemn them.[66] This is why, in her incomparable analysis of the name, given from her window in the night, to no one, she will disseminate it. She speaks to no one – "'Tis not to me she speaks" – signifying nothing – "She speaks. Yet she says nothing. What of that?"[67] She speaks to no one and has said nothing yet in doing so, impossibly, she speaks to everyone, each and every 'one', and so to Romeo alone, in the dark. She finds him by not finding him. By *missing* 'him, himself'. She finds him, in the night, disseminated. Like a seed that has fallen outside its destined furrow. Like a rose below her window, the flowering of which opens to chance.

Such is Juliet's analysis. Her off-beat riposte to Tybalt, the families, and the city. Where Tybalt seeks to identify and so to constantly remake and repair the symbolic and so the civil order, to pin and quilt with his rapier, Juliet un-stitches. Like Penelope, who un-works at night to defer the moment of appointment, she delays a rendezvous with their names.[68] Her analysis puts to work "the indeterminable *dehiscence* of the supplement".[69]

Is it just by chance that Juliet was born at night?[70] And that her weaning, her separation, was marked by an earthquake?[71] It is as if she were born to bring night into the day and to make fair Verona shake. And this is why she, and they, must die.

Autobiography Of Alice B. Toklas, ed. Catherine Simpson and Harriet Chessman (Library of America, 1998), pp. 387–396.

64 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.47–48.

65 See Paul Harrison, 'Strange witness. Rachel Whiteread's art of the immemorial', *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 2022, 138(3–4), pp. 321–346.

66 Derrida, 'Aphorism countertime', p. 139.

67 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.14, 2.2.12.

68 See Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy (Polity Press, 1995).

69 Jacques Derrida, 'White mythology: Metaphor in the text of philosophy', trans. Alan Bass, in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp. 207–271, p. 220.

70 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.3.17–18.

71 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.3.31–34.

Again and again and again

A conclusion is necessary. Unavoidably, unforgivably, I must skip over much. Not least the role of the Church, as personified in the figure of the Friar, Romeo's surrogate father, and the role of the practical and pragmatic Nurse, Juliet's surrogate mother – both of whom will have betrayed our lovers by the end. Further, we have only covered two of their four 'meetings', and have discussed the fifth only in the most minimal of terms. All of this will have to wait for another time. How, then, does the play end? To that dismal Thursday morning, Act 5 Scene 3.

Under the gaze of the Prince the patriarchs reassert order. The fathers outbid each other to recoup and repossess the lovers' dehiscence in a show of wealth. To turn their 'story' into one of 'sacrifice' by gilding their tombs with meaning and parlay their love into a public peace. Romeo's father promises "to raise her statue in pure gold" and so bury her once more.[72] He dedicates the monument to the "true and faithful Juliet".[73] The 'true and faithful Juliet'; it is hard to stomach his gall, for her question throughout has been what does it mean, what could it mean, to be 'true and faithful'? 'True and faithful' *to what*? For she is true and faithful to no *one*, that is, only true and faithful to ~~Romeo~~.[74] This is her and their transgression: to make the order which orders the city tremble by *not* settling, by not ceding the force of their desire. Not by *opposing* this order. As we have seen, they have neither the time nor the space nor the words to create some floating world apart, but rather by passionately, by strategically, *negating* their world at every point. Again and again and again, 'nor . . . nor . . . nor', unbinding their inheritance, their context, themselves. Setting it all amiss. The 'night within the night', the blind spot, the interval, the double-take, the navel of the play, each divides infinitely, interminably.[75]

But now, at dawn, their tale has become a newly minted coin to circulate between the filial fathers: "[CAPULET] O brother Montague, give me thy hand:

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72 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.299.

73 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.302.

74 ~~Romeo~~ – *sous rature*, under erasure; "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins, 1974, pp. ix–xc, p. xvii). A *strategy* for dealing with, engaging and disengaging, deconstructing, an *inheritance*. The strategy "of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself" (Derrida quoted in ibid., 'Translator's preface', p. xvii): "At each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment that I needed to use it" (Derrida quoted in ibid., 'Translator's preface', p. xvii). Is this not what Juliet is doing, at each step?

75 Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Micheal Nass (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 34 *passim*.

/ This is my daughter's jointure".[76] Juliet's 'jointure', her estate to be settled on death in lieu of a dowry, will be an investment in civic brotherhood. The 'night within the night', their non-relation, is sublated and transmuted into a bond between brothers. As their names and their apparent conjunction are memorialised and enshrined in golden idols, so their expenditure is recouped and reinvested, flowing back into the civic future it had sought to evade. A remarkable work of symbolic disaster capitalism. As Alenka Zupančič has it: "Power – and particularly modern forms of power – works first by appropriating a fundamental negativity in the symbolic order, its constitutive non-relation, while binding it into a narrative of higher Relation."[77]

The Prince – today, exasperated liberal governance personified – speaks and seals the deal. There is vague talk of pardon and punishment at some point in the future, but the order that was there at the start of the play is the order at the end. There is no overturning, only returning. Only sublation and the corresponding elevation of the now conjoined names of 'Romeo and Juliet'. The "Sun for sorrow" may "not show his head" this morning, but it is day once more.[78] The Prince maintains his authority, the families remain in place. Last line: "for never was a story of more woe / Than this of Romeo and Juliet".[79] With these words everything they sought to differ and defer arrives: the rendezvous with their names. The earthquake is over. Though dead, Tybalt's desire is satisfied.

In the reading above I have tried not to replicate this gesture. I have not sought to tell the truth of their and, in particular, her love. I have not tried to find, in Michel Foucault's phrase, "the authentic, pure gold" of its identity.[80] This is Tybalt's, the fathers', the families', and the city's gesture. Rather, by insisting that love is a miss, on the *mis-* in Berlant's "love is the misrecognition you like, can bear, and will try to keep consenting to", I have not sought to arrive at a solution to the question of being 'true and faithful', to the question of what Juliet loves when she loves.[81] Instead, a *strategy* was found. The proposition, axiom, or aphorism with which we started: The lovers; they who do not stop not-meeting. Hence, repetition. But a repetition that remarks not a return, but the *felicitous infelicity* thereof, the surplus of a gap or interval in and of repetition; the strategy of *dehiscence*. A survival strategy, perhaps. But a curious one, for this strategy seeks no profit from or return on its investments. No, as the reappropriative economies of idealisation and fetishisation are un-worked and un-stitched by

76 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.296–297.

77 Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (The MIT Press, 2017), p. 31.

78 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.306.

79 Ibid., *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.310.

80 Michel Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum', trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memeory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 165–196, p. 167.

81 Berlant, 'Love/Desire', p. 106.

aneconomic dissemination, only expenditure remains.[82] And remains to-come. Again and again and again.

The play does not end. With each performance, each 'two hours', Juliet poses *us* the question again. With each repetition, each interpretation, each *encore*, the question, her question, is staged again anew: 'O Romeo, Romeo! – wherefore art thou Romeo?' The earthquake is not over. We and they will keep not-meeting. Juliet's love continues. And this is a *jouissance*.

82 See Jacques Derrida, 'From restricted to general economy: A Hegelianism without reserve', trans. Alan Bass, in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Routledge, 1978), pp. 251–277.

2 After love: on love and finitude

Anna J. Secor

In the opening scene of the film *After Love* (2020, British director Aleem Khan's debut feature), there is one long take: a middle-aged Muslim couple return home to their darkened kitchen with some leftovers in hand. The man removes his white skull cap and retreats out of sight to the adjoining sitting room. The woman (Mary, played by Joanna Scanlon) takes off her sequined headscarf and puts on the kettle. The man puts on some Urdu music and starts singing along; the woman chuckles and joins in, humming the melody. She washes her hands and removes gold bracelets and rings by the sink. While she fixes two cups of tea in the dimly lit kitchen, she continues chatting with her husband, who remains out of sight of the fixed camera shot. From their talk, it is apparent that they have just come home from an *aqeeqah* (seventh day birth rite) welcoming a baby girl. Chatting all the while, the woman carries the tea from the dim kitchen to the illuminated distance. We hear her say, "Love? Ahmed, love?", and see her crouch down. The sound cuts out, then the screen goes black, and the story, in which the mourning widow discovers her husband has a second family, begins.

How does love 'end' – or shift to become something that is articulated and inscribed even beyond a life? Or is there nothing 'after love'? Indeed, who or what in Khan's film is 'after love'? In what sense has the knot of love been cut, either before or after the man's sudden death? In the doubled and disjunctive relations of the film, it comes to seem that 'after love' may name not a state or condition but a problem, even a paradox.

The question of love's allegiance to either that which passes or that which endures has been much debated across ancient Greek, Christian, and Islamic thought. If human and earthly love is destined to ignite and expire, this contrasts with a higher, more perfect, and less combustible love of God or Truth. Yet what arises at the confluence of these traditions is not a simple dichotomy. Love in all its earthly fragility (Eros) illuminates a pathway to that which endures without end (Agape), whether this is God or a Platonic ideal. For example, in Islam (as William Chittwick relates this discourse), love for anything but God is merely

'metaphorical', like the moon's light reflecting the sun's; the lover should not mistake the reflection for the origin. But love is not simply bifurcated into mortal and immortal miens; rather it is itself (as bridge, ladder, or toggle) what transmutes the transient into something eternal: "'The metaphor is the bridge to the reality' (*al-majāz qant arat al-haqīqa*)".[1] In love, it is proposed that what is flawed and finite is able to reach beyond its own limit and grasp hands with what is perfect and everlasting.

But how can one reconcile this idea of love with the pain of love's loss? It is all very well to philosophise that love, even in its earthly ruination, is the door to something that exceeds all limits, but what sense does this make of the experience of love's vicissitudes – of the time which engulfs its loss, of the voided space of its absence? From the perspective of such experience, it seems as though there is something agonisingly lacking from love: its eternity.

This chapter takes the film *After Love* as a point from which to reconsider questions of love and finitude. In the first two sections, I grapple with love's transience. The first explores love's fate: that, so long as what is loved is mortal or transient, the destiny of love is to end in loss. Here, we trace the activities of mourning that follow from Ahmed's death at the start of *After Love*. The second section addresses the inconstancy of love itself. If the loss of love's object is the destiny of love, the betrayal or failure of love is its drama. In the case of the film *After Love*, this drama has to do with the discovery of Ahmed's double life. Finally, the third section reconsiders "the destiny and drama of love" and attempts to hold and endure love's contradiction in the name of affirming what follows from love's transience: the *afterlove*.[2]

The destiny of love: an empty space

In the second scene of *After Love*, Mary is formally dressed in mourning white, seated at the centre of a gathering in her living room. The women seated around her chant in Arabic, holding prayer beads or the Koran, while they sob and rock. Mary is silent and still, monumental, her face a mask of devastation. The men enter the room (we see them only from mid-torso down, as from the women's seated positions). One faceless man ceremoniously offers her condolences (in Urdu) and places prayer beads in her hands. The weeping of the women seated on either side of Mary crescendos, and she takes their hands.

In the scenes that follow, time seems to expand as the viewer watches Mary, alone. She stands at the edge of the Dover cliffs on the spot where she used to wait for Ahmed's ship to return from Calais. There are no flashbacks in *After Love*, and

1 William Chittick, 'Love in Islamic thought', *Religion Compass*, 2014, 8(7), pp. 229–238, p. 234.

2 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore: 1972–1973* (Polity, 1998), p. 145.

Mary has no one to confide in; the past becomes present in snippets of recorded speech, video, stories. The significance of the spot on the cliffs is revealed through Ahmed's voice message, which Mary repeatedly replays: "Well, it's four o'clock, which means you are probably on your spot waving to me like a madwoman. Don't get too close to that edge – I don't want you getting blown off. I should be home normal time." After Ahmed's death, for Mary there is no more 'normal time' and there is nothing to wait for on the cliffs. Eventually, the voice message's time has elapsed. Mary methodically cleans the apartment. She does her ablutions and namaz (daily prayers). We listen to the ticking of the clock. She opens her eyes in the morning, facing the empty side of the bed. She stands in the kitchen regarding the pot sitting on the aga, quiet and cold.

What is 'after love' but this – the time and space into which he is no longer returning? It is the destiny of love between mortal beings to end in separation. In this sense, the event of love is an affirmation that calls forth its own negation. Death is not the only passing; the inevitability of change in the world and the transience of all states entwines love with loss. In Freud's 1916 short essay, 'On transience', he contemplates whether what is revealed to be fragile – namely, his world, in the midst of the First World War – is less worthy of love than it was when it was perceived to be enduring. He argues, on the contrary, that "the proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect" enhances its value.[3] In this we glimpse love's wrenching allegiance to ruin, decay, and absence. To love that which we know can be lost – rather than either to reject the ephemeral object as unworthy of love, or to assert (against all reason) its immortality – is arguably the only way love happens at all. In the essay, Freud wonders at his posited companions' (a "famous poet" and a friend) refusal to love what they know will not last, concluding that they are pre-emptively in revolt against the pain of mourning – that is, against what comes after love.

After love, nothing is the same. Mourning is the painful process of reconciling an ongoing (even intensifying) love with the knowledge of an incontestable absence. On the one hand, mourning practices are ritualised, cultural, and prescribed. Indeed, sandwiched in the film between rituals of birth and death, Mary's loss is recognised, symbolised, and even metabolised within the rhythms of generation within her community. But at the same time, the process of mourning is lonely and singular.

For ten minutes following the opening scene of Ahmed's death, *After Love* is a film of everyday mourning. Ahmed's death leaves stranded – renders empty and devoid – all the shared spaces, daily rituals, memories, and mundane objects (his shirts, his wallet, his phone) of his life with Mary. As Mary touches, smells, and regards these things and places, she engages in activities consistent with how Freud

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3 Sigmund Freud, 'On transience', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Volume XIV (1914–1916)*, trans. James Strachey, with Anna Freud and Alan Tyson (Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 303–307, p. 305.

viewed the work of mourning: a gradual process of withdrawing emotional investment from an object no longer present to bear the charge of our love. In Freud's words, "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido [or love] is bound to the object is brought up . . . and detachment is accomplished in respect of it."[4]

If this was all that happened, if we watched Mary mourn Ahmed for another hour, *After Love* would be undoubtedly well wrought and moving, but also probably rather dull. But *After Love*, in its understated way, is not just about the destiny of love in the wake of the finitude of all that is loved. It is also a *drama* of love. This is because mourning involves more than a simple withdrawal of investment from a lost object. It also involves the construction of narrative: "creating an account of who the other person was, what the relationship meant, how it continues to matter".[5] In her solemn activities, Mary is recuperating what Ahmed left behind – the mundane objects, the spaces and routines, but also their shared life itself – from the abyss of meaning that opens after loss. Mourning in this sense eases the pain of loss not only through slow withdrawal but by transforming the brutal reality of pain into "an expression of something else" – a new symbolic meaning.[6]

But Mary's recuperation of meaning is radically derailed. Seated at the dining table in semi-darkness, Mary has laid out Ahmed's keys, his watch, and is going through his wallet: each stranded object to be re-situated, painfully but methodically, in the 'afterness'. She pulls out a picture of herself and Ahmed cradling an infant. She leans it upright against the teacup; it is precious. But then Mary pulls out of his wallet something unexpected: the ID card of a French woman. She stares at it, rubs it with her finger, an impossible object.

The drama of love: betrayal

As André Green writes in his essay on 'To love or not to love: Eros and Eris', "One of the great mysteries of love is its ending."[7] On the one hand, love changes everything, opens a new path, creates a new world. What happens after the event of love is that things are not the same.[8] The astonishing 'event of love' may inspire vows of eternal fidelity, but promises (and imperatives) are always (con)founded

4 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Volume XIV (1914–1916)*, pp. 237–258, p. 245.

5 Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 12.

6 Juan-David Nasio, *The Book of Love and Pain: Thinking at the Limit with Freud and Lacan* (SUNY Press, 2012), p. 13.

7 André Green, 'To love or not to love: Eros and Eris', in *Love and its Vicissitudes*, ed. André Green and Gregorio Kohon (Routledge, 2006), p. 18.

8 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VIII: Transference: 1960–1961* (Polity, 2011); Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* (The New Press, 2012).

with the possibility of their betrayal.[9] This then is a second sense of 'after love': love's denouement, its catastrophe. If the first moment (loss) is destiny, this second one (betrayal) is drama.

The drama in *After Love* arises from Mary's discovery that Ahmed had another family across the channel. In Calais, he had a lover, Genevieve (Nathalie Richard), and a teenage son, Solomon (Talid Ariss). While Mary knew nothing of her husband's second family, Genevieve was aware that Ahmed had a wife in England, though what she knew was not altogether true. As Mary learns, Ahmed had told Genevieve that his wife's name was Fahima, that she was Pakistani, and that they had no children. In fact, Mary is English, and she and Ahmed had a son who died at four months old (twenty-five years before the events of the film). While the entire existence of the French family is a shock to Mary, the uncovering of Ahmed's lies about Mary's identity and their life together is an enigma to both women. Ten minutes from the end of the film, the women are lying side-by-side on Mary and Ahmed's bed. Mary asks Genevieve, "Why did Ahmed tell you that I was Pakistani?" Genevieve answers that she has no idea.

The viewer is left to speculate. Fahima is Mary's Muslim name, but 'Fahima' is also an invention, a fantasy, another double. Perhaps this doubling of Mary as 'Fahima' was meant to shield her, to obscure and protect their shared world and the endurance of their love. Or perhaps it was to shield Genevieve, by letting her imagine that 'the wife' was a 'required' spouse rather than a chosen one. As Genevieve says, lying on Mary and Ahmed's bed, "I had convinced myself I was fine with sharing because I always thought that I had the better half of him." Perhaps the scrim of 'Fahima' was there to protect this fantasy.

In another sense, Mary is Fahima; she became her by converting to Islam and adopting the customs of her husband's family. After Ahmed's death, Mary is evidently sustained by her faith, the habits of her life with Ahmed, and the Pakistani community that calls her Fahima. At the same time, becoming Fahima has enrolled her in the structures of prejudice of European society. When she turns up (wearing shalwar kameez and headscarf) at Genevieve's door, before she can get the words out to tell her who she is and why she is there, Genevieve mistakes her for a cleaning woman and puts her to work, handing her an apron. This cringe-worthy misfire provides the central conceit of the film, in which Mary accepts the misrecognition and starts working for Genevieve and getting to know Solomon without either of them knowing who she really is (or that Ahmed is dead).

The preconceptions with which Genevieve encounters Mary at her door become alloyed with curiosity when she realises that Mary is an English woman. In response to Genevieve's questioning, Mary affirms that she converted to Islam when she married. When asked how she feels about wearing the scarf, Mary bristles, indicating that it is not something that she has 'feelings' about, having worn it longer than

9 Paul Harrison, 'Betray', in *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Peter Merriman, Anna Secor, and Shanti Sumartojo (Routledge, 2026).

not. Struggling to imagine such a choice, Genevieve then suggests to Mary, "It must have been hard to take all that on?" Mary fixes her with a steady gaze and responds, "Back then I did for my husband something that no one else could" – thereby affirming her conversion to Islam as an extension of the singular event of their love.

Love is an event because it is "something that doesn't enter into the immediate order of things".[10] Mary and Ahmed's love was an event that had nothing to do with Genevieve's misrecognitions, either of 'Mary' as a cleaning woman burdened by her husband's faith, or of 'Fahima', the dutiful Pakistani wife. We learn about what happened between them, from the point of view of love, through what Mary tells Ahmed and Genevieve's teenaged son Solomon (before he knows who she is). Having stumbled upon Solomon's secret love affair with another boy, Mary promises not to say anything, and later reveals to Solomon that she herself is no stranger to secrecy and passion. While Solomon is sighing and texting his lover, Mary tells him:

> MARY: You know, when I was young, we used to write letters. My husband and I were a secret too. For years. Before his family found out. Must have been a bit younger than you. About 14 when we got together. Every summer, he'd go to his family's village in Pakistan. Well, I couldn't write to him there. So we agreed that we'd look at the moon at the same time every night. He made these cassette tapes for me and I'd listen to those. And that's how we saw each other.
>
> SOLOMON: And what if there was no moon?

Star-crossed, no older than Juliet, Mary and Ahmed fell in love and maintained that love across years, across distances, and in secrecy. Their love disrupted the given order. It must have felt impossible. But Mary does something extraordinary: when "his family found out", Mary became Fahima in allegiance to their love. As for the moon, present or absent, we will return to that.

Without flashbacks, *After Love* proceeds, like the time after both love and loss, relentlessly forward. But while mourning can be quiet and sombre, the pain of betrayal arrives acute and unbearable. Mary lies down in the ocean surf in her clothes and for a moment it appears as though she might abandon herself. No longer stoic and contained, she breaks down, sobbing on her prayer rug in the hotel in Calais. This scene comes after Mary happens upon Genevieve and Solomon watching an old family video tape, unearthed while packing up the house. "Look how happy your father is", Genevieve says wistfully. And indeed, Ahmed appears different: his affect is light and buoyant. He is dressed not in shalwar kameez nor his captain's uniform (as we have seen him in photographs), but in shorts and T-shirt, romping in the surf with an eight-year-old Solomon, joshing with Genevieve and drinking a beer. With Genevieve, he betrays all: his marriage,

10 Badiou, *In Praise*, p. 28.

his religion, his community – even the shattering death of his and Mary's infant. What Mary thought they both tragically lacked, Ahmed secretly had. He is a different man, with a different story, different rules, enjoying differently.

What happens when there is more than one event of love? Does the catastrophe of falling in love, after love, de-throne the first love from its promised eternity? For Alain Badiou, the Lacanian thinker who most doubles down on dyadic love, one event does not displace another, so that each event of love seals its own inviolable 'always'. Badiou insists that "'I love you' is always, in most respects, the heralding of 'I'll always love you', it is in effect locking chance into the framework of eternity."[11]

The problem of love and eternity has many faces. A particularly well-wrought example, and a rare intervention by a woman into such debates in the sixteenth century, is Tullia d'Aragona's *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, in which Aragona, a Florentine poet and courtesan, stages a vernacular 'dialogue' between herself and a well-known philosopher of her day (Benedetto Varchi).[12] The character of Varchi begins from the premise that love is infinite because the exhaustion of love is also the end of the subject who loved. As Varchi argues, to say of a character that "after falling in love, [he] stopped loving and fell out of love" is as meaningless as saying that "these people and those people were once alive and ate; now they are dead and no longer eat". In other words, as Aragona paraphrases Varchi: "while one loves, one does not love within limits. But when one no longer loves, the issue simply doesn't arise."[13]

Because the drives of both love and life are inscrutable, even meaningless, to the one who is no longer 'in' them, the argument goes, their subjective 'end' cannot be experienced as loss. One doesn't say of a dead person that they have lost their appetite. The promise of love's *always* thus relies, for Aragona's interlocutor, on what might be called the 'subjective idealism' of the lover, in parallel with how Quentin Meillassoux describes the subjective idealist's position regarding their own non-being. As Meillassoux explains this logic:

> I cannot think of myself as no longer existing without, through that very thought, contradicting myself. I can only think of myself as existing, and as existing the way I exist; thus, I cannot but exist, and always exist, as I exist now. Consequently, my mind, if not my body, is immortal.[14]

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11 Badiou, *In Praise*, p. 47.

12 Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, ed. and trans. Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

13 Aragona, *Infinity of Love*, p. 74.

14 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*: *An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 55. To avoid confusion, let me be clear that 'subjective idealism' is not Meillassoux's position; it is an argument that he utterly refutes. I am simply borrowing his crisp articulation of the thesis, and lending it to my purpose, which is to bring about an intersection between the question of the finitude of love to that of life.

The argument for the infinity of love reflects this same idea of immortality, positing that, subjectively, the time after love parallels the time after death because the agent defined by this attachment does not persist past the end of the condition (that is, of life or love) to either mourn its loss or betray its 'always'.

There is something that rings false in this promise of unending love (and life). Whatever logical consistency it can claim, it does not correspond with what Aragona calls the ordinary "vicissitudes of love": the lived experience of either the miraculous fulfilment of love or its evaporation. Similarly to how Aragona counters Varchi in her dialogue, Mari Ruti counters Badiou, arguing that it is not the case that events persist in their own perfect infinity, unaffected by successive events in the same genre.[15] For Ruti, a new event of love "replaces what is supposed to be irreplaceable, thereby putting into question the event-status of the original event". Thus, Ruti argues that it is not *love* that is 'always', but *betrayal*, since there "cannot, after all, be an event that does not on some level betray preceding events".[16] Does the new event of love not resituate the previous one, turn it into a rehearsal, the site of lessons learned, an artefact of a time and place? If the long tail of the event is the necessity of a new order organised around the implications of that event – then certainly it makes sense that this order, too, might be interrupted; one might be surprised by love(s) again. Even granting the possibility of non-monogamy in love, arrangements shift and change. The 'necessity' produced by the event of love (whether between two or a few, whether open or exclusive) wears thin; its 'contingency' shows through.

Who was Ahmed's true love, and to whom was he duty-bound? Captaining the ship across the channel, to whom did he return for love, to whom out of responsibility? Did he love them all at once, one by one, or none of them enough? Later, after Mary reveals that she is Ahmed's wife but before she can tell Genevieve that he is dead, Genevieve fumes: "He has a son. He has a responsibility. And I don't fucking care of him, you, me or anything else, but he has a responsibility to our son, and you can't take that away!" It is not primarily a question of love, after all, after love.

Ahmed travels back and forth, between two loves and two orders, two promises, two betrayals. The film is framed by both Islamic ritual and the birth of babies; in the opening scene, Mary and Ahmed have just returned from an *aqeeqah* gathering for a newborn. And towards the end of the film, we watch Mary putting on the same fine headscarf and gold jewellery that she was taking off in the first scene to attend another such ceremony – the hetero-patriarchal order of family, culture, and religion continue. To one woman he has bequeathed a son, to the other his religion and culture. The concerns of love recede against these lineages.

But what outlasts a life is not just the reproduction of bodies and orders, affirmed or disrupted. There is also what is written, especially in stone. Solomon

15 Mari Ruti, *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

16 Ruti, *Distillations*, p. 226.

traces with his finger but cannot read the writing in Arabic on his father's gravestone. Nor can he read what is inscribed next to it, on a smaller stone, above the name, birth and death dates of the four-month-old baby Mary and Ahmed lost. The writing of this finitude – a name, a beginning, and an end – does not cease, an infinity of loss. While this infant would have been welcomed to the community with an *aqeeqah* and is buried under a gravestone with Arabic inscriptions like his father's, the living son understands nothing of these things. It is as though love's end *precedes* the living of a life, as though life itself – all habit and responsibility – is what is lived in the aftermath of love.

The afterlove: what doesn't stop

Is this then all there is to love's afterness: the time of loss and betrayal, of the effort to keep going as if weren't already over? Does the transience of love and life mean that one is only ever left, after love, with the same 'nothing' one had before? Or could we, without promising love's eternity, nonetheless think of the time *after love* as being of a different sort than the time before it?

At this point, it may appear that all there is to plumb in the aftermath of love is suffering. Indeed, what Freud finds mysterious about mourning is why it hurts so much. Why, he wonders, do we cling on to what we have lost, even when a substitute is at hand?[17] Love, it seems, makes us unreasonable, pain-prone. Psychoanalyst Juan-David Nasio goes so far as to suggest that *all* pain is an experience of love's limit; in his words, "There is pain only against the background of love."[18] Emerging at the boundary between body and the psyche, pain, like love, is always a phenomenon of the limit: of the broken boundary, the threshold, the space between. Perhaps pain is the dumb, implacable sum of all there is to know of love, in the end.

Yet one might allow these thoughts of the limit to open onto another way of thinking about love's afterness. To do so, we might begin by allowing ourselves to dwell on this 'limit' that Nasio identifies as the site of pain and love. For the limit of love does not simply appear when love is definitively lost or betrayed; it is constitutive of love itself. What is love except the experience of the space between: a distance that cannot be collapsed but across which, somehow, something is offered?

What gives rise to love is its limit – that is, the separation, distance, unknowability, unconsumability, and indeed *transience* of what is loved. And, in love, this limit is precisely what the lover strives to overtake, to put an end to, since it is what hurts. This is what Bung-Chul Han calls "the agony of eros".[19] But were it possible to achieve love's end – to 'become one' with what one loves, to vouch safe love against destruction and betrayal, and to guarantee love's eternity – there would be

17 Freud, *On Transience*.
18 Nasio, *Love and Pain*, p. 14.
19 Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros* (The MIT Press, 2017).

no more shudder of emotion, and the motor of love would run down, its movement cease.

The sense of love as constituted by a limit that it strives to overtake, but cannot, is precisely what resurrects something 'unending' in love. To return to our earlier interlocutors, just as Ruti finds the 'always' of love in its betrayal, Aragona finds love's 'infinity' in its *failure to achieve its end*:

> But in truth, as it is the lover's wish to achieve a corporeal union besides the spiritual one, in order to effect a total identification with the beloved, and since this corporeal unity can never be attained, because it is not possible for human bodies to be physically merged into one another, the lover can never achieve this longing of his, and so will never satisfy his desire. Thus, he cannot love with a limit . . . .[20]

Because it is impossible to become one with what one loves, because what is desired cannot be achieved, the aim or end of love cannot be reached. Love *has* a limit, and it is to that extent that it is infinite. Or at least, that it goes on. In another register, as Lacan puts it, "one can only enjoy a part of the Other's body . . . we must confine ourselves to simply giving it a little squeeze, like that, taking a forearm or anything else – ouch!"[21] Because all finite bodies can be divided into an endless number of parts, a little, unsatisfying squeeze is all one can ever get away with. In pursuit of what cannot be achieved, love traces the trajectory of a negative infinity, approaching but never reaching the zero of its desire.

What is love, then, but a movement, a reaching, an act of imagination, and a tussle with the unattainable? To understand love as limit is to grasp that *love is its own end* – a force of world-making even in its devastation. That is, it is not just flourishing, vouchsafed love that makes a world. Love intensifies and reveals the finitude – the capacity for afterness – of all that transpires. What is the world but that which is stitched together out of the *afterlove*, out of all the dumb objects and broken pieces, the empty places sketched in and rubbed out, the mourning and the revelation. As Jonathan Lear puts it, "through our suffering, [we] transform what would otherwise be mere change into a loss".[22] Bit by bit, part by part, without any final arrival, something comes of it all: the reaching, the missing, the going on. It is in this sense that love is always 'always': not because it seals an eternity of fidelity, but because *whatever endures and whatever passes* – what is present as much as what is absent – does so in the shape of love, after love.

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20 Aragona, *Infinity of Love*, p. 90.
21 Lacan, *Encore*, p. 23.
22 Lear, *Imagining*, p. 12.

Afterthoughts

The film *After Love* progresses slowly, contemplatively. Much of it focuses on Mary's face, her corporeal presence. She is alone. She looks at the sea. She looks at her body, tugs at its flesh in the mirror. She handles photographs and objects. She prepares food. She performs her ablutions. She prays. On the one hand, the destiny of love is to end – in death, loss, withdrawal. On the other hand, the drama of love comes to no conclusion, and the contingent encounter does not stop being inscribed in what is bequeathed from it: the religion (culture and community) to one woman, and a son to the other, but also the rush of feeling between Mary and Solomon, the gentleness that settles between the mourning women, the surprise of it all.

The impossible relation at the heart of the film slips from one woman to another, one son to another, and appears again in the secret love affair between Solomon and his boyfriend. It is Solomon who, at the very end of the film, finds and plays a cassette tape that Ahmed recorded for Mary in 1974 while in Pakistan for the summer with his family. Ahmed's voice on the tape says he is looking at the moon and tells Mary to look too, so that way they will see each other – a cliché that must have felt fresh to the teenagers, swept up in the stupefying event of love as they were. But really, she will get the tape weeks later by post. And with the time difference as well, and the inevitability of moonless nights (as Solomon points out), it was always destined to be a missed encounter.

Nevertheless. There is love, now and again. All that happened and all that is missed, all that is written and all unread, speaks of love, after love, on a moonless night.

3 Enduring love: three meditations on woundings

Raine Aiava, Mikko Joronen, and Noora Pyyry[1]

Abiding love (or dwelling in vulnerability)

I am sitting on the porch of our cottage with my teenage daughter. My mother comes and sits down to have a cigarillo. She is droning, like she almost always is these days. An annoying, continuous "mmm". But now she has a new rhythm, "mmm-m-m-m-mmm, m-m-mmm". A kind of simple improvisation. I look at my daughter and we laugh a little. Followed by a flash of sadness as I realize that I've locked her out of the exchange – treated her like an outsider, like someone who is not really there. Not present. This distance is painful, and I miss her terribly. I look at her, feeling guilty and rude, and I try to clue her in on the joke, telling her that we like her jazz. She replies sharply, telling me not to comment on something that she cannot control. Shock. There she is! Pragmatic, aware and present. Then, in seconds, back to droning. Absent again. Connect, disconnect. My mother, a stranger. Like eddies spreading out over a pond, ripples of her arrive with greater or lesser frequency. Sometimes it is like that: a crisp retort, or a practiced joke – echoed reverberations of someone once so sharp. I keep on reaching, but the distance steals her.

There is an impossible knot of emotions, materials, presences, and absences that goes along with caring for someone with Alzheimer's. Not only is there the disease itself – the decay of motor and cognitive functions, the seeming regression to what might sometimes seem a previous or more primordial state of being – but there are also ruptures and fractures of competing memories, decaying subjectivities, persistent wounding, ongoing bereavement, upended temporality, and arrested becoming. This means that attempting to isolate Alzheimer's into any given concept, or to artificially separate it into threads available for analysis, is likely to misrepresent the experience of being-with, loving, and caring for someone suffering the disease. Importantly, then, we must strive not to fall into the trap of

1 Raine Aiava's research has been funded by the Research Council of Finland (Academy of Finland project 357005), and Mikko Joronen's research by the European Research Council (ERC, HOMCRI, 101087950).

representing Alzheimer's – whether the disease itself, or the experience of the disease by either the patient or those who love and suffer with them – as any specific sort of some*things*. Instead, we hope to think-with Alzheimer's as a foil, to consider how love persists in encounters with such embodiment of loss and woundedness. For, as our vignette above shows, it seems that to live with and love someone with Alzheimer's is to confront protracted loss, recurrent eruptions of events and ruptures of slowly transforming self, and extensive trials and tests of patience. It is to endure a wounding, and a *vulnerable reaching*, with no recourse to amendment as bereavement gets arrested and the patient seems to resist any sense of arriving-again. It is to face not only the looming death of a loved one, but the pain of loving one who persists, and yet is no longer – an ever-present oscillation between what they were and what they can no longer be. We are haunted by an avatar, a virtual subject, to which our loved ones cannot advene.

It is this failure to arrive at new alterations of subjectivity, which might be, even momentarily, encountered, intended, and appropriated, that surfaces again and again in our discussions about life and love with Alzheimer's. Yet, this slowly creeping impossibility to arrive-again, which outstrips the ecstatic structure of the world in a never-ending instant that sends both past and future spinning, is not intended as a description of the disease. It is rather a wrenching reacquaintance with what was there all along: the limit to life that can at any moment take away what life prevails. What is being pointed to in such encounters is a way of being-wounded. The work of the disease highlights life in its process of fragile re-emergence and arrival – as a wound that will not be sutured – thus offering encounters based on reaching towards what cuts, disengages, and unrelates.[2] Such, of course, speaks to the familiar frustration of the impossible distance of the other, only intermittently bridged, as much as it speaks about life as an incomplete and fractured process constantly at the verge of collapsing into what it cannot get rid of (its vulnerability).[3] But in Alzheimer's, *something seems to have become broken*. A means of encountering her has been suspended, as the alterity of the other announces itself in a way that increasingly refuses to be re-subjected by representations and identity, leaving in its wake a hollowed-out here and now, a confusion emptied of meaning and resistant to reclamation. And yet, it is here that love can abide, not (only) as a

2 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr, and Ian McLeod (Stanford University Press, 1995); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Routledge, 1978); Paul Harrison, 'Corporeal remains: Vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2008, 40(2), pp. 423–445; Paul Harrison, 'A love whereof non-shall speak: Reflections on naming; of "non-representational theory"', in *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*, ed. David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), pp. 67–91; Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinley (Fordham University Press, 2009).

3 Romantic literature is littered with discourses on the unreachable other, from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde to Marcel Proust's Albertine to Johann Wolfgang von Geothe's Young Werther, to say nothing of popular film and music.

remembrance of what once was, but as a way of dwelling in radical exposure to vulnerability.

In this chapter, we approach love from three different perspectives, illustrating how it stretches and endures in everyday tensions. Taking the lead from the vignette above, we first look at the failures of *reaching* towards that which *distances*. In the next section, we think of the endurance of love through the *haunting spectres* of the non-evental encounter, while in the final section we focus on the *oscillating promises* that form our last meditation on persisting love. Through these meditations we consider ways in which love goes on (and invents new ways of going-on) against the distances, failures, and impossibilities that love's vulnerability carries along.

Impossible love: relating to non-relationality

In his wonderful article, 'Landscape, absence and the geographies of love', John Wylie discusses love in terms of a constitutive sundering of self and other, self and place, and self and world.[4] While love is most commonly conceived of in terms of fusion, or communion – or what Alain Badiou terms sacrificial love (that is, a coming to know the other to such a degree that we sacrifice difference in an effort to collapse into sameness) – geographies of love, Wylie argues, would describe a certain exposure to the other, an openness to their alterity.[5] *Far from being a gathering, or coming-together, love might entail a fundamental distance and separation*. In this chapter, we aim to develop this claim by following Wylie's emphasis (after Derrida) of the inaccessible and unassimilable nature of the other and the originary exposure of the self to externality and alterity. But we could just as easily turn to Critchley, or Levinas, when they claim that "there is 'something' about the other person – a dimension of separateness, interiority, secrecy – that escapes my comprehension".[6] Or to Roland Barthes, who captures not only this chasm between us but also the aporetic promise of language when he intimates that "[l]anguage desires nothing more and nothing else than to touch the beloved's body – and the world in which it exists".[7] What we look to dwell with here is how by loving we become exposed to what one cannot grasp, or access without a distance in

4 John Wylie, 'Landscape, absence and the geographies of love', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2009, 34(3), pp. 275–289.

5 Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New Press, 2012); Wylie, 'Landscape', p. 284.

6 See Simon Critchley, 'Cavell's "Romanticism" and Cavell's Romanticism', in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Stanley Cavell and Richard Boyd Goodman (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 37–54; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1969); Critchley, 'Cavell's "Romanticism"', p. 26.

7 See Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978); Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortés-Rocca, 'Notes on love and photography', in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (The MIT Press, 2011).

between. Indeed, as our vignette underlined, in Alzheimer's it is distance that keeps 'stealing her'.

Returning to the vignette, we recognise the frustration, the guilt, the estrangement and the sense of loss in this impossibility of reaching what remains fundamentally out of reach. And yet, this person was loved long before the disease would gradually steal them away. They were brought near, cared for, nurtured, resented, and worried about. They were not suddenly gone either, but gradually becoming alien, being stolen from those close to them, while simultaneously containing remnants of familiarity. And equally certain, following the distance in alterity cited above, they were always already irrevocably out of reach. All this feeds into an *intimate* form of encounter, where someone, despite the distancing push, is still reached towards, cared for, and brought close. Indeed, distancing here is fundamentally intimate, not antithetical to it. Rather than the cold, calculative, and objectifying masculine gaze that feminist geographers have long criticised, this distancing speaks to movement, to the oscillation in the vignette put into play by the *reaching*: from distance to intimacy to distance again. What thus gets highlighted are the particular *intimacies of distance*. So, what then has come to bear here? What do we make of the kind of exposure that we call abiding or enduring love?

To begin to approach this – and to flesh out our notions of the inaccessibility of the other – instead of approaching love in terms of simple connection and relationality, we turn to what provokes and sets relations in motion while importantly also escaping them: the nonrelational.[8] Nonrelationality is not merely the deferral of relationality, or that which has 'not yet' been taken into relation. Rather, the nonrelational marks a constitutive limit – as that which resists being drawn into and subsumed by relations, but which is incessantly proximal to – conditioning or breaking the relational.[9] Nonrelationality names what no relational composition can fully grasp but what still remains their constitutive condition. It is precisely in this manner, in remaining inexhaustible and irreducible to any form of relation, that nonrelationality at the same time allows relations while posing a limit condition, which no set of relations can overcome, fix, or set aside.[10]

What, therefore, does abiding love acknowledge? Certainly, there remains a distance, alterity, depth, and enigma in loving the other. An abyss that cannot be fully covered. And still, loving, as a relation that remains granted, conditioned, and yet fractured, turns the focus on the nature of relating itself, specifically on what remains embedded in a relation we call loving. By starting from the concept of nonrelationality, we wish to preface *love's intimate distancing*. Love, then, gets figured as a means of approaching what un/conditions relationality itself: a way of

8 Paul Harrison '"How shall I say it . . . ?" Relating the nonrelational', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2007, 39, pp. 590–608.

9 Harrison, 'How shall I say it . . . ?'.

10 Mikko Joronen and Mitch Rose, 'Vulnerability and its politics: Precarity and the woundedness of power', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(6), pp. 1402–1418.

being close and intimate to the incurable wound of living. Such woundedness is not something that relations inflict. Nor is it something that comes to the fore only when one faces the inevitability of dying.[11] It rather comes as a condition of 'natality', as Hannah Arendt would put it.[12] Alzheimer's, or any other disease, cannot create this condition; vulnerability rather sticks with us already, as soon as life begins. Alzheimer's merely brings to the fore the woundedness of living and its fragility – in ways that force us to reconfigure the relationship with a loved one through recurring events of grief and loss.

This, we argue, is about *loving life in its radical vulnerability*. As a form of exposure, loving means becoming inherently tied to what can be described as a vulnerable relationship – as something that can carry intimacy, yet remain beyond capture. It is this vulnerability that the Alzheimer's of the loved other forces us to confront without letting us take it into control – to fix, solve, or undo it. Such incurable vulnerability, Mikko Joronen and Mitch Rose suggest, needs to be seen as part of all constellations of relating – intimate or otherwise – as their negative condition of impossibility.[13] Indeed, we cannot describe the process of one being forced, by a degenerative disease, to become unrecognisable, alien, and unresponsive to love by simply referring to an increasing distance or radical alterity, as these were always already at work. Something also abides in the process of loss. Such abidingness means loving life in its constitutive vulnerability – in its incompleteness, lack, fragility, loss, and distancing; in its impossibility.

Crucially, there is a directionality in this exposure, a sense of movement. Despite the irrevocable and forcibly imposed distance, there remains a *reaching*. In Alzheimer's, one reaches and so takes part, with the other, in the vulnerable processes of worlding that falls apart. Such is not an ethical relationship as imperative; it is not love as an ontological scaffolding which offers frames to (make) sense (of) the world through preset conceptual schemes and axioms. It is rather a reaching that takes part in the *worlding* of the world, of the world becoming – *as* distance – in its intimate and loving encounters with vulnerability. This reaching is something Paul Harrison also highlights (when recycling the words of Gasché) as "the basic and irreducible quality of relation [that] is nothing but the trait of being-held-toward-another".[14] It is from here that our involvement with the other proceeds, as an ethical relation based on us being vulnerable and reliant on the care of others. Such being-held-towards the other means reaching that does not depose or appropriate them into our own modalities of understanding, and so render out their distinctiveness, or outmode their alterity, when dictated by Alzheimer's radical reminders

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11 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford 1962).

12 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958).

13 Joronen and Rose, 'Vulnerability and its politics'.

14 Gasché Rodolphe, *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Harrison, 'How shall I say it . . . ?', pp. 590–591.

of vulnerability. It is here that *love can be said to persist*. We abide in the woundedness of a relation that cannot be subjected, situated, or intended, and we *dwell with this vulnerability*, perpetually working to make it visible in a process that could perhaps be described, following Heidegger, as a way of being at home in not being at home.[15]

Returning to our vignette, and to thinking-with the experience of loving someone with Alzheimer's, we want to end by considering the *failure to arrive*. Following our articulation of love as a dwelling-with vulnerability, through being-held-towards that which outstrips any relation, what is so distressing in the incapacity of the Alzheimer's patient to arrive-again is not only our wrenching reacquaintance with the radical alterity of the other, but also the failure of them to respond to our otherness by reaching out for *us*, by being-held-towards us. In Alzheimer's, we have lost someone twice over, even as they sit beside us. We have not only lost them, but we have lost their love.[16] And yet, as Rose, after Cavell, reminds us, distance does not beget silence.[17] On the contrary, the inclination to recognise and name ourselves is founded in responding to the silence that settles between us: "I (have to) respond to it", Cavell states, "it calls upon me; it calls me out. I have to acknowledge it."[18] One might fail, but they reach out anew nevertheless. Perhaps one must fail, and this is precisely how the love abiding in vulnerability prevails: that *one fails but reaches out and responds again*. Reaching takes place and brings near through its own failure.

Everyday hauntings: love beyond the event

It was tucked neatly inside an "Introduction to Nietzsche's Philosophy" book: a short to-do list, written on the back of a receipt, and functioning as a bookmark: "Call admissions: ask about transcripts, student aid, application process; renew insurance; find recipes for low-purine diet." The last was followed by a careful grocery list. The note knocked the wind from me. She was there. Or the ghost of her was. A her I didn't know. A witness to arrested dreams. The desire to re-direct our crumbling lives. We had been growing apart – through academia, through philosophy, I was becoming a stranger – but, it seems, she had been reaching. Making clandestine efforts to bring our lives back together. Even the shopping list, an earnest effort to effect change in our unhealthy lifestyle, reveals, ten years after the fact, a burst of hopeful energies. How could I have missed this? When had she looked into returning to uni? How was it that I

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15 Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Indiana University Press, 1996).

16 On this double loss, see Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol 2: Within a Budding Grove*, trans. Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff, Dennis Joseph Enright, and Terence Kilmartin (Vintage 1996), p. 425.

17 Mitch Rose, 'Tragic democracy: The politics of submitting to others', in *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*, ed. David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

18 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 161.

hadn't seen her carrying around a philosophy book? Traces of handwriting, in the most ordinary fashion, brought forward the insurmountable space between us, and the spectre of an impossible task. That though she was everything to me, and I to her, we had already haunted each other as perpetual strangers.

In the previous section, we considered love in terms of an originary exposure to the alterity of the other. Far from the happy event of communion between two split souls that we find in Aristophanes' myth, and any number of pop culture songs or movies, we pursued love in terms of a fundamental distance, separation, or rupture in which the other is always already irrevocably absent. In outlining this exposure to the other who can never be completely situated, we highlighted a certain directionality: *the intimate distancing of reaching and failing*. Despite the inaccessible and unassimilable nature of the other – the distance – the work of love seems to entail a reaching for them. Thus, we followed in the footsteps of many of the classic musings on the subject, highlighting love as fundamentally relational. This we aimed to clarify, emphasising that if love is a relation, it is a relation to that which cannot be taken into relations: a *relation to nonrelationality*, where nonrelationality marks a constitutive limit, and reaching an intimate relationship to what remains distant, ungraspable. An aching question. Thus, we conceptualised love as a being-held-towards that which cannot be fully taken into relation, cannot be subsumed or intended, that indeed offers no purchase, but that nevertheless abides.

By foregrounding the alterity of the other as an originary exposure to vulnerability, we sought to unpack how this proximal limit can be said to precipitate thought, and even summon the definitive moment of subjectivity while nevertheless carrying forward an ethics of dwelling-with this wounding. In this way, we found ourselves at the doorstep of the event; that is, the event of love: love as summons, to new worlds, new subjectivities. *But, if our aim is to think love that persists, then how to proceed?* How to consider love that abides – that carries forward an ethics of dwelling-with our vulnerability – while also acknowledging the oft-exalted re-ontologising capacity of love as event? Does the event leave room for the under-going of love? For its persisting, and enduring, beyond its occasioning? Or, must we instead have to consider *love beyond the event*? Here, abiding would not be understood in terms of a persistent subject – "I" do not endure this wounding, but rather this wounding endures. As loved ones become the strangers that they always already were, revealing a vulnerability that could not be emptied fully into relations – a fragility that can never be captured, tamed, or repaired – *we look not to the evental arrival of love, but the non-event of its on-going*. The enduring being-held-towards.

The specter of an evental encounter: love as non-event

It is this non-event that occupies us now. We look to conceptualise the non-event as an intervention, or, perhaps, a stay. We thus move the focus from the arriving 'event' of love – the deracinating encounter which redraws horizons and remakes

worlds – to the undergoing of love that persists in and through the everyday. That is, we turn to the non-event as a means of warding off apophantic demarcations of the event in terms of binary logics. Thus, here, the non- is not 'not'. Nor should it be considered in terms developed in later nonrepresentational theory as 'more-than'.[19] It is not 'not event', nor is it 'more-than-event'. Rather, the non-(event) troubles. Neither affirming nor denying, the non- lacks positive or determinate content and carries this emptiness, or abyss, forward.[20] Indeed, learning from the trials of nonrepresentational theory, we emphasise the non-disclosed quality of the prefix non-, which "names an attunement to moments of indeterminacy and undecidability".[21] In this spirit, we must also cleave it from potentiality: the non-event is not the "(non)event" that Ben Anderson and Rachel Gordon, among others, outline in terms of the arrested potentiality of an almost-happening – where the potential event gets transfigured into a "(non)event".[22] While these contributions importantly expand the 'modes of eventfulness' beyond the spectacular and transformative, we wish to differentiate them from the non- we mobilise here. Instead, we follow Paul Harrison's outline of a non- that remains averse to certain forms of conceptualisation and theorisations: "The non- inheres and persists, however disavowed, in the intervals, the blanks, the gaps, in all the displacements that make speculation possible. The non- neither affirms nor denies but remains the disorganization of systems and structures that would name and subject."[23] Thus, if we are to think of love in terms of a wounding that will not close but rather endures in the face of the slow encroachment of loss – of becoming-strangers – then we must look to the *edges of the event*, namely, to what haunts it.

To do that, we begin by orientating ourselves to what is meant by event. Theorists of the event remind us that it is, in each case, always a *surprise*. That there is a sense of eruption or radical displacement that marks the event as a fundamental break from that which came before. That the event cannot be inferred from the situation from which it erupts. Love arrives to us and captures us unexpectedly. In this sense, then, the event uproots and deracinates, remaking the world that could not have been its origin.[24] This is why Derrida emphasises the verticality of the event as that which befalls me, from on high: *the event is, by definition, impossible*.[25] It is not sequential. Not the next step, but a worlding: "It does not happen in a

19 Harrison, 'A love whereof'.

20 Mikko Joronen, 'Dwelling in the sites of finitude: Resisting the violence of the metaphysical globe', *Antipode*, 2011, 43, pp. 1127–1154.

21 Ben Anderson quoted in Harrison, 'A love whereof', p. 75.

22 Ben Anderson and Rachel Gordon, 'Government and (non)event: The promise of control', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2016, 18(2), pp. 158–177.

23 Harrison, 'A love whereof', p. 84.

24 Noora Pyyry and Raine Aiava, 'Enchantment as fundamental encounter: Wonder and the radical reordering of subject/world', *cultural geographies*, 2020, 27(4), pp. 581–595.

25 Jacques Derrida, 'A certain impossible possibility of saying the event', *Critical Inquiry*, 2007, 33(2), pp. 441–461.

world – it is, on the contrary, as if a new world opens up through its happening."[26] It is in such terms that love is so often exalted: the arrival on the scene of the other so upends my world that I am remade in the moment of arrival.[27] On the other hand, if arrival had already been possible, then its coming would not be an event but a potentiality. Thus, Derrida tells us that "the measure of the event's possibility is given by its impossibility. The event is only possible as impossible. In this way, the impossible is not simply negative. Rather the impossible must be done. The event consists in doing the impossible."[28]

It is this *impossible-possible* that we need to tarry with a while. For even as one experiences the event (of love) coming to pass as possible, the fact that it will have been impossible continues to haunt its possibility. Derrida places this spectral structure of experiencing the event – the haunting of the event – as absolutely essential to it.[29] The event remains impossible – it may have taken place, but it is still impossible – and so reveals "what was previously ungraspable or unpresentable within the situation", namely, 'the void of the situation'.[30] It is thus the very arrival of the event (as an im-possibility) that cannot be taken account of. Yet, accounting for it is precisely what must be done. For Badiou, for instance, the event is an unnameable break for which a name must be invented.[31] Meanwhile, Derrida reminds us that, as soon as it appears, the event is already repeatable.[32] As soon as the event is spoken, named, or pointed to, the unique event is generalised, and the singularity engaged in substitution. The iterability of the event transforms the arrival of the inaugural event into a return – a coming back – whereby the first occurrence is already being erased through substitution. The singular event of love becomes repeatable. As Roland Barthes reminds us: 'I love you' is in each case 'I will always love you.'[33] Or, following Badiou: I love you is always a recommitment to the event: a promise to love you again – to *wrestle with the impossible that continues to haunt the event*.[34] It is this spectre that we have in view with the non-event: not the event that befalls me (the sudden advening of the impossible), but the echo that prevails. To love is to be haunted by the impossible, the residue of the event that endures as a non-event. Non-event is not a potentiality, nor is it distinctly 'not' an event, nor the event that deracinates the subject. Rather, it is transfigured and remaindered: a ghost of the refrain.

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26 See also Françoise Dastur, 'Phenomenology of the event: Waiting and surprise', *Hypatia*, 2000, 16(4), pp. 178–189, p. 182.

27 See Badiou, *In Praise of Love*.

28 Derrida, 'A certain impossible possibility', p. 449.

29 Ibid., 'A certain impossible possibility'.

30 Keith Bassett, 'Thinking the event: Badiou's philosophy of the event and the example of the Paris Commune', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2008, 26(5), pp. 895–910, p. 898.

31 Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 85.

32 Derrida, 'A certain impossible possibility', p. 452.

33 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*.

34 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*.

If love abides, it is in these *displacing repetitions*, which constantly recall our vulnerability through the hauntings (of the impossibility) they carry along. We thus take seriously Lauren Berlant's charge that theorists of the event focus on the extreme and melodramatic of a particular 'mode of eventfulness' at the cost of attuning to what is ordinary, forgettable, charming, boring, inconsequential, or subtle in the event.[35] Indeed, we do not find that the proliferation of inventory magnitudes of the event would be particularly useful in getting at the relationship between love and event – that is, "the situation, episode, interruption, aside, or happening", do not seem to speak to the persistence of love.[36]

What we want to underline is rather the *everyday non-events of encountering ghosts*. Ten years later, pulling a dusty book from its shelf, I still encounter her. And, despite the intervening decade, the encounter wounds. As as sharp now as it had been when our bodies encircled each other. Since what her handwriting conjures is not the particular love lost, but a vulnerability that remains impossible to outmode or strip away. The non-event of this mundane being-held-towards the other – made manifest, in this case, in a re-commitment to reaching that generated such a to-do list – lives in the shadow of the event of love, haunting it, troubling it, and following me. The distance is thus not only temporal; it was always present, marked by our reaching, haunted by the spectre of an impossible task: "Though she was everything to me, and I to her, we had already haunted each other as perpetual strangers."

Oscillation in persistent promises

He is standing in front of the bathroom mirror, concentrating, carefully shaving his newfound (sparse) beard. A shock! My child, a man? A stranger. He notices my stare and tells me to "fuck off". What a sharp feeling of outsiderness with this person who used to be the closest of all. He notices my confusion and adds "Mom, I love you" – a relief, a wonderful sense of re-cognition, a grasping . . . .

There is, above all, a sense of movement here. An oscillation. Recognition and a necessary re-cognition. From response to response-ability – an attending to relational becomings. "Fuck off" marks a productive tension. The words press against the resounding echoes of a primordial exposure. And, reverberating against that originary vulnerability, proffers a tentative, fragile, and incomplete response: *a promise*: "Mom, I love you." It is a gesture – of recognition, care – but also an undertaking to suture, through language, the unmendable.

Promises are often wielded in terms of a guarantee.[37] We reassure, pledge, give our word. We avow our love – remember: 'I love you' is always 'I will always love

35 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 278.

36 Ibid., *Cruel Optimism*, p. 5.

37 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1980/1987), p. 77.

you.' We aim to hem in the unpredictable, to bring under our will that which perpetually refuses it. We mobilise the constative utterance – that theoretical speech which concerns itself with saying what is, demarking or describing being– to rearticulate events within a sphere of knowledge, observation, and information.[38] In doing so, we enlist the other, petitioning them to cosign the re-ordering and categorising – to reinvest in the power of will, agency, and speech-acts to do so. We say the event, say things as they present themselves, as they take place, and in doing so transfigure the excessive event in terms of pure information, laying claim on the future by laying claim to ourselves in a paradigmatically knowable, intendable, calculable world. Indeed, Derrida highlights that it is necessary to interpret the will "as promise", where the 'will' here would be the capacity to promise beyond present power, to will (to love) even where one cannot.[39]

This is the double-bind of the promise: the (impossible) relationality of will and limit. In understanding promises as engaging the will beyond one's own capacities and abilities, promises reveal themselves as both tenable and untenable. On the one hand, promises *must be considered possible* – not only actionable, but also possible, able to be kept. If they were from the start something unfeasible, they risk not being a promise at all but simply an outright lie. On the other hand, promises are *haunted by the possibility of failure* – indeed without the capacity to fail promises would be nothing but a description of what is to come, mere statements of facts. Thus, a promise is never certain nor prophetic.[40] Uncertainty and doubt are the very grounds of the promise, the void it rushes to fill. There is thus something excessive in the promise. They are "by nature excessive and in constant danger of coming to naught, and are therefore frequently hemmed in by legal terminology and contracts that attempt, in vain, to control the unpredictability of such language".[41] This excess is, Derrida tells us, essential to the promise. "One can never promise in a half-way fashion, one always has to promise too much."[42]

This excess in the promise means that I do not know what I promise when I promise: "Mom, I love you" moves beyond and before knowing.[43] The measure of the promise, its fulfillment or its failing, is untenable because the promise itself is outside knowledge, proximally constituted by its impossibility to know if what is promised can be kept. The promise is not a forecast, nor does it refer to a pre-existing event. The promise rather makes the event via spoken act of self-commitment

38 See Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathon Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (Columbia University Press, 1989); John Langshaw Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 55–75; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 77–85.

39 Jacques Derrida, *Advances*, trans. Phillipe Lynes (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

40 Jennifer Rushworth, 'Derrida, Proust, and the promise of writing', *French Studies*, 2015, 69(2), pp. 205–219; see also, Derrida, 'A certain impossible possibility', p. 459.

41 Rushworth, 'The Promise of Writing', p. 206.

42 Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, p. 166.

43 Ibid., *Memoires for Paul de Man*, p. 166.

to what takes and shall take place. I swear by saying "I swear".[44] Similarly, the saying, "Mom, I love you" *pledges to reaching* towards the other in a way that can only promise what cannot be guaranteed – only asserted as possible. Promises thus need to wrestle with the impossible: they are constantly haunted by the possibility of their own failure.

It is worth remaining here a moment to reconsider *oscillation* and *repetition*. As tenable and untenable, possible and impossible, saying-event and making-event, promises mobilise two registers simultaneously. They oscillate between declarative statements and guarantees, and a commitment to reaching towards the intractable other. And they do so in repetition, with each iteration of the promise needing to continually renew itself. Even the event-making in this performative utterance – occurring through the act of speaking – insists on its own re-iterability. It becomes thinkable, not as a surprising and delimiting 'event' outlined earlier, but as a persistent non-event of repetition. Indeed, insofar as we earlier argued that if love abides, it does so in the non-event of repetition that constantly calls us to our irreducible vulnerability, then here we want to further outline the *promise as the scene* of that refrain *by which love persists*. If we are looking to the everyday non-events as echoes of the events that abide in repetition, then the reiterative promise of love, as a being-held-towards that which cannot be subsumed into relations, persists and holds open the vulnerability of living-with. Its oscillation, between the covering of our constitutive vulnerability and the commitment to respond to it, emerges from the constitutive excess of promise, further facilitating the summons to repetition. The impossibility of the promise brings us face to face with the impotence of it, enlisting a re-commitment.

The movement that we sensed in the vignette above points to this oscillation of repetition and re-commitment. There is, of course, changing directionalities in reaching, for instance once the young man recognised the pain his response caused. But there is also a movement in the promise. It is a reiterative non-event by which love invents a different way of enduring in life through the commitment to allow an other's strangeness to play itself out in me – a way of being-held-towards the vulnerability unveiled in the difference and distance immanent to this encounter. Or to put it simply: as a commitment to dwelling-with.

Conclusion

In the years following his mother's death, Roland Barthes, labouring over what would become a kind of eulogy for her in *Camera Lucida*, worried, in his personal notes (published posthumously in *Mourning Diaries*), about the (im)possibility of writing love without making literature of it.[45] Indeed, to think something as

44 Derrida, 'A certain impossible possibility'.

45 Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977–September 15, 1979*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 2010).

precious, joyful, powerful, painful, desperate, and political as love without reducing it into any specific instantiations, representations, or modalities has dominated our conversations. Our aim here has been to think with these three disparate vignettes, not as representative examples of love as such but as a foil to dwell with the various *tensions in the endurance of love*; that is, as an attempt to meditate on how love gets stretched along, and persists in the many woundings that it not only toils beneath but from which it remains inseparable. Even as we anchor our musings in personal narratives of affectual everyday eruptions, our hope has been to consider how love persists through the swells and rhythms of everyday losses and reachings, where love is not necessarily easy to point to but seems instead to merely continue. Where love does not only take place as an event, beautiful and terrible in all its tragedy, but as an ongoing. And even more than this, an undergoing. Something that abides slippings and failings, indiscretions and broken promises.

Attending to the distances, displacements, and intervals that haunt the terrain of love has allowed us to outline the impossible reaching against everyday losses, failures, and oblivions. Encountered in the arrested advenings of a loved one with Alzheimer's, intimate distances revealed, not simply the intractability and radical alterity of the other, but the woundedness of being-held-towards that which cannot be related. Wrestling with the impossible that continues to haunt the event, in turn, unfolded the spectral structure of the event – the non-evental hauntings – which, through repetition, further recall us to reach for intimate relations in the face of the nonrelational. This too led us to the double-bind of the promise, which calls us to the site of repetition and re-commitment in the face of life's vulnerability and fragile connections. Thus, there is a thread that runs through these musings: a recognition of love as a matter of dwelling, as a commitment to *reaching* – to the *work* of being-held-towards nonrelationality. Indeed, as we consider the spectres of the non-event of love that persists through promises, repetition, and care, it becomes clear that it is not simply that love endures, but rather it is the everyday that endures through love and its impossible reaching(s) – promises, hauntings, losses, failures. By and through love, we work at being at home in not being at home.

4 I die you: impersonal love and the annihilation of the subject

Thomas Dekeyser

Clarice Lispector says a great deal about nothing. While much is felt, imagined, diagnosed, introspected, repelled, very little in fact happens. We tend to catch her protagonists at their most immobile, solitary, or silent, those minor moments of life which, whilst all-pervading, seem to miss the call of narration. In *The Passion According to G.H.*, we accompany the narrator as just three things happen: she enters her maid's room, sees a cockroach, and squashes it. In the manner of events that is, strictly speaking, all that occurs. The result is a story told in slow motion, dedicating its dense 189 pages to the intricate unfolding of just a few hours. In another book, *Água Viva*, the temporality that emerges from eventfulness vanishes altogether. We are left with the stillness of a single frame, undisturbed by the movement of plot, logic, or narration. *Água Viva* is the encounter of a painter not with the world, or with others, but with herself, a writing that the narrator calls that of "life seen by life".[1] It is true, as Hélène Cixous writes about the book, that "[i]t is hard to imagine a text that would be more violently real, more faithfully natural".[2] All this, however, in the face of a resounding absence: the real devoid of action. If things do happen, if micro-stories are told, they always do so in spite of themselves. They fail, frail, fragment. The natural tendency of Lispector's tales is the recession into nothingness.

The nothing invades Lispector's prose too. This is writing that undoes itself: syntactic orders, signifying systems, paragraph structures, orthographic conventions, and rules of punctuation are dismantled at every twist and turn. This 'degrammaticalization', as Cixous calls it, is a violence on the reader as much as on language – a source of breathlessness and disorientation, but also of a joy that comes from

1 Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. S. Tobler (Penguin, 2012), p. 8.

2 Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, trans. V.A. Conley (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 15.

attuning oneself to a breathing lyricism, to the "breath that heats the passing of syllables".[3] One begins to look for "the profound organic disorder that nevertheless hints at an underlying order".[4] To find oneself in attunement with that disorder, with this slipping towards disintegration, is to realise, as Cixous suggests, that Lispector's words are not to be read, but to be sung – to hymn an intricate melody always on the verge of going silent.

In story, as in language, the 'nothing' is the 'something' that troubles, and at times animates, the writing of Lispector. But nowhere does the nothing present itself more cuttingly than in the violence, at once metaphysical and existential, shared by the protagonists of *The Passion*, *Água Viva*, and other stories. Each in their own way, these are stories of de-humanisation. They trace the annihilation of the narrator as a human subject. Understood in line with its etymological origins – from the Latin 'ad' ('to'; 'towards') and 'nihil' ('nothing') – as 'the movement towards nothing', 'annihilation' here is the becoming-absent of the human form, with no form available to take its place. In *The Passion*, G.H.'s de-humanisation is triggered by her encounter with the cockroach: "—Listen, faced with the living cockroach, the worst discovery was that the world is not human, and that we are not human."[5] Crushing the small animal, and tasting the white muck oozing out of it, G.H. ponders whether she had completed her abandonment of 'human organisation': "Had I vomited my last human remnants?"[6] She affirms. She had reached nothingness, "and the nothingness was live and moist".[7]

What is so striking about reading Lispector is not simply the raw blend of horror and jouissance we experience witnessing the narrator's encounter with the "terror of remaining undelimited", their disintegration into the impersonality of uncontained life.[8] It is the nature of the event triggering and sustaining the impersonalisation. Rather than the kinds of cut associated with trauma – a tragic loss, social fall-out, economic collapse – what drives de-humanisation is, here, those affects and encounters attachments commonly deemed to be constitutive of agency. Across her pages, Lispector specifically asks us to confront an uncomfortable question: What if it is particularly love that opens us, most forcefully, onto the reduction to nothingness of the subject? In Lispector's telling, love is the sometimes dramatic, other times muted, scene of subjective dissolution: the capacity of the pre-human to invade the terrain of the human. Developing this proposition by way of a speculative reading of *The Passion* and *Água Viva*, the remainder of this chapter foregrounds different unfoldings of the negative labour of love.

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3 Ibid., *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, p. 4; Lispector, Água Viva, p. 20.
4 Ibid., *Água Viva*, p. 20.
5 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 65.
6 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 95.
7 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 55.
8 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 7.

In this foregrounding, my task is not that of minute literary analysis. The books demand to be approached as living entities whose conceptual closure would be akin to a deadening, to sucking the life out of texts that sing precisely because of their breathing rhythms and their incessant displacement of formalisation and fixation. A more appropriate mode of approach is hinted at by the narrator of *Água Viva* when she says: "This text that I give you is not to be seen close up: it gains its secret previously invisible roundness when seen from a high-flying plane."[9] I take this as an invitation to take Lispector's insistence on non-linearity and non-narrative seriously, making connections and leaps between and beyond her two books, and stitching these together with those of fellow travellers. In other words, Lispector's oeuvre is not taken as a resource from which to 'extract' a hidden theory of love, but as an inspiration through and with which to produce my own theses on the impersonality of love.

Shattering the circle

In Lispector's stories, love is not the stuff of emancipation. To those who fall prey to it, love is tortured, impossible, excruciating, hellish even. In *The Passion*, G.H. writes: "love is the experience of the mud and degradation [. . .] The real hell is that of love."[10] So when Lispector speaks of love, she calls it a 'cruel necessity'. But what, exactly, is this cruelty? In Lispector's tales, love is cruel because it always appears to be besides itself: it promises life, but is steeped in annihilation. Indeed, as we will see, for Lispector, love is always a measure of both life and death: "Oh how I love you and I love so much that I die you."[11] Rarely does this paradox involve life's actual termination; however, Lispector's is not the love for a loved one who is no longer with us. What, then, is the annihilatory labour of love she speaks of?

As Lispector is careful to underscore, again and again, that love is beyond the grasp of intelligibility, we may do well approaching it *via negativa*, that is, by way of what it is not. Lispector's formulation of love is first of all not what we may call, following Derrida's terminology, a 'circular' theory.[12] A dominant trace in Western thought, this conception presents love as the promise of fusion and merging, the coming-together of beings (usually the heterosexual Two) into a coalition that is more than the sum of its parts.[13] Love is the process by which the human self, in interaction with the other, is elevated towards a level of heightened capacity; the encounter by which compatible bodies enter into union, boosting the powers of

9 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 20.

10 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 138.

11 Clarice Lispector, *Complete Stories*, trans. K. Dodson (Penguin, 2015), p. 52.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford University Press, 2005).

13 Michael Hardt, 'Red love', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 2017, 116(4), pp. 781–796.

all affected, and creating along the way a new whole. The result is an instance of what Derrida calls the fiction of 'circular eternity'.[14] This fiction signals the completion, fullness, and unity of the perfect circle; or, perhaps more precisely, of the ring, looping the finger of the engaged and wedded. However much the human is affected by entering into a loving relation, it always, like a circle, returns to itself. The human is the origin and end point of circular love, like a wheel that, to quote Derrida, cannot but instigate "the rondure of a return to self [. . .] towards the origin itself".[15]

Lispector, like Derrida, knows that what is forgotten in this circular theory of love is that, in the turn around itself, the circle has always already displaced itself. For a circle to trace its own perfect circularity, to manifest its desire for final closure, it must exclude the alterity that constitutes it.[16] This exclusion is only ever a hiding, or suppression, of that which resists the possibility of closure. In Lispector's texts, the fusional relation is a cruel promise, for its realisation is neither possible nor desirable. The completion of the circle is infinitely deferred.

Two scenes of alterity haunt the possibility of circular love. Scene 1: the lover does not recognise the other. Those dearest to Lispector's protagonists, those whom they call 'their own' – partners, friends, animals – are also those with whom they cannot but share what Derrida calls 'the abyssal un-shareable':

> the abyss between the islands of the archipelago and the vertiginous untranslatable, to the point that the very solitude we are saying so much about is not even the solitude of several people in the same world, this still shareable solitude in one and the same co-habitable world, but the solitude of worlds, the undeniable fact that there is no world, not even a world, not even one and the same world, no world that is one.[17]

The un-shareable strikes us not as the temporary misalignment of subject positions, but as the inherent corruption of intelligibility. G.H. reaches for the non-human other, but hears only silence. In Lispector, to be swayed by love is, always, to confront and to fail to confront this difference that cannot be crossed. The other cannot speak back. Amongst lovers, as amongst strangers, there is no shared world.[18] We may act *as if* there is one, *as if* the feeling of "speaking among ourselves the same language, and sharing an intelligible language" is not simply a comforting 'social insurance' we sign to persevere in love.[19] Despite such attempts, in love, we

14 Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 15.

15 Ibid., *Rogues*, pp. 10–11.

16 Laura Odello, 'The greatest possible mastery, the greatest possible self-presence of life', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2017, 17, pp. 141–162.

17 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, trans. G. Bennington (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 266.

18 Thomas Dekeyser, 'Worldless futures: On the allure of "worlds to come"', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2023, 48, pp. 338–350.

19 Derrida, *The Beast*, p. 267.

are calling out for what cannot be responded to. This is why Derrida says that "[o]ne is always in mourning for the other".[20] Mourning is "the very essence of the experience of the other as other", he writes, for they are always-already missing, receding from our grasp.[21] Therein lies love's cruelty as much as its allure. Love promises the consolidation or fusion of self and other, but can only offer an encounter with their incommensurability – that is, to stay with Derrida's imagery, an encounter with the abyss separating islands, and thus, with the impossibility of ever finally arriving on the other's shore.

Scene 2: the lover does not recognise herself. Before G.H. entered the room with the insect, she had a 'humanised life'.[22] She understood herself to have a human form, confined by her own skin; the person who, slowly over the years, emerged as the one bearing a name, G.H. This G.H. says she liked to "organize myself to be comprehensible for myself" by embracing harmony and cohesion, "because it is too risky to lose the form".[23] In short, she was internally consistent, and wanted to keep it that way. She set up bulwarks to ward off whatever she thought might trouble that consistency – what she can only refer to as 'The Mystery'.[24] G.H. often saw it when viewing pictures of herself. Her eyes revealed something that escaped her, something other-than-human at the heart of the self: "a silence that I'd only seen in lakes, and that I'd only heard in silence itself".[25] But The Mystery was pocketed, turned into something to be approached only through the safety of a still photograph.

On this particular Sunday, however, the safeguards would begin to break down, and The Mystery would come gushing in. The site of the metamorphosis was the room of a maid who'd just moved away to work elsewhere. Entering this room, what G.H. saw left her displeased. The maid had lived in the room for six months before leaving, so G.H. had anticipated darkness, chaos, a heaviness. Instead, she found a room, perfectly clean, vibrant and bright, with a mural of three figures drawn onto the wall. Something in the way the maid had ordered the room and made it her own left G.H. feeling excluded, "as if she'd shut the door and left me a stranger to my own dwelling".[26] In that disorientating state, she, that harmonious cohesion, began succumbing to an unknown rage and, with it, experienced a violent sensation: she wanted to kill something in that room. In this moment, she could feel her human form was crumbling – "the first signs inside me of a landslide, of underground limestone caves, collapsing beneath the weight of stratified archaeological layers".[27] Looking to resolve the sensation, she planned to flood the room

20 Ibid., *The Beast*, p. 244.
21 Ibid., *The Beast*, p. 244.
22 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 6.
23 Ibid., *The Passion*, pp. 20, 152.
24 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 16.
25 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 17.
26 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 32.
27 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 36.

with water, scrub its surfaces, wax its edges, polish its corners, arrange the furniture; that is, she'd set things straight again. Perhaps that would allow her to return to the 'humanised life' she had so carefully crafted for herself.

Acting upon that hope, she opened the wardrobe to be cleaned, peaked inside, and, to her horror, there it was: a cockroach, bulky and slow, "the miniature version of an enormous animal", moving in her direction.[28] The 'landslide' the room had caused in her now truly picked up pace, turning the sensation of violence into its enactment. She slammed the wardrobe door onto the roach, not only having to confront that the stubborn animal was still alive, but also, most disturbingly, that she, "that calm woman", was a creature capable of pure hatred, "drunk with the desire, justified or not, to kill".[29] The safeguards of her humanity had burst: "It's a metamorphosis in which I lose everything I had, and what I had was me."[30] The roach and G.H. were now reduced to the same living matter. She'd been thrown into the inhumanity of life: "As if for the first time I was finally on the level of Nature."[31] The Mystery had taken over.

G.H. ponders: Is this existential drama of de-identification not that of love? Early in the book, she asks: "Could what I saw have been love? [. . .] that horror, was that love?"[32] Towards the end of the book, she affirms that, yes, the hell she had gone through, that was the hell that comes from love. People are misguided, G.H. suggests, in putting the idea of sin in sex, when, compared to love, sex could not be more innocent or childish. "The real hell is that of love."[33] The hell of love is that of losing one's human interiority – the annihilation of the subject as subject.

Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's *Sex, or The Unbearable* understands love's labour of de-humanisation as an encounter with the nonsovereignty of the self.[34] At stake is not the loss of a sovereign subject, the vanishing of a coherent subject where there used to be one, but the subject's confrontation with what Berlant calls its status as 'structurally nonsovereign', as a subject marked by originary incoherences and divisions and, thus, incapable of ever fully knowing or being in control of itself, its motives, and its desires.[35] We never coincide with our 'selves', as we are always-already at the mercy of a contingency and inconstancy of 'otherness', human and otherwise, that impinges upon us. Love, for Berlant and Edelman, undoes the image we have of the self by way of a confrontation with this nonsovereignty. In love, we are "affectively undone by being in relation".[36] Like sex, it is "the encounter with what exceeds and undoes the subject's fantasmatic sovereignty", a

28 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 41.
29 Ibid., *The Passion*, pp. 47, 46.
30 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 63.
31 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 46.
32 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 11.
33 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 138.
34 Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or The Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014).
35 Ibid., *Sex*, p. 5.
36 Ibid., *Sex*, p. 2.

disruption of our attachments to intentionality.[37] So when G.H., in the hellish love that is her encounter with the roach, begins to lose her coherent form and organisation, her 'humanised life', it is only ever the *fantasy* of human selfhood that dissolves. What separates love from other events confronting us with our own nonsovereignty is that it forces us to actually desire to be nonsovereign, to desire giving into that which is not us, to pursue a surrendering to the other. Not just love as annihilation, then, but also the love of annihilation, however tortured: "I started to love the abyss of which I am made."[38]

I, annihilated

Mapping onto love's double scene of alterity – the encounter with the unrecognisability of the other, and with that of the self – is love's twofold movement of annihilation. The first movement is the rupture of the self as an apparently coherent subject. The second is the opening onto, and a surrendering to, the other, further fracturing the fantasy of the subject. At some point, in this second movement one can no longer proceed stepwise, and one needs to take a leap into the unknown and towards the unknowable other.[39] This can only ever be an attempt, as one can never fully encounter the other, never fully arrive in this elsewhere. Where one arrives is not at the other as a knowable, coherent subject, but "into the incomprehension of the other".[40] The result is that the double movement of pulling away from self towards the other lacks the gratification of a merging, a becoming-whole, into an expanded subject. The comforting myth of the subject factures; the self comes undone but without the pleasure of reconstructing by fusing with a knowable other; without a new coherence that would extend shared capacities to act. The circle is, and remains, broken – like a spiral that never manages to close in on itself.

Lispector is not, strictly speaking, alone in pursuing a non-circular conception of love. But there is something uniquely irreparable about the love that sways her protagonists. At first glimpse, one might find resonances with Gilles Deleuze's sporadic reflections on love that, like Lispector's, foreground the undoing of any image of selfhood. Love's annihilation of the self-identical subject fractures any stable self/other distinction, Oedipal or otherwise, in which one is able to recognise the other. Speaking of love, "now one is no more than an abstract line, like an arrow crossing the void", Deleuze and Guattari write.[41] The effect, for Hannah

37 Ibid. See also: Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt, 'No one is sovereign in love: A conversation between Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt', *Amour*, 2011, 18. Available at: http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/no-one-is-sovereignin-love-a-conversation-between-lauren-berlant-and-michael-hardt/

38 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 152.

39 Cixous, *Reading*.

40 Ibid., *Reading*, p. 87.

41 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, cited in Hannah Stark, 'Deleuze and love', *Angelaki*, 2012, 17(1), p. 107.

Stark, is that, in love, we experience others not as perceptible and recognisable forms, delimited by subject positions, but as multiplicities. For some Deleuzian scholars, this promises a departure from power's habits of subjective stratification and social territorialisation. Protevi, for instance, proposes that love is a mode of deterritorialisation that frees the subject, opening it up to material experimentation with new affects, flows, and bodies.[42] In his Spinozist notion of love, Michael Hardt, too, takes love as onto-politically productive. Love, in its rejection of fixed identities and its organisation of joyful encounters, is "the increase in our power, our power to act and our power to exist".[43] As a result, Hardt suggests, love is capable of creating subjectivities suited to the call of democracy. These Deleuzian ontologies of love take it as the emancipation from limitation and the opening-up to new relational capacities with radical potential.

While Lispector would not deny that love may at times be constitutive of possibilities (as I detail in the next section), in her writings it is always matched and in fact made possible by one of destitution and erasure – the drama of losing one's selfhood. If the latter is guaranteed, the former is not. There are no certainties as to where the sparks of de-humanisation may land: "I don't know where my freedom will lead me."[44] This is why Lispector's protagonists are commonly lost or drowning in their newfound departure from limits, only barely making it out.

What is certain, G.H. tells us from the maid's room, is the violent nature of this very departure: "Dehumanization is as painful as losing everything, as losing everything, my love."[45] In that moment, "the world held no more human meaning for me, and man no longer had human meaning for me. And without that humanization and without the sentimentalization of the world – I am terrified."[46] The shedding of the myth of the self, Lispector reminds us, is always a torturous endeavour, "like casting off a still-living body [. . .] that refuses to die like the severed pieces of a lizard".[47]

This means Lispector's critique of humanism's failure to confront the fantasy of the subject cannot be read as a posthumanist argument, as she cannot see love's labour of impersonalisation in purely metaphysical terms. If she takes the human, as a posthumanist might, as necessarily spread across and constituted by the maelstrom of other-than-human life, and if she posits love as perhaps the sharpest edge of this decentring, as its most cutting expression, then she can only do so by foregrounding the existential tyranny of this confrontation with the constitutive fantasy of sovereignty. The posthumanist forgets that the 'decentring' of the subject necessarily involves the loss of access to human meaning, value, hope, compassion – all

42 John Protevi, 'Love', in *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, ed. Paul Patton and John Protevi (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), pp. 183–194.

43 Michael Hardt, 'Prison time', *Yale French Studies*, 1997, 91, p. 73.

44 Lispector, Água Viva, p. 26.

45 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 71.

46 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 67.

47 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 149.

those existential coordinates that, however fantastically, bind us to our world. This is the tyrannical fate of G.H.: triggered by love, she is unbound, falls, and keeps falling. In short, in Lispector's reading, love is actively hostile to the terrain of human affairs, undermining not only humanist dreams of selfhood, but also the posthumanist embrace of an alternative dream: that of a new collective subject, a new world, to be carved out of the dissolution into the more-than-human.[48]

The Passion is, centrally, G.H.'s tortured attempt at refusing both the humanist and the posthumanist dream; she wants to receive the loss of the fantasy, without instigating a novel subject, however collective. She aims to stay on love's path into what is exterior to humanisation. "I who am sick with the human condition. I revolt: I no longer want to be a person", says the narrator of *Água Viva*.[49] This is no easy task, as the humanist or posthumanist lure to domesticate that which escapes us, our feelings, and our recognitions, and to render alterity familiar, lurks around the corner as a way of denying it.[50] Hers is a refusal to stabilise and mortify love as precisely that which opens "onto differences we neither comprehend nor control".[51] To ward off what would (post)humanise love, G.H. needs a new strategy, not of knowing and mastering, but of experimentation – the art of staying with the impersonal.

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48 This is why we can productively read Lispector as a novelist who shares more with those scholars affiliated with 'inhumanism' than with self-proclaimed 'posthumanists'. While the inhumanist follows the posthumanist critique of humanist ideals of self-sovereignty, she is more likely to underscore the horror of confronting the impersonal vitality of the world. See, for instance: Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 2* (London: Zer0 Books, 2015); Ben Woodard, 'Mad speculation and Absolute inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti, and the weirding of philosophy', *Continent*, 2011, 1(1), pp. 3–13; Matt Graham, 'Theory (and/or) fiction: Academic writing, inhuman horror, and the new weird in Reza Negarestani's Cyclonopedia', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2024, 65(4), pp. 665–679; Nigel Clark and Katherine Yusoff, 'Geosocial formations and the Anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2017, 34(2–3), pp. 3–23. For an inhumanist critique of how posthumanist conceptions of the subject end up mirroring humanist ideals of agency, see: Thomas Dekeyser, 'Rethinking posthumanist subjectivity: Technology as ontological murder in European colonialism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2024, 41(2), pp. 73–89.

49 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 85.

50 This turns out to be a significant point of contestation between Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant in *Sex, or The Unbearable*. For Berlant, "[o]nce one acknowledges that one has not lost one's grip but never had it firmly or could have it, ever, in love or any structuring relation, then metaphors of holding and hoarding can be affectively reinvested, reconsidered, displaced, distributed, and diluted by being put next to other platforms for fantasy. This is the task of politics and theory, as well as love" (Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 82.). Lee Edelman convincingly argues that this grants cognition too strong a hold over affect, and invests too strong a hope in the potential for containing the fantasy of sovereignty and for affectively transforming it into new attachments to the world. He suggests that "the familiarity of incoherence", of the "structurally nonsovereign", and a belief in the possibilities of reinvesting it, "can become a way of denying it" (ibid. p. 9).

51 Ibid., *Sex*, p. 18.

And what am I now?

So far, this chapter has described one layer of connections between love and the impersonal, wherein love is a process of impersonalisation, the oft-dizzying annihilation of the fantasy of subjecthood that befalls many of Lispector's characters. But if, as I have suggested, this process lacks the possibility of reconstruction, then what is the 'destination' of this opening-onto alterity? If *Água Viva*'s narrator says "I no longer want to be a person", what then, if not a person or a subject, does she become?[52] What, if anything, do the ruins of the loving subject add up to? Instigating reflections on these questions, G.H. and the unnamed protagonist of *Água Viva* bring us into a second refrain of love's impersonality: the impersonal not simply as a process, but as a destination too – the treacherous terrain of what the protagonists variously call the 'living matter', the 'it', the 'is', the 'X', the 'inhuman', the 'neutral', or the 'instant'.

This conceptual collage is Lispector's response to G.H.'s question: "And what am I now?"[53] In one scene, *Água Viva*'s narrator describes the moment of leaving behind her human 'I', allowing her to near, without ever touching, "the impersonal jewel of the moment".[54] Later, when she's secretly looking at a partner, she continues, "it seems I'm reaching a higher plane of humanity. Or of unhumanity – the *it*".[55] In this moment, the life I am living is no longer that of what I call my body: "My life is used more by the earth than by me, I am so much greater than whatever I used to call 'I' that, just by having the life of the world, I would have myself."[56] This is the becoming-geological of the subject. The 'I' is now an exteriorised subject, whose vitality belongs to that of the earth, of what Lispector calls 'living matter' and 'the neutral'[57] – the vital element that binds things together into the raw glory of life. This vitality is something the 'subject' can only ever partake in but is never able to master or possess.

To G.H., the heart beating in her chest is a reminder of this participation in the fabric of life. It tells her: I am the black roach, the charcoal of the mural on the wall, the shiny floor, the crumbs of bread on the table; I am the birds, the trees, the moon outside. It tells her: "everything lives the other".[58] She no longer knows the language of separation. By annihilating the guardrails of humanisation, love not only paves the way for entry into the neutral, for tasting the 'it'; it also teaches G.H. that the urge to cut life up into manageable chunks is drenched with the desire to escape and deaden it. And so, she asks: "Is love when you don't give a

52 Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 85.
53 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 63.
54 Lispector, Água Viva, p. 4.
55 Ibid., Água Viva, p. 47, original emphasis.
56 Ibid., Água Viva, p. 127.
57 Lispector, *The Passion*, pp. 59, 101.
58 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 61.

name to the identity of things?"[59] It is, she answers, and it is love's greatest promise: the possibility to participate in the 'living matter' that precedes and exceeds us.

A certain current of mysticism fuels the longing for partaking in the absolute vitality of the earth. Indeed, Lispector has often been called a mystic and her writing as being mystical in content, style, and ethos.[60] Let us, for a moment, entertain the possibility that this judgement is correct. We could call Lispector's a vitalist mysticism, wherein a mystical union with the world, as it is, is gained by entering its liveliness. Following this logic, love would present itself as a unique experimentation in becoming enwrapped by the unnameable 'it' of things, by their breathing, raw pulse. And Lispector would be expressing an energetics of love attached to an *amor fati* in which to love is to love life.[61] Such a vitalism would easily slip into the habit, commonplace in philosophies of Life, of turning an ontological proposition (world as the immanent differentiation of Life) into an ethico-moral one: the duty to affirm the entanglement with, and enlargement of, Life. To be enamoured with Life becomes an ultimate good and to be hesitant in the face of calls for 'the affirmation of life' at best suspicious, if not corrupt.[62] For Paul Harrison, such a vitalism runs the risk of forgetting the finite, the dead, the extinct, the not-yet-living, and other dimensions of living slipping away from, consumed within, or diminishing Life. Vitalism centres Life without the ruination that makes it.

Perhaps one might be forgiven for reading a mystical vitalism into Lispector's protagonists, particularly when they speak of the loving subject as reaching the primacy of earthly vitality. But only if we understand it as a *melancholic vitalism*. The first 'melancholy' of this vitalism would be that of unsurpassable failure. With the annihilation of the subject, we develop a desire to touch the 'is', the 'neutral', and may even brush up against it, but without ever being able to grasp or contain it, let alone seamlessly integrate into it. This is why *Água Viva*'s narrator insists that love is "the impossible living of the *it*".[63] Not least, and this is the second 'melancholy', because Lispector strips vitality of its assumed generosity, its interest in and compassion for living subjects. The deep impersonality of Lispector's 'living matter' means it is imbued with a cold indifference that is hair-raising. For G.H., the roach was life looking back at her, "[b]ut its eyes were radiant and black. The eyes of a bride. Each individual eye looked like a cockroach. The fringed, dark, dustless and living eye."[64]

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59 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 85.

60 For instance, according to Fitz, Lispector's protagonists enter into a mystical quest that pushes them into a "Nirvanalike state of inner awareness". Earl E. Fitz, 'A discourse of silence: The postmodernism of Clarice Lispector', *Contemporary Literature*, 1987, 28(4), p. 422. See also: Sarah Denne, 'Possession and consumption: Clarice Lispector and the ethics of mysticism', *Literature and Theology*, 2023, 37(4), pp. 328–344.

61 On 'amor fati', see: Paul Harrison, 'After affirmation, or, being a loser: On vitalism, sacrifice, and cinders', *GeoHumanities*, 2015, 1(2), pp. 285–306.

62 Ibid., 'After affirmation', p. 285.

63 Lispector, Água Viva, p. 59, original emphasis.

64 Lispector, *The Passion*, p. 49.

This is the horror of *too much life*: the slimy eye, the ooze running out of the hard shell, her own nausea, the vertiginous speed of her heart beating, and the spinning earth. The "greatest horror" of the earth, G.H. continues, "is that it is so alive".[65] And when later she admired that "[e]verything lives the other", that she is wall, bird, trees, moon, a flux in the inexhaustible return of life, she suddenly catches herself: "But that isn't eternity, it's damnation."[66] The indifferent multiplication of life is a source less of expansivity – the exhilaration of incessant becoming – than of a painful confrontation with the inhumanity, and impersonality, of the world; the melancholy of seeing one's singularity reduced to pure neutrality.

So when G.H. speaks of love as a freedom – the release from subjective delimitation – it is only ever as a *hellish* freedom. Love is the melancholic experience of unboundedness, free from the straps of selfhood, and open to the indifferent exposure of the world.

65 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 60.
66 Ibid., *The Passion*, p. 60.

PART TWO

Love's Im/possible Futures

5 The revolutionary love plot: on love, im/possibility, and the common

Eleanor Wilkinson

There are some love stories that are stuck in an endless loop. One such story is what I am calling 'the revolutionary love plot': a tale about the politically progressive potentials of love. While there are of course many variations, many characters, many scenes, the revolutionary love plot tends to follow the same narrative arc: *from loss to redemption*. The revolutionary love plot typically opens by lamenting the way that love has been corrupted and destroyed – whether by capitalism, by commodification, by patriarchy, or by empire. These forces have tethered love to notions of property and territory, resulting in a possessive form of love that is founded on a violent and perilous 'love of the same'. Think, for example, of the ways in which nationalist and fascist movements often speak of themselves as acting in the name of love: a love for 'their' country, a love of a national 'culture', a love of whiteness,[1] or the ways in which norms around coupled and familial love have created isolated social units and have upheld patriarchal property inheritance under capitalism.[2] The revolutionary love plot seeks to rediscover the political potentials of love (*to love others, to love otherwise*); it is a story of redemption and rescue. Writers of this love plot seek to unleash the latent capacities of love, to activate the political promise of love and free it from its corrupted forms.

The revolutionary love plot is a grand and seductive tale, a fantasy that we are meant to fall in love with. We can picture ourselves as the hero, fighting for this radical vision of love and the new world it promises. As such, it is a story that is in keeping with the normative ethos that continues to dominate contemporary geographic thought: what Dekeyser et al. describe as a commitment to "rehabilitation – to making things right again", striving for a "better world" where both human and

1 Sara Ahmed, 'In the name of love', *Borderlands*, 2003, 2(3), pp. 1–41.

2 Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh and, *The Anti-social Family* (Verso, 1982).

more-than-human life can flourish.[3] The revolutionary love plot seeks to compel us to act, to get beyond political impasse, and to quash left melancholia. It comes in many forms, some overtly revolutionary and some less so: from centrist liberal calls for love found in benign political slogans such as 'love trumps hate', climate movements mobilised around love of the planet, to movements such as Occupy and the 'Arab Spring' being framed as political movements underpinned by feelings of love. Thus, as Stanley notes, love has become "tautologically cemented as the primary if not singular affect in which liberatory action might live".[4]

"How could the crisis we're facing be transformed into perhaps the greatest love story on earth?" This line is spoken in the opening to the 2012 documentary *Occupy Love*, which brings together a broad spectrum of social movements that have emerged in response to economic and environmental catastrophe; from indigenous activism around the Alberta tar sands, protests at Tahrir Square, to Occupy Wall Street: what unites these diffuse and geographically dispersed global struggles, this documentary proposes, is love. In this chapter I set out to question what is at stake in narrating these moments of rupture and resistance through a script of love. I want to open space to think not just what this radical love story makes possible, but also what it might foreclose. Perhaps this fantasy of and for revolutionary love desires too much, or perhaps it desires too little.

The focus of the chapter is on how love has been positioned as the affective foundation for diffuse political projects in common, *amor humanitas*. While this revolutionary love story may offer the optimism needed for social change, might it provide a limited affective register for conceptualising coalition building across difference? I want to think not just whether narrating liberatory struggle into a love story is desirable, but also whose desires shape this plot. To do so, I turn to the work of Lauren Berlant and Gargi Bhattacharyya, whose thinking helps interrupt the exuberant crescendo of the revolutionary love plot. Their thought, whilst still seeking alternatives to the catastrophe of the present, offers a radically different set of affective tonalities that help us sense how love might relate to the revolutionary imagination. Both thinkers make space for thinking love otherwise, beyond the neat promise of optimism and transformation. Instead, they recognise the need to attune to minor scenes of love: moments where love is unruly and inconvenient, times of lost love and heartbreak, love that fails to begin. As such, this chapter also comes into dialogue with an emergent body of work in human geography that has drawn attention to the limits of affirmationist and vitalist thought, with a turn to work that foregrounds the negative and

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3 Thomas Dekeyser, Vickie Zhang, and David Bissell, 'What should we do with bad feelings? Negative affects, impotential responses', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2024, 48(2), pp. 190–205, p. 90. See also Leila Dawney and Thomas Jellis, 'Endurance, exhaustion and the lure of redemption', *cultural geographies*, 2024, 31(2), pp. 153–166.

4 Eric Stanley, 'The affective commons: Gay shame, queer hate, and other collective feelings', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2018, 24(4), pp. 489–508, p. 499.

the abyssal.[5] It also connects closely to geographic work on 'feeling otherwise' that has explored the political importance of ambivalent affects and ambivalent modes of critique.[6]

To begin, though, let us start with the revolutionary love plot. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have written perhaps the most sustained and influential recent set of works on why we might want to resurrect an understanding of the revolutionary potentials of love. Their trilogy of works *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* serves as an allegorical fantasy of revolutionary love in common. They note, however, that this turn to love is often met with some suspicion, as "people today seem unable to understand love as a political concept".[7] As a result, they set out to "do some conceptual housecleaning . . . redefining [love] in such a way as to demonstrate its utility".[8] They seek to free love from reactionary and negative connotations. For them, to understand the political potentials of love we must free love from its corrupted forms, political love is not the egoism and possession of romantic love, it is not the transcendental force of divine love, it is not the violent saviourism found in colonial fantasies of love. Instead, to understand love as a political concept, they propose we must think of love as an immanent force.

Hardt and Negri's conceptualisation of love is derived from their reading of Spinoza; love as pleasure accompanied by an external cause: "[t]hrough love we form a relation to that cause and seek to increase and expand our joy, forming new, more powerful bodies and minds".[9] Love is not something that passively happens, or is bestowed upon us, instead it "is an action, a biopolitical event, planned and realized in common".[10] They write of "the constitutive power of love and its creation of the common", "an ontological force involved in the production of being".[11] As such, love is a force that is depicted as central to the formation of "our political projects in common and the construction of a new society".[12] For Hardt and Negri, the "creation of a new humanity is the ultimate act of love".[13] Love is

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5 David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison (eds), *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh, 'Abyssal geography', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 2023, 44(2), pp. 99–214.

6 Derek Ruez and Daniel Cockayne, 'Feeling otherwise: Ambivalent affects and the politics of critique in geography', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2021, 11(1), pp. 88–107; Jess Linz and Anna J. Secor, 'Undoing mastery: With ambivalence?', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2021, 11(1), pp. 108–111; Eleanor Wilkinson and Jason Lim, 'Life from the fragments: ambivalence, critique, and minoritarian affect', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2021, 11(1), pp. 112–116.

7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004), p. 351.

8 Ibid., *Multitude*, p. 179.

9 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 181.

10 Ibid., *Commonwealth*, p. 180.

11 Ibid., *Commonwealth*, p. 196.

12 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 352.

13 Ibid., *Multitude*, p. 356.

the immanent potential of life itself. It marks the formation of a new "singularities in common": the loving multitude.[14]

Hardt once spoke in an interview of how "in certain political actions, in certain political demonstrations – the really good ones – you do have a feeling of something really like love".[15] This small – perhaps throwaway – sentence has stuck with me ever since. What does it mean to feel "something really like love"? What does it mean to enter a space collectively shared with a multitude of unknown others, and to sense an affective atmosphere of "something really like love"? Such a statement is reliant on, first, the assurance to know what you feel in this moment, second, the sense that this joyful feeling is somehow shared. A key question then, as Berlant asks, is whether Hardt's "version of love [is] a love we would feel as love?"[16] Further, this seductive plot risks becoming coercive, impossible to refuse, due to what Paul Harrison has termed the "double yes" of affirmative thought, of the ontological and the ethical, "[t]o affirm and moreover to choose to affirm, to affirm affirmation [. . .] to judge such an affirmation as good": "for what monster would ever choose anguish over generosity, fatalism over love, the past over the future, *ressentiment* over joy?"[17]

But what might happen if we made space for monsters in the revolutionary love plot? The characters who are left in the background and fail to take centre stage, those who haunt this vitalist scene of love-as-joy, or who feel this revolutionary love story was never meant for them. What place is there for Sara Ahmed's 'affect aliens' in this plot, for those who enter out of kilter, skirt round the edges, that is if they even enter at all?[18] What kind of alternative love story might they tell?

"A feeling of something really like love"

Whose fantasy is this?

To sense an affective atmosphere as one of love may in fact be a failure to recognise what Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel have described as the "deep alienation in spaces ostensibly constituted by egalitarianism, camaraderie and solidarity".[19] In their important work on women-of-colour activists in white-dominated spaces,

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14 Hardt and Antonio, *Commonwealth*, p. 184.

15 Hardt, cited in Leonard Schwartz, 'A conversation with Michael Hardt on the politics of love', *Interval(le)s*, 2009, p. 813.

16 Lauren Berlant, 'A properly political concept of love: Three approaches in ten pages', *Cultural Anthropology*, 2011, 26(4), pp. 683–691, p. 687.

17 Paul Harrison, 'After affirmation, or, being a loser: On vitalism, sacrifice, and cinders', *GeoHumanities*, 2015, 1(2), pp. 285–306, pp. 285, 289.

18 Sara Ahmed, 'Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2010, 35(3), pp. 571–594.

19 Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel, 'The lonely activist: On being haunted', *The Sociological Review*, 2024, 72(1), pp. 58–75, p. 61.

they trace how there is often an 'emotional gap' between the desired-for fantasy of community and how this community actually operates. A stark disjuncture between the promise and the lived. So, what happens if we take part in an action or a movement but feel out of sync with the collective mood? What if we know we are meant to feel optimistic, but just cannot help but sense the tragic? Or perhaps the presumed collective mood of loving joy frustrates us, even angers us?[20] Maybe we have been disappointed by this love story too many times before: dissociation becomes our only defence. Or what if it's *all of these things*, an affective dissonance of contradictory and conflicting feelings: of joyful love, sadness, hostility, exhaustion.

Yet what if love is a concept that can actually make space for this affective dissonance? Life in the common can bring profound moments of joy, but it is fraught, disappointing, and often full of grief. *All* these moods, I propose, can all feel "really like love".

"A feeling of something really like love"

You turn up day after day, no one seems to notice
Invisible, not sure if your presence is making a difference, but still you endure.

So, what would it mean to think of love as a political concept beyond a narrow affirmationist framework of love-as-joy, to instead think of love across a multitude of different temporal frames, a multitude of scenes, from the major to the minor. Feelings of love can be joyful while hateful, euphoric but exhausting, love can burst into our lives when we least expect, or be felt as a steady attachment that endures despite-it-all. What might these alternative love plots bring to our understanding of the revolutionary imagination, and how might these alternative love stories help us attune to the incoherence, chaos, and contradictions of love? What if the political force of love is not its relation to joy, but its ambivalence? It is to this question that I now turn.

Ambivalent love

There are some love stories that we are told are not really about love at all, they are perhaps the tales that are not meant for telling, or that feel too incoherent to put into words. Moments of love that feel out of sync, shameful, even violent. Mistaken love, unrequited love, nasty love, love that breaks us. All the love stories that fail even to begin. But also mundane stories where love drifts, ebbs, and drags: frustration, inconvenience, exhaustion, but nevertheless love endures. There is little space for these unruly, inconvenient, ordinary, and incoherent loves in the

20 Eleanor Wilkinson, 'On love as an (im)properly political concept', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2017, 35(1), pp. 57–71.

revolutionary love plot: where the affective register of political love becomes narrowly equated with immanence and joy.

"A feeling of something really like love"

"I fell in love, it felt like disaster"[21]

Speaking of the heteronormative 'love plot', Berlant writes it is a "story that promises that our desire can be made coherent, that its unresolvable ambivalence can be stabilized, that its aggression can be smoothed over, and that its objects can be known".[22] Berlant's work helps us draw out how dominant scripts of love normalise and tame unruly desires, free them from destruction, aggression, disgust, and ambivalence. The revolutionary love plot offers a similar promise of coherence and stability; with just a bit of "conceptual housecleaning" we can separate out 'good' love from 'bad' love, we can take the promise of love and cast away the bad. The revolutionary love plot is a fantasy, a projection, an attachment to a promise. We can think, then, following the work of Ben Anderson, of how the revolutionary love plot itself becomes the object of our attachment: a cluster of promises, the story itself becomes the promissory object.[23] It offers us the promise of promise, of the certainty that the loving multitude will hold us. It is a fantasy that takes away the risk and unknowability of collective life. As Berlant notes, "when you're asking for social change, you want to be able to say there will be some kind of cushion when we take the leap".[24]

Yet the revolutionary love plot is not just a fantasy about creating better worlds, it is a story about our own redemption, taming unruly desires: reckoning with our own catastrophe (the failures and broken promises of who we want to be, and how we want to love). The revolutionary love plot presents a vision for love without narcissism, without possession, without a demand for reciprocity. It is a fantasy of altruism: that the revolutionary thinker can be freed from dangerous desires, domination, hate, narcissistic impulses, egoism.[25] That we can love in a way that frees us from all its destruction, all its chaos, all its unruliness.

But if love marks a profound rupture and the opening of a new society in common, there can be no assurance that what emerges will be good, that this love

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21 Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales New Skins* (Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 13.

22 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (punctum books, 2012).

23 Ben Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, 13(3), pp. 392–409.

24 Berlant, cited in Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin, '"On the risk of a new relationality": An interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt', *On the Commons*, 2009, 2(3), p. 10.

25 I'm interested here in how the revolutionary love plot of the multitude seems to be a particularly seductive tale for those who theorise love from the centre: in whiteness, in straightness, in masculinity, from the minority world: What redemption does the love plot offer?

will hold us, that it will lead to our collective flourishing. We can lose ourselves in love, but there is no guarantee of who we might become. Thus, as Berlant writes, it "is impossible to tell the difference between destructive and world-building impulses".[26] So, what then, if love continues to be unruly, inconvenient, unbearable, despite the desire to quash this ambivalence. In the revolutionary love plot love is narrated as an affective force that can rescue us from the catastrophe of the present, *but what if love itself is the catastrophe*?

After all, fantasies and scripts of love have long legitimated and continue to perpetuate suffering and injustice. Here, we could draw upon a long history of feminist psychoanalytic work on love's inextricable connection to domination, and how gendered discourses of romantic love have led to the risk of women's annihilation.[27] Or how the violence of imperialistic projects continues to be masked in the name of love, pity, and rescue. The past traumas committed under the name love continue to reverberate and impress upon the present. The violence of love emerges even within the loving multitude.

"A feeling of something really like love"

Suffocating

We can also think about the failure of love, how desire will wane, how the object of love fails to meet the promise: heartbreak, abandonment, rejection, disappointment, thus, as Berlant notes, "love is a cruelly optimistic concept".[28] The promise of love in common can offer the promise of other worlds, but it can also exhaust us, as we run into dead ends, love fails, the promise breaks. An attachment that was cherished can become a bond that burdens, it can even become a source of our oppression and subjugation. Failed attachments can become a source of disappointment, destroying our hope, shattering the promise that we once held so dear. Thus, as Anderson notes, what is needed is "a way of understanding *both* how attachments allow subjects to make and inhabit lives, *and* how power holds subjects through their attachment. The *both and* is important for the ambivalent relation this work establishes with attachment(s)."[29]

Here, I am not presenting some fatalistic vision that we are condemned to repeat these perilous incarnations of love *ad infinitum*, but that the failed, unruly, and disruptive sides of love may not so easily be wished away. But, more than this, I propose *there is much to learn from the margins*: from loves that do not fit into

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26 Berlant, 'A properly political concept of love', p. 689.

27 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (Pantheon, 1988).

28 Lauren Berlant, 'Conversation: Lauren Berlant with Dana Luciano', *Social Text Online* (2013), n.p.

29 Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment', p. 393.

dominant scripts, from moments where love fails. While we may want to condemn these corrupted and failed visions of love as 'not love', and certainly not 'political love', what is lost in the rush to crush ambivalence? What Berlant proposes, then, for thinking about the political potentials of love is:

> an affective register which recognises the relationship between the joy-giving parts and the parts that require a kind of patience with the way things do not fit. The out-of-synchness of being matters.[30]

Affirmationist fantasies that speak only of the promise of love fail to make space for this "out-of-synchness of being": moments when love does not quite connect, or tires us, or disappoints us, feels inconvenient. Or moments where the promise of love might both hold us and fail us. Thus, as Derek Ruez and Daniel Cockayne note in their reflections on the importance of ambivalence for critical thought: "[s]eeking ambivalence means [. . .] acknowledging that the concepts with which we are already familiar may have other stories to tell".[31] Ambivalence holds space, it evades certainty, it helps us become attuned to affective dissonance: it allows alternative love stories to be told. A revolutionary love plot that recognises the inherent ambivalence of love will allow us to hold together the *both and*: where the joyful promise is also the cruel disappointment, where loving attachments can also be the conditions of our subordination. Recognising the ambivalence of love helps us to unravel our own objects of attachment and scripted fantasies of political transformation. To seek ambivalence is to pause, to resist the desire to straighten the love plot into a neat crescendo of affirmation, becoming, and joy: but instead to hold space for love in all its ambiguity, in all its incoherence.

Revolutionary heartbreak

"A feeling of something really like love"

Sometimes my love feels like endless heartbreak.

There are some love stories that are stories of tragedy. I am writing this piece while trying to hold things together, writing, deleting, rewriting, giving up. The editors of the collection sign off their emails about missed deadlines 'with love', and this gentle gesture makes me feel ten times worse. I feel disillusioned with academia, with theory, with the ability to change anything through writing. There is too much noise, too much heartbreak: trans lives are under attack, rising fascism, genocide. I often find myself thinking of a line from Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* written in the aftermath of his mother's death:

30 Davis and Sarlin, 'On the risk of a new relationality', p. 11.
31 Ruez and Cockayne, 'Feeling otherwise', p. 101.

> Everything began all over again immediately: arrival of manuscripts, requests, people's stories, each person mercilessly pushing ahead his own little demand (for love, for gratitude): no sooner has she departed than the world deafens me with its continuance.[32]

Sometimes it feels like everything and everyone I love is falling apart: breakdowns, chronic depletion, ends of life. I think of all my loves struggling to endure, I think of the loves lost too soon. The world deafens me with its continuance. The love needed to try and survive in a world hostile to your very existence. At times love feels nothing more than a thin thread of hope, trying to stitch things back together whilst they slowly unravel.

"A feeling of something really like love"

The world shrinks, you become my centre, but even this love cannot hold you.

To love is often to feel helpless. At times my love feels so stretched, there are moments when it feels like there is nothing left to give. Threadbare. Love can result in a narrowing of worlds, stuckness, an inertia that can reduce our capacity to act in the public sphere. Love can diminish us, a force of depletion. What is often missing in the revolutionary love plot is a recognition of the *labour* of love, and how this labour is deeply uneven. At times the bonds of love impede our ability to expand our love beyond *this*. This narrow little world of care and survival is sometimes all love can be.

"This does not mean you cannot love your spouse, your mother, and your child. It only means that your love does not end there."[33]

If only it were so simple.

Psychic life, intimate life, political life: as if they can somehow be disentangled.

The revolutionary love plot presents a bountiful vision of love: a love without the risk of catastrophe. It offers the promise of joy, potential, becoming, with none of the bad stuff. It is a love without ambivalence, love without loss, love without end. But if we narrowly reduce love to an emergent affective force of joy, then these intimate, tender, and catastrophic everyday scenes of love are left invisible. I am interested in stories of love that rarely feel bold and world-making, as we fight to hold up those around us and ourselves. These disparate love stories are never going to become a heroic rallying cry for a revolution: they are ordinary, minor, the scenes that do not quite make the cut.

Here, there is much the revolutionary love plot could learn from the rich body of Black-feminist and decolonial-feminist work on the politics of love: a vision of

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32 Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (Hill and Wang, 1979).

33 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 351.

political love that is founded upon love-praxis, intimate relationships, the power of love as a force of collective care, and the necessity of radical self-love.[34] For as bell hooks has written: "the word love is most often defined as a noun . . .[but] we would all love better if we used it as a verb".[35] So, what could be learnt from not trying to narrowly fix love as a political concept, to do less "conceptual housecleaning" and instead to simply inhabit this mess? In doing so, we might let ourselves become better attuned to these varied and fragmented scenes of love, to let go of the fantasy of coherence.

Love can hold us up, right at the same time it wears us thin. It can open up other life-worlds and can confine us to the catastrophic everyday. It can bring us abundant joy alongside unbounded grief. The affective life of love exceeds neat divisions between affirmation and negation: the ambivalence of love means it is never either/or, it is always *yes/and*. So if we are to speak of a 'properly political' conceptualisation of love, my proposition is *to think love beyond joy, and to try hold together the messy ambivalence and incommensurability of love*. This is a political conceptualisation of love that can speak of love's inherent relation to failure and to heartbreak.

Gargi Bhattacharyya writes that "heartbreak is the class consciousness of our times".[36] In her beautiful poignant book on the revolutionary imagination, she turns not to love and joy, but to sorrow, endings, and diminishment. What if that which connects us is not a collective feeling of love, but collective heartbreak? As Bhattacharyya writes:

> Commonality in sorrow seeps out when so many other commonalities never land. Joy? That is all too often something limited. Perhaps we're too enthralled in the sensation, perhaps quietly anxious that elation cannot be shared too widely.[37]

There is so much the revolutionary love plot could learn from her work. For without love there could be no heartbreak: whether it be the loss of a lover, the breakdown of a social movement, the grief of displacement, the violence of ecocide. Heartbreak is disorientating, but it can open up shared ground. For Bhattacharyya, heartbreak is not singular but collective, but she highlights how racial capitalism exposes us to heartbreak in starkly different ways. Drawing on her personal reflections of her Bengali family, tracing histories of heartbreak and violence, writing of the "many generations of barely speakable grief" that her family

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34 Natalie Havlin, '"To live a humanity under the skin": Revolutionary love and Third World praxis in 1970s Chicana feminism', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 2015, 43(3/4), pp. 78–97; bell hooks, *All About Love* (Harper Collins, 2000); Jennifer C. Nash, 'Practicing love: Black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality', *Meridians*, 2013, 11(2), pp. 1–24; Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

35 bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

36 Gargi Bhattacharyya, *We, the Heartbroken* (Hajar Press, 2023).

37 Ibid., *We, the Heartbroken*, p. 3.

holds.[38] She also draws out how proximity to heartbreak is often deeply uncomfortable, the heartbroken appear absurd, ridiculous, grotesque: we are encouraged to get over our heartbreak. Heartbreak shatters the self, heartbreak shatters the world.

What then would the revolutionary love plot become if it was narrated not as joy, but as one of heartbreak? This story would tell a tale of how moments of love and joy are always haunted by loss and sorrow: the trepidation that this love will never be enough, or that one day this all will end. Political love can never be separated from grief and diminishment. This is not a plot that would seek to find the utility of heartbreak, or transform sadness into some sort of empowering affect via a redemptive tale that loss makes you stronger (though of course, it may). Not this, but simply a plot that would open space for us to reside with our individual and collective heartbreak: to recognise and make space for moments of dissociation, drift, and finitude. Fear of loss is something we cannot escape: heartbreak haunts every love plot.

This alternative love story would not deny that there are moments when collective love emerges, opening up a momentary crack in the world, a fleeting glimpse of our collective power. But the story would not end there (on the promise), instead it would move on to explore what happens after that moment, when loving feelings of joy reside, when social movements fall apart, when the crack that was opened violently closes.

What happens when the revolutionary love plot ends? What comes after? No one seems to want to write an ending. The final scene is left open, so we can each imagine our own happily ever after.

But what happens if things fall apart? In moments of ending or abandonment the affective common might shift from hope to despair, mourning our lost love. Usually there will still be optimism: what happened here can and will happen again, the promise that things will be different *next time* (an act of deferral that often prevents an engagement with the messiness and catastrophe of the present).

Or perhaps the ending comes too soon, and we have not even momentarily glimpsed the love we so desperately desire. What is the psychic toll of this loss, what if this pain feels unbearable? If this love fails, we might turn inwards, blaming ourselves for the failure: maybe we no longer know what we desire, lonely, on the edge of the abyss. Or we might write our own tragic love story, one of betrayal, anger, and exhaustion: the tragedy of the commons.[39]

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38 Ibid., *We, the Heartbroken*, p. 35.

39 See Catherine Eschle, 'Troubling stories of the end of Occupy: Feminist narratives of betrayal at Occupy Glasgow', *Social Movement Studies*, 2018, 17(5), pp. 524–540, for feminist accounts of the 'betrayal' felt at the end of Occupy.

There are those of us who have been heartbroken too many times.

"A feeling of something really like love"

"Losing it before it happened."[40]

Some might say that what we demand from love is impossible or not viable, but this is not the argument I am making. Such a critique fails to see that love itself is always bound up with im/possibility, and that our desires will always remain unmet. The revolutionary love plot was tragic from the outset, but the im/possibility of love is its driving force.

What would happen, therefore, if we disrupted the linear crescendo of the revolutionary love plot, to disturb its rhythms, twisting how the story ends and how it begins? What might it mean to start to tell the revolutionary love plot *backwards*; to begin not with the joyful moment of transformation, but with impossibility, with failure, and with heartbreak? Not as a way to dismiss or disparage the revolutionary love plot, but as a way to steady ourselves for the heartbreak that will follow. *Heartbreak is not a failure of love, heartbreak is our proximity to love.*

How might the tragedy of heartbreak bring us a different tale of revolutionary love? For as David Scott writes, "tragedy may offer a different lesson than revolutionary Romance does about pasts from which we have come and their relation to presents we inhabit and futures we might anticipate and hope for".[41] I propose that it is only by starting the story with heartbreak that we can better understand both the potentials and limits of what love can be. This alternative telling of the revolutionary love plot would allow space for alternative scenes and temporalities of love, helping us think about how love can sustain worlds not just at moments of rupture, or revolutionary promise, but during times of impasse, the mundane, and the chronic. Shattered fantasies, moments of unravelling, waiting: what will we ask of love in these moments of abeyance? How might love hold us together in the meantime?

Throughout this chapter I have traced how the revolutionary love plot offers us a seductive and heroic tale, a fantasy of hope and transformation. The promise that our love can build a better world. It is an attachment to the love of the promise, of a world-yet-to-come. But as I have argued, such a framing prevents us engaging with the messiness, heartbreak, and failures of the present, which are only disclosed as 'mistakes' in light of the deferred (promised) end. If we fail, we must go back and start again, to learn to love the right way, to love without corruption. It is a story that appears stuck in an endless loop: from hope, to failure, and back again,

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40 Marguerite Duras, *La Maladie de la mort/The Malady of Death* (Grove Press, 1982/1994), p. 55.

41 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004), p. 135.

to the promise that things will be different next time. But might it be possible to narrate a revolutionary love plot without crescendo or the hope of redemption? What would revolutionary love look like without a need for joyful promise, without certainty, a love without a guiding star? How, then, might the revolutionary love plot continue in the absence of such a telos? The proposition I have set out in this chapter is that an alternative love plot must make space for the inherent ambivalence, unruliness, and catastrophe of love. Such a story would open up space for a different range of affective tonalities for sensing how love might relate to the revolutionary imagination. From fleeting moments of love that we know are destined to fail. Scenes of love that are mundane, minor, cruddy, that deplete us even whilst holding the world together. The myriad forms of love that help us endure and survive the crisis of the present. All the minor love stories that fail to take centre stage, or are dismissed as not revolutionary at all.

This chapter then is a call for alternative narrations of the revolutionary love plot, not the grand heroic tale of love as rupture, transformation, and losing ourselves in love, but mundane stories of love as steady endurance, of holding space without promise. I want to demand more from love, not less. But to do this we need a multitude of revolutionary love stories, fragmented unruly tales that can hold love in all its ambiguity, in all its heartbreak.

6 A coal miner's apprenticeship: transforming industrial identity and rebuilding postindustrial worlds with love

Vickie Zhang

We're seated on the back patio of the home that Robbie shares with his partner Nicolette – Nic for short – in the small town of Kandos, located three and a half hours drive west over the Blue Mountains from Sydney. It's early autumn 2018 and twilight air is heavy and warm as their 'kids' – two happy chickens – doze quietly on the water heater nearby. It is my first time meeting the pair, in their mid-thirties, after receiving a beguiling email in response to an ad I had placed in the local newsletter:

> Hello Vickie,
>
> My name is Robbie and I was employed at Charbon Coal mine from 2007 until the closure in 2014. I live in Kandos and witnessed the impact of the mine and cement works closing.
>
> For many the mine closing had a negative impact. However for myself it had a very positive outcome.
>
> If you are still collecting research for your PhD I am more than happy to provide any information I can.
>
> Regards
>
> Robbie

Charbon Colliery is a medium-sized underground coal mine, predominantly a bord-and-pillar operation, located three kilometres down the road from where we sit. Bordered by bush, agricultural land, and the escarpments of the Great Dividing Range, the colliery aptly shares its name with the French word for coal,

charbon. Although the colliery once excavated coal for use at the neighbouring Charbon Lime Works and the closed Kandos Cement Works, in its final years most of its production was hauled by rail for export to Asia, shipped through Port Kembla. Having exhausted its viable resources after more than ninety years of operation, Charbon closed three years before my meeting with Robbie and Nic. Coming after the closure of the local cement works four years before that, Charbon was the deindustrialising region's last major employer; it was the last falling domino that turned the town of Kandos from a beneficiary of Australia's industrial sector into a casualty of its booms and busts.

Before the closure of Charbon's underground operations in 2014, Robbie was an underground coal miner – more precisely, a mining electrician. At the time of closure, he was one of around 150 people employed at Charbon across the underground and sub-contracted open-cut operations. After the closure, some of the underground workers were redeployed to another mine owned by the parent company; most, however, were laid off. When Robbie and I meet on his back patio over three years later, Robbie's life has come full circle; he has left Kandos, returned, and is working once more as a mining electrician at the redeployed coal mine. However, to extrapolate a consistent line of subjectivity across these points – to imagine Robbie at the time of closure and Robbie three years after the closure as being the same coal-mining Robbie – would be to overlook fundamental transformations that have taken place in the intervening years. Attentive to these transformations, this chapter tracks how Robbie has changed in ways that are invisible from the ostensibly continuous surface of his job description as a coal miner.

In literatures on postindustrial change, the potential for transformation in the mining subject is rarely centred. Whilst deeply concerned with transitions, transitions are couched in infrastructural, spatial, and systemic terms. For the subject, a tendency towards melancholy dominates, reflecting the memories and masculinities that undergird mining ways of life.[1] The interrupted industrial subject is suspended in the event of trauma, trapped in 'smokestack nostalgia' and living legacies of ruination.[2] Sherry Lee Linkon's influential formulation of a 'half-life'

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1 V. Zhang, 'Embodying industrial transitions: Melancholy loss, interrupted habit and transitional memory after the end of a coal mine', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2024, 50(2), e12672. K. Lahiri-Dutt, 'Bodies in/out of place: Hegemonic masculinity and kamins' motherhood in Indian coal mines', in *Gender and Masculinities* (Routledge, 2017) pp. 47–63; B. Pini and R. Mayes, 'Performing rural masculinities: A case study of diggers and dealers', in *Masculinities and Place*, ed. A. Gorman-Murray and P. Hopkins (Routledge, 2016), pp. 431–442; M. Rohse, R. Day, and D. Llewellyn, 'Towards an emotional energy geography: Attending to emotions and affects in a former coal mining community in South Wales, UK', *Geoforum*, 2020, 110, pp. 136–146; L.J. Jakobsen, 'Extractive subjectivity in a corporate coal mining site in Colombia', *Geoforum*, 2024, 148, pp. 136–146.

2 V. Walkerdine, 'Communal beingness and affect: An exploration of trauma in an ex-industrial community', *Body & Society*, 2010, 16(1), pp. 91–116, p. 113; A. Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (University of Toronto Press, 2012); T. Strangleman, '"Smokestack nostalgia," "ruin porn" or working-class obituary: The role

of deindustrialisation offers an instructive imaginary: it draws out the *endurance* of the event of loss – a drawn out, asymptotic, and inevitable movement towards decay.[3] Reframing this approach, this chapter asks, what of the *other* half of life, the half that is not life shutting down but *something else* emerging? As cultural geographer Leila Dawney argues, deindustrialising places are not just sites of ruination; they are also spaces of ordinary inhabitation, places where worlds continue to be made "through practices of making, growing, play, and care".[4] How might geographers imagine life as coming to emerge anew from these abandoned spacetimes, to follow through on their conviction that ordinary subjectivity is an inexhaustible site of potential?[5] My hunch is that Robbie's striking story of post-closure transformation offers an inviting lure for thinking through life's surprising possibilities, even – perhaps *especially* – when assumptions to the contrary dominate.

This chapter thus shifts attention from the inevitability of melancholic fates after industrial closure, towards the transformative potential that can be grasped in the surrounds of life. Love is offered as a force that can enact such a transformation – as a force that inaugurates an *apprenticeship* in becoming otherwise. Geographers have approached apprenticeship as a formalised and institutionalised practice of learning, often thought in close proximity to a broader interest in the process and effects of acquiring specific sets of skills and capacities.[6] In this chapter, I focus on an apprenticeship not as an intentional structuring of conditions leading to a specific aim (such as to replicate specific abilities or knowledges), but as a 'journeying' that magnetises the movement and contingencies of learning that compose singular paths through life.[7] In thinking about *love* as enacting an apprenticeship in the other, I draw on the understanding of apprenticeship suggested by Gilles Deleuze

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and meaning of deindustrial representation', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2013, 84, pp. 23–37; L. Meier, 'Encounters with haunted industrial workplaces and emotions of loss: Class-related senses of place within the memories of metalworkers', *cultural geographies*, 2013, 20(4), pp. 467–483; J. Emery, 'Geographies of deindustrialization and the working-class: Industrial ruination, legacies, and affect', *Geography Compass*, 2019, 13(2), e12417.

3 S.L. Linkon, *The Half-life of Deindustrialization: Working-class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

4 L. Dawney, 'Decommissioned places: Ruins, endurance and care at the end of the first nuclear age', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2020, 45(1), pp. 33–49, p. 45.

5 K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2020).

6 M. Patchett, 'Historical geographies of apprenticeship: Rethinking and retracing craft conveyance over time and place', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2017, 55, pp. 30–43; M. Patchett and J. Mann, 'Five advantages of skill', *cultural geographies*, 2018, 25(1), pp. 23–29; C. Carr and C. Gibson, 'Geographies of making: Rethinking materials and skills for volatile futures', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2016, 40(3), pp. 297–315; L. Richardson and D. Bissell, 'Geographies of digital skill', *Geoforum*, 2019, 99, pp. 278–286; T. Brown and S.S. Ali, 'Transgressive capabilities: Skill development and social disruption in rural India', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 2022, 112(8), pp. 2452–2468.

7 Patchett, 'Historical geographies of apprenticeship'.

in *Proust and Signs*.[8] Deleuze reads the narrator of Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* as being engaged in an apprenticeship to signs, structured around the disappointments, compensations, and revelations of encounters in the world.[9] Sitting in the background is therefore what Keith Ansell-Pearson calls the "overcoming of memory" shot through Deleuze's philosophy.[10] By decentring memory's place as the core of the subject and launching that subject into the sensate world, memory is resituated as but one force acting on the present.

In turning to a notion of life – and especially the trajectory of a life's loves – as apprenticeship, journeying is placed in dialogue with cultural geographers who have recently turned to 'attachments' as a fundamental to understanding what it means to live and work as a contemporary subject.[11] As a manifestation of memory, the importance placed by geographers upon attachment resonates with Lauren Berlant's claim that desire has become the "truth" of an individual – part of a "historical process" through which people "learn to identify particular aspects of themselves as their core traits".[12] It is this worlding 'truth' of the subject that Anderson spies in the space-time-stitching promises of attachment, with attachments becoming "constitutive of that subject and their sense of the continuity of world, others and self".[13] To approach attachment as identity-forming is thus to explore it as duality: as both a "structure of self-encounter and encounter with the world".[14] Identity, understood through attachments, becomes less a *position* and more a spatial *process*: a mode of manoeuvring through an uncertain world by holding on to particular forms of relation.

'Love' in this chapter encapsulates a tension between situating enduring attachments as core to identity, and an understanding of life as an unceasing apprenticeship in becoming-different. The 'paradox' of love is that what one loves is foundational to 'individuated social identity', and yet at the same time an "impulse that destabilizes people, putting them in plots beyond their control".[15] Love stabilises *and* destabilises.[16] Rather than seeing this tension as tragic, I value love precisely *for* its subverting, searching, transformative force. It is in offering *desirable destabilisation* that love manifests its ordinary powers – a force that shines all the more brightly

8 G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

9 Ibid., *Proust and Signs*, p. 3.

10 K. Ansell-Pearson, 'Deleuze and the overcoming of memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 161–174, p. 161.

11 D.G. Cockayne, 'Entrepreneurial affect: Attachment to work practice in San Francisco's digital media sector', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2016, 34(3), pp. 456–473; M. Rose, 'The question of culture in cultural geography: Latent legacies and potential futures', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(5), pp. 951–971; B. Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, 13(3), pp. 392–409.

12 L. Berlant, *Desire/Love* (punctum books, 2012), p. 17.

13 Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment', p. 8.

14 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 17.

15 Ibid., *Desire/Love*, p. 13.

16 Ibid., *Desire/Love*, p. 13.

when it continues to take place, undeterred and unassailable, amidst the destructions of structural change (economic or otherwise). Although taking on the 'composed' understanding of subjectivity offered by nonrepresentational theorists, this chapter emphasises the *durational* dimension of the subject by focusing on the shifts between different versions of self that exist across an individuated lifetime.[17] Life becomes a complex timespace in which different lines of time flow and discontinuous selves exist in series, sequence, and succession. By finding paths beyond the gravitational pull of the past through Robbie's story, this chapter, with love, offers a counterpoint to the dominant melancholic narrative of extractive industry – namely, a story in which in which endings do not foreclose life's possibilities.

* * *

We start from the start.

It was a bit of an accident, Robbie explains, how it was he found himself working as a coal miner at Charbon. He had jumped ship to mining a decade ago, in the throes of change at a previous job in Sydney at national airline Qantas, where he had worked and completed an apprenticeship in avionics straight out of high school.

When Qantas begins offshoring jobs in the early 2000s, Robbie and his colleagues sense a fast-approaching cliff. His apprenticeship was specific, he says – too specific to be easily redeployed elsewhere. Like his other colleagues, Robbie begins looking around, not sure where to go next. His family and friends join the hunt and, perhaps providentially, "mum found an ad in the local paper". It was an ad for an apprentice mining electrician at Charbon Colliery.

Robbie was hesitant to apply at first. The job was close to the small town where he grew up, and as a young man in his early twenties who had moved to the big city, returning to the country felt like regress. "I left that!", Robbie exclaims, "I drove off into the sunset!" But, he reasoned, he had always liked the idea of being an electrician – and it was not like he had many options. So, "I went, well, I'll start again."

Robbie first moves from Sydney to the town of Lithgow, two hours away on the western edge of the Blue Mountains. There, he joins a small group of apprentices at the local trade school. The rapid change is borne of necessity, but something unexpected happens.

"As soon as I got into the Lithgow area, I noticed a big change in myself", Robbie recalls. "It was just – I dunno – a moment of clarity."

"I even remember the *exact* moment when I had that bizarre sensation", Robbie continues. It was an otherwise mundane, ordinary moment. "I think it was, like, walking down the hallway", he laughs, "and I just went, hey, you know what: *this* is where I want to be."

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17 P. Simpson, 'Spacing the subject: Thinking subjectivity after non-representational theory', *Geography Compass*, 2017, 11(12), e12347.

In her book *The Weather in Proust*, Eve Sedgwick declares that "[n]o one is better than Proust at giving the sense that the true interest of a psyche, a landscape, or indeed a sentence may actually be inexhaustible".[18] Written in her final years of life, Sedgwick's book draws attention to the underexplored importance of renewal in the twentieth-century French novelist's best-known work, *In Search of Lost Time*. Sedgwick's emphasis parallels Deleuze's approach to Proust's text, which, as Ansell-Pearson writes, stands precisely in contrast to "an entire French (and not only French) tradition that traps the Proustian search in a depressive cycle of nostalgia and regression".[19] Sedgwick's interest is in how worlds are made and remade as part and parcel of everyday life. Unlike geographers who are concerned with maintenance and repair as "the main means by which the constant decay of the world is held off", Sedgwick's book is not interested in the renewal of places and processes, but of the *self*.[20]

For Sedgwick, the leitmotif of Proust's novel is the latent possibility of life to *surprise*, and the characters and encounters that make it possible to get there. Sedgwick draws out the underexplored importance of what she calls 'reincarnation': "envision[ing] an individual's lifetime as a narrative encompassing many deaths and many unrecognizable births".[21] To do so, Sedgwick emphasises an earthly dimension of Proust's mysticism: the capacity for worldly encounters to refresh bodies. In this reading, Proust's search for lost time is a journeying prompted by the embodied sensibilities of encounters. Given over to the contingencies of experience, encounters gain their capacity to reincarnate through the "transformative potential of the faculties of attention and perception".[22] This affirmation of life-as-reincarnation issues an invitation to consider the subject from an alternative perspective: rather than imagining the self as melancholically attached to the past, one might consider the self from the position of their future-self, looking back wryly on the person they once were.

* * *

Situations can turn on a dime.

Life is not just a geography of conservation or endurance, but foundationally one of contingency and openness. Social and cultural geographers have sought to rethink the 'limits of the body' beyond the sovereign individual, enfolding relations with others into the heart of what it means to be a self.[23] This understanding of an

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18 E.K. Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Duke University Press, 2012), p. 5.

19 Ansell-Pearson, 'Deleuze and the overcoming of memory', p. 173.

20 S. Graham and N. Thrift, 'Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2007, 24(3), pp. 1–25, p. 1.

21 Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, pp. 6, 7.

22 Ibid., *The Weather in Proust*, p. 4.

23 S. Abrahamsson and P. Simpson, 'The limits of the body: Boundaries, capacities, thresholds', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2011, 12(04), pp. 331–338; M. Joronen and M. Rose, 'Vulnerability and its politics: Precarity and the woundedness of power', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(6), pp. 1402–1418.

enfolded-self emphasises the worlding persistence of vulnerability to otherness: subjective life is not only experienced through familiar sensations of self-relation, but through the vicissitudes of exposure that includes experiences of shock, interruption, wonder, and more.[24] The capacity of affective intensities to generate transitions in self-relation is thus familiar to cultural geographers. Rather than imagining surprises as the result of errors of judgement and calculation – as a problem of (not enough) knowledge or "violated expectations"[25] – surprise is not a problem *of* knowledge, but rather a problem *for k*nowledge. Knowledge is put into question by surprise; surprise marks the limit of what it is possible to be sure of in a contingent and unfolding world. Rather than evidence of an erroneous subjectivity in need of correction or rehabilitation, the shock of surprise is an operator that plants the seeds of transformation. As a result, whilst the incapacity to know the future can be felt as a source of threat, terror, and trauma, surprise itself is ambivalent: "there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones".[26]

* * *

By now, we're on to our mains.

After completing his formal apprenticeship, Robbie hits the ground running at Charbon: he settles in, he buys a house. Robbie is on night-shift maintenance; his job is to maintain the machinery. Several years in, the cracks start to show.

"Despite what people say, everything is production in a coal mine", Robbie asserts, repudiating the notion that just because the dangers of mining foster a strong sense of camaraderie, mining were somehow directly about generating community spirit – an elaborate team-building exercise, rather than a multi-trillion-dollar global extractive industry.

"*You* are there to make money; the *company* is there to make money – *everyone* is there to make money", Robbie affirms.

Robbie hits the ground running, and seven years quickly pass him by. Soon, "the writing starts being on the wall" – Charbon has run out of coal. To be fair, Robbie

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24 T. Woodyer and H. Geoghegan, '(Re)enchanting geography? The nature of being critical and the character of critique in human geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2013, 37(2), pp. 195–214; L. Dawney, 'The interruption: Investigating subjectivation and affect', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2013, 31(4), pp. 628–644; A. Lapworth, 'Habit, art, and the plasticity of the subject: The ontogenetic shock of the bioart encounter', *cultural geographies*, 2015, 22(1), pp. 85–102; N. Pyyry and R. Aiava, 'Enchantment as fundamental encounter: Wonder and the radical reordering of subject/world', *cultural geographies*, 2020, 27(4), pp. 581–595.

25 D. Simandan, 'Being surprised and surprising ourselves: A geography of personal and social change', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2020, 44(1), pp. 99–118, p. 99.

26 B. Anderson, 'Security and the future: Anticipating the event of terror', *Geoforum*, 2010, 41(2), pp. 227–235; A. Amin, 'Surviving the turbulent future', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2013, 31(1), pp. 140–156; M. Rose, 'Consciousness as claiming: Practice and habit in an enigmatic world', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2018, 36(6), pp. 1120–1135; Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p. 146.

says he knew this was coming at some point. "I was told in the interview that 'we *will* be shutting.'" But his response at the time was to flippantly wave it off: that's future-Robbie's problem.

But the future is now. When the end comes, it comes quickly. After years of drilling in, the crews begin pulling out of the mine. "It's now just full extraction, it's just rip-tear-bust", and, then – all of a sudden – "we are done".

Déjà vu. Robbie starts applying for jobs, left, right, and centre. He looks all over: at other mines, fly-in fly-out work, he even applies to become an electrician on board the research and resupply ship for the Australian Antarctic Division, Australia's science programme in Antarctica. Surprised by this left turn, I ask how the latter application came about. In a parallel to his start at Charbon, Robbie's sister had sent him a newspaper cutting of a job ad, the whole family keeping an eye out for him once again.

In the end, Robbie turns out to be one of the lucky ones. Months into the known unknowns of oncoming closure, management announces that a select group of workers will be offered redeployment to another coal mine in the company's portfolio, an hour's commute away. Robbie is relieved to receive a letter to his locker confirming his place in the first batch of redeployees. Grateful for the life raft in the thin regional economy, all else falls by the wayside.

After a few months at the new mine, life's rhythms begin to settle again. But then something unexpected happens. One day, Robbie finds a voicemail on his phone. It's the Australian Antarctic Division; they'd like him to come in for an interview.

* * *

The problem raised by surprise is not practical but existential.[27] Sedgwick contrasts Proustian time with Freud's Oedipal time: the latter is based on a closed and cyclical economy of reproduction – a return of the same with its "perpetual recycling of elements, lives, positions, structures, and desires that honors the conservation of matter and energy, that operates according to law".[28] In contrast, Proust's text highlights that such systems, social or otherwise, are never truly closed, that instead of aiming at conservation and law they constantly break out of presumptions of order, constantly go "wastefully, farcically off-course".[29] What is more interesting than the question of order is thus the question of how diversions become opened up – "how open systems relate to closed ones".[30] Throwing the centre off-axis, surrounding conditions can overtake even the most ardent desires of intention and will.

The surprising encounter can engender what Berlant describes as the dispossessing duration of an affective impasse, a duration in which the "sheer impact of a thing induces a suspension of self-encounter where breathing, noticing, and not

27 Rose, 'Consciousness as claiming'.
28 Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p. 3.
29 Ibid., *The Weather in Proust*, p. 3.
30 Ibid., *The Weather in Proust*, p. 4.

knowing happen".[31] In the impasse, people move experimentally in fragmented scenes.[32] The impasse sits outside of the field of certainty, characterised by heightened sensation and "lived in excess of predictability".[33] As a "turbulence in perceived order", the impasse forces modes of sensing incompatible with habits of recognition.[34] Accordingly, the encounter doesn't just interrupt – it also *estranges*, decentring the subject from itself. Berlant describes these suspensions as the subject's chance at *something else* – a suspension that happens precisely "so that an alien concept or world can begin to be metabolized, to become different and intimate".[35]

* * *

Exposures interrupt.

The language of *order* and *disorder* feels apt for the interruption's catalytic operation, one that scrambles sense and meaning. Taking after Michel Serres, we might approach the world's primary material forces not as production and destruction, but as the decaying and disintegrating forces of entropy and the encoding and ordering conservations of negentropy.[36] Rather than shifting between being and non-being, Serres thinks existence along a spectrum from uniformity (order) to dissolution (disorder). Order only and always arises from *within* a more foundational chaos, as an impermanent flow state from within what – from another scale or at another moment – might appear as disorder. Serres thinks negativity as the disordering that interrupts and dissolves laminar flows, rather than negativity as absolute destruction.[37] As a 'parasite' – an instance of uncoded noise – interruption is the event around which new forms of order begin to emerge, compelling change and reorganisation.[38] Framed thus, the challenge of moving through the impasse becomes less about restoring the interrupted state back to a former way of being, and more about joining up the fragments of disordered worlds with the circumstances that crowd in the surrounds, allowing new forms of order to emerge.

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Robbie is invited to a two-day selection process and the intensive days there prove to be transformative. Robbie recalls with marvel his time there – the staff, the other

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31 L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 274.

32 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; A. Secor and J. Linz, 'Becoming minor', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2017, 35(4), pp. 568–573.

33 J. Linz, 'Where crises converge: The affective register of displacement in Mexico City's post-earthquake gentrification', *cultural geographies*, 2021, 28(2), pp. 285–300, p. 286.

34 Ibid., 'Where crises converge', p. 286.

35 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 274.

36 C. Watkin, *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 132; M. Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans. J. Hawkes (Clinamen Press, 2000).

37 S. Connor, 'Michel Serres' five senses', in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Routledge, 2012), pp. 318–334.

38 M. Serres, *The Parasite* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

candidates, the activities they undertake. "I went through it – trade interview was great; selection centre was amazing – and I just went 'these people are *fantastic*.'" He returns to the coal mine and slips back into work, but after the horizon-tilting experience his focus has shifted. No longer fixated by the job at hand, he spends the next weeks impatiently anticipating a return call.

Robbie is stunned when he is offered a twelve-month deployment to Mawson Station, one of Australia's three permanent research stations on Antarctica, as the electrician in the small onboard crew. "I met some of the most amazing people I have ever come across", Robbie recounts, still visibly awestruck. The vegan doctor, the hard-rock miner, the guy who worked in the gas fields, the chef who taught refugees to bake bread. After three energetic months of training, the crew set sail, spending buoyant months docked and traversing icy seas.

Somehow, though, the biggest surprise of the journey is still to come. A month into their deployment to Antarctica, Robbie receives an email out of the blue.

"Hi, my name is Nicolette, Nic for short."

Thinking it's a joke, maybe someone in the crew pulling his leg, Robbie doesn't try too hard. "I sent back an *appalling* email", he says. Nic, sitting beside him, nods in agreement.

It turns out the pair have been set up through Robbie's brother-in-law, an old colleague of Nic's – except no one remembers to tell Robbie. Nic says she was hesitant – she wasn't exactly in the mood for love – but figured there was nothing to lose. "I just thought, 'well, now I've got a pen pal in Antarctica'. That's kind of novel, isn't it?"

After the shaky start, the pair quickly start exchanging emails regularly. Robbie tells Nic of the unfolding mundanities and adventures of day-to-day life in Antarctica, and Nic tells Robbie about her new teaching job and how the kids at the school are driving her crazy. After a few months, they have their first phone conversation. When Robbie returns to Australia, they meet at the airport for the first time.

Robbie compares the feel of meeting Nic to his first move to Lithgow all those years ago, to the changes catalysed when he first trained to become an electrician at Charbon. "It was that sensation again that I hadn't had for years. And I'm going, hold on, I know this feeling. *Times are changing*."

* * *

Identity is a form that imparts legibility into a situation, carving out a field of possible action. It is "like a turtle shell out of which the subject keeps craning her/his neck to see if and where it might be possible to move".[39] Identitarian norms and forms are thus markers that secure not just a symbolic position, but also modes of self-possession and manoeuvrability. Identity responds to an uncertainty that doesn't just live in the impasse (although the "anxiety of formlessness" is heightened there); instead, uncertainty is a "potentiality [that] follows us everywhere".[40]

39 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 53.

40 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 125.

Whilst self-possession often comes in the form of a recourse to what is already known – repeating conventions through which life has already been made familiar – Berlant underscores that "the anxiety of formlessness" also "makes us awfully teachable, for a minute".[41] The heightened exposure of the impasse magnetises unanticipated signs and unfamiliar sensations, posing a tension that geographers have yet to fully explore: the idea of a conflicted subject, in which one's "intrinsic impulses conflict with one another even more drastically than they conflict with the claims of [their] environment", in which the self's primary defences are not just against the demands of external forces but towards creative yearnings that the self already has for difference.[42] In the sensate and responsive spaces of affect, the subject is not interpellated just by discursive power, but also by the desires it senses in the world, in the wake of which it is always running – 'it's not just "Hey you!", but "Wait up!"'[43]

* * *

The encounter teaches.

Sensations don't just move, they mobilise. In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze describes the narrator of Proust's novel as engaged in an apprenticeship to 'signs'.[44] Throughout the book, Deleuze distinguishes the different operation and effects of four types of signs on Proust's narrator – the worldly signs, signs of love, sensuous signs, and signs of art – and the lines of the apprenticeship they each develop. Signs gesture to feelings sensed in the wake of an encounter, emitted in the space between subject and object. Mobilised by the involuntary and the unconscious, signs are experienced as sense before their significations are *made sense of*. The sign is not mute, but rather than signifying it compels the subject to seek its possible meanings. They therefore communicate not through their content, but through the processes of learning and discovery that they set off: a "sign riots the soul, renders it perplexed, as if the encountered sign were the bearer of a problem".[45]

Compelling an apprenticeship in the signs emitted by an other; the signs of love transform. Falling in love instigates a process of individualisation in which one becomes sensitive to the other – not just *any* other, but a *singular* other in which

41 Ibid., *Cruel Optimism*, p. 125.

42 Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p. 130.

43 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 125. Here, Berlant is thinking about the surprising temporality of not only the encounter, but of self-encounter – supplementing Althusserian interpellation by power with an attention to how even one's own attachments are unknown to oneself, operating in a relationship of *Nachträglichkeit* and surprise (see L. Berlant, 'A momentary anesthesia of the heart', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2015, 28(3), pp. 273–281).

44 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*.

45 D.W. Smith, *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 92.

"a possible world unknown to us" is enwound.[46] The apprentice's search "reconstruct[s] associative series", concatenating the chains that link lines of the past with the present.[47] This process is also not immediate; it "is an apprenticeship that in simple but vital terms takes time".[48] But under the apprenticeship of love's signs, one learns. One not only learns, but, significantly, one learns before they know where they are going and before they – or anyone else – can know who they are becoming through that journeying.

By instigating an apprenticeship that commences before we know much of the other or the world we are building, love occasions a unique and fragile hope: "hope for the depth of signs in worlds that we cannot always control and cannot completely know".[49] Love thus finds hope from within the unknown. Love in this idiom is "not about recognition", but rather the "eradication of the stable and self-identical subject"; it is a process of depersonalisation.[50] This is not to say that love's apprenticeship is not without disappointments, as the enigma of an enfolded world wavers in the face of the unexpected and unknown – but even disappointment opens a moment that compels the turbulent search forward, acting as an operator of difference, a 'parasite'.[51] Whilst Deleuze can be more dismissive of love's signs, focusing on the jealousies and phantasms it can harbour, I am less prescriptive of where love can lead. Love's apprenticeship puts the productivity of love's "fundamental ruthlessness" to work, offering conduits for "new optimism" and "new narratives of possibility".[52] The depersonalising paradoxes of love's apprenticeship holds the promise of an ethics in which "difference is not merely enabled but affirmed" – not only encountered but desired.[53]

* * *

Nic is a worldly soul – a social worker, a humanitarian – and through his time overseas and his time with Nic, Robbie has developed a new outlook on life too. By the time I meet them, they are back in Kandos, Nic for the first time. Robbie is back at his redeployed job at the coal mine, the one he left to go to Antarctica. But the pair are back in Kandos not to settle down, but to uproot.

I enter Robbie and Nic's home amid renovations, as they put the final pieces together in order to sell up, to go travelling, to see where life's adventures take them.

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46 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, p. 6. The world enwound in the other is not something that already exists prior to the search; the search refers forward, to "the development of the sign in itself" through its mixing, morphing, and alteration in encounters, compelling the subject to seek its possible meanings and build worlds around signs (Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, p. 12).

47 Ibid., *Proust and Signs*, p. 36.

48 Ansell-Pearson, 'Deleuze and the overcoming of memory', p. 162.

49 T. Laurie and H. Stark, 'Love's lessons', *Angelaki*, 2017, 22(4), pp. 69–79, p. 75.

50 H. Stark, 'Deleuze and love', *Angelaki*, 2012, 17(1), pp. 99–113, p. 107.

51 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*; Serres, *The Parasite*.

52 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 43.

53 Stark, 'Deleuze and love', p. 109.

They excitedly tell me about an upcoming housesitting job, spending several months looking after a wildlife reserve in Tasmania, and I can't help but find their love infectious.

Robbie reflects on the disorientation of going back to his job as an underground coal miner after the Antarctic detour – back on night shift, back with all the old guys, even staring back into the same locker in the change rooms.

"It was like a very creepy time warp", Robbie recalls, taking him back to his life before the journey. The world seems to have come to a standstill . . . "*except* Robbie", Nic says emphatically, "all that's changed is *Robbie*".

* * *

Transitions, interruptions, crises are here, willed or not.

Berlant writes that "attachments are made not by will . . . but by an intelligence after which we are always running".[54] In writing with love, I have chosen to dwell on its mobilisations as an affective operator of transformation. Compelled by the heady signs of love – from the exhilarating interview process, to months at sea with beloved colleagues, to the return to pen pal Nic – Robbie's anchors shift, slowly reordering the contours of his self and world. Tracing the catalysing forces of Robbie's move away from self-identification as a coal miner, this chapter exists as a shrine to Robbie and Nic's reincarnating bond, retold to me by the pair over a joyful evening in a small country town. It was a love set diamond-like in relief above the quotidian anxieties sensed in many I spoke to, dotted throughout the postindustrial region. Robbie's optimism was much more than hope, if hope suggests a fragility that might still collapse into a mirage; Robbie's optimism for life, his belief in the future, was as solid as the earth into which he dug. Catching the light, the encounter urged me to seek out the operators of Robbie's trajectory, in which the exhausted terminals of the mining subject fold into a different line of becoming. Whilst Robbie's story might not be 'typical', it resonates with the truth that whilst there is no *single* story of how things become otherwise after closure, life *can* become otherwise – indeed, it must. If things must change, then how might such changes lead to a life that comes to feel like a *whole*-life again, rather than just a 'half-life'?[55] For Robbie, the catalyst was love: not just one love, but a sequence of transforming loves – from the steady care of family, to an eye-opening job, to world-expanding colleagues, to a new life shared with Nic. An ambient, inexhaustible force, love refuses the closures of ends. Love shows how there is more to find in the endless surrounds of life, always more encounters to surprise, transform, and renew.

* * *

After hours of conversation, the warm night finally draws to an end. We're saying goodbyes on the front veranda when Nic makes a final remark that catches me

54 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 125.

55 Cf. Linkon, *The Half-life of Deindustrialization*.

off-guard, forming the contradictory sign that sets me on my own search for meaning.

Despite everything, Nic muses that old Robbie would *never* have left his job if Charbon hadn't shut: "he would have kept going on and on until some *big thing* happened to him". Despite misgivings, old Robbie would never actively have given up the job, not in a million years. New Robbie, standing beside Nic at their front door, agrees.

"For us", Robbie nods, "Charbon closing was a good thing."

7 Love in times of impossibilisation: making space for Alain Badiou

Arun Saldanha

Passing by

The deafening street howled around me.
Tall, slender, in full mourning, sadness majestic,
A woman passed, with an ostentatious hand
Lifting, swaying the festoon and the hem;

Agile and noble, of statuesque leg.
Me, I drank, trembling like an extravagant,
In her eye, livid sky where brews the storm,
The sweetness that fascinates and pleasure that kills.

A flash . . . then the night! – Fugitive beauty
In whose gaze I am suddenly reborn,
Shall I see you no more till eternity?

Elsewhere, far away! too late! *never* perhaps!
For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go,
O you I could have loved, o you who understood![1]

Charles Baudelaire's famous ode to a someone he would have, could have, might have loved captures key features of how this chapter will theorise love, but it does so in some respects in a negative way. If love comes to be, it starts in the midst of a cacophonous crowd of which two suddenly *come to see* each other, if not exactly face to face then through a furtive glance, sideways, clandestine,

1 Charles Baudelaire, 'To a passerby', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Nathan Brown (Verso, 2024), p. 315.

stolen. This sort of moment has been captured in countless movies and novels. It is eminently urban. The amorous encounter is unforeseeable, immeasurable, and almost impossible to understand on sociological terms. What happens is almost nothing. There is just a flash: in this poem, a fragmentary vision of a stranger-woman. The fact that Baudelaire bathes the urban encounter in a mist of pessimism – after the look he descends back into darkness, he will see her again only after death, she was already mourning about something else, he was already drunk – heightens the significance of the almost-possible, that is, that there *might* have been love.

The use of the literary tense of the pluperfect subjunctive in the famous last line (in common usage it would be *que j'avais aimé*) explains much of its immense beauty. Both personae know very well love could have ensued, but only in a radical elsewhere. Both are completely ignorant of the paths the other is on, and it is pure intuition not empirical knowledge which stirs their love-interest. Baudelaire makes his modern reflection on the actuality of missed chances, passings-by and too-late-nesses classically *tragic* against the background of the eternal perfection of Love that possibilises *this* love. Somewhere in the grandest scheme of things, the poet and the woman do meet and consume their encounter in a passionate embrace. In an instant, this entire possible universe was glimpsed, then lost.

Badiou's theory of love requires first of all a full affirmation of the absolute *contingency* of the encounter. He would furthermore point out another important dimension of Baudelaire's poem: sexual difference. The man sitting and drinking, the woman walking. Both sad, but she is cold, tall, fair, elegant, mysterious, inaccessible, while he is just a weirdo, wishing he was special, as the Radiohead song goes, a bohemian alcoholic (*extravagant* in the sense of bizarre; *extra* + *vagari*, the one who wanders outside). The poet can see in her eyes a purple sky reflected, about to burst into storm. Yes, she makes him feel "reborn", but ultimately she brings not peace but death, she portends a "pleasure that kills". Her mourning makes her only more irresistible: Has she driven someone to death already? Raising the hem of her elaborate garments to glide more easily along the pavement shows something of a leg. This could not have been much given the dresses of those days, but more than enough for the poet to fantasize about how strong it is. Her gesture is *fastueuse* (here 'ostentatious', but could be 'sumptuous' or 'lavish'), indicating she is aware of the effect the slight lifting of her skirt will have on some eye that might catch it.

The erotic drama of this scene presents one character as 'feminine' – the one being looked at, even parading, catering to the point of view of a possible audience – and the other as 'masculine', the one looking, static, less elaborately dressed, in the location from whence looking is systematic and judgemental. The feminine form of the titular noun *passante* is lost in most translations ('passer-by'), and from the beginning we know the scene is set for erotic looking. Also, importantly, the poem's last line does not say that the woman would return the poet's affections if

their paths could align, only that she knows she would be loved. The pathos permeating Baudelaire's poetry (spleen, ennui) makes us think, in fact, that both know right away the love would turn out to be one-way.

For Badiou, that would not be love at all. Even if both 'know' love could have been attempted (a flirtatious conversation, sexual intercourse, an affair, marriage, a family – there is a wide range of meanings to the word) and a mutual glance per definition requires reciprocity, and even if women in mid-nineteenth-century Paris were also checking out the handsome *flâneurs* so celebrated in Baudelaire, in the eroticism of the looking and the musing of this poem there is no symmetry, and it would take decades of feminism to highlight the patriarchal restrictions of this visual economy. The gendering of the gaze bifurcates urban space and makes it pleasurable for men and unpleasant or dangerous and potentially lethal for women and transgender people. The latter can court sexual visuality to their advantage, as occurs most intensely in the red-light district. Yet it is characteristic of the romantic poet that he inverts the situation, locating dangerousness in femininity instead, and concluding that the pleasures of woman for man only leave him in more despair. Finally, we must note how radically *cut off* the drama is from the rest of the city. The tumult of the street ('deafening') is crucial to grasp the intensity of the moment wherein a poet notices a beautiful bourgeois woman, but only because it momentarily vanishes.

Four negative theses on love

To summarise Badiou's concept of love we can distinguish it from four dominant ideologies vying to define it:

(a) Love is not a romanticism: the Two is irreducible.
(b) Love is not a mysticism: there is no exterior intervention or support.
(c) Love is not a hedonism: it requires a courage to commit.
(d) Love is not a pessimism: it persists despite despair and obstacles.

What love *is*, for Badiou, is a "truth procedure" or a "condition for philosophy", the other three being art, politics and science. These four are facets of human existence wherein "events" occur that demand a reordering of life according to new principles, which are to be worked out in social interaction. Badiou's philosophy is emphatically about delineating not what is but what could be good, it is *prescriptive*. However, a truth cannot fall from the sky, it is immanent to a "situation", a site in (or, technically, a trajectory *through* and *out of*) a formation which had thus far been working to disallow it and anything genuinely novel to happen. He rigorously distances his system from truths themselves – philosophy only "registers" and conceptualises truths – and the methodologies of working them out have to be continually belaboured inside the four procedures. Truths lift humans out of the repetitiveness of mere living.

(a) The irreducibility of the Two

The inaccessibility of the woman in Baudelaire's poem is a classic theme in literatures, music, and poetries around love. What is desired finally in this configuration, and is often an explicit theme in the tradition of courtly love, is a complete merging between lover and loved, even if that only happens in death. Romanticism, as a tradition and more colloquially, is not a naive glorification of sensuous life, but quite pessimistic about all pleasure and beauty, as a rule noting their fleetingness and dangers.[2] The reason why tales and songs of love are so compelling is that their baseline is catastrophe. Class, blood feud, epidemic, the world ending: the more love is impossibilised by its objective situation, the more incandescence in its subjective force. As Roland Barthes wrote about so poignantly, when love does happen the feeling for the lover is one of the sublime, transcendence, eternity, but it is never not contaminated by continuous doubt and emotional entanglement.[3]

Badiou has an obsession with Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* but argues against its infatuation with the alleged death-bound nature of love. Badiou's love is not a romanticism, because it insists that a transcendence of the subject away from the concreteness of loving's difficulties does not happen.[4] To the contrary, the constant exposure of love to potential catastrophe requires of its two subjects an unspeakable dedication. In what Badiou calls the "fusional" concept of love, the ecstatic intensity experienced by lovers, not just while "making love" but in building a life together, including the tribulations of separation, makes individuals "stand outside of themselves" (the well-known etymology of *ex-stasis*). Interestingly, in depictions of love there is a strange enjoyment in narrating its impossibilities and yet also a stipulation that the lovers are transcendently intertwined. Badiou fully agrees with someone like Rumi or Baudelaire that love, as much as poetry, should be a foundational aspect of human existence. But he takes issue with the almost perverse celebrations of finitude, loss, distance, so often found therein. It seems the consummation of love as complete bliss shimmers only in some distant Platonic universe. Love, for Badiou, militates against modernity's tendencies towards melancholic narcissism but, at the same time, it does not ever smoosh two subjects together. There might well be *feelings* of profound togetherness, as if a perfect private world is stitched together through letters, travel, orgasm and endearing daily habit. What love is conceptually about, however, is not the ecstasy and the suffering, but the ongoing bifurcation two people have *chosen* to negotiate.

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2 I am emphasising a romantic reading of Baudelaire here even though he is a key figure in the shift from romanticism to modernism.

3 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1978).

4 In the following I draw from Alain Badiou, "What is love?", in *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Continuum, 2008), pp. 179–198.

This incorporeal, performative, non-affective aspect of love is crucial. If the marital vow was for J.K. Austin the paradigmatic example to explain how people "do things with words", love for Badiou is the procedure through which two bodies come to radically reconstitute themselves after having decided that they are going to literally *follow the consequences* of having fallen in love.[5] Each lover does this according to a framework they are to reinvent together at every turn of the relationship – especially the difficult turns. For Badiou, the Two create a new "world" together, but it is one of disjunction. Each lover's sense of space and time cannot but become radically reorganised:

> Once the encounter is determined in the declaration ["I love you"], whatever form this may take, the amorous experience in the strict sense begins: that of a world 'existed' by two. There'll be question of moving into an apartment, with space itself having to become a space for two. Time too, for its part, is to be a time for two: when are we going to see each other . . . and when not? Are we going on holidays together? Little by little, a series of elements of everyday life are taken up, captured, by this salience of being-two.[6]

In love, sharing spacetime means inhabiting it in two irreconcilable modes. Trying to simply please or imitate the other is per definition a recipe for disaster. Despite mirror neurons, a love-relationship is actually a division, a nonrelation. Love involves what Badiou calls "the scene of the Two" in that it requires two individual life-projects somehow aligning without ever intersecting. As a couple we are not a unity, but two subjects forever trying to forge a life together even while "love will tear us apart". Love is a stumbling-along that can be excruciatingly demanding, but is most of the time fairly boring, a good-enough sort of deal.[7]

In a straight couple under heteropatriarchy women and men experience their love-project in sharply different ways. The dominant supposition is that the woman is geared towards love as a stable reality, which includes starting a family, and that the man looks for sexual gratification and being mothered, which once depleted he will seek with another, usually younger, woman. Luckily there are many kinds of subjectivity that do not conform to these constricting stereotypes. But whatever genders and sexualities are involved, there is always a constitutive disjunction in how each deals with the demands of a relationship.

The main philosophical source for thinking this radical asymmetry in the experiences of love is Jacques Lacan, whose late anti-romantic and anti-libertarian

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5 J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Clarendon, 1962).

6 Alain Badiou with Fabien Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Polity, 2013), p. 43.

7 Badiou briefly theorises this 'limping' aspect of love, in which there can never be any dialectical resolution, in *The Immanence of Truths: Being and Event III*, trans. Susan Spitzer and Kenneth Reinhard (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 538–541.

motto was, "there is no sexual relationship". What psychoanalytic practice demonstrated for Lacan is the illusion that sex (sexual difference as well as coitus) entails some kind of complementarity wherein two kinds of beings *complete* each other. Lacan redefined human sexuality as constant separation, the opposite of what hippie culture was making it to be at the time. What attracts is not a positive being as much as something *missing* in the other. As movies love to show (especially French ones), man and woman forever do not *get* each other, especially if they fall madly in love. If Baudelaire would have found the opportunity to talk to the statuesque woman, they would not comprehend each other. For Lacanian psychoanalysis each 'side' fails to relate to the other and secure an identity for itself. Sex therefore contains no 'binary' in the sense critiqued in gender studies because we are dealing not with an oppositionality but with two completely different planes of symbolisation variously articulated in actual individuals.[8]

Love then becomes the 'compensation' for the lack of a sexual relationship. Freud already theorised love as a structure of belief and illusion that ultimately appeases infantile, basically narcissistic urges. In this way psychoanalysis retains much of the pessimism not only of mythology and the Romantics, but also of mainstream Darwinists and evolutionary psychology today, even if it validates the fact that humans cannot do without it. Badiou's departure from psychoanalysis is that, as a philosopher not clinician, he refuses to see in adult love but a "covering-up" of two failures-in-being and a botched repetition of the attachment to one's mother (or of brute competitiveness for the evolutionists). Love for Badiou is not at all fake, but the opposite, an adventure in truth that can be embarked on only reciprocally. Badiou radicalises Lacan's concept of sexual difference away from the drama of desire and objects, to theorise love as a "new experience of difference", or even as the point of view *of difference as such*. Real love is one that triumphs lastingly, sometimes painfully, over the hurdles erected by time, space, and the world.[9]

(b) There is no help from the divine, nor from the community

If love is not a romanticism, it is not a mysticism either. From a certain perspective romanticism is perhaps but a weaker and modern version of the yearning for transcendence in mystical discourse. In the atheist framework developed here, unrationalisable belief is indeed a necessary feature of existence, but it aims neither at the ineffably distant nor at the preordained. With religious ideas about romantic love, it is as if the lovers *do not trust themselves* to be true to one another. There is a demand for a higher authority, the highest authority, the earthly expression of

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8 Alenka Zupančič, *What* is *Sex?* (The MIT Press, 2017); Arun Saldanha and Hoon Song (eds), *Sexual Difference Between Psychoanalysis and Vitalism* (Routledge, 2013).

9 Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (Serpent's Tail, 2012), p. 32.

which is then found in the seeming inevitability of law, blood bonds and the sacred rites of marriage.

The apophatic definition of love is what Badiou calls "ablative". Other postwar thinkers writing against Western egocentrism like Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray tend to continue the tradition of anchoring the 'wisdom' of love in an ethics of spiritual openness. Though respect is in order for the powerful artistic legacies celebrating (which includes lamenting) the infinitudes of love, wherein the affection for another human being is always already mixed with the love for God or Nature, the phenomenology of actually-existing relationship-spaces quickly shows that these celebrate the *imaginary* involved, and barely touch upon what makes love actually persist at all. Love is radically immanent, that is, it *only* exists thanks to, and as long as, two subjects continue to vow to pull each other along on an adventure entirely peculiar to the difference between them. The marriage vow "in the presence of God" or in front of one's family or a clerk is a quintessential order-word (*mot d'ordre*), as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call the Austinian speech-act.[10] But this order-word can concomitantly create immense anxiety, especially for the bride, as captured with relish in Lars von Trier's cinema. A vow is an appeasement of what Lacan calls the Big Other. But what really matters for the love-encounter is what happens *after*, the ongoingness of tackling animosities and crises in the long term.

Hence God or the community should have no say about love. No legal bindingness or parental involvement, no shaman, imam, or therapist, not even the lovers' very best friends or children can provide solutions when the tests of love come to overshadow the scene of the Two. There is definitely no eternal harmony to the universe of which the Two of love would be an exemplification. Love is not hierophantic. Its raison d'être is only found, and found again and again, in the space-between-two. The encounter that inaugurated love does necessarily obtain a sheen of fatefulness (*it was meant to be*), concomitant with a sense of eternity and futurity (*forever and ever*). But to believe that the lovers' fortunes are guaranteed by anything exterior is already to deny the radicality of their love.

(c) The courage to commit

Given that love is the most radical process of singularisation in (non)relation to another's singularisation, it is unsurprising that two interviews with Badiou on love begin with the critique of online dating apps.[11] What is sometimes celebrated as another sexual revolution and exploration of gender options is from another

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10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'November 20, 1923: Postulate of linguistics', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

11 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*; "Clique x Alain Badiou, Part 1", interview with Mouloud Anchour, Clique TV, 16 January 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IO39uEsK2ug

angle but desperate atomised individuals spending lots of money and emotional energy generating easy profits, in effect commodifying their need for love and sex. While neoliberal capitalism's injunction to amass personal worth as measurable in likes and salary appears to work well for a minority of (already privileged) cosmopolitans, the in-built pandemics of rejections, antifeminism, narcissism, abuse, stalking, revenge porn, anxiety and ultimately loneliness point to a quite catastrophic picture for many participants.

In the discursive space of dating apps, the declarative cut of an "I love you" can appear ridiculous. The replacement of the scene of the Two by a quasi-imperative to explore momentary pleasure without exposing oneself to another's unpredictable demands on oneself fits nicely with a Deleuzian society of control wherein freedom and pleasure replace discipline and duty as central ideologies. The problem is not hedonism as such. It can happen that love ensues even if the encounter was engineered by blind algorithms in a cynical marketplace. The key ethical problem is rather that technologies of self-creation promise to make the choice of love-object entirely *safe*, convenient and calculable. The fantasy that one has a stable 'taste' in partners just like in food or music ("she is not my type", "I would never date a *p*") and the touristic attitude to finding partners according to body type and perceived attractiveness preclude the agential openness of the love-encounter. Even though there are plenty of material risks and anxieties involved, *what is avoided is existential risk*.

What makes Badiouian love exceptional is its departure from the seriality of affairs and one-night stands, without making any moral denunciation of sexual plurality. Logically, there must be *a courage to commit* if the consequences of the encounter are to endure and be endured (which will often require the negotiation of infidelities). Badiou's philosophical system since *Being and Event* has centred around a notion of being-true, following-through or bonding and is condensed in his concept of *fidelity*.[12] Fidelity is his technical term for what is required for a subject to emerge at all, in tandem with the event it declares to have happened. From his first systematic ontological treatise in 1982, *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou has emphasised that becoming-subject is beset by an affect of "anxiety" that has to be somehow transmuted into what he calls "courage".[13]

While some new to Badiou's work suspect an overconfidence in the self-constitution of revolutionary agency, the concept of fidelity is in fact fundamentally concerned with weakness, uncertainty and struggle. At first sight, fidelity appears as a throwback to conservative ideals. And there might actually be some strategic sense for left-wing thinkers like Badiou or bell hooks of finding agreement with those conservatives who lament the impossibilities of love, belief and community under neoliberal cynicism.[14] But the courage to commit summoned by and in the

12 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (Continuum, 2005).

13 Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Continuum, 2009).

14 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (Perennial, 2001).

Badiousian or Black-feminist lover does not derive from an adherence to any transcendent emblems. It is found in the exploration of mutuality despite incommensurability.

In the system of *Being and Event*, what provides consistency to the event is strictly speaking not its material intensity but the *declaration it indeed took place*. For the truth procedure this chapter is discussing, this takes the form of the first moment the phrase "I love you" is said. The audacity required for love is acutely felt in this initial symbolic act.

> Who is going to be the first who dares to say to the other, "I love you", and thereby that he or she depends on the other, to put themself in a situation of dependence and therefore of risk? Saying "I love you" in this sense is taking a risk, taking a pretty serious risk, especially if the other would say, "Well, I don't." This is obviously a catastrophe. But this is a catastrophe that must be risked.[15]

Love is not a hedonism because it is not pleasure that one commits to, but the possibility of catastrophe. If an encounter is organised for short-term pleasure, in fact, the statement "I love you" would kill the desire immediately. Love is per definition rare, because its nature is to be an upheaval requiring some time (perhaps years) to figure out its implications. What keeps it going is solely the commitment of Two to the fact it has started.

(d) Love happens

We can be brief in concluding with the final thesis, that love operates against pessimism. Against the pastiche of postmodern society, Badiou's mathematically subtended philosophy provides a defence of truth the strength of which, I think, hasn't been seen since Kant, or maybe even since Plato. *Love happens* just like uprisings, artistic genius and scientific breakthroughs. If truths indeed exist, the important thing to understand is how Badiou fully embraces the lessons of poststructuralist thought in that this "existence" of truths is exceptional, spectral and completely dependent on subjects reinventing themselves in accordance with it. Love's magnificence inheres in the confidence that the amorous subject manages to gather from nothing but the conviction that it can and should continue – not because of the pleasures or security a relationship brings, at least not primarily – but because the experience of asymmetrical difference is the site that makes us fully agents.

In its combination of desires and project-making, in its affirmation of life despite suffering and disappointment, love could be the ultimate space of individuating tests (*épreuves*, an important term in French thought). In a society

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15 "Clique x Alain Badiou", my translation.

wherein everything is calculable and the only risk-taking that is celebrated is that of the stock exchange, true love is logically going to be relegated to the impossible.

Love, revolution and scale

We are entering an era in which a stupefying overload of consumer choices coexists with ever more opportunities for technological control and reactionary identitarianisms. Badiou's international role as public intellectual has been to help reinvent the idea of communism, but how to think the jump from love to his radical politics? The impossibilisation of love seems to repeat the impossibilisation of communism at the level of the intimate. And in the inverse direction: would 'scaling' a reinvention of love qua openness to the other itself demolish capitalism? Or, inverting our scalar gaze one more time: Would the end of capitalism itself bring about true love?

Love and revolution both commence with a performative proclamation that functions incorporeally just like an order-word, the force of which derives from its existence outside of power, *against* the legalities of the state and the dominant culture. Both love and revolution have to negotiate the inescapable tensions internal difference brings, though in very different ways. Both are inundated with the question, 'What is to be done?' – in the case of love especially at those difficult points we call 'fights', in the case of political revolution whenever the older regime attempts to return, hence more or less permanently, as Trotsky said. Both love and revolution are per definition *pulled back* by a material and affective milieu intent on dissuading them: cynicism, counterrevolution, boredom. Hence, Badiou says, "at its own level, love is not necessarily any more peaceful than revolutionary politics".[16] Both have beautiful moments of self-annulment in an overall procedure marked by fighting, passion and self-sacrifice. As Badiou notes,

> I never fail to recall that love is a bloody procedure that can generate acts of violence and murder. It's comparable, from this point of view, to politics: a great number of crises, a great number of losses, and a considerable amount of suffering. Love is a creative undertaking and nothing that is creative is easy. Yet in love (as in politics), there are extraordinary moments of enthusiasm when each individual has the feeling of going beyond him- or herself and of accomplishing sensational things.[17]

Conjuring new musical sounds, writing a book, working out a mathematical hypothesis, every creative practice has likewise been compared to love.

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16 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 61.

17 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 44.

Moreover, there are many ways in which revolutionary politics is implicitly or explicitly seen to encompass the radicality of love. The definitive double biography of Karl and Jenny Marx is titled *Love and Capital*.[18] More than almost all Marxists until then, Emma Goldman saw that anticapitalist organising required at the level of personal conduct an openness to encounter and a simultaneity of affections on many fronts. For Goldman, true love is an anti-marriage ethics that corresponds to the politics that works to abolish the state: "Love, the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope, of joy, of ecstasy; love, the defier of all laws, of all conventions; love, the freest, the most powerful moulder of human destiny; how can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little State and Church-begotten weed, marriage?"[19] And there might be faint echoes of anarchists in Badiou when he says, "Ideally, politics should organize the 'withering away of the State'; it is, therefore, completely in relation with the State but in such a way that it aims at its abolition. Similarly, love should ideally organize the withering away of the family."[20]

Plenty are the stories that combine the intensities of love, of revolution and of the poetics of life. In *The Radicality of Love* Srećko Horvat reminds us of Che Guevara, such a thoroughly romanticised figure that one suspects everyone secretly wants to be a communist. A few years into the Cuban Revolution, Guevara wrote:

> At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality. Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he or she must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching. Our vanguard revolutionaries must idealize this love of the people, of the most sacred causes, and make it one and indivisible. They cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the level where ordinary people put their love into practice.[21]

The 'love' Guevara is talking about here is the love of one's country and one's people. What distinguishes the guerrilla fighter from the people they are fighting on behalf of is not only a capacity to kill in cold blood, but the unique affection for a whole collectivity that can sustain their revolutionary activity. Horvat deliberately muddles the scalar difference between sexual love and larger affective structures. He argues that the feelings and decisions around sacrifice, beauty, hardship and the awkwardness of sexuality are essential for conceptualising the possibilities as well as the beauty of the communist life. In the systematic study *The Communism*

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18 Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (Little, Brown, and Company, 2011).

19 Emma Goldman, 'Love and marriage', 1914: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1914/marriage-love.htm

20 Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, p. 50.

21 Che (Ernesto) Guevara, 'Socialism and man in Cuba', trans. Margarita Zimmermann, 1965: https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm

of Love, Richard Gilman-Opalsky goes one step further – or rather, makes a backward salto – and demonstrates that what love *is* in the Western conceptual tradition has been nothing but the yearning for and the power of the life of equality, hope and authenticity outside of oppression and the marketplace.[22] In the traditions of Black activism, too, one often sees the term 'love' applied with strong humanist and spiritual tonalities, from Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin and John and Alice Coltrane to Cornel West, bell hooks and Prince.

However, from the discussion above it has become clear that I would like to narrow the scale of love strictly to the *intersubjective*. The many affirmations of community-love, communist love and love-communism are genuine and evocative, but they make a category mistake.[23] Following Badiou, my claim is that love conceptually should be limited to the interpersonal adult Two because, as we have seen, its evental eruption, spatialities of intercourse and separation, and extremely intense reciprocity of co-subjectivation are simply not found at the scales of kin, circle of friends, ecosystem, social movement, nation, religious community, world or earth.

Of course, there can be excessive affects and sometimes difficult decisions involved in one's belonging to these other scales. Since Freud these expansions of love – from the womb to the nuclear family, all the way to geophilia – have been fruitfully interpreted as deriving phantasmatically from one's first attachments. However, these more diffuse definitions of love erase the *contingent inter-existential choice* of/in the Two. The formal horizontality of the love-relationship entails a qualitatively different kind of fidelity.

Three questions

To wrap up this chapter, three avenues for further research into the Badiousian concept of love. First, even if Badiou clearly wants to sharply distinguish the truth procedures of love, politics and art, there are tantalising moments where he himself seems to relativise scale. On the one hand, we see how the prevalent uses of the term 'love' at the scale of groups – like the weaker terms 'community', 'culture', 'tradition', 'safe space' and so on – are often sentimentalised and governmentalised, hampering the collective efforts towards confronting the increasingly catastrophic discriminatory systems of the present. Politics is about unceasing critique and antagonism, and any internal coherence needs to be strategic. So the positive affects involved can be called comradeship, friendship, dedication to the

22 Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *The Communism of Love: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Exchange-Value* (AK Press, 2020).

23 Most references to 'love' at the communal scale continue a monotheistic tradition. Christianity especially has prided itself on being 'the religion of love' even while brutally suppressing other modes of affection, not only in the cultures it colonised but in Europe itself (and these reactionary persecutory tendencies are returning with a vengeance amongst the far right).

cause and so on. Politics requires enmity, whereas lovers, however violent their bifurcation-togetherness, are on the same side.

On the other hand, Badiou has said at some points that some art forms and love can conceptually be a little like communism after all. Discussing theatre, he says at one point:

> there is, in that sense, something communist in all theatre. By 'communist' I understand that which makes the held-in-common prevail over selfishness, the collective achievement over private self-interest. While we're about it, we can also say that love is communist in that sense, if one accepts, as I do, that the real subject of a love is the becoming of the couple and not the mere satisfaction of the individuals that are its component parts. Yet another possible definition of love: minimal communism![24]

It is somewhat ironic that Horvat briefly alludes to this same moment to make his argument about Che Guevara discussed above, given Badiou would disagree that revolutionaries are driven by any 'love of the people'. But Badiou may not be contradicting himself here if we take heed of scalar asymmetry: love is minimal communism, but communism is not maximal love (and a theatre or a rave are not meso-level enlargements of love either). In the quote above, with 'communism' Badiou means something utopian, even speculative-teleological, that which we imagine collective project-making to be, instead of the militancy and difficult decisions he usually discusses under the term.

Second, the question of polyamory. Why should love be a scene of only "the Two"? Would love not become more radical still if the contingency of the encounter and the labour of fidelity is multiplied? There can be love triangles, as in the movie *Y tu mamá también*.[25] There is no reason why the Badiousian schema cannot accommodate 'opening' a relationship, since openness foregrounds precisely the ethics of negotiating spacetimes according to encounters. But polyamory is entirely different than ethical nonmonogamy, having love-relationships *in addition to* a primary one. If it is to live up to its name, polyamory entails falling in love with more than one other and the rebuilding of multiple lives simultaneously according to the demands of each. The road trip portrayed in *Y tu mamá también* is formative but does not demonstrate polyamory. If spatially contained groups like communes share long-term partners as they do resources and utopian vision (despite some of them actually leaning strongly libertarian-capitalist, Ayn Rand and L. Ron Hubbard too being advocates of free love), we could well see at least the theoretical possibility of love and communism coinciding. Yet, for Badiou, polyamory is an oxymoron. If one falls in love while already in a long-term relationship and then commits to sustaining both the prior and the new subjectivation, whether the respective partners are aware of each other or not and whether they themselves

24 Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 90.

25 Dir. Alphonso Cuarón, 2001, Producciones Anhelo.

embark on more love-adventures or not, what seems to militate against this scenario is simply the affective mess it is bound to entail given how fraught attachment tends to be. If most people cannot deal with the psychic violence and logistical demands true polyamory involves – to start with, questions around children and property – there have been many illustrious proponents of polyamory and non-monogamy on the radical left: Goldman, Charles Fourier, Friedrich Engels, Frida Kahlo. Maybe Badiou's call for a reinvention of love, if it is indeed "minimal communism", will need to overcome the traditional emphasis on *just one two*. Queer, trans, relationship-anarchist and non-anthropocentric circles are exploring whether a matrix of true love with multiple mutualities is possible. Badiou remains heteronormative, Eurocentric, perhaps stereotypically *French* in all this. Still, his emphasis on *existential radicality* remains relevant to prevent hedonism and narcissism popping in through the backdoor of otherwise strongly anticapitalist experiments in living life together.

Third, the austerity in Badiou's formalist conception of love. Clearly his post-Maoist politics, dedication to avant-garde art and mathematical-logical formalisations have often been off-putting to readers. But what is usually misunderstood is that Badiou does not condemn in some moralising way the broader ideological 'situations' from which events extricate themselves *into* love, politics, art and science (respectively, families, friends and other relationalities; socialist parties and left-wing protest movements; popular and everyday culture; the empirical sciences). The meticulousness of the *Being and Event* trilogy is precisely to lay out in detail how the consequences of an event are necessarily worked out using existing elements of the situation that it ruptures. The stringency and prescriptiveness of his concept of love does not mean Badiou is cold-hearted about affections at other scales. He has written touchingly about the death and experiences of structural racism of his stepson Olivier, whom his then-wife and comrade Cécile Winter had adopted from the Democratic Republic of Congo.[26] In the documentary on Badiou it is obvious how much affection he has for his children and ex-wife (while he is mesmerised by their photographs). Badiou says he 'loved' his two packs of cigarettes a day; he has a 'love' for Wagner; he says he now 'loves' the brother he was so long envious of, as well as his mother, though he despised her when she was alive.[27] All these affects are about love in the everyday (and Freudian) sense. They are essential in order to live. But they remain in the realm of being. The truly loving encounter pokes through mere attachment.

There is perhaps no thinker who has done more than Badiou to build an entire philosophy about commitment. Inspired by his 'master' Sartre, what has driven Badiou's whole philosophical system is the necessity of thinking the ontological

26 Alain Badiou, *Tombeau d'Oliver* (Fayard, 2020).

27 *Badiou*, directed by Goran and Rohan Kalyan (USA/Fra 2018). Available at: https://www.openculture.com/2021/02/badiou-the-first-feature-length-film.html

exception, *the subject*, that which turns anxiety into courage. What should ultimately be of relevance in Badiou's emancipatory rationalist project for geographers is the catastrophic nature of the planetary present. Our current conjecture intrinsically impossibilises genuine truth-making, and its narcissism and hedonism do this with astonishing efficacy. If there is a future for love, there must be a future for communism too.

8 "In politics, love is a stranger": Baldwin, Arendt, and the geographies of liberation

Derek Ruez[1]

In the fall of 1962, James Baldwin's 'Letter from a region in my mind' was published in the *New Yorker*. The essay grapples with Baldwin's coming of age in Harlem, shaped by the awakenings, ecstasies, and disillusionments of sexuality and religion, the suffocating constraints of anti-Black racism, and the living that persisted despite it all. The essay weaves together intersecting insights into sensuality, religion, and white supremacy as Baldwin simultaneously pursues a critique of separatist politics, advances an analysis of (racially) organised religion, diagnoses a lack of love at the heart of a white supremacist order, and ends with a call "to end the racial nightmare . . . and change the history of the world".[2] In the following year, it was republished as the anchor essay in the best-selling *The Fire Next Time*, and quickly became a landmark text which has been read by generations of people concerned with white supremacy and the white innocence that underwrites it.[3]

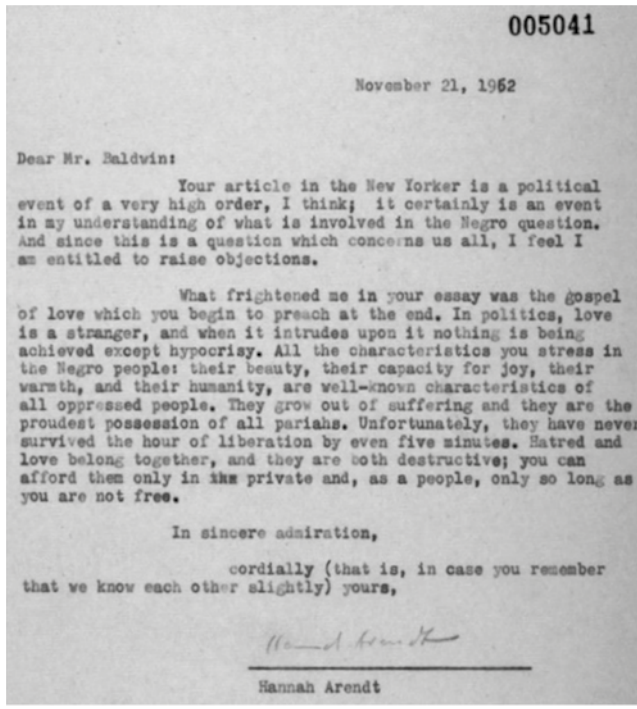
In a letter written to Baldwin by Hannah Arendt shortly after the article's publication (Figure 8.1), Arendt praised Baldwin's essay and recognised it as "a political event of a very high order".[4] Yet, Arendt uses her letter mostly to develop an objection to the role of love in Baldwin's essay. Love, Arendt asserts, has no

1 This research has been funded by the Research Council of Finland, decision number 339525.

2 James Baldwin, 'Letter from a region in my mind', *The New Yorker*, 17 November 1962, pp. 59–144, p. 144. An unpaginated version is available online: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind

3 Ben Fried, 'James Baldwin's readers: White innocence and the reception of "Letter from a region in my mind"', *African American Review*, 2022, 55(1), pp. 69–85.

4 Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Hannah Arendt Papers: https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss11056dig.020140/?sp=10&r=-0.315,0.338,1.869,0.836,0



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November 21, 1962

Dear Mr. Baldwin:

Your article in the New Yorker is a political event of a very high order, I think; it certainly is an event in my understanding of what is involved in the Negro question. And since this is a question which concerns us all, I feel I am entitled to raise objections.

What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in ihm private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.

In sincere admiration,

cordially (that is, in case you remember that we know each other slightly) yours,

Hannah Arendt

Figure 8.1 Hannah Arendt's letter to James Baldwin, 21 November 1962. (Source: Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division, Hannah Arendt Papers.)

proper place in politics. It can only be what it is in private, away from the necessary publicness of politics. Invoking love in politics produces only hypocrisy. It is bound up with hate, and either passion is destructive of the conditions for politics. Baldwin's "gospel of love" "frightened" Arendt.

Arendt's short letter is infused with conceptual material that she elaborated elsewhere in her published writing, including her previous writing on love and politics in *The Human Condition*, as well as her theorisation of the pariah developed in writing on the exclusion encountered by Jewish people in Europe.[5] In this sense, the letter's concerns might be familiar to readers of Arendt, but for readers of Baldwin's essay, the letter could appear puzzling. I would argue that love's absence is more central to the essay than its presence, both in the substantive diagnosis of the lovelessness of white supremacy and in the way that allusions and analogies to love – "*like* lovers", "a freedom that was *close* to love" – are more central than love itself. Further, Arendt's point about the characteristics of oppressed people,

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1958); Hannah Arendt, H., 'The Jew as pariah: A hidden tradition', *Jewish Social Studies*, 1944, 6(2), pp. 99–122; Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace, 1968).

re-routed through her own consideration of the pariah, ignores Baldwin's ambivalent framing of the question that Arendt confidently answers.

Revisiting Baldwin's essay, Arendt's response, and the critical literature on this (non)encounter, this chapter questions how love figures into a politics that could, as Baldwin put it, "end the racial nightmare . . . and change the history of the world".[6] Reading into what Arendt could not recognise in Baldwin, while also grappling with the force of both Arendt's and Baldwin's accounts of love, this chapter seeks to contribute to discussions about the prospects of developing an (im)properly political concept of love amidst the ongoing catastrophes of racial-colonial capitalism.[7] The chapter proceeds first by tracing the reception of this asymmetric exchange between Arendt and Baldwin among critical scholars, before I grapple with Arendt's assertion about the humanity and liberation of oppressed people as a response to Baldwin's provocative questions about the beauty of Black life. Then I turn more squarely to Arendt's and Baldwin's writing on the relationship between love and politics. There I show how, for Arendt, the strangeness of love in politics becomes something to be warded off and kept in its proper place, while for Baldwin, the strangeness of love invites an uncertain opportunity to become estranged from white supremacist orderings. In the end, I suggest that the strange *vulnerability* of love, with which we are left after reading Baldwin and Arendt, can open up important geographical insights into the paradoxes and ambivalences of our affective lives, political projects, and intellectual commitments.

Arendt's and Baldwin's (non)encounter

Since being digitised and brought to wider attention in 2006, Arendt's letter and the asymmetric exchange between Arendt and Baldwin it represents, has garnered increasing critical attention, especially among political theorists (though less so among geographers).[8] For much of this work, the letter becomes an occasion to open up some kind of dialogue across Arendt's and Baldwin's writing around the relationship of love and politics. For example, Sean Kim Butorac looks to Baldwin's writing on messy, erotic love to disrupt Arendt's relatively more pristine account of intimate love, while Martin Caver finds in Baldwin's writing a corrective to Arendt, where *feeling* can facilitate rather than cloud political

6 Baldwin, 'Letter from a region in my mind', p. 144.

7 Michael Hardt, 'For love or money', *Cultural Anthropology*, 2011, 26(4), pp. 676–682; Lauren Berlant, 'A properly political concept of love: Three approaches in ten pages', *Cultural Anthropology*, 2011, 26(4), pp. 683–691; Eleanor Wilkinson, 'On love as an (im)properly political concept', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2017, 35(1), pp. 57–71.

8 'The meaning of love in politics: A letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin', *HannahArendt.net: journal for political thinking*, 2006, 2(1). https://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/95/156

judgement.[9] These efforts to, in effect, correct or supplement Arendt's approach with Baldwin's help illuminate important aspects of both thinkers. This chapter is indebted to their careful readings in a range of ways, even as I think there is a tendency to locate Baldwin a bit too readily within the thinking of the political that is Arendt's own conceptual universe and thereby miss an opportunity to consider the limits of that terrain.

Other readers have taken a different approach to the letter, positioning it as a key moment in the explication of the anti-Black racism informing conceptualisations of the political, in Arendt and more broadly. Kathryn Gines situates Arendt's letter in the context of the anti-Black racism identifiable in a range of ways across Arendt's work, and she emphasises how the tone and asserted entitlement of the letter meet up with its refusal to engage with Baldwin's analysis on its own terms:

> Arendt commits an error that is common among those with white privilege, namely, recentering whiteness as a source of entitlement and a position from which one can raise objections – all the while erasing whiteness as a source of the very problem in question. With a paternalistic pen, Arendt congratulates Baldwin for being published in the *New Yorker* (would she also describe her publications in the *New Yorker* as "political events"?), only to assert that he does not understand politics. Arendt rejects Baldwin's analysis but expects him to acknowledge her entitlement to reframe the debate on her own terms.[10]

Gines argues that Arendt here repeats a broader pattern where white approaches to what Arendt's letter called "the Negro question" tend to ignore the source of that question in the white supremacist order – a point which is an overriding concern of Baldwin's essay. Arendt's 'error' and the reframing performed in the letter also becomes a key moment in Fred Moten's reading of Arendt, which finds in her repeated misreading of Black study and action a "self-imposed sensory deprivation" to Blackness that Arendt has the dubious distinction of raising "to a level of philosophical rigour".[11] In doing so he similarly situates the letter against the backdrop of Arendt's troubling analysis of school desegregation, her diverging reactions to white and Black student movements, and her seeming inability to recognise the Black freedom struggles of her time as instances of the inaugural and emergent politics that she otherwise celebrated. While acknowledging significant internal conflicts within her work, Moten approaches Arendt's writing, whatever else it

9 Sean Kim Butorac, 'Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the politics of love', *Political Research Quarterly*, 2018, 74(3), pp. 710–721; Martin Caver, 'A different price for the ticket: Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin on love and politics', *Polity*, 2019, 51(1), pp. 35–61.

10 Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 24.

11 Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Duke University Press, 2018), p. 138.

might also be, as part and parcel of an anti-abolitionist, counterinsurgent response to demands for Black freedom.[12]

These conversations serve as key points of departure as this chapter seeks to glide along multiple registers of love and the political through close engagement with Arendt's letter, Baldwin's essay, and some of their most relevant theorisations of love and politics from elsewhere in their published writing. My goal in this chapter is neither primarily to bring Baldwin and Arendt into a kind of commensurable dialogue nor to trace the anti-Black racism that emerges in Arendt's work, but rather to explore what a juxtaposition of Baldwin and Arendt on the question of love's relationship to politics can teach us about the geographies of affect, vulnerability, and living enmeshed as we all, differently, are in the ongoing catastrophes of racial-colonial capitalism. For this goal, Katherine McKittrick's account of Black methodologies that understand that "black life is not a static object of analysis (a black concept, a black body, a black community, a black idea) that is poised to be assessed, but rather a site (or sites) of sustained and/or provisional world-making activities that are invested in liberation" is instructive.[13] Thus, this chapter seeks not primarily to offer of a counter-assessment of Baldwin against Arendt's static object analysis, but to find out what we might be able to think and feel about love and politics, when we situate Arendt's and Baldwin's (non)encounter squarely in the context of world-making in, against, and beyond the confines of racial-colonial capitalism.

"What will happen to all that beauty then?"

Baldwin's essay offers a powerful account of the beauty of Black living in and against the violence of white supremacy and white ignorance, and it ends with an urgent call for "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" to work "to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world".[14] The stakes of this could not be higher, and yet Baldwin emphasises that change, of a kind, is likely coming either way. In the wake of that, he poses the question: "what will happen to all that beauty then?"[15] Given the central place of Baldwin's conclusion to Arendt's letter, it needs to be presented here at some length:

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12 Also see Joy James, '"All power to the people!": Hannah Arendt's theory of communicative power in a racialized democracy', in *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 249–267; Will Kujala, 'Hannah Arendt, antiracist rebellion, and the counterinsurgent logic of the social', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2023, 22(2), pp. 302–323.

13 Katherine McKittrick, 'Dear April: The aesthetics of black miscellanea', *Antipode*, 2022, 54(1), pp. 3–18, pp. 3–4.

14 Baldwin, 'Letter from a region in my mind', p. 144.

15 Ibid., 'Letter from a region in my mind, p. 144.

> When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table . . . and we talked about God's – or Allah's – vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable – a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, "Whatever goes up must come down." And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*[16]

Arendt's letter interprets the beauty that Baldwin sees in Black living within, against, and beyond white supremacy as the equivalent of what she wrote about elsewhere as the warmth and love shared among people who were pariahs. In her broader theorisation of the pariah, Arendt emphasises that this warmth and this love, however appealing, is an impoverished substitute for actual inclusion in the public, *properly* construed, from which the pariah is, by definition, cut off.[17] It is also necessarily a temporary state of affairs, lasting only as long as the oppression that is its occasion.

There is something compelling about this latter part of Arendt's point about pariahs. One can examine the track records of people who have been brought in from the cold and assimilated into the fold of racial-colonial capitalism to see how this can work. In the one moment I know of where Baldwin discusses Arendt's claim, he agrees.[18] Yet, for all that, its invocation here as a response to Baldwin's essay raises some questions. Baldwin poses, but does not answer the question, "What

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16 Ibid., 'Letter from a region in my mind, p. 144.

17 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, pp. 11–17.

18 Baldwin notes this point of agreement in an interview: "Hannah Arendt told me that the virtues I described in *The New Yorker* piece – the sensuality I was talking about, and the warmth, and the fish fries, and all that – are typical of all oppressed people. And they don't, unluckily, she said – and I think she's entirely right – survive even five minutes the end of their oppression." Fred Stanley and Louis Pratt, *Conversations with James Baldwin* (University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p. 75. This is discussed in Robert P. Crease, 'Missed connection: James Baldwin's hangup on Hannah Arendt', *Arendt Studies*, 2022, 6, pp. 29–42; and Butorac, 'Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the politics of love'.

will happen to all that beauty?" In response, Arendt asserts her analysis of the pariah as an answer to a question that it is not entirely clear she grasps. Arendt's answer positions Black liberation as one specific case of the pariah problem, and one whose resolution – liberation – seemed to be on the immediate horizon. For Baldwin, however, nothing could be less certain than the prospects of liberation. While his essay does suggest a certain inevitable comeuppance against white supremacy, he was also clear that Black liberation was itself an impossible demand: "I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand."[19] There are also reasons to question how well the situation of Black people living in a white supremacist society corresponds to Arendt's conceptualisation of the pariah. For example, Moten's reading emphasises the fugitivity of Blackness, of Blackness as "*wanted* . . . dead or alive", against the isolated exclusion of the figure of the pariah.[20]

There is, as well, a danger that Arendt's invocation of the pariah tends to emphasise the characteristics, simultaneously impoverished and exceptional, of the people being oppressed, rather than of the society doing the oppressing, when a key part of Baldwin's essay is precisely the diagnosis of white ignorance. To put it another way, while Arendt's pariah concept emphasises the impoverishing effects of being cut off, Baldwin points to how the impoverishment rebounds back onto that white order itself, whether in small moments of dehumanisation propelled by wilful ignorance and irresponsible innocence or in the broader prospect of 'historical vengeance' that haunts the essay's conclusion.

Love: "perhaps the most powerful of antipolitical human forces"?

What then of love? Moten hints (well, more than hints) that it might be Baldwin's audacity to love the beauty of Black life that confuses Arendt. Situated in the broader context of Arendt's failure to recognise the Black and anticolonial struggles of her time as moments of the emergent and inaugural politics she otherwise championed, it would be hard to argue otherwise. Yet, whatever we might be able to take from this exchange about the constraints of Arendt's vision, the juxtaposition of Baldwin's essay and Arendt's letter opens up broader questions about love and politics in the context of the catastrophes of racial-colonial capitalism.

Arendt's assertion of the necessity of separating love from politics is, on its own, hardly unique. In terms of her own work, it is part and parcel of a tendency towards conceptual boundary-drawing (for example, her tripartite division of labour, work, and action or her much critiqued distinction between the social and the political).[21]

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19 Baldwin, 'Letter from a region in my mind', p. 144.

20 Moten, *The Universal Machine*, p. 82.

21 For a geographically informed discussion of Arendt's boundary-drawing tendencies that also seeks to work through and beyond them, see Mustafa Dikeç, *Space, Politics and Aesthetics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

More broadly, the idea of separating love and politics can find broad affinities across otherwise contradictory intellectual and political positions. I would suggest that her approach carries forward within it many of these contradictions. There are echoes of the kind of liberal-patriarchal political theorising that posits the necessity of setting feelings or personal considerations aside as a normative requirement of proper politics. At the same time, there are resonances with critical approaches to love that one might find in strands of Marxist or psychoanalytic thought; for example, emphasising the limits and problems of bourgeois sentimentality or neighbourly love ethics.

While being rather strict about the borders of love and politics, Arendt's approach to love does not devalue love. Rather, it puts it up on a pedestal (out of the way, for the sake of politics as much as for love):

> For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequaled power of self-revelation and an unequaled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings, no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others . . . Love, by its very nature, is unworldly . . . it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.[22]

There are different engagements with love across Arendt's work, but the reference here is to a kind of rare love between two people, irreducible, Arendt argues, to mere romance, but which nevertheless takes the form of a heteronormative love plot, with children trailing along behind.[23] It implies a kind of unconditionality (the lack of concern with "what the loved person may be"), and a kind of passion that unites lovers in(to) themselves and against the world, as it were. In the ellipses of the extended quote above, the child makes an appearance, as "the only possibly happy ending of a love affair":

> As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can assert itself between two lovers is the child, love's own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers are now related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world. Through the child, it is as though the lovers return to the world from which their love had expelled them. But this new worldliness, the possible result and the only possibly happy ending of a love affair, is, in a sense, the end of love, which

22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 242.

23 But the tensions between love and politics remain quite similar when Arendt explores religious conceptions of love, where the unconditionality and unworldliness of God's love produces similar kinds of problems when brought into the worldly conditionality of politics (see Caver, 'A different price for the ticket').

> must either overcome the partners anew or be transformed into another mode of belonging together.[24]

Getting lost in each other before finding a way back to the world through the child – a more heteronormative love plot seems difficult to imagine.[25] Yet, the account does begin to clarify what politics must be for Arendt to understand love as antipolitical. Politics, here, depends on a space in-between people. The difficulty of love for politics, in Arendt's rendering, is that it collapses that space between the lovers and isolates the lovers as they draw in upon themselves.

Baldwin's writing can go some distance in offering a different perspective on Arendt's love plot and its attendant normativities and boundaries. The messy scenes that Baldwin's essay brings to life are not easily amenable to Arendt's boundary-drawing sensibility. Even if one agreed it would be a good idea to separate love (and hate) from politics, it is not clear how one could. From the beginning of the essay set in the Harlem of Baldwin's youth, the constraints and violence of the white political order are inescapable, and hate figures as an entirely reasonable response. Love, for Baldwin, then becomes a name simultaneously for what is absent in the white order and what is (almost) achieved in Black living with and beyond oppression:

> In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare. Perhaps we were, all of us – pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children – bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love.[26]

Indeed, taking Baldwin's essay as a whole, love appears most often as an absence (the absence of love he finds in the church, the absence of love he finds in the separatist politics of the Nation of Islam, the loveless condition of white supremacy, and so on). Even where a kind of positivity attaches to love, it is often just out of reach. Furthermore, so many of the lovers that Baldwin writes about, the fictional ones in his novels and the ones that emerge in his essays, would complicate or refuse aspects of the normative love plot implicit in Arendt's idealisation, and when Baldwin's essay invokes 'lovers', it would be a stretch to assume that their connections would be so complete that the world in-between them would be in danger of collapse.[27] Indeed in Baldwin's hands, love often magnifies or intensifies the space in-between the lovers.

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24 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 242.

25 Although see Julian Honkasalo, 'Hannah Arendt as an ally for queer politics?', *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 2014, 17(2), pp. 180–200.

26 Baldwin, 'Letter from a region in my mind, pp. 80–82.

27 Butorac, 'Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the politics of love'.

In 'Take me to the water', Baldwin reflects on his own first experience of falling in love after his move to Paris, of lying in bed with his "breathing and belching" lover. Here the relationship between love and the world gets articulated very differently:

> The world changes then, and it changes forever. Because you love one human being, you see everyone else differently than you saw them before – perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to *see* – and you are both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home – your lover's arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world.[28]

If, for Arendt, the passion of love between people collapses the distances between them and shields them from the world and its attendant politics, then, for Baldwin, love's transformative power lies precisely in the way that it brings you outside of yourself, into the arms of another – in and as the world. This is a love that renders one stronger and more vulnerable and that offers a paradoxical kind of liberation into "the glory and suffering of the world". Of course, love may also do a great many other things, rendering this, too, something of an idealisation. Yet, Baldwin's 'Letter from a region in my mind' opens up a richer sense of this glory and suffering through its attention to the absence of love in the white supremacist order and to the freedom 'close to love' achieved by Black living in and beyond it.

The politics of love amid catastrophe

Catastrophe marks Baldwin's and Arendt's work, from the terror of anti-Black racism in and beyond the United States that would push Baldwin to spend a significant part of his adult life in France, to the fascism, anti-Semitism and Holocaust that made Arendt a refugee in the United States. These catastrophes intertwine across continents, on and off the pages written by both. Their significance twists and transforms as the shifting dynamics of racialisation, assimilation, and resistance, the vagaries of Cold War politics, and the rumbling pressures and possibilities of 1968 all remade the American scene in which Baldwin and Arendt were invested, as well as their own places within it. These catastrophes reverberate into the current moment in countless ways. Love, whatever else it might be, is not a panacea that can paper over problems of politics in a general sense, much less the catastrophic histories and geographies of white supremacy and racial-colonial capitalism. In this, Arendt's hesitance about the love-politics relation could have some traction, but this can emerge as an objection to Baldwin's essay only at the cost of missing much of what is most alive there.

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28 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (Dial Press, 1972), p. 366.

Regardless of boundary-drawing attempts, love (and hate) will continue to shape and be shaped by politics in myriad ways, and it will necessarily be an important part of the affective landscapes of racial-colonial capitalism. Baldwin's work, of course, has long been important for work in Black geographies and more broadly for geographers researching white supremacy, and I think Baldwin's insistence on the vulnerability of love in and against white supremacist orderings also offers important insights for understanding the differentiated geographies of affect, sensuality, and phenomenality.[29] His *New Yorker* essay alone highlights Baldwin as a complex theorist of ambivalent attachment (and detachment).[30] His attunement to vulnerability, at once existential and violently conditioned, can also speak to ongoing conversations about vulnerability and non-sovereignty at intersections of affirmative and negative geographies.[31] For these reasons and more, Baldwin's writing seems well-situated to contribute to approaching the geographies of love through, as Eleanor Wilkinson has put it, the "messiness, ambiguities, and unruliness of affective life".[32] And, more than this, Baldwin's foregrounding of the absence of love in white supremacy brings forward the ways that the structuring principles of white supremacy impinge on ordinary love without, in every case, reducing that love to its image.[33]

This (non)encounter between Arendt and Baldwin also raises questions about the prevailing strategies of reading Arendt in geography – strategies which I have

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29 For examples of his influence in Black geographies and the geographies of white supremacy, see Willie Jamaal Wright, 'As above, so below: Anti-Black violence as environmental racism', *Antipode*, 2021, 53(3), pp. 791–809; Joshua F.J. Inwood '"It is the innocence which constitutes the crime": Political geographies of white supremacy, the construction of white innocence, and the Flint water crisis', *Geography Compass*, 2018, 12(3), pp. 1–11. In relation to the differentiated geographies of affect, sensuality, and phenomenality, see Eden Kinkaid, 'Is post-phenomenology a critical geography? Subjectivity and difference in post-phenomenological geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(2), pp. 298–316; Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, 'Affect: An ethnocentric encounter? Exploring the "universalist" imperative of emotional/affectual geographies', *Area*, 2006, 38(2), pp. 213–217.

30 Ben Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, 13(3), pp. 392–409; Daniel Cockayne and Derek Ruez, 'Inconvenience, ambivalence, and abolition: A politics of attachment and detachment in geography', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, 13(3), pp. 423–427.

31 Sage Brice, 'Geographies of vulnerability: Mapping transindividual geometries of identity and resistance', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2020, 45(3), pp. 664–677; Mikko Joronen and Mitch Rose, 'Vulnerability and its politics: Precarity and the woundedness of power', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2021, 45(6), pp. 1402–1418; Paul Harrison, 'Corporeal remains: Vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world', *Environment and Planning A*, 2008, 40(2), pp. 423–445.

32 Wilkinson, 'On love as an (im)properly political concept', p. 66.

33 On this point, Baldwin's approach to the absence of love in the white supremacist order could be productively compared to Maldonado-Torres' reading of Frantz Fanon's approach to love, where the violence of coloniality impinges on ordinary ethical life and intersubjective relations, and where the (im)possibility of love demands fighting against colonial dehumanisation. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008).

participated in – that seek to recuperate Arendt's insights into plurality, action, and democratic politics, against the grain (and with varying degrees of acknowledgement) of her categorical boundary-drawing tendencies and the anti-Black racism implicit (and explicit) in some of her analyses. There is also a different path that would precisely foreground and carefully read Arendt's more troubling tendencies for the insights such readings might offer into the intellectual infrastructure through which liberatory demands are countered, dismissed, or rendered illegible.[34] This path is also suggestive for engaging with the possibilities and problems of a political concept of love, properly or improperly construed. When Arendt suggests that, "in politics, love is a stranger", what would happen if we took her reverence for the Western tradition seriously? Instead of papering over the racism and coloniality therein, we could suggest that love, in some sense, might indeed be a stranger to *that* politics, which we could approach through Barnor Hesse's critique of the Western political, within which both traditional and critical approaches to the political tend to share a racially and colonially construed commensurability, manifested in their difficulties approaching Black struggle on its own terms.[35] Understood in that context, perhaps, the positioning of love against the Arendtian couple of politics and world could, at least, open up space for questioning the more constraining aspects of that pairing, or even for imagining a kind of love that would push towards the end the world of racial-colonial capitalism.[36]

Finally, I think that Arendt's letter can also be a reason to move with care when engaging with invocations of love, especially when they emerge from Black and anticolonial living and struggle, lest scholars risk repeating the pattern of Arendt's persisting misreading. To be sure, no one is immune from anodyne invocations of love that position it as an unproblematic solution to either the harms of the violently uneven social antagonisms of racial-colonial capitalism or to the existential challenges and vulnerabilities of living with ourselves and others. Yet invocations of love in the context of political struggle, including centrally, the struggle of living when one's living is a problem for prevailing orders, may do more and other kinds of work than are initially obvious from the outside. They may be about the resistance of loving what prevailing orders deem unlovable. They may be about

34 This approach is evident in much recent critical work on Arendt already cited, including Moten, James, Gines, and Kujala, although its influence has not yet been fully registered in geography, although see Angela Last, 'Re-reading worldliness: Hannah Arendt and the question of matter', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2017, 35(1), pp. 72–87; Anna Secor, Derek Ruez, and Daniel Cockayne, 'Love and work: Affect and ideology beyond "The Great Resignation"', *New Formations*, 2024, 112, pp. 94–112.

35 Barnor Hesse, 'Marked unmarked: Black politics and the western political', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 2011, 110(4), pp. 974–984.

36 Moten, Wright, and others also read Baldwin to come to similar conclusions: "Real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety" (James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes from a Native Son* (Dial Press, 1961), p. 117). Also see Thomas Dekeyser, 'Worldless futures: On the allure of "worlds to come"', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2023, 48(2), pp. 338–350.

demanding or creating a different kind of space in which love might make a different kind of sense. They might be about fighting dehumanisation to make something like love possible. They might be about gesturing towards another time and place, while trying to survive this one, or of feeling one's way towards, perhaps the end of a world or the beginning of another. Or maybe, as Lauren Berlant suggests, love in the context of world-making can also just be a "form of affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment".[37] But even here, there would be a lot for many of us to (un)learn. Towards this end, the strangeness of love in politics can, if nothing else, prompt us as critical scholars to reflect on our analytical habits and assumptions, and to explore other ways of relating to our concepts and our worlds.

37 Berlant, 'A properly political concept of love', p. 686.

PART THREE

Geophilia

9 The iconographic landscape and the materiality of love

Mitch Rose

> Every image is a revelation . . . of something hidden.
>
> St John of Damascus[1]

Love, sacrifice, and landscape

In his classic text *A Theory of Shopping* Daniel Miller argues that the everyday practice of purchasing needs to be understood as a sacrificial act.[2] Miller's argument begins from the assertion that those that we love and hold dear have a transcendent quality, something that cannot be touched or owned in a definite or definable manner. Our love for them is elusive and defies clear speaking or articulation. Our gifts, therefore, are not dissimilar to the sacrificial gifts given to spirits, gods, and other deities. Sacrifice, whether it be the first fruit of the harvest or our hard-earned cash, is a means of objectifying a relationship with something mysterious and infinite, bringing it into a relational economy, even as it defies such purposes. As Miller puts it, the sacrifice personifies the deity, transforming an amorphous spirit, god, or ancestor into something (or someone) that desires our gifts and is pleased by our offering. It moves a transcendent entity from what Georges Bataille called a general economy (an economy of excessive nonrelational energies which are wasteful and beyond utility), to a restricted economy where transaction and relation can be situated, calculated, and personified.[3] In Miller's terms, shopping is the "objectification of love . . . [it] transfer[s] the sense of transcendence – the goal in life that rises beyond mere living – and brings this into daily practices, where it

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1 St John of Damascene, *On Holy Images: Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption*, trans. Mary H. Allies (Alpha Edition, 2020), p. 92.

2 Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Polity Press, 1998).

3 See George Bataile, *The Accursed Share. Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1991).

is recognised as devotion".[4] In this manner, shopping engenders the *appearance* of relation. It concretises a relation that cannot be seen into a realm of visibility. The extent to which sacrifice delivers the transaction that is hoped for is not the point. The gods will always be gods, elusive, unpredictable, beyond our reach. But we sacrifice nevertheless, showing our devotion through a representational act; a ritual which if nothing else, instigates the appearance that we are in relation with something outside us.

There are three implications I want to draw from Miller's analysis. The first is that to think of shopping in this manner means to reject the idea that sacrificial objects are representations. His argument is not – to be clear – that my purchase of ice cream for my kids represents or symbolises my love. It is not a sign or message. On the contrary, the ice cream *objectifies* my love. My love for them is elusive, inscrutable, excessive, and beyond words. But its presence in material objects gives it form. The second implication is that understanding shopping as a devotional act implicitly suggests that love should not be understood through its emotional registers but through spiritual ones. We have faith in our love for another like we have faith in a deity. While the bargain is elusive and there is no guarantee, we believe nonetheless that relation is possible. This leads to the final implication, which is that both love and faith require objectification. Whether we are talking about the totems built by indigenous communities, the notion of 'the book' in the Jewish tradition, or the ring given to our beloved, love and faith rely upon some material surrogate. Material forms, in other words, are *necessary*. They transform love from an elusive inarticulate yearning to a visible gift that can be given.

The purpose of developing this connection between love, faith, and objectification is to make the point that love is already part of our geographic purview. Whether we recognise this or not, love is powerfully implicated in the constitution of our geographic world. If love relies upon objectification, then geography is one of the fundamental means by which love takes place. To illustrate this point, I focus on the cultural landscape. For too long we have conceptualised landscape as epiphenomenal: either it is an expression of sedimented ideologies (as in 'new cultural geography') or it as an effect of pre-cognitive affective processes (as in non-representational theory). The problem with both frameworks is that they do not approach landscape as something necessary. By this I mean something that is needed to allow elusive and transcendent desires to appear as part of this world. Understood in these terms, landscape offers a means to make our love (for history, identity, nation, heritage) visible, material, tangible, and real. Landscape does not *represent* our love for country or culture – it *objectifies* it. Thinking landscape in these terms brings us back to one of its earliest theoretical formulations: landscape as *icon*. Yet to see this we need to reconceptualise our understanding of icons. In Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels' book, the iconographic nature of landscape

4 Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, p. 108.

referred to its symbolic/linguistic content.[5] The landscape was an icon because it communicated specific ideas about what the nation, culture, or community stood for; the dominant ideologies which defined how society is or should be organised. But what if we used the terminology of icons in its traditional religious sense, that is, as images that make the divine visible? As Nicholas P. Constas suggests, the purpose of the icon is to facilitate "the appearance of the uncreated God within the concrete forms of the created world".[6] Understanding the iconography of landscape in these terms means approaching it not as a set of textual symbols or meanings (that is, not in terms of what messages or ideas it communicates or transmits) but as an objectification of something that denies easy visualisation. In other words, the iconography of landscape refers to its capacity to make love (of country, culture, identity, and so on) present. Landscape is what gives our love a geography.

The chapter develops this conception of landscape in three parts. First, it explores two different approaches to landscape iconography. Approach one (represented by Daniels) conceptualises landscape as representing established ideologies, while approach two (represented by James Duncan) conceptualises it as a materialisation of esoteric mythologies. The second part explores the medieval writings of St John of Damascus to better illustrate how icons transact with the invisible, and the final section develops this conception of iconography into a theory of landscape. Its central argument is that the purpose of landscape is not ideological (or even sociological) but existential. Landscape is how humans materialise their love. They are what allow the abstract fidelities we hold to appear.

The iconic landscape

The iconography of landscape is perhaps one of the most enduring ideas developed by new cultural geographers. Instead of reading landscape morphology in an indexical manner (à la the Berkeley School), landscape is conceptualised as a signifying system, a constellation of signs that are indicative of taken-for-granted presumptions, habits, and power relations. That said, the use of the term iconography served a very specific purpose. In their seminal edited collection, Cosgrove and Daniels do not engage with the history of *icons* in theology or religious studies. Rather, their interest (and the interest of most of their contributors) is on icons that symbolise the essence or character of a particular citizenry or class. In Daniels' work on woodland estates in Georgian England, for example, he explores how various approaches to estate management were debated for their capacity to visually

5 Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

6 Nicholas P Constas, 'Symeon of Thessalonike and the theology of the icon screen', in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art, Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon E.J. Gerstel (Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 164.

represent a pastoral ideal.[7] Similarly, Brian S. Osborne's work on Canadian landscape painting explores the various artistic movements that sought to capture the essence of the Canadian nation.[8] The overall theme is the search for an appropriate visual ideology. The landscape, therefore, is not so much an icon but is iconic. It is shaped into symbolic forms that situate and promote an unquestioned political ideal.

In comparison to this conception of iconography, I want to turn to the work of a different new cultural geographer working in a slightly different vein. In his study of landscape representation in the royal capital of Kandy, Duncan argues that the purpose of landscape symbology was not to inculcate ideological norms nor reinforce established hierarchies of power.[9] Rather, it was to transform a mystical story about authority into a material tableau, that is, to literalise a mythic narrative in concrete form. In this rendering, the Royal city of Kandy operated as an icon. It transacted between the invisible world of the gods and the terrestrial realm on earth. As Duncan states, the purpose of landscape was "to make the real world *like* the world of the gods [. . .] achieving this liminal state of likeness was the closest humans could approach to heaven while remaining in this world".[10]

To be clear, Duncan does not deny that the iconography of Kandy had ideological purpose. Indeed, his analysis takes shape within a highly contentious political situation. Yet the role of landscape was not iconic in the Cosgrove and Daniels sense. The king's ambition was not to symbolise divine power but to use landscape iconography to transact with it. As Duncan argues, the king's position within the Kandyan kingdom was deeply precarious, permanently challenged by a wide array of nobles and imperial authorities. The mobilisation of landscape iconography, therefore, was about affirming a relation between the king and the divine. It was not a hegemonic gesture imposing the king's will. On the contrary, it was a frail appeal: an attempt to concretise authority in imagery because it could not be realised in practice. In this sense, the landscape asserted the king's rights by objectifying its divine power in the world. While such a move was no doubt political, it relied upon the landscape's capacity to objectify the divine. My point, to be clear, is not that there is no power in the landscape or landscape representation. It is rather that all such ambitions are predicated upon the landscape's objectifying capacity.

Building off this insight, I would argue that the iconographic nature of landscape has been misconstrued. What is iconic about landscape is not its unquestioned power nor its ability to crystallise a social-ideological order in symbolic form. On

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7 Stephen Daniels, 'The political icongraphy of woodland in later Georgian England', in Cosgrove and Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape*, pp. 43–82.

8 Brian S. Osborne, 'The icongraphy of nationhood in Canadian art', in Cosgrove and Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape*, pp. 162–178.

9 James Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom*, Cambridge Human Geography (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

10 Ibid., p. 164.

the contrary, understanding the iconography of landscape means attending to the work of icons in and of themselves. As previously suggested, icons are not signs. They are not created to speak, tell a story, or send a message about what the divine wants. Rather they are created to mark a site where the divine can appear. They create a material place in the world where the invisible, immaterial, and ineffable can transact with human life. To understand this conception of iconography better, we need to know more about its history and role in Christian thought.

The work of icons

The veneration of icons was a problem for the early Christian church. The biblical prohibition of imagery was embedded in the second commandment – "thou shalt not make a graven image" – and was reinforced through numerous biblical stories, for example, the golden calf and Micah and the idol shop.[11] Yet, the use of images in the ancient world also had a long-standing legacy. It was standard practice in Roman and Byzantine times (and even more so in Pharaonic) to use statues, portraits, and other images to make political power *felt* throughout the empire. In line with pagan cosmologies of the time, images were used to make the presence of far-away gods and emperors appear in the presence of daily life.[12] It is not surprising, therefore, that the rise of Christianity would carry with it the practice of creating and venerating images of Christ and the apostles. Indeed, it was second nature to the political culture.

A movement grew during the late Byzantine Empire to banish the use of icons, culminating in the eighth-century prohibition by Emperor Leo III. In response, a number of monks and scholars emerged to defend iconography, the most famous of which was St John of Damascus. Originally a Christian bureaucrat in the Umayyad Caliphate, John retreated in his middle years to a monastery outside Jerusalem (at this point not in the Byzantine Empire) from where he wrote a number of Apologies and Treatises in defence of iconographic images. While the arguments are manifold, the key idea I want to focus on is John's position that icons are necessary for veneration. The concept of veneration is, for John, different from worship. The latter, he argues, is where one's devotion is dedicated to the object itself, for example, worshipping the wood of the cross. Such practices are tantamount to idolatry. But venerating the image was akin to love. For John, love is an impulse that must be distilled into concrete practices, kissing and caressing things that one can touch. These were the practices the Byzantine authorities abhorred. The Church did not mind priests using icons to decorate their chapels or orient their congregations. What they objected to was the fact that icons were

11 Quote from Exodus 20:3; golden calf from Exodus 32; Micah and the idol shop from Judges 17–18.

12 Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

touched, kissed, cradled, and venerated in ways that almost appeared erotic, ecstatic, and unseemly. John, however, celebrated this sensible dimension. His justification for icons was not that they would assist with prayer or focus praise. On the contrary, it was that the icon objectified the absence of divine love. It allowed humans to engage with or encounter that which is essentially invisible and thus infinitely outside all feeling: "Man has not a clear knowledge of what is invisible", he states, but "the image was devised for *greater* knowledge, and for the manifestation and popularising of secret things".[13] For John, God gave humans the capacity to create images and it is thus their obligation to use images to make love felt. Icons make love real by giving it something to touch.

The arguments John makes in this regard are multiple and far from programmatic. Yet, I would suggest that he makes at least three key points to develop this idea of veneration as a modality of love. First, he argues that love naturally and normally attaches itself to things; second, he argues that the incarnation of God in the body of Christ is the ultimate expression of this principle; and, finally, he suggests that the veneration of things does not facilitate an encounter with God but with God's mystery, that is, the fact that God is infinitely distant and mysterious. I discuss each of these ideas in more detail below.

In terms of the first point, John tells multiple stories about things (particularly clothes) being naturally associated or imbued with our love for other people – friends, family, benefactors, and so on. This is particularly pronounced in his third sermon when he states, "I have often seen lovers gazing at the loved one's garment and embracing it with eyes and mouth as if it was himself" or elsewhere, "when Jacob received Joseph's cloak [. . .] from his brothers [. . .] and he caressed it with tears as he gazed at it. He did not weep over the cloak, but considered it a way of showing his love for Joseph and of embracing him."[14] One can see that the emphasis here is twofold. First, John is emphasising how things transact our love for others. The garments are not loved in and of themselves but facilitate a love that defies speech. Second, John is emphasising that the garments are not the source of our veneration. Jacob does not weep because he loves the cloak. He weeps because he loves Joseph. Thus, John is fending off accusations of idolatry by distinguishing the veneration of objects in and of themselves and veneration for an object because it mediates love. The object is not the receptacle of our love but mediates and intensifies its presence.

This leads to the second point, which is that orienting our love to the icon recapitulates the divine act whereby God inserted love into creation. For John, this is a basic Christian principle, that is, that God expressed love for humanity by making that love human. In doing so, God essentially made Christ an image of himself. As John quotes Paul's famous line, Christ "is the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God".[15]

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13 St John of Damascene, *On Holy Images*, p. 92.

14 First quote: Ibid., *On Holy Images*, pp. 88–89. Second quote: Ibid., *On Holy Images*, p. 131.

15 Colossians 1:15.

In suggesting that Christ is himself *an icon* he is arguing that the body of Christ is analogous to the image. As such, it makes sense that it should be encountered sensibly and thus felt, kissed, and caressed. Indeed, it would be apostasy to deny that images deserve our veneration. God requires flesh. It is not simply that icons should be allowed. They are necessary for transforming the invisible, numinous, and abstract into something tangible, touchable, kissable: "in the same way do we greet images as we should embrace our children [. . .] to signify our affection".[16] To not venerate icons is to misunderstand the divine act. If God's love required the body of Christ, then it is our duty to venerate that body through sensible images.

This leads to the final point, which is a clarification of what exactly is being venerated through the image. As John repeatedly states, venerating the image is not venerating God directly. God does not reside in the image nor does God reside on the other side of the image, as if the image were a portal through which God could be found. On the contrary, what the image transacts is an encounter with mystery. As he states, "every image is a revelation of something hidden".[17] When John states that the icon was "devised for *greater* knowledge", he does not mean it allows greater knowledge of God. Rather it is greater knowledge of the fact that God is (in essence) unknowable. Later in the same treatise he states that "the image is a mirror and a puzzle".[18] While it allows us to see, it does not allow us to penetrate. The more we look to the image to find God, the more we remain puzzled. What is being venerated, therefore, is the secret of God. We praise the secret, adore the secret, kiss the secret, but we do not penetrate it or reveal it. This is why the icon is necessary. It brings us face to face not with God but with the image that keeps God hidden. It allows us to love a mystery we can never hope to understand.

To conclude this section, we can see that the icon does not capture or hold anything. It does not sublimate God or allow a relation with God to transpire. It does not represent God nor turn God into a system of meanings. What it does is mark a site where God (as mystery) can be adored, loved, venerated, and kissed *in its mysteriousness*; where the hidden secrecy of God can be made visible *as a secret*. Such a conception of icon is profoundly different than we find in new cultural geography. In the work of Cosgrove and Daniels, the iconography of landscape is designed not to mystify nor draw our attention to a secret. On the contrary, it is to crystallise (in symbolic form) an ideological power structure, that is, to present dominant social relations as natural, normal, and indicative of the world's secular reality. The iconography of landscape is thus designed to be read as corresponding to the values and structures shaping the broader ideological system. The iconography I am

16 St John of Damascene, *On Holy Images*, p. 120.

17 Ibid., *On Holy Images*, p. 92.

18 St John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth, St Vladimir's Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 62.

developing here is quite different. It is iconographic rather than iconic. It points to a secret, something that *withdraws* from reading and interpretation; something whose reality cannot be discerned. I explore this distinction more fully in the final section.

The iconographic landscape

In Jean-Luc Marion's excursus on the nature of the icon, he makes a distinction between the representational role of the icon and that of the idol.[19] Both, he argues, work to objectify the mystery of God's love; a love that Marion describes as a primordial yearning present in the silent uncrossable distance between humans and the divine. But the idol and the icon work in different ways. The former operates by standing in for divinity. The idol dazzles with its materiality and beauty, soliciting our attention through its aesthetic magnitude and structure. The idol thus covers over the divine, allowing us to transact with something secular, visible, and material in its place. In short, the idol erases the mystery. It occludes its secret. By bringing the divine down to earth – in giving it attributes and impugning it with character and desire – the idol makes the divine human. The icon, however, works to preserve the fundamental mystery of the divine. Similar to John's conception of the icon, Marion understands icons as preserving the divine's distance. The icon operates like a seal. It situates the divine behind an impenetrable veil. Thus, while it situates a relation, it is a relation of nonrelation.[20] A relation with that which denies relation, reminding us (though its imagery) of God's permanent separation.

What if we understood questions of culture and identity in similar terms? Not as divine per se but as ideas which similarly deny or defy determination. While humans are always giving names and attributes to the cultures and identities they inhabit, none of those descriptions or terminologies ever properly holds. They always miss its essence. This does not mean that there is no essence to our identity. There may indeed be. But even if that is the case, that essence is *unknowable*. It cannot be excavated or revealed. Even as we recognise different cultures all the time, we can never get to the heart of what makes one different from the next. Every explanation fails. Every determination deconstructs. And yet, it is precisely this elusive quality that demands it be represented in material forms. In the same way we express the elusive nature of love (divine or otherwise) through objects, actions, and practices, we also express the elusive nature of identity through landscape. National identity, cultural identity, ethnic identity, etc., these things operate

19 Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2002).

20 Paul Harrison, 'How shall I say it . . . ? Relating the non-relational', *Environment and Planning A*, 2007, 39(3), pp. 590–609.

like faith. We care for them, cultivate and caress them, but that love we feel requires objectification. It needs expression in material forms.[21]

Given this framework, I would suggest that landscape operates as an icon in Marion's dual sense of the term. Landscapes appear like idols. They are material representations that communicate certain ideas about what our identity is and what it stands for. They dazzle with their structure and form and allow the esoteric nature of identity to appear visible and real. And yet, the idol can never fully hide the untenable nature of those representations. Identity is always and interminably unknowable, perpetually hidden by the representations that stand in for it. Thus, while landscapes represent culture, those representations can never properly hold. They have no power beyond the power it takes to build them. They do not impose themselves on consciousness. They do not stamp themselves onto our subjectivity. Landscapes are feeble attempts to name something that perpetually escapes those names. Yet, our identity would be nothing (would be an empty elusive idea) if it did not transpire materially and visibly in the world. Landscapes, therefore, are also icons. While they may attempt to erase the essential mystery of identity through their material form, that mystery always shines through. This is why landscapes are contested. Their idol-like presence cannot erase their fundamental indeterminacy.

In many ways this conception of landscape does not – at first blush – sound radically different from the theories proposed by new cultural geographers. Yet while a full elaboration of this conception of landscape will need to wait for a longer discussion, we can, for the moment, point to three key distinctions. First, iconographic landscapes mark, rather than represent, identity; second, iconographic landscapes are sustained through the dissemination (rather than the concentration) of meaning; and, finally, the power of landscape resides in its capacity to anchor (rather than construct) diverse imaginations of its role. I talk about each of these in turn.

To say that landscape is a marker is to draw attention to the purpose of landscape. As already suggested, landscape is not an expression or effect of something prior. Rather, it is how various modalities of attachment (our love and faith in nation, culture, community, etc.) are made visible. While there are no doubt many ways to express our identity (humans discourse endlessly about what it means to be 'an American', 'a Muslim', 'a progressive', and so on), landscape is more than just words. Through their basic materiality (through the simple fact that they can be seen) landscapes transform our diverse conceptions of love and faith into a physical reality. It gives them a place in the world. This is what I mean when I say landscape is necessary. When landscape is viewed as a representation it is not necessary. It simply reflects something already present in the socio-ideological order.

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21 This is an argument I develop in Mitch Rose, *Dreams of Presence: A Geographical Theory of Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2024).

But as markers landscapes are necessary. Our love does not seem real until it is marked, that is, until it has some kind of *phenomenality* (an engagement ring, a wedding photo, a family home). Such materialities do not define or represent our love but make it appear in the world. The same holds for landscape. Identity has no definition (no clear determination or nature) until it is marked, that is, until it is made visible through monuments, buildings, and other materialities. Landscapes are thus necessary because they situate a site where these abstractions – these powerful but elusive attachments – can appear. This leads to the second distinction.

Landscapes exist by virtue of the dissemination – rather than the restriction – of meaning. While historically landscape was conceptualised as something that imposed meaning, the landscape (as marker) does not work in this manner. If anything, it works through the propagation of meaning. To understand this, we need to recognise that every struggle over landscape is an act of love. The more subjects struggle over the landscape's symbolism or meaning, the more secure that landscape is in the world. An example can be drawn from my work on heritage landscapes in Egypt. Over the last twenty years I have researched various social and political struggles over the development, preservation, and representation of the Giza plateau, the site of the three largest Egyptian pyramids and the Sphinx. While these debates in the press, public, and various government ministries are intense, they do not work to undermine the landscape or somehow weaken its integrity. On the contrary, the more Egyptians argue over landscape, the more their love is affirmed. This is the magic of icons. It is by giving love (for country, history, culture, religion, and so on) a visible site that the landscape sustains these attachments in all their diversity. The landscape does not impose a singular definition of Egyptian culture, heritage, or civilisation but provides a place where love for Egypt (in all its diverse manifestations) can gather.

This leads to the final distinction, which concerns how we understand the power of landscape. It could be argued that conceptualising landscape as icon depoliticises landscape or minimises the significance of symbolic struggle. To be clear, landscapes can (and often do) reflect the desires of hegemonic agents or other institutional actors. Yet, this is not to say that this makes the landscape powerful. If we measure the power of landscape in terms of its capacity to be stable, then powerful landscapes are those that gather the widest diversity of attachments. Take for example Benedict Anderson's discussion of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.[22] As Anderson suggests, what makes this landscape resonant as a national symbol is precisely the fact that it does not define the nation. It does not impose a particular interpretation of what the nation stands for nor represent the nation's unique place in history. On the contrary, the monument's power resides in its capacity to anchor love – love for nation itself rather than what the nation means. Thus, it is by gathering diverse forms of love (and holding them together) that the

22 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

nation (as an abstract idea) appears visible, present, and real. This is a very different conception of landscape power. Rather than understanding power in terms of how it imposes, power here is thought in terms of its capacity to objectify – to make an abstract idea or feeling (love) appear as a present and abiding force.

Taken together we can see how an iconographic approach to landscape reorients our conception of what the landscape is and how it works. Rather than conceptualising landscape as epiphenomenal to social relations, I have tried to illustrate how it is fundamental. Subjects, in short, need landscape. It is only through the practice of objectification that we can make that which matters – that which we love, desire, and need – visible, present, and real in the world. Geography, in short, is fundamental to how subjects understand themselves and their world. While geographers have a long history of proclaiming the importance of geographic concepts – space, place, landscape, and so on – they rarely conceptualise the spatiality of our world as fundamental. The aim of this chapter has been to take some preliminary steps to illustrate geography's fundamental role in the constitution of our social world. If we understand dynamics such as identity, culture, and meaning in terms of love, then we need to also understand that geography does not simply reflect these things. On the contrary, it is what allows such needs and desires to be visible. Geography is fundamental. It is what allows our love (in all its various manifestations) to take place.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to illustrate the fundamental relationship between geography and love. If we understand identity as something we, as human subjects, care about, then we need to recognise the fundamental role that geography plays in this process. It is interesting that we rarely think about identity as something we love. More often it is thought of as something constructed or performed. But why not loved? To suggest such a thing would be to imply that we must somehow forget that all identities are imbued with power. While certain definitions of identity are certainly imbued with power, identity itself perpetually escapes such definition. As social scientists have recognised for a long time, identities are mobile, becoming, and perpetually escape determination or definition. And yet, humans nonetheless continually struggle over identity, that is, they continually endeavour to make their identity visible. How is this not a process of love? It is only once we understand identity in these terms that we can also see why geography is fundamental. It is precisely the elusive nature of identity that demands that it be objectified. As I have argued, to objectify is not the same as to represent. While the latter is primarily concerned with definition, the former is concerned with presence. Objectification is the transformation of an elusive and inscrutable idea into something tangible, visible, and real. It is to give that which defies definition (indeed which defies clear thought) phenomenality. This is why geography is fundamental. Our love needs geography.

To illustrate this relation, I have attempted to outline an iconographic conception of landscape; a framework that is less concerned with what the landscape means and more interested in what it marks. Landscape cannot define identity in an enduring sense. As a modality of love, our identity is always elusive, perpetually defiant of definition. Yet it can mark our identity. By this I mean it can objectify it and thus make it appear real. This is the key to understanding landscapes iconographically. They make our love (indeed our faith in love) appear. While this appearance can be dressed up with symbols and meanings, messaging is not the landscape's primary role. The ring we give to our betrothed may be inscribed with words and song. But this is not the ring's primary role. Landscapes objectify our love. And like the ring, they provide no guarantees. Love remains elusive and mysterious. In this sense, landscapes are always a failed gesture; attempts to give visibility to something that defies visibility; definition to something that always transcends definition. Landscapes are the only means we have of making our love present. They are not simply useful. They are necessary.

10 Letters to a glacier: love and mourning in a time of climate catastrophe

LuLing Osofsky

What does it mean to love at the end of the world, when the very ground of our desires and our commitments is giving way, cracking and melting in plain sight? In the face of this catastrophe, love does not appear *prima facie* as a fitting response. Rather, as Walter Benjamin once argued, to the extent that the melancholic remains fixated on the lost object or image of desire, it is melancholia – the "indolence of heart"[1] – that exerts its gravity most strongly in moments of destruction. From a purely melancholic position, love appears exhausted, if not historically naive. It promises a sense of beauty and fulfilment that, in our current crisis, seems to have been irreparably shattered.

But to say that the conditions for love today are shattered is to miss the capacity of love to shatter on its own accord. In 'Shattered love', Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the heart exposes the subject to what and to whom it is not.[2] Love shatters in the sense that it cuts across itself, signalling the "arrival and departure"[3] of the other, such that love is never complete and never *my* love. Love, we might say, is an intersubjective project. For Alain Badiou, love necessarily exceeds the bounds of solitary self-consciousness and private self-interest: it is an experience not of the One but of the Two, even if it "goes beyond the immediate interests of the two individuals involved".[4] And it is this Two-structure that, in Badiou, gives love the character of an encounter or event, something to which one chooses (or refuses) to have fidelity. Without the Two, there is a danger of affirming the One

1 Walter Benjamin 'On the concept of history', in *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 391.

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Shattered love', in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Conner, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 82–109.

3 Ibid., 'Shattered love', p. 102.

4 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. P. Bush (The New Press, 2012), p. 73.

of this world, closing off the possibility of the other, and with it, the possibility of another world.[5]

What does a dyadic structure of love afford us in a time of planetary crisis? We may, alongside Emmanuel Levinas, think of the Two in terms of a face-to-face encounter with the other – with a "substantial interlocutor [. . .] a thou, springing up inevitably, solid and monumental"[6] – that is foundational to an ethics of responsibility. Such an ethics presupposes a second-person address: it requires a "you". According to Levinas, the relation of love emerges within the context of this ethics. "Love aims at the Other", he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "it aims at him in his frailty"[7] – an alterity that arises in the face-to-face encounter. But does Levinas' commitment to the 'face to face' bind love, along with its ethics of responsibility, to a human relation? How might we think of love's I-thou relation beyond the human to bear more incisively on our ecological present?

Written in the vein of geopoetics, the following chapter comprises a series of love letters to Nordenskiöldbreen Glacier, a glacier in Spitsbergen, Svalbard. According to NASA, Svalbard's ice caps suffered extreme episodes of melting in the summer of 2024; the archipelago is one of the fastest-warming locations in the world.[8] In addressing Nordenskiöldbreen Glacier – suffering, solid, monumental, frail – as "you", the glacier shifts from being an object of environmental gaze, an aestheticised symbol for the effects of climate change, into a full and vulnerable subject with whom I invite relationship, one with the potential for mutual response-ability.[9]

Perhaps more than any other literary genre, the epistolary form is structured by the presence of the You. In its historical development as a mode of writing, the letter is unique insofar as it is "conditioned as much by the second person as by the first".[10] This makes the letter a fitting mode through which to explore the contours of relationality, and an opportunity to cultivate an intimacy with another, an intimacy which strengthens one's commitments to the other. As a visual studies scholar, I'm particularly concerned with the ways glaciers are imaged and seen, the ways they circulate visually in the spatial imaginary. What might it mean to engage a glacier differently?

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5 See Key MacFarlane, 'A thousand CEOs: Relational thought, processual space, and Deleuzian ontology in human geography and strategic management', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2017, 41(3), pp. 299–320.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Oher*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (Continuum, 2006), p. 28.

7 Emmanual Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 256.

8 NASA Earth Observatory, *Svalbard Melts* (9 August 2024): https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/153189/svalbard-melts

9 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

10 Thomas Keymer, 'Epistolary writing in the long eighteenth century', in *A Companion to British Literature*, ed. Robert DeMaria Jr, Heesok Chang, and Samantha Zacher (Wiley, 2014), p. 164.

In this chapter, the letters only go one way; there are no letters back from the glacier. The potential for reciprocity is only intimated. I accept that Nordenskiöldbreen may not be an obliging recipient, or that I may not know how to receive or perceive its messages. Writing a letter never promises response. It is an attempt to connect; it is an offering. In this endeavour of loving amid ecological catastrophe, the space allocated for the glacier's reply is the space in which another world can be imagined.

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

I actually first encountered you in a painting. A mural, taking up an entire wall of an otherwise empty room, save for two wooden chairs powdered with dust. The painting was in the 'Culture Palace' of Pyramiden, a ghostly Soviet coal mining village bought from Sweden by the USSR in 1927, and hastily abandoned in 1998. Pyramiden was constructed as a utopian workers' outpost in the Arctic archipelago: the Culture Palace housed a library holding 50,000 volumes of Soviet classics, a ballet studio, an eerily refined theatre, upon whose stage sat a grand piano, so out of tune its notes leapt out in croaks and wails. But the theatre's velveteen seats still opened at their hinges, as if they'd never given up the hope of holding a body again. I barely explored these other rooms though, instead turning one of these two chairs around, magnetised by your depiction.

It was only after disembarking from Pyramiden, from the deck of the *Antigua*, the triple-masted Barkentine tall ship that I had been residing on for the past several weeks, that I saw you in real life.

Five years later, in 2019, I took a boat to visit you again, having returned to Spitsbergen for research. Again I witnessed you as a live and powerful being and I sucked in the biting air, trying to inhale as wide a scope and far a depth of you as possible, an exercise in total presence. In the years I had been away, you were at once the same being, but also not – rarely are any of us unscathed by time.

I've noticed that you exist tenuously not just in an ecological sense, but even your place in the spatial imaginary is unstable. You're a symbol of sublimity, of nature's indomitable power, but then also something of its opposite: an icon of the impacts of anthropocentric climate change, vulnerable, precarious, even an endangered species.[11] I experienced your size and life force as extending beyond the limits of my comprehensibility. But as the boat turned to head back to Longyearbyen, and I stood on deck watching you recede into the distance, another piece of you crumbled off your massive facade, a boom-cracking sound barely audible over the engine of the boat. But I did hear it.

11 Mark Carey, 'The history of ice: How glaciers became an endangered species', *Environmental History*, 2007, 12(3), pp. 497–527.

Figure 10.1 Mural of Nordenskiöldbreen Glacier in the Culture Palace of Pyramiden, Spitsbergen, Svalbard. Photograph by the author.

Figure 10.2 Nordenskiöldbreen Glacier, Spitsbergen, Svalbard. Photograph by the author.

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

Are you a mother? Is this a viable point of connection between us?

When scientists say that you're 'calving' – as in, a giant block of ice breaks off your frontal facade – is it anything like giving birth? Heat and subsequent melt causes forward momentum; that pushing forward inside a glacier creates a tension that can only resolve through rupture. Is this birth? It looks as though pieces of your face are breaking off. They fall dramatically, splashing into the sea.

Is that what being a mother is, having pieces of your face constantly breaking off, and yet, going on, continuing to face the world? I know delivering a baby does not 'make' a 'mother'. Calving does make for calves though. With this term 'calving' – I imagine the glacier reanimating as a cow.

What about a whale instead? A blue whale. Ancient and unknowable, studied but ungraspable, physically massive, slow moving stores of carbon. Their offspring are called calves too. In my researcher position at the university, I'm working with marine mammal scientists and contemporary artists on an exhibition examining climate change through the lives and fates of whales. I learned that the first-born calf of a whale is much more likely to die as an infant, as the mother's body collects and stores toxins and offloads them in her breast milk, with the first-born receiving the build-up of that toxicity. The second calf has a much stronger chance of survival.[12]

Like you, the whale is mega-charismatic. Over the course of several centuries, the bowhead whales of Svalbard were hunted to the edge of extinction – and the violent cycle of extraction simply gets updated, blubber and oil. The eye of a blue whale, a whale also nearly hunted to extinction, is the size of a grapefruit. You could hold it in your hand. In old drawings and paintings, it looks so human; it looks so tired. I haven't myself glimpsed a whale's eye, but I have a few times looked closely into the eyes of dolphins, dead, dying, and alive in play. The eye of the dying dolphin is a story perhaps for another time, a subsistence hunt I found myself on in Indonesia, somewhat by accident. But this was some years ago.

Last month, I toured the university's marine mammal research and training facility with a visiting artist, and we stood beside the glass wall of the dolphins' tank – large, but a tank nonetheless. The two male dolphins swam alongside the glass, nearly brushing up against it. The artist and I craved each lap; again and again the dolphins made their way towards us, their faces inches from ours. The scientist giving us the tour had to pull us away.

When the boat turned to head back to Longyearbyen, I strained; I yearned. There was so much more to see in your face.

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12 Laura Geggel, 'Dead baby orca reveals harmful chemicals in killer whales', *Livescience*, 24 May 2021: https://www.livescience.com/orca-whales-toxicology.html

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

I'm trying to figure out what to make of British artist David Buckland's 2005–2009 works in which he projects images – some text, some figures – onto the faces of icebergs.

What would it mean to consider Levinas here and take seriously the idea of perceiving your face as a *face*, and instead of looking *past* you, or *at* you, or *onto* you, to perceive you as a 'you'? To catch and steady oneself in the moment prior to the projecting act – might therein lie a chance to transcend that chasm of otherness between us?

My experience seeing your face for the first time in real life was a con-frontation. Not a face-off, but two fronts facing each other. You emanated a distinctive power, but not one that bowled me over, or made me cower or rise up either. I was both frozen and drawn in. There was a complexity and inscrutability to your face that I could not look away from – neither beautiful nor ugly – just the densest, rawest, vastest amount of aesthetic information I had ever beheld. I tried to force my eyes past their natural blinders, to make a panorama out of my field of vision. I worry about making you uncomfortable, going on about "the moment we met"!

My reaction was not to the *idea* of you: your unfathomable entirety, the millennia-old histories you contain, the dangers you pose, the dangers you 'face' as it gets hotter and hotter. Rather I was reacting to the encounter with your face. I know that in their work Levinas and Hannah Arendt were reckoning with the Holocaust. But they both write about the *event* that serves to interrupt what would otherwise be the givenness of the circumstances, setting in motion an ethical capacity that makes a new politics possible. For Levinas, famously, it's the destabilising power of a face-to-face encounter that catches one completely off-guard: "the face enters our world from an absolutely foreign sphere [. . .] exterior to all order, to all world",[13] and that moment of recognition of the Other is the foundation of an ethics. I am not drawing a likeness between your face as a glacier and the face of a camp prisoner. But Levinas gives me a mental framework and language for grasping the extent to which a face-to-face encounter can be an event so startling that there is a paradigmatic shift. And it was one in which I was made privy to your being-ness, a vitality and potential for mutuality I had not previously considered. And while of course I could've been imagining it, I felt solicited, pulled forth. What, if anything, might you be asking of me?

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13 Mick Smith, 'The earthly politics of ethical an-archē: Arendt, Levinas, and Being with Others', in *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought*, ed. W. Edelglass, J. Hatley, and C. Diehm (Duquesne University Press, 2012), p. 147.

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

It's been some time since my last letter, and I'm still thinking about Buckland's works – many of which were made in Svalbard.

Almost twenty years ago, as part of the Cape Farewell project (which he founded), Buckland and a group of artists and scientists sailed around Svalbard archipelago, with the goal of creating works that addressed climate change. In his 2008 piece, *Pregnant Woman*, Buckland projects a photographic image of a nude, pregnant woman onto a piece of floating sea ice that is breaking apart.[14] Projected, she is a figure of light. However much her likeness hovers over the surface of the ice, there is no levity: the image of her is sinking into the water, sinking in the places where there is no ice to prop her up. Her pregnancy – the precondition for humanity – is rendered vulnerable. There is the potent ambiguousness of whether the ice will move and she will become a drowned Ophelia. That maybe she, and the symbolic future that she carries, won't survive the shifting ice.[15]

In other iterations, depending on the shape of the iceberg or arrangement of the ice floes, the pregnant woman's image is distorted, rippling, her head elongated and pregnant belly striated like geologic layers. It is a body warping, pushing at the limits of what coheres the form of a body. Just as being plunged underwater seems a possibility, we're asked what other conditions will distort her pregnant body beyond its capacity to perform its symbolic value and purpose – to deliver the baby that we see in other iceberg works by Buckland. It always struck me how Arendt regarded the catalysing political event as a 'natality'.[16]

In all this, Buckland treats the sea ice and the iceberg's face as a wall, instrumentalised as a surface for projection, projecting the fate of humans. The ice is a tenuous billboard. It's the artistic medium, solid and white enough to hold an image, with the perfect amount of ghostliness, as the spectator knows its materiality is poised for eventual disappearance. As Marshall McLuhan said, the medium is the message, and McLuhan might consider Buckland's works 'cool media' – what with their low saturation of sensory data.[17] There is a diffuseness to them, the fate of blurring-to-the-point-of-disappearance, the dispersal of 'data', that is, the dispersal of the pregnant body.

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14 See David Buckland, 'Cape Farewell and the art of David Nuckland', *Interalia Magazine*, April 2017, n.p.: https://www.interaliamag.org/audiovisual/david-buckland/

15 This precariousness is actual for the cultural survival of indigenous communities in the Arctic for whom "rotting ice" threatens the livelihood and lifeways of marine mammal subsistence hunting. See Henry Huntington, Lori T Quackenbush, and Mark Nelson, 'Effects of changing sea ice on marine mammals and subsistence hunters in northern Alaska from traditional knowledge interviews', *Biology Letters*, August 2016, 12(8), n.p.: https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2016.0198

16 See Wolfhart Totschnig, 'Arendt's notion of natality: An attempt at clarification', *Ideas y Valores*, 2017, 66(165), pp. 327–346.

17 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

In the spring of 2020, graduate students at my university were months-deep into a wildcat strike, striking for wages commensurate with the feverishly high cost of living in coastal California. I was eight months pregnant and on the verge of losing my job and health insurance, and it was my turn to speak at a rally. In the fog of late pregnancy, I had nothing prepared because not a single thought had visited my mind. Then I remembered the purpose of my being there: I was pregnant. I should deliver an apropos message: something about how we all carry dreams within us, something about doing the right thing for future generations. In the end, I was fired, a global pandemic roiled, and my baby was born on 1 May, International Workers' Day. As soon as he came out, he raised his fist in the air. I snapped a photo. I too cling to the tidy way symbols naturalise a narrative.

Buckland doesn't just project images of the expecting mother. The baby in Buckland's pieces, projected onto floating blocks of ice; they are no particular baby because they are every baby. But the 'every baby' is a myth, obviously. Based on their round cheeks, the chubby fat clumping on their limbs, the baby Buckland projects is a healthy baby. Not the toxicity-overloaded first-born whale calf, not the baby of an Inuit mother with high levels of DDT, PCBs, mercury, and lead contamination in her breast milk either.[18] The baby is not unequivocally white, but like the pregnant woman walking in his other pieces, the baby is definitely not Brown or Black. The baby reads as the youngest of possible protagonists. Will it be an oil baron? An activist? It doesn't matter. For now, the baby is just a symbol of The Future.

18 NIH study as early as 1995, see J. Wormworth, 'Toxins and tradition: The impact of food-chain contamination on the Inuit of northern Quebec', *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, April 1995, 152(8), pp. 1237–1240; see also Florence Williams, 'Toxic breastmilk?', *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 January 2005, n.p.: https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/09/magazine/toxic-breast-milk.html

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

I recently showed my class James Balog's documentary *Chasing Ice*,[19] which relies heavily on time lapse photography to demonstrate the extent of glacial recession. Slowing down to perceive otherwise, we witnessed the shocking displays of retreat – glaciers from Alaska to the Himalayas to the Alps disappearing. I didn't intend for it, but I could feel the class pulling together, as if drawn in by a melancholy magnet. We watched you melt off the surface of your own tongue.[20] I fear that as your tongue shrinks, so does the longevity of your ability to speak.

What would you say, now, while you still have your tongue, while you still can face us?

19 Jeff Orlowski (Dir.), *Chasing Ice* [film] (Submarine Deluxe, 2012).

20 The form of glacial ice as it projects seaward may resemble that of a tongue protruding from an open mouth. 'Glacier tongue' is a scientific term for this glacial extension: https://nsidc.org/learn/cryosphere-glossary/glacier-tongue

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

It probably sounds like I am expecting you to have an imploring, or indignant, or melancholic (perhaps?) monologue about climate change, about clinging to the mountain, the streaks of retreat, of boulders, rocks, dirt, like fingernail tracks clawing back across skin, against time. But maybe you don't wish to speak, or maybe I wouldn't know how to perceive your responses, if you have them. In M. Jackson's book, *The Secret Life of Glaciers*, Jackson has interviewed Icelanders about their experiences with glaciers, and one man recounts how upon (over) stepping onto a local glacier, it let out a loud, unequivocal snarl. I will put my ear up to the wind and hold it there.[21]

21 M. Jackson, *The Secret Lives of Glaciers* (Green Writers Press, 2019).

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

I'm relieved that you don't pose the usual questions. When someone asks what my dissertation is about, I typically say "art about climate change in the Arctic" – which is really not accurate at all, but as a description it does the job (no follow-up questions). Sometimes people ask if I've seen Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's thrice-installed *Ice Watch*. It's arguably the most recognisable work of contemporary art engaging with climate change through the use of ice.

The installation consists of twelve massive blocks of ice that have broken off from the Greenland ice sheet. Eliasson and scientist Minik Rosing took the ice from a fjord outside Nuuk, transporting the hulking pieces thousands of miles to display them in heavily trafficked urban spaces in major European cities, at sites and times proximate to and concurrent with international summits dedicated to environmental concerns, such as COP21, the UN Convention on Climate Change, in Paris. The pieces are arranged in the formation of a clock; the passage of time is central to the work. The installations generally exist for three days: long enough to attract thousands of visitors, and on the flipside, short enough for the work to vanish before one might be able to catch a glimpse.

Part of me hates this work; part of me appreciates its political potential. I don't like the idea of icebergs plucked – as Eliasson himself said, "harvested" – from the ocean, hauling them by ship and heaving them onto land, onto concrete, left to drip their way into pools, to be stroked and licked by city-dwellers and tourists. There's something obscene about it, or am I being prude? The unbridled sensuality of the ice turned into a spectacle of a specimen – and the salivatory way in which Eliasson discusses the piece, giddy for the drama of the melt. Isabelle Fremaux and Jay Jordan, in *We are Nature Defending Itself*, lament Eliasson's extractivist relationship with the natural world as an international hypercommercial art star.[22] In his review of the installation, Joseph Nechvatal criticises Eliasson's hubris in extracting the essential natural resource of ice to fulfil a vision with a tremendous carbon footprint to create and exhibit, calling Eliasson "one of the most wasteful mega-artists of our time".[23] I don't mean to be offended on your behalf.

I haven't seen it in real life, but I've seen images, watched interviews with Eliasson, and read the reviews. I try to imagine the full sensorial experience of the work, and what it might galvanise. I imagine pressing my cheek against the ice and hearing the fizzy, popping, crackling of its melt and feeling the brightening smack of cold. Perhaps I'd be standing in melted glacial water, the soles of my

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22 Isabell Fremaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* (Pluto Press, 2021).

23 Joseph Nechvatal, 'Olafur Eliasson's sundial of melting icebergs clocks in at half-past wasteful', *Hyperallergic*, 9 December 2015, n.p.: https://hyperallergic.com/260217/olafur-eliassons-sundial-of-melting-icebergs-clocks-in-at-half-past-wasteful/

shoes, with their rubber patterned geometries, about to track the indexicality of the ice, rubber-stamping it across the city square, only to disappear seconds later into thin air, as I might disappear into the crowds and the banality of my consumptive life, or maybe I'd disappear into the chanting masses of a protest march. Either way, maybe forever changed by this encounter with the ice.

But this loss is convenient to comprehend because it is so aesthetically appealing. The sun and wind and elements sculpt the ice in unpredictable ways. The ice glints in the light. And the experience is one in which the human maintains superiority: the pieces of ice are like hulking bodies that grow more vulnerable with the passage of hours. They live only about three days. They go from sublime to gone. As Immanuel Kant asserted, the sublime presents the human with a daunting and exhilarating confrontation with one's own mortality and power.[24] Does Eliasson think he is God? Selecting icebergs for sacrifice?

To what extent does one's body remain one's own? It's easiest to identify a body as a solid form, the parameters delineated by a cohesion of matter into a single entity, like a human, like an animal. But you – you melt. You collect toxins. You evaporate. You become clouds. Where do you begin and end? Once pieces of you break off, do you become 'detached'?

My mother used to say, by virtue of having been in her womb, by having been attached to her by an umbilical cord, that I belonged to her. The severing of the cord was biologically necessary but otherwise irrelevant. She claimed I would always be part of her; I came from her body. It seems I am, even at forty-two years old, something of an iceberg still.

To whom do you belong?

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24 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

If it was a couple decades ago, I would've wanted to send this to you as a newspaper clipping. It's a story about the first public funeral held for a deceased glacier.

In August 2019, after Iceland's hottest July on record since 1880, approximately one hundred people trekked to the base of Okjökull (OK for short) volcano to mourn the dead glacier. What once was sixteen square kilometers had, by 2014, been declared "dead" by glaciologist Oddur Sigurðsson, as it was then a patch of "dead ice", too thin to move.[25] So, as you know, it was no longer a glacier.

Attendees delivered eulogies, observed a moment of silence, read poems, sang. It was organised by two American cultural anthropologists, Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, from Rice University, who study the social impacts of glacier loss in Iceland. Speakers, including Iceland's Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, spoke to the crowd through a megaphone, and Icelandic glaciologist Oddur Sigurðsson presented the glacier's death certificate.

There was a dedication to the dead glacier through the installation of a bronze plaque, like you would find at the base of a monument or memorial. Held in place by three children's gloved hands, the plaque was drilled into a large rock. It is titled 'Letter to the future', penned by Icelandic author and poet Andri Snær Magnusson. It reads:

> *In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.*

Written in both Icelandic and English, the final text at the bottom of the plaque, beneath "August 2019", reads "415ppm CO_2", marking the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at that moment in time.

The death certificate drawn up and read by Sigurðsson presented OK's cause of death to "excessive heat", "caused by humans." The responsibility is cast across an all-expansive demographic of 'humans' – do you care about the lack of attributed culpability here? After all, funerals are usually about the deceased, not about their killers. If protest is a component of this funeral, wouldn't this be the occasion to clearly state the overwhelming effects of fossil fuel consumption in wealthy nations, and the consistent deferral of their governments – let alone fossil fuel corporations themselves – to legislate

25 Cynthia Zarin, 'A dance for the melting icebergs', *The New Yorker*, 25 November 2016, n.p.: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-dance-for-the-melting-icebergs

and commit to significant reductions in carbon emissions? Am I being pedantic?

I wonder if you would like a funeral? If so, what should it be like? Perhaps we can get down your wishes (if you have any) for whomever may one day find this exchange. For when your last push forward has passed.

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

One quirk of academic achievement is coining neologisms that gain traction. I only seem to come up with silly ones, and my latest: 'mourganise'. That OK's funeral was designed for both mourning and organising recalls my own bristling at the resounding call to action in the wake of Trump's election in 2016, and now again, in 2024: "Don't mourn, organize!" The slogan is an abridged phrasing from Swedish-American labour organiser and musician Joe Hill, telegrammed to a friend in 1915.[26] It's been popularised by labor activists ever since, and particularly in the wake of deaths of labour leaders. But something feels off for me, as yet again half the nation grapples with depression and dread. A militant directive to *NOT* mourn, as if it will drag the necessary urgency of the moment.

Carole Levine, in her book *Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*, argues that theorisations and engagements with melancholy and mourning are a tired domain, and that it's time for the academy to move beyond melancholy and mourning, as, she claims, it holds back the necessary political work of 'resiliency'.[27] Maybe Levine is right. Maybe mourning and melancholy, and my own interest in memory and memory studies, is so 1990s.

But I like what ecomusicologist and scholar Andrew Mark has to say about it. In discussing the role of the arts in grappling with environmental loss – and particularly music (the genre of Joe Hill's creative legacy) – he asserts the necessity of the motto's counter stance: "Don't organize, mourn!"[28] He argues that the psychic structure of commodity fetishism allows consumers to replace one lost object with another, without coming to terms with the loss itself, an enactment of Freud's theorisation of melancholia. Without enduring the difficult work of mourning, striding ahead with activist organising, he says, represses a necessary release of the lost object. The lost object here being the glacier.

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26 Andrew Mark, 'Don't organize, mourn: Environmental loss and musicking', *Ethics and the Environment*, 2016, 21(2), pp. 51–77.

27 Carol Levine, *Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

28 Mark, 'Don't organize, mourn'.

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

A year before OK's funeral, in 2018, I went to a lecture on campus given by Judith Butler. It was in an overcrowded room that barely qualified as an auditorium; there was a stage, but it was more like a rehearsal space for a school play, and the audience sat rapt on what were essentially bleachers. Butler's lecture was titled, 'Shadows of the absent body: The materiality of mourning in the work of Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo', and focused centrally on grievability. During it they said, "Every act of making visible is haunted by what can no longer appear."

OK's funeral was situated at the remote location where the glacier's body once lived – and in its death, its absence was palpably revealed. Butler states, in the context of Salcedo's work, that "the field of grievability is a sensate field riddled with loss".[29] Here at the base of OK volcano, the field is a literal one, an expanse of rocky terrain on which the evidence of (slow) violence is absence itself.

A year after OK's funeral, on 18 October 2020, a funeral was held for the deceased Clark Glacier, which was located on the southwest side of South Sister, one of a trio of dormant volcanoes in the Cascade Mountains. The funeral was held on the steps of the Oregon state capitol. At the top of the steps leading to the commanding and marble art deco building, directly in front of its large front doors, atop a small table draped with black cloth, sat a small black box that resembled a square coffin. It held a vial of water from the glacier's melted ice. I can't tell from the photographs if the coffin on the table holding the vial is an open or closed casket.

The director of the Oregon Glacier Institute, Anders Carlson, gave remarks, read a poem by Robert Frost. He was dressed in formal dark-coloured attire. The draped table holding the coffin is flanked on each side by a young child, also dressed in black, each looking under the age of ten. Again, the symbolic presence of children, embodiments of innocence and vulnerability in the face of a fraught future. Is Clark not fully grievable in its own right?

29 Judith Butler, *Shadows of the Absent Body: The Materiality of Mourning in the Work of Doris Salcedo* [lecture], Visual Media and Culture Colloquium Series, University of California Santa Cruz (2018).

Dear Nordenskiöldbreen,

This will be my last letter to you, at least for a while. Trying to relate to you is a practice of letting go. I watch you crumble. I know that not eating red meat and yet flying from California to Svalbard to do my research – to, in essence, grasp you – isn't doing you any favours. That's euphemistic, avoidant. From 35,000 feet up in the air, in the metallic-winged, fossil-fuelled plane, peering down at the glaciers of Kalaallit Nunaat Greenland, the irony is not lost upon me as I ruminate: What does it mean to conduct research in a time of climate crisis, especially when one's 'subject' – glaciers, the ice – faces a death by a thousand cuts, some cuts larger than others, some cuts cut by me? I fly to you. I am bound to you through love and transgression.

I'm writing now from an old, historic ranch house an hour north of San Francisco, where the university has a field station for scientists to come and conduct ecological fieldwork. If the house is empty, they let writers and artists come, and I am here to spend some uninterrupted time writing to you. To request use of the house, you have to work your way down a long checklist, confirming that you are not harming any specimens through your collecting of data, through your research. I check 'no' for everything, knowing it's untrue.

Though she is writing about human-animal relations, something struck me in Radhika Govindrajan's book, *Animal Intimacies*, when she writes about knots of interspecies connection and the "violence at the heart of relatedness, the expected outcome of a difficult yet inevitable entangling of lives and fates".[30] In considering the kinships, intimacies, and harms of these multispecies entanglements, she also writes that "Love can sometimes hold open the fleeting possibility of another world [. . .] [It can] invite us to dwell a little longer in the possibility of how we might be, together, differently."[31] Nordenskiöldbreen, I want to say that I'm sorry. And that I am hopeful too.

I've made a new friend named Hannah. She's a filmmaker. As we swam to the end of the wharf in the beach town where we live, over the sounds of barking sea lions, we talked about our work, and I told her about how I was writing letters to you. That it felt clumsy sometimes, writing to a non-human entity in earnest. She asked good, probing questions (she'd make a great therapist). She asked: How will you be able to hear its voice?

During one of the meetings with the marine mammal scientists that I work with, a translation studies scholar, Şebnem Susam-Saraeva, gave a presentation about what it means to truly listen to cetacean communication, and not from the

30 Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 176.

31 Ibid., *Animal Intimacies*, pp. 180–181.

privileged position of anthropos.[32] She said translation is always ideological, and the transmission of scientific knowledge is often already shaped, if not dictated, by the demands of colonialism and capitalism. An awareness of this, coupled ideally with time to deeply listen, allows for a different way of knowing. Writing to you has been an unexpected practice of deep listening, of making space for a different kind of transmission.

Swimming with Hannah, the water was cool and decidedly not icy. My nerves were alive like antennae. I knew that within these waters were whales, and that the water held infinite ways to reach you. As you calve and melt, I feel grief that you are now swimming with us too.

32 Şebnem Susam-Saraeva, *Translation and Cetacean Communication Systems: Interactions and Synergies* [presentation], Institute of the Arts & Sciences, University of California Santa Cruz (8 November 2024).

11 Eating (each other's) (hearts) out: mycelial love and the forest as queer con/figuration

Sage Brice, Kate Marston, Richard Wright, and Scarlet Hall[1]

Breaking down the dyadic formula of love

The active sapwood of a tree encloses a structural core of 'nonfunctional wood' – the heart – that decays even as the tree grows, providing habitat for other life and contributing to the cycle of nutrients that feeds both the tree itself and the forest of which it is part. This chapter elaborates the proposition that heart-rot, an important fungal decay process in oaks and other trees, might offer a way of lovingly undoing cis-hetero-reproductive assumptions about the 'nature' of love; it gestures towards a theory of love grounded in the observation that entities are not pre-individuated or fixed beings within an ordered system, but emergent constellations of relations that are constitutively vulnerable and entangled. Heartwood rot has traditionally been understood on a pathogenic, immunological model as an external threat in which one organism causes catastrophic damage to another.[2] Recent mycological studies instead highlight that the relationship between oak and heart-rot fungi may in some circumstances significantly enhance both the longevity of affected oaks and their associated

1 Sage Brice developed the initial conceptual framing for this chapter and co-wrote the text with Kate Marston. Richard Wright contributed original mycological research and expertise. All authors participated in the graphic exchange. Richard Wright and Scarlet Hall read drafts and contributed to developing and revising the ideas presented.

2 F.H. Berry and J.A. Beaton, 'Decay in oak in the central hardwood region' (US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1972); Meijer, Andreu, Emigdio Jordán Muñoz-Adalia, and Carlos Colinas, 'Early thinning: A promising tool to prevent Fistulina hepatica heart rot in Castanea sativa coppice stands', *Forests*, 2024, 15(9), p. 1639.

biodiversity.[3] While we do not view longevity as a 'natural good' in itself, we note that this observation challenges classical understandings of decay in living trees: much of what makes an oak an oak is in fact its non-dyadic entanglement with fungi and their wider communities. We develop this observation as an analogical study through which to imagine other ways of approaching love. What if the aim of love were not to consummate a dyadic reproductive association, but to commit to an ecosystem of individual and collective affective capacities, contributing to a distributed cycle of growth and decay?[4]

Can we take seriously – playfully – the novelist Barbara Kingsolver's provocation that "the forest eats itself and lives forever"?[5] Kingsolver invokes a defiantly morbid sort of immortality, one that refuses linear temporality. We hold up this invocation as a mirror to queer theorist Lee Edelman's exultation of the "death drive" as that which "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability".[6] The logic of social viability, for Edelman, is that of a future guaranteed through reproduction of the self-same; wherein love stands for lineage, inheritance, and property. In refutation of such logics of succession, we investigate instead the queer possibility that "to love" (a person, or indeed anyone) could be, following family abolitionist Sophie Lewis, "to struggle for their autonomy as well as their immersion in care".[7]

In writing this chapter, we are excited about the possibilities for thinking with non-possessive, non-exclusionary love as a political and ethical concept or even a model for imagining relation differently. At the same time, we are mindful of a certain queer scepticism around the very concept of love; a scepticism that has its roots in the ways love has historically been mobilised *against* queer and trans lives, as well as other forms of 'difference' that are seen as threatening the coherence and stability of a societal norm organised around attachment to sameness. What is at stake in this scepticism is not only the critique that love underpins xenophobic forms of unity as an organising theme for hatred – where love of liberty, the nation, the home, the family, and/or the race requires a defensive stance towards that which falls outside, or encroaches upon, the social body of the abstracted love object.[8]

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3 Richard Wright et al., 'Heart of oak: fungal communities decaying the heartwood of standing oak (Quercus robur and Q. petraea) trunks', in preparation; Richard Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities of British oak (Quercus Spp.) trees' (PhD, Cardiff University, 2024): https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/165966/; L Boddy, *Fungi and Trees: Their Complex Relationships* (Arboricultural Association UK, 2021).

4 We derive this conception of affective capacities from Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (Penguin Classics, 1996 [1675]).

5 Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 1.

6 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press Books, 2004), p. 9.

7 Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso, 2022), p. 2.

8 Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book', in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* (Routledge, 2022); Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*

Beyond this critical observation, we might also observe that such xenophobic orders underpin conventional imaginaries of love as dyadic, possessive, and exclusionary. Turning on its head the Freudian equation of heterosexuality with love of difference and of homosexuality with love of sameness, queer theorists have long argued that heterosexuality is driven and defined precisely by its obsession with what Edelman has called "the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism".[9] Fetishistic attachment to the reproduction of sameness stands in for an immortality of sorts; a societal negation of the death drive. Fear of death thereby translates into a reproductive imperative that underwrites and constrains culturally acceptable expressions of love.

We are struck by how consistently discussions of love (at least in Euro-American/Anglophone literatures) revolve around the notion of a binary complementarity – a duality of the self and its definitive other. Love is imagined as quintessentially a question of two. Even when explicitly concerned with showing how love undoes the unitary subject, or with elucidating the fundamental incommensurability of self and other, still the starting point for much discussion of love is the idea of an exclusive coupling in which one individual completes – or fails to complete – the other. Such a model of love is catastrophic in the sense that it is a zero-sum game, both narrow and deterministic. Whether conceived as a productive or a negative form of compatibility, the inherent (non-)complementarity of the dyad remains foundational.[10] This teleological idea of love as catastrophic union with a complementary other, a necessary union which both destroys and completes the subject, subsumes the recognition of love's (dis)individuating power within a totalising logic of homeostasis. It carries with it a host of what we might loosely term cis-hetero-reproductive logics. These include sex and gender binaries, prescriptive gender roles, the monogamous ideal, the relationship escalator, the nuclear family household, gendered divisions of labour, and so forth.[11]

Importantly, we identify within that cluster of ideas an implicit appeal to nature, naturalising binary complementarity so that it becomes written into the very ontology of love, even where scholars and other critical thinkers resist the possibility of defining what love actually *is*. Digging a little deeper, we also identify in this cluster a set of attachments to the idea of the individual as a pre-individuated entity, one which is understood to make sense within a specific constellation of fixed identity positions, and whose relations are oriented towards the reproduction of

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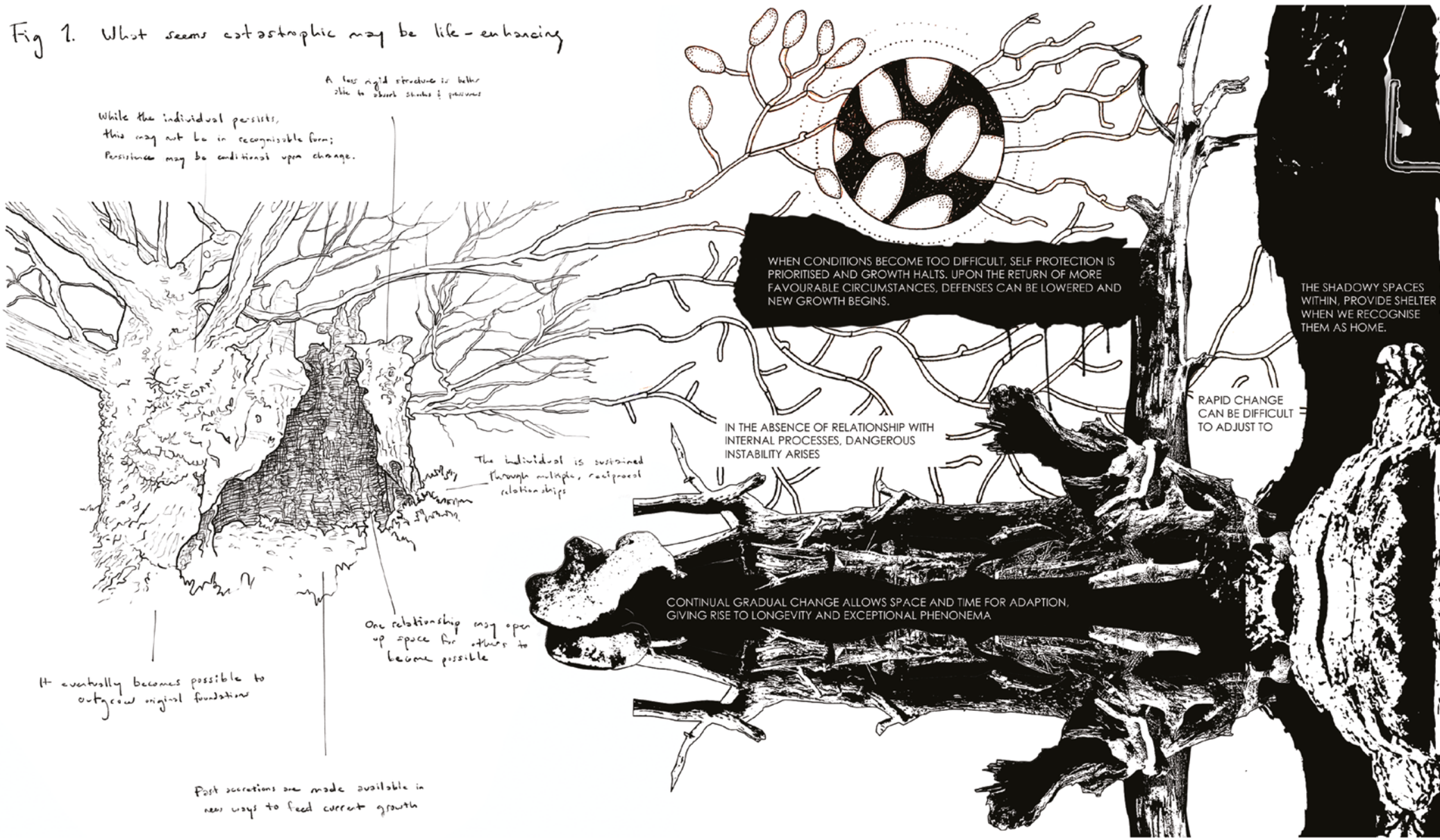
(Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 2011); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

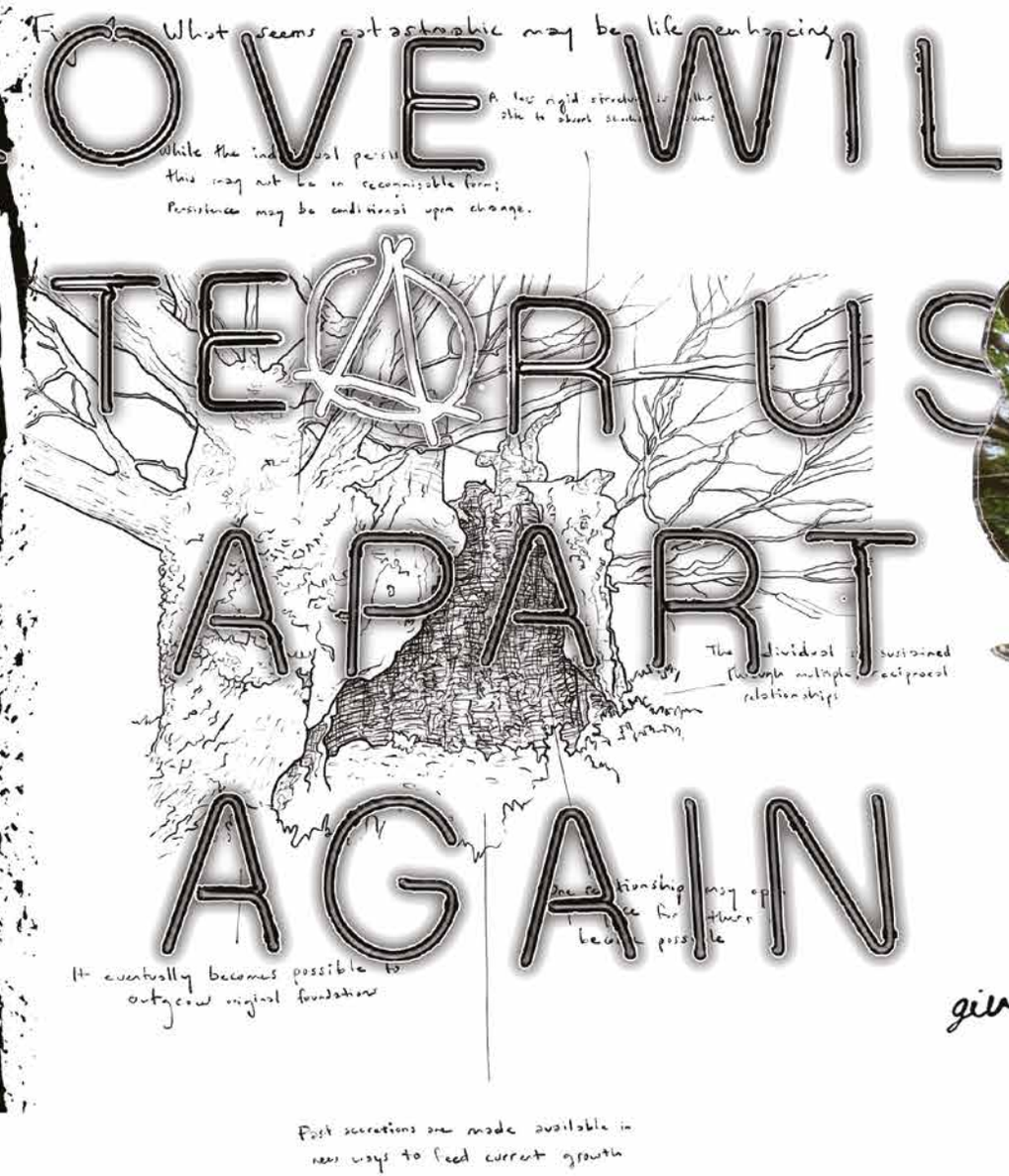
9 Edelman, *No Future*, p. 21; see also Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*.

10 For discussion of how we are here mobilising the concept of compatibility, see methodology (below).

11 Angela Willey, *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology* (Duke University Press, 2016).

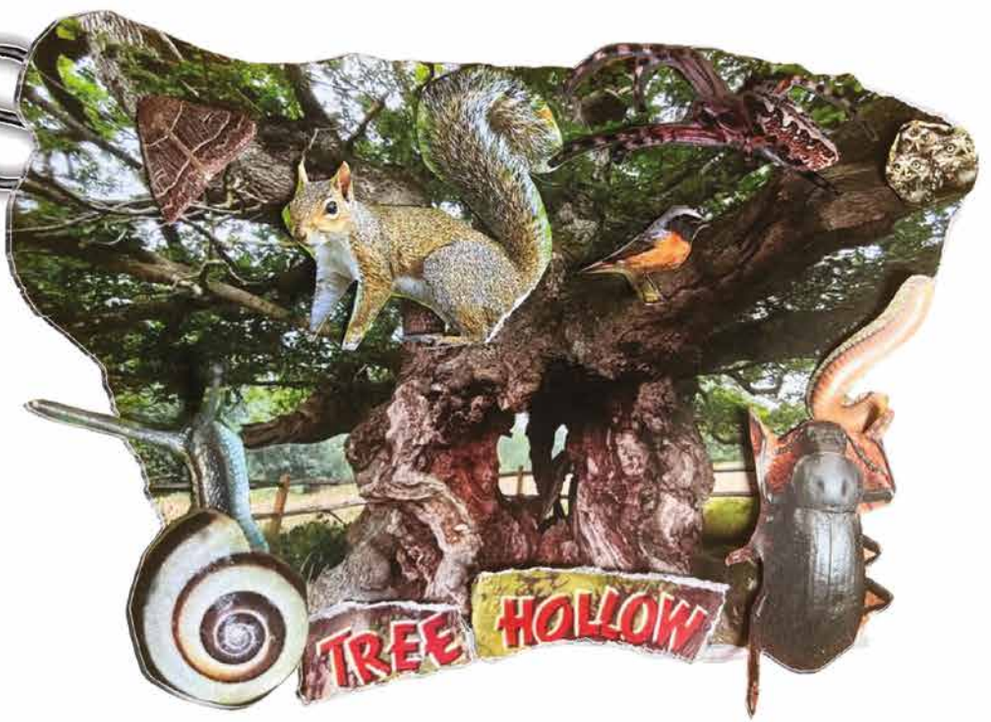
Fig 1. What seems catastrophic may be life-enhancing





LOVE WILL TEAR US APART AGAIN

Not one life but a multiplicity



giving-over (through death) to the collectivity of life unfolding

sameness, in part as a protection against death and mortality. Love on this model has certain definitive characteristics; it is exclusive, possessive, extractive, binary, complementary, takes place between pre-individuated entities, and is oriented to reproduction. This normative model of love is both naturalised and predicated upon a certain idea of nature as a competition for survival between distinct organisms and species possessing stable identities. The example of oaks' entanglement with heart-rot fungi helps to complicate this picture, unsettling neat distinctions between competitive and collaborative forms of survival or thriving, and presenting an altogether messier, more promiscuous idea of what and how nature is, does, and – dare we say it? – loves.[12]

A queer methodology: promiscuous analogy

The chapter proceeds by two methods: *promiscuity* and *analogy*. We take up Donna Haraway's provocation to promiscuous thinking in two ways.[13] First, through an experimental and cross-disciplinary collaboration (in conversation and graphic exchange) between an artist-geographer, a scholar of education, a mycologist, and an artist-animist-in-emergence. Second, by putting queer/trans practices and politics of care and solidarity into conversation with queer and trans critiques of love, reproduction, family, and future – and by putting both of these into conversation with ecological mycology.[14] The graphic exchange (Figure 11.1) introduces a deliberately playful element to our process: a flirtation with the unknown. As in the parlour games 'consequences' and 'exquisite corpse', each author adds something and passes to the next. Whereas those games rely on combining unseen elements within a unifying formulaic structure, however, in this case we respond directly to one another's provocations.[15] It is the absence of a predetermined

12 While we do not feel qualified to draw directly on animist philosophical traditions with which we are only partially familiar, we, together with much Western process-oriented philosophy, owe a frequently underemphasised debt to non-dualistic traditions of thought for which creativity and destruction are not opposing forces. See for example Kazi Adi Shakti, 'Emptiness, creativity and feminist ecology: An introduction to process Buddhism', *Process Perspectives*, (27 November 2023), 44, pp. 12–26.

13 Donna Haraway, 'When species meet: Staying with the trouble', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2010, 28(1), pp. 53–55: https://doi.org/10.1068/d2706wsh

14 Cleo Wölfle Hazard, *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice* (University of Washington Press, 2022); Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020); The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso Books, 2020); Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (Verso, 2021); Lewis, *Abolish the Family*; Edelman, *No Future*; Lauren Berlant, ed., *Desire/Love* (punctum books, 2012): https://doi.org/10.21983/P3.0015.1.00

15 In the game of *consequences*, players take turns to insert a word of their choice into a set (and markedly cis-hetero-normative) formula: '[name] met [name] at [location] to [action]. He wore [clothing item]. She wore [clothing item]. He [action]. She [action]. And the consequence was [outcome].' *Exquisite corpse* was devised by the French Surrealists. A body is drawn in four

unifying structure that, in this case, produces a sense of the unknown. Our collaborative writing process, though less formalised than the graphic exchange, is similarly polyvocal, so that our contributions in a sense eat, digest, and transform one another much as a fungal decay community would. The speculative analogies that are first seeded within the graphic exchange are then reworked through co-authorship of the text. Rather than seek always to find common ground, however, we also attempt to notice what fails and is digested or expelled in the process and to retain something of this unevenness in our writing, valuing queer polyvocality over the (re)production of sameness.

Our use of analogy borrows from Gilbert Simondon, for whom it has a particular methodological function.[16] Analogy differs from metaphor or simile in that it is less concerned with double meanings or similarities of form than it is with understanding what particular material arrangements or configurations of entities and ideas make possible. In a Simondonian analogy, an observable process or operation in nature provides a model for understanding a social process. In particular, analogy for Simondon elucidates the process of individuation: how the individual and its milieu come to constitute one another through transformative encounter.[17] The individual elements within such a system are defined by what they *do*, rather than what they are considered to *be*; "not an analogy of structures, which would produce only an association of ideas, but an analogy of operations".[18] The operation of individuation resolves a problem of compatibility between individual and milieu; a compatibility that may be negative as well as positive.[19] Here we look to recent research on the relationship between oak trees and heart-rot fungi as an analogy through which to explore alternative queer figurations of love. Of course, the distinction between metaphor and analogy is not always as clear-cut in practice as in theory, and there is some slippage between them. Indeed, fudging the distinction between double entendre and analogy is a well-used tactic of queer theory as well as process ontology.[20] Nevertheless, we attempt to walk this fine line: in this

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stages from top to bottom, the paper being folded over between each part so that it is not visible to the next player. Once complete, the drawing is unfolded to reveal a fantastical composite being.

16 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (University of Minnesota Press, 2020 [1964]).

17 Sage Brice, 'Geographies of vulnerability: Mapping transindividual geometries of identity and resistance', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2020, 45)(3), pp. 664–77: https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12358; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (The MIT Press, 2012); Anne Sauvagnargues, 'Crystals and membranes: Individuation and temporality', in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 73–91.

18 Andrea Bardin, *Epistemology and Political Philosophy in Gilbert Simondon: Individuation, Technics, Social Systems* (Springer, 2015), p. 58.

19 Brice, 'Geographies of vulnerability'.

20 Consider, for example, Edelman, *No Future*; J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press, 2005); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Continuum, 2004).

chapter even where we employ figurative language, we believe what is at stake in our arguments is something more than metaphor.

Queer myco-optimisms

Although myco-enthusiasm has a long history, recent years have seen a marked proliferation of popular cultural engagements with fungi, in which mushrooms are valorised as affirmative figurations of hope and survival in the face of capitalist ruin.[21] In this newly eminent myco-aesthetics, "the distributed network or the swarm, imagined to be instantiated by mycelium and spores, enable modes of allegorical thinking that produce sites of hope".[22] This hopeful, sometimes utopian, orientation is located in the unique biophysical capacities of fungi, such as those made famous by the Canadian forestry scientist Suzanne Simard, as well as popular mycologists such as Paul Stamets and Merlin Sheldrake.[23] There is reason to feel ambivalent, however, about the current mycological turn, characterised as it is by an optimism which, while it offers openings for radical social imagination, may not offer actionable solutions to persistent material injustices – and worse, may serve as an enabling logic for continued extractivism and colonial capitalist exploitation.[24]

While fungi might be commonly thought of as the weird and wonderful fruiting bodies that appear after rainfall, visible mushrooms are the transient product of much larger organisms, composed of long filamentous structures called hyphae that branch out in search of food and new territory, and form into mycelia. Mycelia can travel through soils and in some cases inside organisms, forming intimate connections with bacteria, protoctists, animals, and plants, in some cases trading nutrients and water or creating protection, in others deconstructing or killing the host organism.[25] Some fungi utilise this network to redistribute nutrients among neighbouring plants, contributing to the regulation and management of an ecosystem.[26] It has also been suggested that this mycorrhizal network is utilised by

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21 See for example Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

22 Natalia Cecire and Samuel Solomon, 'Mycoaesthetics; or, why mushrooms can never run out of steam', *Critical Inquiry*, 2023, 5: https://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/112132/

23 Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest* (Allen Lane, 2021); Paul Stamets, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World*, Illustrated edition (Ten Speed Press, 2005); Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*, Illustrated edition (Random House, 2020).

24 Cecire and Solomon, 'Mycoaesthetics'.

25 Boddy, *Fungi and Trees*; D. Moore, *21st Century Guidebook to Fungi*, 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press, 2020); B. Spooner and P. Roberts, *Fungi*, New Naturalist Library (Collins, 2005); Michael J. Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Lives For: Matsutake and the Worlds They Make* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

26 Moore, *21st Century Guidebook to Fungi*; Boddy, *Fungi and Trees*; Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*.

trees and plants to exchange messages and share information using "info-chemicals" that warn neighbouring plants of potential insect attacks.[27] Furthermore, fungi have a vital role as decomposers, able to break down the most persistent of organic wastes.[28] Unlike plants that use the energy of sunlight to make their own food through photosynthesis, saprotrophic fungi can get their nutrients from almost any non-living organic materials (leaves, wood, insects, animals, dung, petrochemicals, tannins, and more) that they break down with specialised enzymes. This process helps keep nutrients flowing through the ecosystem. All these properties and more lend themselves to imagining distributed, collaborative, and remedial solutions to modern problems of fragmentation, contamination, depletion, and waste. As noted above, however, there is a tendency to exaggerate fungi's technical capacities in the service of what Natalia Cecire and Samuel Solomon have dubbed a "cruel myco-optimism" wherein a putative 'fungal fix' appears to overcome the devastating contradictions of biopolitical, colonial capitalism.[29] Indeed, we see a certain colonial and redemptive logic at work in popular attempts to harness fungi's technical capacities to human ends, while the misrepresented bio-remedial capacities of fungi may in fact lead to various forms of ecological harm through overharvesting, indiscriminate mycorrhizal inoculation, and associated practices.[30]

Amongst queer and trans scholars, artists, and activists, fungi's collaborative and remedial capacities have been embraced as affirmative figurations for alternative forms of love and community. Here, mycelial comparisons lend their potency to visions of decentralised activist organising "inspired by the underground fungal networks that turn waste and toxicity into new life", forming connections and sharing information across vast distances, celebrating the decompositional capacities of gender/sex transition, and turning on their head cis-heteronormative orders of beauty and disgust.[31] From foraging walks to musical theatre, innumerable queer cultural productions reference fungi and the mycelial network as a site of speculative and imaginative resistance against oppressive cis-hetero-normative kinship structures.[32]

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27 Zdenka Babikova et al., 'Underground signals carried through common mycelial networks warn neighbouring plants of aphid attack', *Ecology Letters*, 2013, 16(3), pp. 835–43: https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.12115

28 Moore, *21st Century Guidebook to Fungi*.

29 Cecire and Solomon, 'Mycoaesthetics', p. 13.

30 See also Max Liboiron, 'Pollution is colonialism', in *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2021): https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478021445

31 adrienne maree brown, 'Four insights for radical organizing from the mysterious world of mushrooms', Truthout, 1 May 2023: https://truthout.org/articles/four-insights-for-radical-organizing-from-the-mysterious-world-of-mushrooms; Syrus Marcus Ware, 'Possibilities of mycelial Love w/ Syrus Marcus Ware' [Possibilities podcast] (n.d.): https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/possibilities-podcast/episodes/S3-E8-Possibilities-of-Mycelial-Love-w-Syrus-Marcus-Ware-e1rr0he; Primary, 'Queer mushroom joy', We Are Primary [blog] (2023): weareprimary.org./

32 Nina Marianne Scott and Dan de la Motte, 'Be more mushroom' [musical theatre production] (2023): https://ninamariannescott.com/bemoremushroom

These brief yet persistent appeals to fungi's biophysical characteristics often lean heavily towards metaphor, tacitly embracing a new materialist impulse which looks to the vitality of the more-than-human to model an emancipatory line of flight.[33] Specifically, the mycorrhizal network offers a radical imaginary for queer and trans care networks that move beyond the heteropatriarchal framework of privatised love and care straitjacketed by the nuclear family. This chapter takes these multiplicitous entanglements with fungi as an invitation to stop and linger; to think carefully about fungal analogies as a means with which to imagine alternative queer figurations of love and community care, without collapsing that imaginative work into an uncritically redemptive fungal narrative. In doing so, we do not intend to reproduce a strictly affirmative vitalism, but neither do we intend to negate the potential for fungal analogies to generate radically different – and hopefully better – ways of relating. Echoing recent geographical work on negativity and the negative, we aim instead to insist on the fundamental indivisibility of vulnerability and death from life, and thus also from any expression of love.[34] To that end, we focus specifically on heart-rot decay, a process which has been much less well-studied and less widely popularised than the mycorrhizal network, and which offers a very concrete analogy for considering the relationship between love and (dis)individuation along ecological lines.

Heartwood rot: what seems catastrophic may be life-enhancing

The two native oak species in the UK, where we the authors live and work (*Quercus robur* and *Q. petraea*), are slow-growing, long-lived trees, known for their ability to reach great age and size, and for hosting an exceptionally rich ecosystem of associated species.[35] The high concentration of tannins (polyphenols that inhibit

33 David Hollingshead, 'Neko case and the molecular turn', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2019, 25(4), pp. 617–647: https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-7767809; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

34 Perhaps it is unsurprising that we struggle to articulate an approach outside the opposition of affirmation and negation, given the intellectual lineages we are trained to. In non-dual traditions this indivisibility has long been considered self-evident; for a current example of practice in this vein see Darius/Dare Carrasquillo, 'Death practice musings', Substack newsletter, 'The night garden: Wisdom-play via nondual animism' [blog] (5 June 2022): https://thenightgarden.substack.com/p/death-practice-musings. For recent geographical engagements with negativity see Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (eds), *A Place More Void* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison (eds), *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); Thomas Dekeyser and Thomas Jellis, 'Besides affirmationism? On geography and negativity', *Area*, 2021, 53(2), pp. 318–325: https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12684; Thomas Dekeyser et al., 'Negativity: Space, politics and affects', *Cultural Geographies*, 2021, 29(1), pp. 5–21: https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211058080

35 Though we use the language and conventional scientific taxonomy of species, it is worth bearing in mind that species' names represent useful fictions rather than natural entities (see Jody Hey, 'The mind of the species problem', *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 2001, 16(7), pp. 326–329:

fungal growth) in oak heartwood makes these trees a hostile environment for all but a few specialist decay species that have evolved the capacity to degrade them.[36] These include two dominant species, the keystone and most abundant heart-rotter *Fistulina hepatica* (beefsteak fungus) and *Laetiporus sulphureus* (chicken-of-the-woods), a more generalist species which also commonly occurs on other host trees.[37] Each species decays heartwood in a different way. *Fistulina* causes a slow, diffuse decay of the non-functional heartwood that makes up much of the internal volume of the tree. As a result, the tree has time to adapt and adjust to the impact of fungi, resulting in changes to the structure and ecology of the tree that can both extend and enrich the tree's life as well as the number of relationships it is able to sustain as part of a wider ecosystem.[38] Oaks and heart-rot fungi co-evolved and in that sense enable and participate in one another's (un)becoming, but this is not a dyadic relation. Decay communities within an oak are multispecies assemblages, involving both multiple fungi and numerous other life-forms.[39]

The presence of heart-rot decay fungi has historically been understood as singularly detrimental to their host trees.[40] This approach derives at least in part from a preoccupation with loss of value to timber production.[41] It also derives from an

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https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-5347(01)02145-0). These particular oak species hybridise wherever they overlap, queering the species distinction to the point where the hybrid Q. × rosacea can in some areas outnumber either parent species (see P.A. Stroh et al., 'Quercus Petraea × Robur = Q. × rosacea Bechst', in *BSBI Online Plant Atlas 2020*, (2020); Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities'. On the properties and ecological importance of oaks see R.J. Mitchell et al., 'Oak-associated biodiversity in the UK (OakEcol)' (NERC Environmental Information Data Centre, 2019): https://doi.org/10.5285/22b3d41e-7c35-4c51-9e55-0f47bb845202

36 Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities'; K.St.G. Cartwright and W.P.K. Findlay, *Principal Heart Rots of Oak* (Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, University of Michigan, 1936).

37 Wright et al., 'Getting to the heart of the matter'.

38 On host tree adaptation, see Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities'; Boddy, *Fungi and Trees*; V. Nolan et al., 'The Ancient Tree Inventory: A summary of the results of a 15-year citizen science project recording ancient, veteran and notable trees across the UK', *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 2020, 29(11–12), pp. 3103–3129: https://doi.org/doi: 10.1007/S10531-020-02033-2/TABLES/4; A. Farjon, *Ancient Oaks in the English Landscape* (Royal Botanical Gardens, 2017). On its ecological effects see Gianluca Piovesan et al., 'Ancient trees: Irreplaceable conservation resource for ecosystem restoration', *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 2022, 37(12), pp. 1025–1028: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2022.09.003; Ross Wetherbee et al., 'Hollow oaks and beetle functional diversity: Significance of surroundings extends beyond taxonomy', *Ecology and Evolution*, 2020, 10(2), pp. 819–831: https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.5940

39 Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities'; Jogeir N. Stokland, Juha Siitonen, and Bengt Gunnar Jonsson, *Biodiversity in Dead Wood*, Ecology, Biodiversity and Conservation (Cambridge University Press, 2012): https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139025843

40 Berry and Beaton, 'Decay in oak'; Wagener and Davidson, 'Heart rots in living trees', *The Botanical Review*, 1954, 20(2), pp. 61–134.

41 G.T. Kirker, 'Wood decay fungi', in *Encyclopaedia of Life Sciences* (Wiley, n.d.): doi:10.1002/9780470015902.a0027655; K. Gales, 'Heartrot in forest plantations – Significance to the wood processing industry' (ACIAR Technicak Reports, 2002); J.S. Boyce, *Forest Pathology* (McGraw Hill Publishing Co., Ltd, 1938).

immunological model in which organisms are conceived as discrete, self-contained units, and health is equated to the unadulterated integrity of the bounded organism: "the parameters of biological survival are normative by nature, in that they are governed by a practical ideal of homeostasis".[42] This is a logic of (re)production: the individual entity is conceived in terms of its extractive potential, whether as commodity value or through the production of future labour.[43] However, while it is true that in some circumstances heart-rot fungi may shorten the life of their host trees in various ways, recent mycological research shows this does not represent a full picture of the possible interactions between trees and decay fungi.[44] In particular, the relationship between oak trees and heart-rot fungi may in some circumstances significantly extend both the longevity and the associated biodiversity of individual trees as well as the forest ecosystems within which they coexist. Thus, even as decay breaks down the substance of the individual entity, it also constitutes it in its perceived identity as an exceptionally long-lived and species-rich tree. Indeed, we could go so far as to argue that much of what makes an oak *an* oak is directly or indirectly enabled through its non-dyadic entanglement with fungi.

Speakers and writers of English use the word 'love' to refer to a range of quite different relations, including among others: attachment, desire, worship, jealousy, affection, commitment, nurture, and care. As Eben Kirksey points out, humans are not exceptional in their capacity for 'entangled empathy' and co-constitutive 'intimacies'.[45] Queer thinkers from bell hooks to Sophie Lewis have written of love as a practice of extension: a reaching *towards*, an entanglement *with*, and an investment *in* the autonomous flourishing of love's object.[46]

Extension of this kind is an intimate, perhaps affectionate commitment to (an) others' flourishing. Such a commitment, a 'reaching towards', need not always or

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42 B. Massumi in Emre Sünter, 'Interview with Brian Massumi: From the ecology of powers to an aesthetics of the Earth', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2022, 39(7–8), pp. 269–286: https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221146413; on the intersection of cis-hetero-normative and immunological logics see also Sage Brice and Felix McNulty, 'Viral ecologies: Resurgent nature, COVID-19 and the discourse of transgender contagion', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2024, 25148486241284176: https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486241284176

43 For notes on a Marxist theory of non-human species-being, see Hannah Fair and Matthew McMullen, 'Toward a theory of nonhuman species-being', *Environmental Humanities*, 2023, 15(2), pp. 195–214: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-10422366

44 Wright, 'Fungal heart-rot communities'; Emma C. Gilmartin et al., 'Fungal endophytes and origins of decay in beech (*Fagus Sylvatica*) sapwood', *Fungal Ecology*, Fungal community structure, development and function in decomposing wood, 2022, 59, 101161: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.funeco.2022.101161; Boddy, *Fungi and Trees*; Lynne Boddy et al. 'Wood decay communities in angiosperm wood', in *The Fungal Community*, ed. John Dighton and James F. White (CRC Press, 2017), pp. 169–190.

45 Eben Kirksey, 'Queer love, gender bending bacteria, and life after the anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2019, 36(6), p. 199: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418769995

46 bell hooks, *All About Love* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2016); Lewis, *Abolish the Family*.

necessarily imply nurture, since love – including mycelial entanglement – is also at times acquisitive, selfish, or depleting. Nor is it necessarily helpful to think in terms of the age-old (Greek, Christian) dichotomy of 'selfish' and 'altruistic' love. However, extension for us is 'selfless' in an altogether different sense, in that it need not be contingent on the presence of an identifiable, desiring self, nor of a single, identifiable other. It is in this spirit that we speak of entangled non-human relations – and of mycelial entanglement, specifically – as manifestations of love that are not reducible to the grammar of subject and object. Similarly, though we write, for want of a better word, of mycelial entanglement as a 'manifestation' and 'expression' of love, we do not mean to suggest that love somehow precedes these processes, but rather to point to an understanding of love-as-doing, where doing comprises also *un*-doing.

Thinking about non-human affection is a reasonably straightforward proposition, since many forms of life evidence it. It names a mode of intimate attraction that can vary in expression but revolves around proximity and connection, and is often tactile and sometimes tender. While it is a greater stretch of the imagination to consider affection in plants and fungi as well as animals, the concept of 'extension' carries with it some of this quality. Equally, it is possible to speak of non-human entanglements in terms of commitment, on condition that commitment is not conflated with attachment or with a prescriptive teleology, either of which conflation could be said to be contingent on the presence of an intentional self. Commitment might be measured not by longevity but by degree of investment, such that a committed relationship is one in which those involved become invested in one another's flourishing and/or demise. Similarly, among humans, commitment needn't always equate with long-term, linear plotlines.[47]

In *Fistulina*, loving oaks has been a long-term, even an evolutionary commitment. What started out as a 'toxic' relationship has matured into the more reciprocal arrangement we observe today; one that can reasonably be considered mutually beneficial. Yet *laetiporus* (less specialised and therefore less dependent) may well take more than it gives back, while the branch failures and snag habitats it creates become opportunities for other species to flourish. Thinking strictly in terms of longevity ignores the ecological significance of failures, interruptions, and temporary openings that draw out a greater variety of types of relationships.

Becoming entangled is thus a form of (ecological) commitment. Importantly, this definition wouldn't count every form of relation as love, but it is open enough to encompass a range of non-volitional, non-intentional relationships. We might think of a mycelial relationship as a form of love because it involves intimate entanglement combined with practices of nurture and decomposition. The doing-with of mycelial love involves processes of destruction, vulnerability, and corrosion as a necessary but insufficient condition of multispecies flourishing, which is itself, in turn, an enabling condition of decay.

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47 Willey, *Undoing Monogamy*.

Furthermore, such expressions of love are not limited to the naturalised Darwinian logics of lineage and sexual reproduction, nor to Freudian logics of 'normal' sexual development tied to the nuclear familial relations of the father, mother, and child.[48] The triangulation of relations in the Oedipal complex produces a distinct heterosexual order and direction for desire. Lauren Berlant describes how popular notions of the Oedipal complex have been translated into a narrowly prescriptive love plot – "a temporal sequence in which erotic antagonism or anxiety is overcome by events that lead to fulfilment".[49] This translation smooths over the ambivalence and complexity in many psychoanalytic ideas of love where destruction (the death drive) and preservation (the pleasure principle) of the love object are part of the same process.[50] By contrast to the arborescent geometry of the cis-hetero-reproductive love plot, rhizomatic thought splits off in multiple, branching, reversing, coalescing, and rupturing directions that displace linear trajectories. Mycelial love takes this impetus one step further, positing love as a convergence of non-exclusive, material entanglements.

Eating out to help out – beyond a jealous, exclusionary love[51]

The love affair between oak and fungi completely disregards that "reduction of life's legitimate possibility to one plot", which according to Berlant "is the source of romantic love's terrorizing, coercive, shaming, manipulative, or just diminishing effects – on the imagination as well as on practice".[52] Conventional expressions of love remain tied up with institutions like marriage, family, and property relations that promise durable intimacy. The nuclear family is legally, economically, and aesthetically privileged, yet the demands of neoliberal capitalism have sabotaged many of modernity's seemingly secure institutions of love and reciprocity, which prove increasingly unattainable and/or undesirable in the context of precarious employment and spiralling house costs.[53] Queer, trans, and feminist scholars have long

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48 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Martino Fine Books, 2011).

49 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 24.

50 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

51 This subheading references an ill-conceived government scheme in the UK, intended to counter economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by subsidising sales of food and non-alcoholic drinks in public social venues. Whether tapped as a vein of (queer) hilarity, or anger and despair at the reckless encouragement of epidemiological risk (see Peter Walker, 'Science adviser referred to Rishi Sunak as "Dr Death", Covid Inquiry hears', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2023, sec. UK news: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/oct/19/science-adviser-referred-to-rishi-sunak-as-dr-death-covid-inquiry-hears), the slogan draws attention to an existential condition of mutual vulnerability, entanglement, and dependency: where we eat and how we fuck matters to more than just ourselves.

52 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 87.

53 Catherine H. Mercer et al., 'Changes in sexual attitudes and lifestyles in Britain through the life course and over time: Findings from the National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and

sought to dislodge the cis-hetero-reproductive love plot from its culturally hegemonic position, experimenting with alternative configurations of love as a generative site of collective transformation and resisting the powerful imposition of traditional Oedipal family narratives that fail to recognise there are "other histories to be told about the structuring of the unconscious" that are not as conservative, cis-hetero-normative, familial, and exclusive.[54] While Sophie Lewis acknowledges the unknowability of a post-Oedipal psychological landscape, she challenges us to project ourselves into a future where people do not rely exclusively on the private household for care.[55] Evoking abolition as "the concept we have for the simultaneous destruction, preservation and transformation" of a system, Lewis calls for an expanded configuration of the familial, based on more varied forms of relationships and on collectivising the burdens of care.[56] Following Hil Malatino, we wonder what care labour looks like if we "begin not with the family but instead from the intricately interconnected spaces and places where trans and queer care labor occurs: the street, the club, the bar, the clinic, the community centre, the classroom, the nonprofit" or – for the purposes of this chapter – the forest.[57]

Love on a possessive, future-bound model is conservative in the sense that it is invested in the reproduction of sameness, and hence also in that it affords no space for dissolution and decay as legitimate, necessary, and (yet) potentially transformative functions of love. Disaffections, discontents, obstructive behaviours, and forms of abuse or violence remain suppressed and unchecked, in the service of an outwardly 'healthy' familial productivity. Decay ecologies, however, indicate that an absence of mechanisms for transformation can amplify the risk of premature failure or harm. A process with only one admissible outcome does not allow for rupture, healing, evolution, or necessary escape. It is only through openness to multiple potential outcomes that it becomes possible to fully surface tensions that might otherwise become increasingly harmful. Furthermore, one relationship can

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Lifestyles (Natsal)', *The Lancet*, 2013, 382(9907), pp. 1781–194: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62035-8

54 hooks, *All About Love*; Jennifer C. Nash, 'Practicing love: Black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality', *Meridians*, 2013, 11(2), pp. 1–24: https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1; Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, 'The personal is still political: Heterosexuality, feminism and monogamy', *Feminism & Psychology*, 2004, 14(1), pp. 151–157: https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353504040317; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press Books, 2016). The quoted phrase is from Constance Penley, Andrew Ross, and Donna J. Haraway, 'Cyborgs at large: Interview with Donna Haraway', in *Technoculture*, Vol. 3, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 1–20: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsdkh

55 Lewis, *Abolish the Family*.

56 Sophie Lewis, 'Abolish the Family: Sophie Lewis speaks to Ben Smoke', interview by Ben Smoke [video], Verso Books (13 October 2022): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FiD-2JGrM3s; see also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022).

57 Malatino, *Trans Care*, p. 42.

alter how its constituent individuals enter into another relationship – the 'failure' of branch loss is also an opening into new and different forms of life. Allowing our thoughts to stray further into the realm of metaphor, we might consider how love in the sense that Lewis gestures towards can instead allow for, perhaps even facilitate, the process of breaking down difficult internal structures, bringing about transformation for both the individual and the relationship. Yet it can only achieve this by accepting the risk of exposing unresolvable weaknesses, which may spell death for certain forms of relation.

"Endosymbiotic love", as Kirksey writes, "involves ensembles of selves – associations of entangled agents involved in relations of reciprocity and accountability, assemblages that can generate feelings of empathy and desire".[58] Endosymbiosis, theorised at the scale of cellular evolution, describes the process whereby one form of life became absorbed within another to produce the possibility of complex, multicellular life.[59] Understood more broadly as the phenomenon of one organism living within another, endosymbiosis names the constitutive entanglement of multispecies living arrangements – and dying arrangements – including the love affair of oaks and fungi. Nutrients locked up in dead heartwood are made available to feed new growth through the process of fungal, invertebrate, and microbial decay. The fine lignin skeleton remnants that eventually become combined with soils form part of the vitally important humus layer, which allows microbial life to thrive in soils.[60] Furthermore, decaying wood attracts invertebrates, which attract small birds and mammals, which attract larger predators, all of which contribute to the immediate cycle of nutrients that sustain the tree's growth. In a very literal sense, the oak (through processes of fungal and microbial decay) eats itself.

In the context of rapid invertebrate population crashes at global scale, however, the creation of invertebrate habitat does more than merely enrich the individual tree's immediate environment; it helps maintain the ecological conditions of possibility for future survival of countless interdependent species.[61] This is a future that is largely unknowable. While the language of biodiversity conservation measures prospects of future survival in terms of the continuity of familiar, existing life-forms (the reproduction of sameness), it is possible to discern between more or less diverse and complex ecological futures without necessarily seeking to reproduce

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58 Kirksey, 'Queer love', p. 207.

59 L. Margulis, 'Symbiotic theory of the origin of Eukaryotic Organelles; criteria for proof', *Symposia of the Society for Experimental Biology*, 1975, 29, pp. 21–38; Lynn Margulis, Michael F. Dolan, and Ricardo Guerrero, 'The chimeric eukaryote: Origin of the nucleus from the karyomastigont in amitochondriate protists', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2000, 97(13), pp. 6954–6959: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.97.13.6954

60 B.G. Marcot, *Ecosystem Processes Related to Wood Decay* (US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 2017), pp. 1–44.

61 Rodolfo Dirzo et al., 'Defaunation in the anthropocene', *Science*, 2014, 345(6195), pp. 401–406: https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1251817; Stokland, Siitonen, and Jonsson, *Biodiversity in Dead Wood*.

what we currently have and know. Returning to forest ecology, we wonder whether conservation science's predilection for cherishing those things that remain in place over a long time – such as iconic oak trees – has to do with our extractive tendency to cause precisely those kinds of damage that prevent such longevity. This paradoxical nostalgia for an unchanging nature makes it harder to value those ecological phenomena that churn faster, and as a result we don't tend to attribute conservation or cultural priority to the disruptive, the ephemeral, and the short-lived. If cis-hetero-reproductive love is a pursuit of immortality through reproduction of the self-same, the oak that eats itself offers instead a model of immortality predicated not upon homeostasis, but on change.[62] This is an immortality composed as much of slippages, failures, absences, and endings as it is of openings, encounters, and new beginnings, and if it therefore no longer resembles the kind of immortality for which cis-hetero-reproductivity strives, this is, after all, our stated intention.

Loving oneself and/or loving multiple others offers viable arrangements for living and dying in community with wider ecologies. The dissolution of the individual – the disruption of its hermetic boundaries and transformation of its interiority – opens up spaces in which new forms of relation (perhaps even new ways of relating to relation) become possible.[63] The power and the pleasure of such a mycelial love lie in the simultaneity, the coextension, of decay and abundance.

Conclusion: "love will tear us apart (again)"

An oak's cellular architecture is composite. Because *Fistulina* begins by digesting soft cellulose and leaving the much harder lignin, an oak's heartwood can become gradually less dense over a protracted period while retaining its structural integrity.[64] Decay has architectural possibilities: as we have seen, hollows and structurally altered wood opened up by the process of decay create habitat for nesting invertebrates, birds, and small mammals.[65] Indeed, the tree itself can sense and respond to this process with new architectural forms, putting out buttress roots that provide a stronger foundation and enable the tree to support a larger crown. Once the non-living centre of the tree begins to hollow out (and by around 200–300 years of age), the tree acquires a cylindrical shell structure – a tubular column – that can possess more tensile strength than a solid trunk. A densely solid hardwood trunk is strong but brittle. As the tree matures, it is at risk of snapping under the force of high winds that catch the sail-like canopy of a tree; a rupture that will likely result

62 Compare Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central Publishing, 2000).

63 Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*.

64 J. Latham and F.H. Armstrong, 'The mechanical strength properties of "brown" oak', *Forestry: An International Journal of Forest Research*, 1934, 8(2), pp. 131–135: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.forestry.a063380

65 Stokland, Siitonen, and Jonsson, *Biodiversity in Dead Wood*.

in premature death. A hollow tree may instead shed an individual limb, releasing its load without sustaining fatal damage, and persisting to regrow a full and healthy crown.

In the oldest extant examples, hollow oaks have outgrown their original buttress foundations, and begin to reduce down slowly into the ground that sustains them. Such oaks, if not hit by other major pathogens or structurally problematic wounds, can be extremely robust and may continue to live for many centuries.[66] One potential outcome of this process is full subsidence of the original trunk, leaving nothing but a circle of darker soil and a ring of seemingly youthful trees, each of which is in fact a re-rooted branch of the vanished tree, in what is known as a 'phoenix' form.[67] While it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to verify individual cases, it has been speculated that such a cycle could repeat multiple times, and perhaps indefinitely.[68] Many of the 'individual' trees we encounter in an ancient forest may actually be reborn in this way, as whole stands of trees that constitute single organisms, thousands of years old. Thus we bear witness to the possibility that an oak tree, like Barbara Kingsolver's forest, "eats itself and lives forever". Indeed, we are not sure any longer that there is anything but the most tentative and provisional distinction to be made between the oak tree and the forest at large.

Catastrophe invokes fatalistic totality: the tree that shatters and breaks under the weight of a storm wind, an entity that was there and then is no more. But what if the tree never was a singular and self-contained entity? What if the tree has already grown hollow; drops a branch and sends up new shoots from the wound? How then would we understand mortality and loss, and understanding loss differently how else might we imagine immortality – and therefore love? In place of the teleological ideal of love as catastrophic union, predicated as it is upon a binary, dyadic (non-)complementarity between unitary subjects, mycelial love suggests a nonlinear, distributed, and multiplicitous relationship in which death and life are not mutually exclusive domains, but two aspects of one process.

The danger of such an argument is that by foregrounding the generative and enabling functions of death and decay we might appear to redeem, or even to bypass, loss and finitude.[69] As David Bissell, Mitch Rose, and Paul Harrison have argued, "to not acknowledge the finality of death, to see it only in terms of the

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66 Farjon, *Ancient Oaks in the English Landscape*.

67 Dirk Dujesiefken et al., *Trees-a Lifespan Approach* (Fundacja EkoRozwoju, 2016); Peter Vujaković, 'Phytobiography: An approach to "tree time" and "long-life learning"', *Arboricultural Journal*, 2013, 35(3), pp. 134–146: https://doi.org/10.1080/03071375.2013.852363

68 Richard Worrell, 'The ecology of Scotland's wonderful recumbent or "phoenix" trees', The Scottish Forestry Trust, 4 June 2019: https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1719099/the-ecology-of-scotlands-wonderful-recumbent-or-phoenix-trees/2450670/

69 Amid recent enthusiasm, in Anglophone academia, for metaphors of compost and composting, we must continue to ask which bodies get to live and which to decay in service of white ecological imaginaries; see Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative* (Cambridge University Press, 2023): https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009320337

processes it instigates or triggers, is to ignore the singularity of what is gone".[70] Well, we might ask: Is longevity any better a measure of a 'natural good' than immunological self-containment? What we have attempted in this chapter, however, is not to substitute one moral compass for another through an alternative rendition of 'nature' and the 'natural'. We do find cause for celebration (albeit with varying degrees of ambivalence) in the ways that decay enables the formation of new and seemingly ever more complex arrangements of life and death. Yet to celebrate decay as an enabling condition of life's exuberance – and even to acknowledge certain attachments we may personally feel to diversity, complexity, and liveliness as measures of what is desirable – need not translate into a redemptive logic whereby such qualities are taken to justify, diminish, or negate decay's destructive properties. Rather, it is in the attempt to avoid or subsume such properties through a reproductive fidelity to sameness that we identify a form of harm. To be clear, there is undoubtedly an ethical dimension to the question of what kinds of love are made possible through putting aside cis-hetero-reproductive fears of death and decay. However, the significance of the analogy is not exhausted (spent) by its ethical implications; nor do we feel that heartwood rot offers a singular, programmatic model of a 'good' queer love. Rather, we hope to find in the profligacy of mycelial entanglements a diversity of possible strategies for relating; for 'doing queer love' differently.[71] In doing so, we hope also to unsettle any form of moral or ethical claim that attempts to arrive at a prescriptive idea of what is 'good' by asking what is 'natural'.[72]

The longevity of the hollow oak does not constitute a 'natural' good in and of itself. It does, however, demonstrate that mycelial entanglement, contrary to classical opinion, can in many cases both enrich and extend the life of the oak. This extension can be observed not only in terms of endurance – the persistence of a recognisable, individuated entity – but also in the ways that an individual becomes unrecognisably altered, and less neatly individuated, by virtue of entering into evermore-complex relations with the collective of which it forms an inextricable part. The tree, in eating itself, becomes unrecognisable *as* itself. Immortality here is not avoidance of death or the reproduction of the same, but a giving-over (through death) to the collectivity of life unfolding (that is, love). The life of the oak includes the lives of every creature that eats, shits, fucks, and dies within the embrace of its decaying trunk. Not one life but a multiplicity. A composite entity in the most concrete, as well as the most abstract, of senses.

If dyadic love is exclusive, possessive, extractive, and binary, mycelial love is multiplicitous, mutualistic, and non-dyadic. Neither oak nor fungus desires

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70 Bissell, Rose, and Harrison, *Negative Geographies*, p. 18.

71 Lisa Diedrich, 'Doing queer love: Feminism, AIDS, and history', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 2007, 112, pp. 25–50.

72 Sage Brice, 'Not just gay penguins: On the importance of queer/trans ecologies for critical geography', *Gender, Place and Culture*, online pre-print (2025); Willey, *Undoing Monogamy*.

exclusive possession; indeed, their coming-into-relation opens up spaces for other relationships to become possible. Nor is their relationship straightforwardly one of either nourishment or destruction. Instead we observe a complex dance in which decay becomes a necessary condition of possibility for life, and life a prerequisite for decay. The love affair between oak and fungus does not take place between pre-individuated entities, but is itself an individuating encounter, in which individual potential is expressed through a transformation enacted in the space between the individual and its wider ecology, or milieu. Finally, if such a love is oriented to reproduction, it is oriented to reproduction of that which is always changing, which thereby becomes unrecognisable as itself, and yet (paradoxically) is only recognisable *as* itself by virtue of that capacity to change. The non-dyadic love of oak and fungus offers an analogic structure through which to imagine queer forms of love that do not resort to exclusivity, possession, and binary complementarity as a protection against mortality and the fundamental unknowability of mutualistically vulnerable futures.

12 Eros, orgasms, eco/geopoetics, and geophilosophy: some creative reflections on loving and the climate catastrophe

Sarah de Leeuw

Midway through Irish millennial author Sally Rooney's 2024 novel *Intermezzo*, one of the messy and complicated protagonists recalls a poignant conversation with a former lover. During their contemplation about global warming and the climate catastrophe, in both jest and deadly seriousness, the lover declares a need for an *erotics of environmentalism*. This short sentence prompted in me a careful reflection about various not fully realised threads unfurling for almost two decades across human geography and other social sciences as we grapple with how to meaningfully intervene into and live within a terrifying heterocolonial world of climate catastrophe.[1] This chapter explores those threads, with an aim both of weaving them together and nudging them further towards serious considerations about the potential of feminist erotic eco/geopoetic practices.

An assemblage of poetic contemplation, theoretical discussion, and critical engagement of ecological responsibility, this chapter tackles survivance in a time of ecological catastrophe from the perspective of a geographer, queer-informed cis-gendered feminist woman, and poet.[2] Specifically, I argue that human and

1 See for instance Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2020); Nathan Snaza, 'Asexuality and erotic biopolitics', *Feminist Formations*, 2020, 32(3), pp. 121–144.

2 While I write as a cis-gendered woman, female bodies are diverse and varied and include any and all beyond cis-gendered women – when 'woman/en' is used in this work, I am expansively referencing cis women, trans women, and non-binary folx who feel comfortable being recognised as women.

non-human survival on this planet requires deeper loves, loves that are much more embodied and sexually felt than the ones conceptualised and practised in ecopoetry, geopoetics, climate catastrophe literature, or even bio- and topophilia discussions. I am thus interested in queer feminist discussions, including historically by geographers about sex and sexuality, about eco/geo/biocultural worlds, orgasms and erotica, a genre often pejoratively positioned as one invested *solely* in moving the body (of too often cis-hetero-men).[3] Queer feminist orgasms, and erotica, I suggest, may offer ways by which to live in and create new worlds out of our climate catastrophe. Given its preoccupation with moving the body sexually towards climax, erotica (like pornography but to a lesser extent) has been categorised as unsophisticated, if not damaging, when compared with erudite genres designed to stimulate the mind.[4] I am interested in how the body, and specifically the movements and orgasmic beingness of women's sexualised bodies, are subordinately relegated to *un*productive with reference to serious (learned/thoughtful) critical sociopolitical change.[5] I thus offer a critique of both ecopoetry and much work about geopoetic practice (including some of my own) and observe that both genres and practices are deeply reliant on intellectual and spiritual (as opposed to orgasmic) contemplations of the natural world as corrective to human-induced ecological destruction.[6] In response, this chapter writes in bodies – and especially sexualised female bodies – as means by which to extend and amplify theoretical frameworks, beyond disciplines, about loving and living in climate catastrophe.

My writings and thinkings are situated partly in reference to long-standing work in geography and beyond calling upon experimental, creative, and politicised methods of expression, including poetry, to (re)present our bio/geo/cultural world. Indeed, the disciplinary blurrings of current creative geohumanities have an almost half-century-old history.[7] More than forty-two years ago, Donald Meinig observed

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3 For geographers who have led the way in considerations about sex and geography, see Robyn Longhurst, 'The geography closest in-the body . . . the politics of pregnability', *Australian Geographical Studies*, 1994, 32(2), pp. 214–223. Lydia Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). For discussions about the way erotic is pejoratively framed, see again Snaza, 'Asexuality', as well as Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (The MIT Press, 2024). See also Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (NYU Press, 2024).

4 Sophie Marie Bange, 'More than (only) words: The enduring influence of Catharine Mackinnon's antipornography feminism' (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 2020); Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen, 'Risk and utopia: A dialogue on pornography', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2014, 20(3), pp. 215–239.

5 Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Mireille Miller-Young (eds), *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).

6 Eric Magrane, Linda Russo, Sarah De Leeuw, and Craig Santos Perez (eds), *Geopoetics in Practice* (Routledge, 2020).

7 Sarah de Leeuw and Harriet Hawkins, 'Critical geographies and geography's creative re/turn: Poetics and practices for new disciplinary spaces', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2017, 24(3), pp. 303–324.

a crisis of disciplinary limitations resulting in a lack of "knowledge, reflection, and substance about human experience and human expression, about what it means to be a human being on this earth".[8] Meinig's solution was "greater openness, a clearing away of pedantic barriers [. . .] a toleration of geographical creativity", which, for Meinig, would result in geographers becoming artists and poets who embraced creations that moved beyond the rational and, instead, engendered active and engaged geographic humility.[9] The creative and disciplinary-bending geophilosophy, in its fundamental questioning not about what the Earth *means*, but how it *works* and *how we can work of and within it*, provides a conceptual framework for political and experimental geographies: in this chapter, I suggest pushing it further, with feminist queer erotic geo/ecopoetic practices, to ameliorate our calamitous destruction.

In many ways, and in conversation with Rooney's imperative for an erotics of environmentalism, this chapter takes up Meinig's challenge for geographers to become artists: in my case, I am interested specifically in the work of poets, ecopoets, and geopoetics, the latter two of which insist on a politics of poetry as an onto-epistemological project arising from direct contact with the earth.[10] Given that the chapter turns in great part on poetry itself, the work is also situated within geography's creative re/turn wherein new scholarly interactions are born at the intersections of geography and other disciplines.[11] Where this chapter departs from many discussions in eco/geopoetics and geohumanities is in its injection of a serious, and highly sexualised, consideration of human physicality and orgasmic love in response to what I argue are dominant orientations to questions of ecology and sustainability that privilege the mind. In conversation again with Snaza, I too believe that:

> the human is a hybrid biological/cultural entity or system, one that is constantly becoming in relation to a material environment, which already involves many scales – from the energetic swirl of protons, neutrons, and electrons, to the individual level of an organism's environment, to the global territorializations of transnational colonialism, and in relation to sociogenic scripts that run the cybernetic system of the person.[12]

I suggest that geopoetics and ecopoetry might become more productive upon purposeful inclusion of women's sexual political orgasmic bodies. In ways similar

8 Donald W. Meinig, 'Geography as an art', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1983, 8(3), p. 315.

9 Ibid., 'Geography as an art', p. 323.

10 Sarah de Leeuw and Eric Magrane, 'Geopoetics', *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, Antipode Editorial Collective (Antipode Foundation Ltd, 2019), pp. 146–150.

11 Sarah de Leeuw, 'Geohumanities: An evolving methodology', in *The Routledge Handbook of Methodologies in Human Geography*, ed. Sarah A. Lovell, Stephanie E. Coen, and Mark W. Rosenberg (Routledge, 2022), pp. 94–103.

12 Snaza, 'Asexuality', p. 124.

to geopoetics, but without the express focus on the geographic, ecopoetry has long searched for "a new or renewed sense of world, a sense of space, light and energy which is experienced both intellectually, by developing our knowledge, and sensitively, using all our senses to become attuned to the world, and requires both serious study and a certain amount of de-conditioning of ourselves by working on the body-mind".[13] As it stands, however, I suggest that eco/geopoetic practices, despite gesturing towards workings of the body, remain firmly entrenched in thinking and the mind, as opposed to arousal and embodied feltness. Finally, I conclude in much the same place as I begin. With a meditation on the untapped potential for new worldings that might be held by the body, by bodies, by women's moving and sexualised orgasmic bodies. With a return to the potential of poetry and poetics not as spaces of deep thought but instead as sites for women's bodies and bodies of the earth. The political possibilities of my own feminist erotic eco/geopoetic practices and languages that draw on radical critical and queer feminist epistemological demands that humans be physically and sexually moved by geologies and ecologies. This orientation allows me to think about my own body as a means of being in the world of climate catastrophe, of *becoming poetry and poetics* as a means of extending erotically-loving registers that may open new means of thinking and practising in this threatened world: returning again to the lover in Rooney's novel, I want to advance an erotics of environmentalism.

Placing poetry: an erotics of body and possibility

In 2007, British poet Don Paterson, author of eight books of poetry, including the ecologically focused *Rain*, published in *Poetry Review* a two-part essay about poetry and poetics entitled 'The lyric principle'. This was later collected as part of three essays on poetics published in the book *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*.[14] Despite reasoned and well-placed critique (the essay is exclusionary in denseness and somewhat myopic in its privileging of the English language), the essay argues a materiality of language, an ontology of poetry. Poetry, according to Paterson, is atavistic and, through a collusion between reader (and listener), poetry has a unique potency to 'engage our physical senses' due to its pressurised and patterned form. The words and structure of a poem, according to Paterson, must always evoke the world that the poem is representing.

In this way, a poem is as close to 'the real' as possible – a poem is the world, the human who first utters it, and the humans who ingest and remember it: to

13 For insightful conversations about both geopoetics and ecopoetry, see Eric Magrane et al., *Geopoetics in Practice*, and Kenneth White, 'What is geopoetics?', Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, 1989: https://www.geopoetics.org.uk/what-is-geopoetics/#:~:text=It%20seeks%20a%20new%20or,ourselves%20by%20working%20on%20the

14 Don Peterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (Faber & Faber Poetry, 2022).

remember a poem is the poem, it has become, quite literally, a part of you.[15] Although Paterson's sense of sound as foundational to poetry's lyric principle does not expressly enter sexual realms, it makes much of poetic language's capacity to move the body. Repetition, resonance, rhythm, rhyme, and pauses – the ability of words to anticipate the sounds of the words which follow them and to produce a fabric of patterning that allows the reader/listener to bodily navigate the poem – is what gives poetry the unique ability to affect, to live in the world as alive.

Paterson's interrogation of poetry is a start to understanding poetry as a theory and practice through which humans might live less destructively. Paterson's lyric principle offers a glimpse into embodied possibilities of poetry. Unlike the privileging of purely contemplative work, poetic work that eschews 'poppiness' and snappy consumption, Paterson's defence of poetry rests in part in its deeply primal, almost instinctual, and even (I would extrapolate) stimulating potential. There is a sense that Patterson's vision of poetry might include dancing, or at least, tapping one's feet, to the flow and patterning of poetic verse. Paterson, like many others discussed in this chapter, follows a lineage set in motion well before he began as a poet: mid-century American poets such as Kenneth Irby – associated with language poetry and the Black Mountain poets, who also cultivated deep relationships with geographers, including Carl Saur – insisted that poetry was a 'jumping into' the interior of the land and the self so that we might always identify paths not taken. What happens if we extend Paterson's and Irby's logics? The potential to earnestly and carefully sexualise language, so that it demands a bodily connection and attention with the world – and presents itself ontologically *as* this world – may be precisely what is needed to awaken in humans new and creative orientation to this climate catastrophe epoch.

I am calling, then, on poetry – and poets – to seriously consider making an effort to embody, and call forth, the orgasm – that event that is both cultural and biological, that is both of this world and other-worldly – because surely we do need to attend to *an/other world* that is not the destructive and human-subjugated one in which we currently inflict so much damage. What I am saying is that there might be something productive about poetry, and poets, fully embracing the possibility of a poem bringing a reader/listener to a sugary-sweet-passionate-climatic-pop. A kind of climax that engages our bodies in new ways of connecting with the earth. Why not ask that sustainability be enjoyably, consensually, ecologically, biologically, orgasmically sexual? Why not ask that this precisely be what a poem, what poetry, insists upon? Why relegate poetry to a dispassionate intellectual, cerebral, effort? Why not be moved by poetry – and seek to produce poetry that moves us – in the same way that we might be moved by land, biology, ecology, and the world? Is it not often the case, after all, that carnal and lustful love (the Greek's eros) often calls forth in us other kinds of commitments, other kinds of linkages and feelings of connection? To feel erotically connected to other beings, other subjects, does not

15 Ibid., *The Poem*.

preclude interactions that take seriously other registers of connectivity. Why then suggest that purely thinking, without the body, without carnality and sexuality, is the sole path to sustainability? Why not advocate for theories and practices aimed at engendering an ethos of feminist eco-eros, a possibility of merging the biological and cultural, the natural and the social, the body and the land – why not write poetry that celebrates and calls forth an orgasmic responsibility, a thrumming humming loving and passionate connectivity between humans and the world that moves us?

Poetic interlude: a loving offer

Here, then, is a poem. A poem to move bodies. A poem followed by an admission. The poem is from my 2012 book of poetry, *Geographies of a Lover*, in which I map, through a narrative about two grieving lovers, the tremendous sense of loss humans feel as we continue to distance ourselves from, and inflict violence on, this planet.[16]

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making love in the morning olichan running close to the river's surface early spring the days short the nights long a perpetual greyness in the northwest coast sky small silver fish twisting in the beaks of gulls converging by the thousands on the skeena river on the nass river after a thousand times or more inside of me the rhythm is perfectly matched and at low tide the mud flats smell slightly of salt the ocean reaching this far inland eel grass wet held bent seals gorging round bodies with eagles overhead slow flying barely a flicker of movement in their outstretched wings then a quick collapse and closing tight like a fist hammering their bodies drop, surface tension split open i like to hoist my cunt upward and watch you lean back both hands on my hip bones wrenching my body harder i can reach down and feel you, in out in, with my finger the ice still not broken up on sections of the rivers, monstrous blocks of graveled snow blue and black with salt speckles and once at high tide, the ice flows rushing groaning bashing as they pour downriver, at the mouth of the skeena, we witness an eagle dig her talons into the back of a salmon too large to lift from the water, that muscled hunting bird banging wings on water awkward swimming salmon wrenching the eagle must have been so exhausted when the fish was finally pulled ashore, she ripped into the guts and faced sideways a fast pumping of blood and sometimes if you stand very still on the edge of the skeena you can hear avalanches occurring, snow pack loosening and rushing, like water down mountain sides or granite faces, years later the slices through tree line scar over with slide alder and salmon berry bushes and as you pull out of me there's a sound like our dogs running across seaweed on mud, the wet ground trying desperately to coax paws back down, a resistance to release, in the estuary everything is waiting, balanced between fresh water and ocean, bodies acclimatizing, there is that tiny space of time in the morning

16 Sarah de Leeuw, *Geographies of a Lover* (NeWest Press, 2012).

> just between night and day when my body is thickly full and once again tired although i've only just awoken.

When I make my way home, I often find myself crying.

By 'home' I'm speaking broadly of so-called Northern British Columbia (BC), although what I'm about to describe happens with most sharpness when I return to either of the two places I grew up.[17] When I fly over or drive into the northern ranges of the Coastal Mountains en route to Terrace. Or when I take a tiny floatplane or a creaking white ferry across Hecate Strait en route to Haida Gwaii.

I'm not crying because I'm upset. Nor am I crying in a way that others are likely to notice. I'm not sobbing. Tears are not *streaming* down my face. The back of my throat, however, burns with a tight twist. A sticky pinging sensation settles behind my eyeballs. I clench my fists as I hold back what feels like could be a full-fledged bawling episode. I fiercely sweep away the water leaking out of my tear ducts. I am, to put it simply, experiencing what I can only describe as a physiological, biological, and embodied response to landscapes I know.

Let me be more specific, more illustrative.

As I am flying back to so-called Northern BC from some larger Southern Canadian city, there is inevitably this moment when the small jet bumps through the clouds and then, spread below me, I see huge black snapped and raw rock mountains speckled with cracked snow-covered peaks, bright punctures of turquoise lakes, creases and scars of glaciers all striated and almost filthy with brown striping blue, rips of rivers and watersheds dull green and silver, motionless.

I see this, and my body responds. As assuredly as if I were being stimulated by food, by a long run, a lover, a moment of terror. I inhale. My guts flip. Muscles knot. And I begin to move – my body especially – towards crying.

The same thing happens when I'm in the droning metal stomach of an Otter, the kind of floatplane that flies from Prince Rupert to Queen Charlotte City on Haida Gwaii. We lift off, a line of sparkling water trailing. I adjust the ear mufflers that the pilot and I are wearing and I look down on Hecate Strait.

The last time I made this flight, in mid-May, the waters were still cold steel-grey, dotted with frothy crests of waves whipped by wind and breaking below puffs of low-hanging mist that perpetually engulfs the islands. As I stared harder, though, the on-first-glance-homogenous grey of the ocean began to dissipate. Sweeps of deep almost blood-red algae-blooms, smears of colour. Clutches of gulls, hundreds of miles from any shore, forming a white island in the salty water. Once I saw whales, so impossibly tiny below that at first I thought I must be imagining the

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17 'So-called' because the mostly untreatied geographies currently mapped and demarcated as British Columbia are home to 196 First Nations, all of whom have names for what became a British colony in 1858, when Queen Victoria decided upon the moniker 'British Columbia' based on the name of the Columbia River, which the American trader Robert Gray had named after his boat. 'So-called' because this really isn't a settled-upon name, except for settlers like me.

plumes they breathed skyward, the prehistoric and soil-like colour of their massive bodies, turning, arching, breaking the sea's wide surface and slamming back down.

I cried when I saw those whales. I was moved. My body moved. The crying sensation became stronger the closer we came to Haida Gwaii, flying along the long lines of sandy shore. I remembered – and in more than just my mind – moments of digging for razor clams, of walking wet and cold.

I experienced something in my body, *as* my body, as a biological physical response. Something close to reflex, to an involuntary body-memory-movement. Something fundamentally different than *thinking* about or contemplating what I was seeing. Something best described as love. But the kind of love that is more jarring and arresting than love borne from the deep, caring, and celibate connections I have with close friends. This love was somehow more akin to lustful love, an active in-the-body love, a jolt. This 'something-close to reflex', jangling physical sensation is what I want to consider for the rest of this chapter.

Geography, poetics, feminism, queer theory, and the orgasm: the political body in times of ecological catastrophe

Almost two decades ago now, cultural geographer Sarah Whatmore noted that we live in times requiring "new ways of approaching the vital nexus between the *bio* (life) and the *geo* (earth), or the 'livingness' of the world".[18] About the same time, literary theorist Dianne Chisholm also began to extend Deleuzian writings about geophilosophy wherein, in part from a place of desire, she wrote that we might be able to rethink, and thus be in, the world as constantly undergoing change, constantly coming together and coming undone.[19] For Chisholm, geophilosophy became a means of (re)thinking our ecological catastrophe, in part by understanding text's material ability to affirm and embody the earth's flows and folds, the ground's stratifying and deterritorialising in a constant and creative state of instability and perpetual becoming. Whatmore and Chisholm might be understood as connected across disciplines in their common interest about what Jennifer Gabrys and Kathryn Yusoff, again within the same time period, observed is a shared moment of "catastrophe and global meltdown" that demands new "way[s] to register, communicate and address these changes in natural-cultural worlds [. . .] [that] give rise to new understandings and capacities within and across [. . .] disciplines".[20] Recently, queerly asexual literary theorists have noted that "erotic biopolitics" are one means of forging and crafting new disciplinary-bending

18 Sarah Whatmore, 'Materialist returns: Practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world', *cultural geographies*, 2006, 13(4), pp. 600–609.

19 Dianne Chisholm, 'The art of ecological thinking: Literary ecology', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2011, 18(3), pp. 569–593; Arun Saldanha, *Space after Deleuze* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

20 Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys, 'Climate change and the imagination', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 2011, 2(4), pp. 1–2.

practices that "link humans and nonhumans in ways that cannot be conceptualized within liberal humanist frames".[21] This project of rethinking human and non-human relationships is, as Whatmore also observes, inherently political – and, as Gabrys and Yusoff offer, "while politics might be understood as anything from the machinations of government to the forms of assembly [. . .] [. . . politics is also] that [which] encompasses the material and sensible practices that enable and are continuous with political possibility and experimentation".[22] And certainly human geographers – as noted by Angela Last – are actively engaged in experimental geographies, geographies that distance themselves from "reductive forms of testing" and are instead marked by pushing "the limitations of current conventions of representation and knowledge-making" including "embedding new forms of citizen involvement in institutional processes [or] questioning disciplinary boundaries through the use of poetry in academic writing".[23]

Might radical orgasmic poetics offer insights into how we can love in times of climate catastrophe? Can love, and possibly orgasmic lovingness, be productive and political during our climate catastrophe? Following Annamarie Jagose's *Orgasmology*, I want to explore how the orgasm may indeed be richly positioned to reconfigure deliberations about how to change powerful hegemonic sociocultural systems (as well as geographical and ecological systems).[24] I am concerned specifically with human systems that consistently (re)produce some subjects (including the geo-bio-ecological/natural world) as less worthy than powerful elites. These elites are most often white cis-gendered heteronormative males who have accrued vast resources and power within increasingly neoliberalised capitalist structures: queer theory has thus many potentials for much-needed frameworks through which to work out sociocultural and political – and perhaps ecological – change. Queer theory (as Jagose notes) is one of the most radical frameworks through which to consider sex and sexuality (as well as ecological catastrophes) because it carefully considers sublimated, dismissed, or overridden sex and sexualities. Both feminism and queer theory serve as frameworks to push the boundaries of how change can occur. In other words, if one suspects (as I do) that lenses through which to transform human relationships with ecology are not proving successful, it might be productive to seek queer and feminist theoretical frameworks.

Jagose's *Orgasmology*, and those who have more recently taken up and extended *Orgasmology*, provide compelling evidence that the corporeal – the messy fleshy spaces of women's sexualised bodies and sex/uality – is often a 'second-class citizen' in critically oriented discussions about dismantling hegemonic systems.[25] Citing various canonical [male] theorists, Jagose makes the point both that mind and

21 Snaza, 'Asexuality', p. 122.
22 Yusoff and Gabrys, 'Climate change', p. 4.
23 Angela Last, 'Experimental geographies', *Geography Compass*, 2012, 6(12), pp. 707–708.
24 Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Duke University Press, 2012).
25 See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*; Snaza, 'Asexuality'.

body are too often dualised and that, in the duality, thought and brain are privileged over body. Baudrillard, for instance, notes "in the absence or denial of the orgasm, superior intensity is possible".[26] Cultural theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – the originators of geophilosophy as discussed above – support 'plateaus' as opposed to climaxes, noting subjects should "not allow themselves to be interrupted by any external termination, any more than they allow themselves to build toward a climax".[27] In fact, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise the orgasm as a "mere fact, [and] a rather deplorable one" that serves to end, even kill, desire, relegating orgasm to the end of sex.[28] Jagose notes that even Michel Foucault, in his writings about histories of sex, sexuality, bodies, and biopolitics, writes mostly about a more opaque 'pleasure' than he does climaxing or orgasm. In the stead of orgasm, writes Jagose, Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari promote 'pleasure' (Foucault) and 'desire' (Deleuze and Guattari), arguing that only these responses allow escape from the regulating and disciplining sociocultural powers that compel bodies to achieve a mindless normalised state of sexual complacency and completion. Indeed, even radical medical practitioners and theorists of sex and sexuality (think here of Dr Alfred Kinsey) were taken most seriously as 'thinkers' when researching and analysing sex. Their efforts lost credibility when understood as the outcome of being a sexually interested and sexually insightful actor.[29] As Jagose summarises in reference to the orgasm, then, "across leftist, critical projects [. . .] orgasm is figured in the registers of normativity. Associated with [. . .] standardization and the status quo, orgasm is [thus] always in the service of systems of social oppression."[30] Orgasm is precisely the moment when the mind, the intellect, ceases to control the body: it is, therefore, base and thus, baseless. Not a true means of being in and of the world differently, in flowing folding ways that might navigate and change climate catastrophe.

For Jagose, however, the orgasm is exactly what is required for being differently in the world: "[the] 21st century orgasm is biological and cultural, representable and unrepresentable, personal and impersonal [. . .] it is also and at once worldly and out of this world".[31] Surely considering sustainably also requires being and living in registers that are simultaneously cultural and biological, that are both worldly and out of this world. Why not, then, think (and *be*) orgasmically when considering the ecological, biological, and geographical world, when trying to sort out new ways to approach sustainability? Why not privilege the body, as opposed to the mind? Which leads me to a literary genre positioned as explicitly political and ecologically action-oriented: ecopoetry embraces the ecological imperative for

26 Quoted in Jagose, *Orgasmology*, p. 7.
27 Quoted in Jagose, *Orgasmology*, p. 5.
28 Ibid., *Orgasmology*, p. 5.
29 Mary Roach, *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).
30 Jagose, *Orgasmology*, pp. 8–9.
31 Ibid., *Orgasmology*, p. 34.

personal sensitivity and social change and, unlike more traditional 'nature poetry' or poetics concerned with the pastoral, implies responsibility and ethical consideration. It is to this genre that I now turn a critical eye.

The ecologies and geographies of poetry: a loving visceral embodied sexualised critique

When I published the book of poetry *Geographies of a Lover*, it did reasonably well (it won the Dorothy Livesay Award for the best book of poetry published by a BC author in 2012) and received reasonable critical engagement, especially as an 'eco-erotic' text.[32] Recent conversations about that book and other poetic works of mine have been taken up in growing conversations about geopoetics.[33] As a book by a feminist and geographer concerned with the state of the ecological worlds in which we live, *Geographies of a Lover* was an explicitly political and sexual text, a book written to expand what I perceived as a dearth of frank, muscular, sexual, ecologically attuned feminist poetry. My political poetic intentions include a long-standing stake in the world as a feminist. Because ecopoets clearly state a political stake in the world, a stake aligned with ecofeminism, anticolonialism, and Marxism, my critical-political orientations to the world compel me to ask questions of the genre: Who is producing eco/geopoetry, what voices are absent, what kinds of work is the genre doing in the external world, and what work might still be required?[34] Because geopoetics "seeks a new or renewed sense of world, a sense of space, light and energy which is experienced both intellectually, by developing our knowledge, and sensitively, using all our senses to become attuned to the world", I feel compelled as a poet and queer-informed feminist geographer to ask: Whose mind, whose body, whose senses, and mobiliSed how and where?[35]

Although there are a significant number of ecopoets in Canada, many of them working at the radical edges of what I will characterise as 'canonical ecopoetics', ecopoetry in Canada remains – and certainly deservedly so – dominated by Don McKay, Robert Bringhurst, Tim Lilburn, Dennis Lee, and Jan Zwicky.[36] All are widely referenced as foundational to ecopoetry in the country. The highly

32 de Leeuw, *Geographies of a Lover*.

33 Tim Cresswell, 'Writing (new) worlds: Poetry and place in a time of emergency', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 2022, 104(4), pp. 374–389; Clare Madge, 'On the creative (re) turn to geography: Poetry, politics and passion', *Area*, 2014, 46(2), pp. 178–185.

34 Angela Hume, 'Imagining ecopoetics: An interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2012, 19(4), pp. 751–766; Jonathan E. Skinner, *Ecopoetics: Outsider Poetries of the Twentieth Century* (State University of New York at Buffalo, 2005); Jonathan Skinner, 'Small fish big pond: Lines on some ecopoetics', *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 2009, 14(2), pp. 111–113.

35 See White, 'What is geopoetics?'

36 Daota Jabbour, 'Crisis and calamity: Reimagining Canadian ecopoetics in response to anthropocenic disaster' (Master's thesis, University of Windsor, Canada, 2023).

anthologised and widely published work of all five poets is credited with expanding ecological understandings and engendering much-needed attention to impending environmental crises. McKay's work is credited with attuning readers to the agency of geology, of insisting that humans situate ourselves humbly amongst spaces and times of rocks and the geologic. Literary critics note of Lilburn that his poetry demands an engaged rethinking of human and non-human relationships:

> Like [Don] McKay, Tim Lilburn unites deep thinking with deep feeling in both his poetry and prose [. . .] For Lilburn, as for McKay, poetic attention begins in awe. Lilburn defines this state as "what happens to you when you are knocked to the ground by some astonishment: You go very still at some point in yourself and become entirely eye."[37]

Certainly, the innovative poetic projects of these five do exactly what poet James Engelhardt, in *The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto*, calls upon ecopoets to do: "engage the world by and through language [push] past the traditions of the pastoral or the georgic [. . .] starkly confront us with what it means to be human".[38] What is remarkably and noticeably absent from so much ecopoetry, however, is any fleshy, material, guts-and-tendons person. Earth, ground, ecology, territory, and even animal life are separated from human tissues, excretions, muscles, and ligatures. The sexual body is absent – but for scant references to love-making in memory, in places of somewhere/elsewhere. The works breathe patience. This is, indeed, a touchstone in the way the poets describe their poetics. Tim Lilburn notes in conversation:

> I think of myself as [. . .] someone who engages in various contemplative acts. That's my work. The writing is the sort of wake thrown by that [. . .] contemplative momentum [. . .] The work is shaped by the contemplative exercise.[39]

Other literary critics and scholars observe similar imperatives in Canada's leading ecopoets: in *The Poetry Foundation*'s eulogising of Robert Bringhurst, his work is celebrated because:

> Bringhurst's poetry is known for its wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and linguistic clarity [. . .] Bringhurst aims high: he attempts to grasp the essence of what it is

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37 Susan McCaslin, 'Facing the environmental crisis with contemplative attention: The ecopoetics of Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Russell Thornton', *The University of the Fraser Valley Research Review*, 2010, 3(1), pp. 64–82.

38 James Engelhardt, 'The language habitat: An ecopoetry manifesto', *Octopus Magazine*, 2007, 9(1), n.p.

39 Darryl Whetter, 'Listening with courtesy: A conversation with Tim Lilburn', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1997, 2(1), pp. 135–144, p. 135.

> to be alive [. . .] He also has the curiosity of a scientist. He never overindulges in emotion.[40]

In reading across Canada's most canonical ecopoets, what can be noted is a cool, intellectual, spiritually attuned, contemplative, sublime, and disembodied relationship to ecology and environment. Poetic reverence stands as an antidote to human violence. Deference to the micro-scale and the miraculous nature of the non-human are ecopoetry's corrective to unimaginable macro-scale planetary damage. There is little in the work that is sexually arousing, that privileges the carnality of the body as opposed to the sage focus of the mind. This is, interestingly, at odds with other calls in *The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto*, namely that while "some ecopoetry wishes to engage nature as a spiritual place [. . .] we [must remember that we] live in bodies, not spirit. We can only speak from a *bodied* connection to the world."[41]

So far as I can tell, 'cerebral' and 'spiritual' imperatives continue to dominate the genre of ecopoetics in Canada and beyond. Little space is opened to the ecological geological world as orgasmic, as moving in a fierce physical sexualised way, and as having the capacity to move human beings in an equally gut-clenching way. To put it bluntly, one is hard pressed to find the word 'orgasm', the verb 'fuck', much less the nouns 'cunt' or 'cock', in the poetry or essays of canonical ecopoetics in Canada – and beyond Canada too. This is also the case in much of the geophilosophical, geohumanties, and creative-returning work being done by geographers. Which struck me as worthy of questioning – because the work of feminists and critical thinkers is to destabilise taken-for-granted ideas about the norm, especially when that norm is bereft of women's sexualised bodies and particularly when that norm is circulating as ethically attuned socio-eco-political work and practice. Which leads me to other work and theoretical frameworks seeking to make new spaces in which humans might move towards living ecologically sustainable lives.

Love, orgasm, and poetics: considering the limits, extending the boundaries

Geographers and other social scientists are advancing approaches anchored in materialist and ontological orientations to critical theory and practice: concerns focused on connections between the planet and all life upon it. This rematerialising of theory, as Deleuze and Guattari (those of plateaus as opposed to climaxes) would have it, might be categorised as a new 'geo/bio-philosophy'.[42] Increasingly, within this material and ontological re/turn, concerns about the climate catastrophe forge

40 See https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-bringhurst (accessed December 2024).

41 Engelhardt, 'The language habitat', n.p., emphasis added.

42 See Whatmore, 'Materialist returns'.

new and embodied orientations to the human-induced calamities facing all life on Earth. The geological and the biological, the human and the non-human, are always 'a becoming', a constantly dialoguing set of subjects. Much of the writings about non-human and more-than-human subjects, or even animal geographies, emphasise the futility of divisions between natural and social sciences, between human and non-human subjects. Conjuring histories when disciplines operated in less siloed relationship to one other, there are re/newed commitments to view science and philosophy as co-invested connected projects in which theory does not take on a representational function, but rather an active and practical one, such that every theory acts as a 'mechanics' – simultaneously a technology of practice and an intervention in the world.

More-than-human geo/biophilosophies are in part extensions of late twentieth-century concepts of biophilia and topophilia. Edward O. Wilson, considered to be the father of sociobiology, coined the concept of 'biophilia' to capture an instinctive bond between humans and other living systems.[43] Shortly after Wilson, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan popularised the concept of 'topophilia' to denote human love of place.[44] Both topo- and biophilia conjure the possibility of living lovingly within the world. Both insist on this as a practice, as a necessary intervention given the state of the planet.

It is with the concept of 'philia', however, that I want for a moment to pause. There is no question that humans need new ways to conceptualise and practise life on this planet. What I want to carefully pause on, and to parse apart, is a reading of 'philia' and the potential limitations that it engenders.

'Philia' is one of *four* ancient Greek words for love. Philia is a mental love, the love of friends, a *dispassionate* virtuous love. The three other Greek words for love are: 'agape', an unconditional spiritual love in which one expects nothing in return, typified in love for one's children; 'storge', an affectionate love, a natural love, again often typified in familial kinds of love or to describe a kind of loving acceptance – as in towards a nation state, and, finally, 'eros,' a passionate love, the kind of love that accompanies sensual desire and longing. Eros is associated with an initial (read here gut, carnal, bodily) response, a physical attraction.

What does the privileging of 'philia' over 'eros' in discussions about sustainability, or living in an ecologically ethical way, suggest? What is missing from theories and practices concerning remedies for this anthropocene epoch that centre on a dispassionate virtuous love – as opposed to passionate and physical love? Can a geo/biophilosophy of interspecies 'becoming', a true materialist practising of a more-than-human orientation to the world, ever be full productive (and even REPROductive) if the 'becoming' ultimately (and, as I would argue Deleuze and Guattari would have it) never, physically, involves an actual 'coming', an orgasmic

43 Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

44 Yi Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Columbia University Press, 1990).

climax? And what might poets have to offer as answers to these questions? Perhaps the best and only way to answer this is with a return to poetry. A final poem. A poetic call for love and orgasm, for moving and being differently in this world of climate catastrophe.

Poetic concludings: an orgasmic loving offer

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the headwaters of this orgasm, this blue, begin somewhere in switzerland, a drowning in paul klee's tableau de poissons, a shaking of blue hues sparkling fish floating at sea, your weight full length on top of me, your cock slowing, a start, a prelude to quick thrusts, the flashes of light, a current, shelves of turquoise ice sun-slivered shards stacked in the skeena river's throat, cliffs of icicles dripping and the taste of my own cunt as you slide into my mouth and back again and when did i start swallowing your cum with you up so close your pulse, the vein in your leg at the base of your hip against my chin, little dipper birds dipping in the strips of water that ice hasn't yet swallowed up, their wings in the clear flow, swimming birds surrounded by wind racing over snow smoothing a high gloss shine like the skin of your cock, tight, and i am fucking tight around you, you tell me this, as my sides loosen, the huffing of a moose running across a clearcut, scent of wolf not so far away, clouds of breath, nostrils splayed, a valley that bends before a running animal, the streams of warm air from sub-alpine, the memory of klee in a city but my body an estuary-place, mouth opening on the pacific ocean where you have poured into me, the way you cup my jaw and jack yourself off into my mouth, the way you say i am going to come, shit oh shit and then the deluge that breaks blue inside me, spots of blue, a wall of blue, wet and unstopped salty you remember to thank me, fingers still inside.

13 Lithic 'I love yous'

Harriet Hawkins, Long Ly Vouch, and Flora Parrott[1]

One. Geophilia

Geophilia, a love of stone, might appear a doomed affair, only ever to be unrequited. After all, petric couplings of stone and flesh seem to summon intimacies shaped by withdrawal, remoteness, and difference. A human-non-human romance whose temporalities of courtship unfold over millennia, and conclude, ecocritic Jefferey Cohen muses, with "familiar solitudes, human exceptionalism and lithic indifference".[2] But are there other plotlines for lithic loves? In his interweaving of human and stony biographies Cohen contemplates a "conjoint creativity that breaches ontological distance [. . .] stone is devoid of neither life nor love, even if it questions what we mean when we use those terms to enclose a small world".[3] For Cohen stone "rebuke[s] the arrogance" of considering humans as set apart from a world as cold as stone, "triggering the vertigo of inhuman scale, the discomfort of unfamiliar intimacy, and the unnatural desires that keep intermixing the discrete", lithic intimacy, he concludes, "runs slow and deep".[4] Such concerns shape relations between love and the lithic as an expansive query, asking what if, rather than starting from difference we queried the space-times of attachments and detachments shaped by/through the lithic, what if we queried presumed discontinuities and continuities of mineral and flesh? What kinds of love does this open us onto?

Stone and love are an enduring coupling. From eighth-century BCE Indian understandings of diamonds as divine blessings, materialisations of the ultimate love, to the elemental allure that for Empedocles bound earth, air, fire, and water.[5] This influential theory counterposed elemental love as "material magnetism, cosmic

1 This chapter is part of this project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 863944 THINK DEEP).

2 Jeffrey Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

3 Ibid., *Stone*, p. 5.

4 Ibid., *Stone*, p. 24.

5 Jeffrey Cohen, 'Geophilia, or the love of stone', *Continent*, 2015, 4(11), pp. 8–18.

glue" shaped by spatial relations of binding, drawing, gathering, to the strife of elements in perpetual motion, a drawing apart. A rather different episode of lithic intimacy is suggested by De Beers' proclamation 'A Diamond is forever' in 1947. In yoking diamonds' adamantine inheritances with an idealised lasting love, the world's largest diamond trader and mining company bound intimate life and the lithic in the 'slogan of the century'.

In what follows we ask seven times, how does the lithic speak of love? Ranging from explorations of the cliff-based etching of love's anticipatory futures, to the lithic attachments of gemstone miners, what, we ask, do such mineralogical romances tell us of love's depths, durations, and durabilities?

For literary scholars the lithic, and especially gemstones, are 'a form thing', often disruptive of genres they feature in. Diamonds sparkle brightest in print, when everyone from writers in the Renaissance courtly love tradition, to Victorian novelists, and most recently feminist poets, mobilise them to upend a text's form and genre, and so, by extension, the wider world. To think with diamonds, writes literary scholar Stefanie Markovits is to entangle textual critique with adamantine materiality and structure.[6] As popular Victorian plotting devices, for example, diamonds' associations with deep-time and celebrated durability render them as compressed repositories of history, refractive of contemporary values, and promissory of an eternity to come. Whilst their multiscalar geographies, their wearability and portability, enfolds the Imperial and the intimate in corporeal renderings of the era's geopolitics.[7] Elsewhere in the poetry of the time, diamonds' doubleness was celebrated; enabling both lyric and narrative forms, and imparting the force of the affective and the commercial, a tricky if important proposition as consumer culture came of age.[8]

Inspired, we take forward the generative force of lithic materiality and form in reflections on a somewhat unconventional archive of lithic 'I love yous', ranging across art, visual culture, and literary genres, from the canonical classic to the popular. The stones we set together, like the octahedral form of the diamond, reflect and refract different facets of love. We ask what the lithic has to say about love, how it breaches love's apparently unspeakable qualities, but we also note its inseparability from the myriad genres and forms which create and reproduce our public and private intimacies. After all, as Lauren Berlant asks, "what does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so conventional, so bound up in institutions [. . .] and in stock phrases and plots?"[9] What does it mean, in turn, that the lithic is so

6 Stefanie Markovits, 'Form things: Looking at genre through Victorian diamonds', *Victorian Studies*, 2010, 52(4), pp. 591–619.

7 Adrienne Munich, *Empire of Diamonds: Victorian Gems in Imperial Settings* (University of Virginia Press, 2020).

8 Munich, *Empire of Diamonds*; John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

9 Laurent Berlant, *Desire/Love* (punctum books, 2012).

bound up with these expressions and institutions, phrases and plots, their reproduction, and potentially their disruption?

Two. Lithic sentiment – And what of love?

> There are girls' hearts and boys' hearts, speaking to each other daily about the trials and insecurity of our small universe. In the light of her engagement diamond, a girl's eyes keep a constant vigil [. . .] seeing recorded not only the loveliness of love but the hope of a future tender and rewarding, when growing trust and abiding peace will give their world rich meaning . . . Your engagement diamond need not be costly, or of many carats, but because it will be cherished for generations it should be chosen with care [. . .] A Diamond is forever.[10]

Flipping through the pages of a magazine in 1953 your gaze might have been arrested by a striking image, the painted head and shoulders of a stylish young blonde woman gazing into the distance over an empty desert landscape. The work of Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, the painting *Girl in Love* is the focal point of an advertisement that opens, "And what of Love?" And closes, on the bottom right of the page, with the slogan, "A diamond is forever." Dalí was an inspired choice for mass-marketing diamonds. Surrealism after all was a movement delighting in collaborations between high and low, setting commercial culture alongside rather than in opposition to the artistic avant-garde. Dalí navigates the risks of kitschy sentimentality through the oddity of a dystopic wasteland of cartoon trees and white monoliths that the woman stares across. Surrealist landscapes have long been situated as invitations to imagine, to partake in dreamlike combinations of the familiar and unfamiliar, reality and the imaginary; ideal then for fulfilling De Beers' desire to trade off links between the lithic and love.

By the late nineteenth century such volumes of diamonds were being extracted from South African soils that they were no longer rare. The De Beers Consolidated Mining Company, which controlled the world's diamond supply, needed to market their way through this radical change in the diamond's fate, preventing it from becoming a "mundane commodity".[11] In 1947 Francis Gerety, one of the few women working in advertising at the time, secured the diamond against this fate with her slogan, "A Diamond is forever", cementing the tradition of the diamond engagement ring.

What followed was a master class in the corporate enrolment of elemental forces for the ordering of intimate life. In one of the first advertising campaigns to be

10 De Beers placed their 'A Diamond is forever' ads featuring works by great artists in a range of the era's popular magazines, including *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, and *Time*.

11 Stefan Kanfer, *The Last Empire: De Beers, Diamonds and the World* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

significantly informed by market research and psychology, De Beers set about selling diamonds to ordinary Americans.[12] In the forty years after 1939 diamond sales in the US rose from $23 million to $2.1 billion, with up to 80 per cent of engagement rings featuring diamonds (up from 10 per cent in 1920).[13] De Beers designed ad campaigns, pioneered film-based product placement, and recognised celebrities' value as influencers alongside sponsoring a series of educational films for schools, churches, and movie theatres.[14] These showed throughout the 1940s and 1950s with titles like *The Eternal Gem*, *The Magic Stone*, and *Diamonds are Forever* reaching an audience of over 50 million Americans (a third of the country) in less than a decade.[15]

Integral to this 'education' was (and remains) links between love and diamonds' temporalities and materialities. As slogans like "the timeless talisman" make clear, diamonds are forever, and so, by extension, love was secured by a diamond. The strong, unbreakable diamond offered a material manifestation of what Berlant describes as the "cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" enabling the "fetishistic optimism of romantic love about tomorrow".[16]

De Beers, in fixing its oversupply problem, entangled the diamond's powerful forevers in the uncertainty of the postwar era, offering "a form of secular immortality in times of war, depression and austerity".[17] Incorporated within the dream of the American Good Life, the diamond took up a place within the "culture of sentimentality"; which Berlant writes of "as a response to a world out of joint . . . to social anxiety and the generic wish for an unconflicted world".[18] Indeed, De Beers' advertising firm NW Ayer, claimed "sentiment is as essential to your advertising as it is to your product, for the emotional connotation of the diamond is one competitive advantage which no other product can claim or dispute".[19] In its enduring form, the diamond thus enabled a re-storying of life and love outside of the "small category, the diminished frame" of human life and vulnerability, which had been made so powerfully, unignorably present by the death toll of the war and the aftermath of shattered bodies and economic

12 Peter Stanwick, 'De Beers and the diamond industry: Squeezing blood out of a precious stone', *International Journal of Case Studies in Management*, 2011, 9(4), n.p.

13 Ibid., 'De Beers and the diamond industry'.

14 Kanfer, *The Last Empire*.

15 Donna Bergenstock and James Maskulka, 'The De Beers story: Are diamonds forever?', *Business Horizons*, 2001, 44(3), pp. 37–44.

16 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 23.

17 Charles Moore, *A Diamond is forever: The construction of secular immortality and De Beers diamond advertising 1939–58* (New Mexico State, 2011).

18 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 20–1.

19 Courtney Sullivan, 'How diamonds became forever', *The New York Times*, 3 May 2013.

devastation. Its elementally promissory futures now part of how "capitalist culture effectively markets conventionality as the source and solution to the problem of living in worlds that are economically, legally and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival, let alone flourishing".[20]

Three. Lithic cynicism – "Little pets get big baguettes"

It is a classic moment of modern cinema, endlessly reprised. Marilyn Monroe sashays down the stairs, her iconic blonde hair and bright pink satin dress emphasising those famous curves, popping against the red background, her neck and wrists heavy with diamonds. Surrounded by men in tuxedos holding up classic red hearts, she croons, "Diamonds are a girl's best friend." In what was her break-out role, propelling her from pin-up to Hollywood superstar, Monroe played Lorelei Lee in the 1953 Hollywood production of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The story, based on the 1925 novel by Anita Loos (with the subtitle *The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady*), followed the path often taken by the era's representations of femininity; progressing from the pages of a women's magazine, to novel, stage, and screen (Monroe was the second Hollywood actress to play Lee).[21] The plot shifts with each adaptation; Monroe's Lorelai, funded by a rich fiancé, goes travelling with a friend. Her father-in-law, suspecting Lorelai of being a gold-digger, hires a private detective, and through a series of mishaps (involving diamond tiaras and a compromising embrace with a diamond mine owner) the two women end up singing in a Parisian cabaret, whereupon Lorelei's fiancé shows up just as she sings her iconic number (originally written by Jule Styne and Leo Robin).

But what of love in this "cynical knife of a story", as Loos' tale of modern femininity and sexualised consumerism was described?[22] For while Monroe and her gems (actually diamante) might have helped shape the diamond's aspirational image, the song is far from on brand with De Beers' marketisation of lithic sentiment. Indeed, immediately before the famous song starts Monroe enacts a cartoon rejection of love. As tuxedoed suitors hold up red hearts she darts away, flicking them dramatically with a black lace fan, before snapping it shut and tapping hearts and men's heads alike, "no, no, no, no, no", almost shrieking (apparently dubbed by soprano singer Marni Nixon). It is against this backdrop of love's demonstrative rejection that she sings of diamonds as an insurance policy against a fickle lover's vagaries. As the song progresses, De Beers' equation of diamonds and lasting love is replaced by their (imagined) primary value as bankable asset; a

20 Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 31.

21 Bethany Wood, 'Gentlemen prefer adaptations: Addressing industry and gender in adaptation studies', *Theatre Journal*, 2014, 66(4), pp. 559–579.

22 Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady* (Penguin, 2014 [1925]).

promise not of love's endurance, but security against its falsehood, fleetingness, and perhaps inevitable failure.

Until 1945 engaged women were protected by the "breach of promise", entitling them to sue for damages if their engagement was broken off.[23] In an era in which women were still perceived to loose "market value" if their virtue could be questioned, diamonds offered financial security (a false promise however as they hold little resale value). Monroe's song however does not proclaim "tender fantasies of a better good life" even if it might fail, rather as Monroe sings, affairs are a "better bet, if little pets get big baguettes". The cuteness somewhat of an antidote to the song's cynicism.

Here the lithic – and the diamond no less – speaks back to the relation between romantic fantasy and lived intimacy that it had, by way of De Beers, come to have a role in sustaining. Monroe's sassy rejection of the false promises of the suitors with their flimsy cardboard hearts is a both a statement of – but also a refusal to partake as a victim within – what Berlant describes as the Female Complaint; "women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking".[24] Diamonds do not sustain the dream of a good life here, but seem rather to call out its misrecognitions.

Monroe's success, and her sassy lithic cynicism, tends to overwrite the runaway success of the original novel, described by Edith Wharton as "the great American novel – at last", and marketed as a "culturally indispensable book".[25] The novel is a satire, sometimes cruel, taking the form of vapid Lorelei's European travel diaries. Replete with naivete, cultural ignorance and spelling errors, Lorelei meets everyone from the Dolly Sisters (Moulin Rouge performers) to Sigmund Freud, who, she reports, "seemed very intrigued at a girl who always seemed to do what she wanted to do".[26] Towards the novel's close Lorelei muses, "I am beginning to think that family life is only fit for those who can stand it."[27] As adaptation studies scholars make clear, the journey from serial in a 1920s women's periodical to 1950s Hollywood blockbuster saw Lorelei come to embody multifaceted modern femininity; exposing the inanity of sexualised, consumerist femininity, whilst also glamourising it.[28] For some, the target of its satire was smart, foolish men, reflecting the novel's mythical origins in Loos' frustration with H.L. Mencken, an infamous intellectually snobby literary critic who fell for a "golden-haired birdbrain".[29] Mencken reportedly suggested that

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23 Margaret Brinig, 'Rings and promises', *Journal of Law Economics and Organisation*, 1990, 6(1), p. 203.

24 Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 1.

25 Jenny McPhee, 'Introduction', in Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, p. 4.

26 Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

27 Ibid., *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

28 Wood, 'Gentlemen prefer adaptations'.

29 Ibid., 'Gentlemen prefer adaptations'.

Loos send the novel to *Harper's Bazaar* "where it would be read by a frivolous public and, lost among the ads, wouldn't offend anybody". For others though, this frivolous public – *Harper's* middle-class aspirational readers – was exactly Loos' target and her audience. For them the magazine offered an "instruction manual in middlebrow social pretension, offering fetish objects of cultural capital to arrivistes who were waiting to arrive".[30] Through Lorelei, "a shrewd little parasite" well-aware of the value of gems, "Loos exposes the moral and intellectual vacuity of a system and industry that trains women to create the façade of wealth and culture through accumulation".[31]

Four. Mining attachments – the desire to mine

"Svay plerng", Po San murmurs, "svay plerng, sparkly", he explains, "with lots of fire and in beautiful condition". Po San, a ruby miner working in the forest on Cambodia's northwest border is fondly reminiscing about a 24.5 caret stone he found in the early 1980s, aged nineteen. He sold it for ten damlang of gold, worth US$35,000 today. Forty years later, he returned to the area remarking, "If I work as a wage labourer, I will be a wage labourer forever, but if I mine gemstones my life can be changed someday. But being a wage labourer will never change our destiny, our fate."[32]

Desire, suggests Berlant, "describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it".[33] Artisanal mining is often described as an economy of dreams, the hope for "just one stone" shaping everyday actions of individuals imagined as desperate and foolish.[34] Yet, our understandings of the extractive practices that source stones so sought by lovers might better challenge the "too simple stories" that dismiss the miners' attachments, by casting them as yet another example of the "promise-less promise" of cruel optimism.[35] Following Berlant, Vickie Zhang invites us to consider desire, and its "scrambled surfaces and mixed temporalities [. . .] organised less by form and more by sensation, less by optimism and more by fantasy, less by endurance and more by excess".[36] As Zhang continues, under the power of

30 Ibid., 'Gentlemen prefer adaptations'.

31 Ibid., 'Gentlemen prefer adaptations'.

32 Ethnographic work conducted between 2022–2024 with over ten visits to the field site in Pailin by a team of between three and eight researchers. The story presented here is composed from the lives of several different miners.

33 Berlant, *Desire/Love*; Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

34 Daniel Tubb, *Shifting Livelihoods: Gold Mining and Subsistence in the Choco Colombia* (University of Washington Press, 2020).

35 Vickie Zhang, 'Desire's misrecognitions, or the promise of mutable attachments', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, 13(3), pp. 410–413.

36 Zhang, 'Desire's misrecognitions', p. 410.

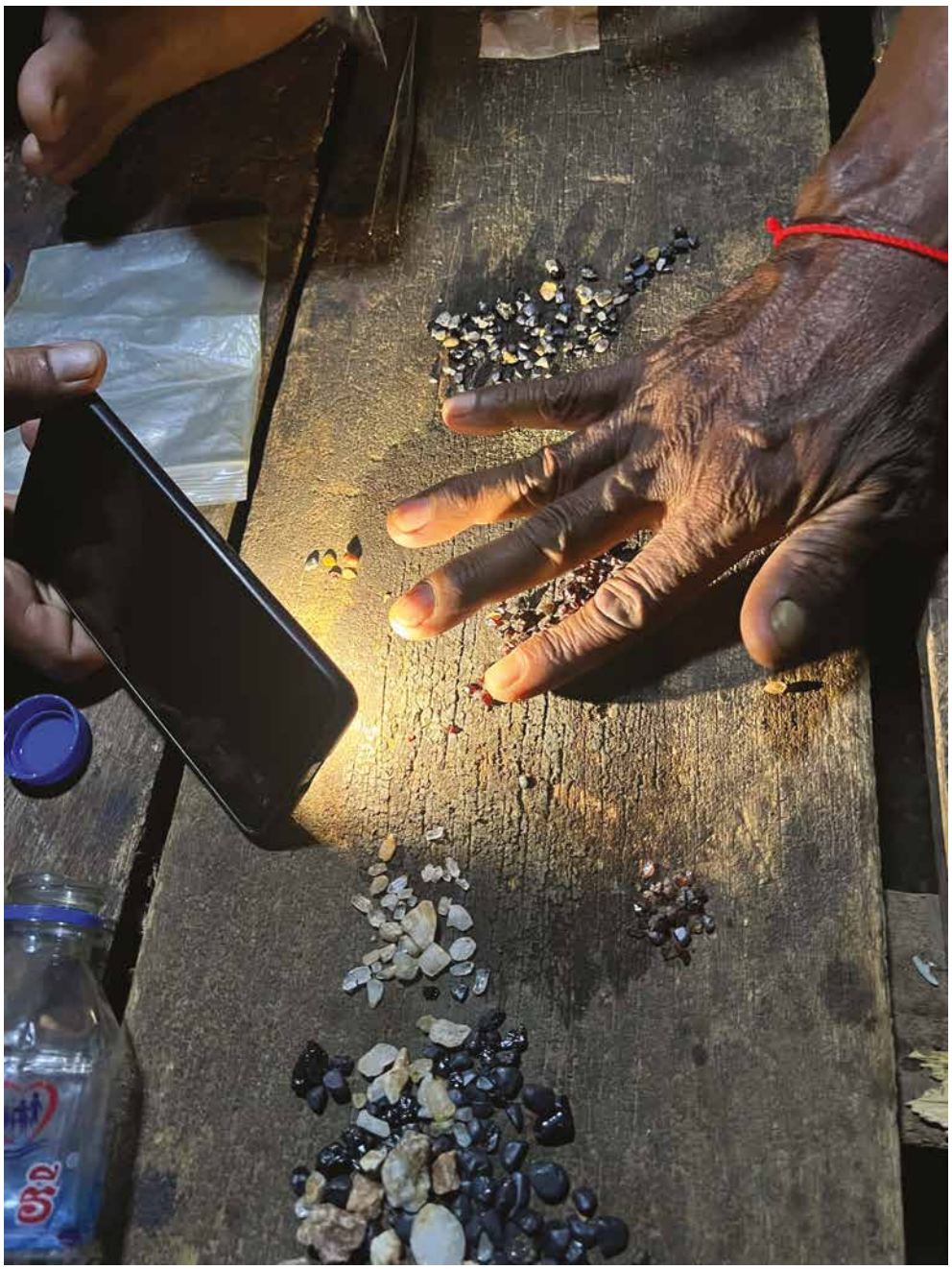

Figure 13.1 Untitled. Photograph: Authors' own.

desire, attachments don't add up, desire "leaves a gap – a gap that is also its promise".[37]

Po San is known for being ambitious, his hopes fuelled, he explains, by the memory of that "one stone". Driven, he roams the forest, seeking his older pitch, hoping for more beautiful stones. He repeats that shared sense amongst miners that success lies in "mining with heart". Every morning, he fills about ten rice sacks with soil and rock, and after a lunch of fish and vegetables foraged from the forest and, if funds allow, some rice, he goes to the river to pan. As he works, he verbally sketches this landscape forty years again. He describes easy finds of many good small and medium stones but also the growing risk to life as the area emerged as the front line of conflict between the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese, and the Cambodian Royal Military: "I was not scared of death", he said, "I only know how to push and get more [. . .] I did everything to be able to mine." He recalls a particularly bad experience of being shot at; more than thirty miners died that day, some bayoneted as they fled. Waving to another miner even older than himself, he observed ruefully that mining is very addictive.

For Ben Anderson, attachments are "enduring trajectories that bring closer something that comes to feel necessary to a way of life".[38] Today the rhythms of Po San's labour are determined by intermittent finds of small, cracked gemstones and the enduring hope for "just one stone". He observes,

> Mining gemstones is difficult and exhausting, but I have hope and this gives me energy. I came here twice already. The first time I came, I wanted to dig deep [. . .] then I ran out of food [. . .] I could not stay any longer because I have no more food.

Po San has a significant "family burden"; his wife has a chronic illness, and his son is mentally ill. Regularly running out of money, Po San returns to his village and undertakes wage labour – in construction, on a plantation – to amass a small surplus to keep them afloat. Then he returns to mine. Po San's experience of mining's "cloud of possibility" appears akin to what Zhang describes as "an enveloping embrace that clarifies and blurs at the same time".[39] In the gap between the realities of his situation and the possibility of "just one stone", mining emerges as a significant something. Different to the lithic promise of a diamond ring, this is an affective promise of "something better to come . . .", something that "opens a valued future".[40] A few months later we visit Po San again. He has found nothing in that time; the chain of association between small

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37 Ibid., Desire's misrecognitions'.

38 Ben Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment: A cultural geography of promises', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2022, 13(3), pp. 392–409.

39 Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment', p. 411; Zhang 'Desire's misrecognitions'.

40 Anderson, 'Forms and scenes of attachment', p. 411; Zhang 'Desire's misrecognitions'.

finds that enable daily subsistence and the future promises seems to be breaking down. Po San is hungry, tired, and anxious. He muses on his future; if he continues to find nothing, he will have to stop mining. He describes his deep "heart sadness", likening the failure of mining to sustain him as akin to pain of divorce, the failure of a promissory love.

Five. Petrifying desire

> They filmed her harder, harder, till her hair
> was platinum, her teeth gems, her eyes
> sapphires pressed by a banker's thumb.
> She sang to camera one, gushed
>
> at the greased-up lens, her skin investors' gold,
> her fingernails mother-of-pearl, her voice
> champagne to sip from her lip.
> Excerpt from 'Beautiful', by Carol Ann Duffy[41]

Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Beautiful' describes the rise and fall of four women: Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe, and Princess Diana. Writing of Monroe, Duffy renders her lithic and mineralogical – sapphires, gold, platinum, mother-of-pearl – the camera's lens operating as a device of petrification, enrolling the lithic in Duffy's critique of the politics of the gaze and revision of canonical love poetry.

Petrification, or the turning of things to stone, is often a feminine power, associated in the West with Medusa, the gorgon whose punishment for being raped by Neptune was to possess a gaze that turned all living things to stone. Medusa's story is told and retold across the centuries, often as an upending and scrambling of male-female power relations; the ultimate antidote to the power enshrined in the male gaze.[42] In 'Beautiful' Duffy casts the camera (and perhaps by extension the viewer/reader) as in possession of the petrifying gaze, lithifying Monroe, fixing her limbs and voice in place.

Like Duffy's other works, 'Beautiful' uses gems, gold, and pearl as classic motifs of love's lyricism – found within the courtly love tradition and its antecedents – and enrols them in recrafting the classic love poem as a space for the representation of other bodies and desires.[43] This matters because of the Western love poem's

41 Carol Ann Duffy, 'Beautiful', in *Feminine Gospels* (Picador, 2002).

42 Susan Bowers, 'Medusa and the female gaze', *NWSA Journal*, 1990, 2(2), pp. 217–235; David Lemming, *Medusa in the Mirror of Time* (Reaktion, 2013).

43 JuiletaFlores, 'Pearls, diamonds and coins: Fashioning the beloved's body in Carol Ann Duffy's poetry', *Lectora: revista de dones i textualitat*, 2020, 26, pp. 33–48.

function as a technology, shaping inherited cultural understandings of love.[44] Indeed, bequeathed to us by Renaissance poet-scholar Petrarch are over eight centuries of love's imaginings as tortured, extreme, and disruptive, as passion beyond will, an invisible chain binding the eternally faithful lover and his idealised lady. Duffy stands in a long line of women poets seeking to reshape love's lyricism by turning its classic motifs and forms against it. The lithic listing of Monroe's body, the itemisation of her petrifying form – her teeth as gems, her eyes as sapphires, her skin as gold – echoes the poetic form of the blazon, a technique by which the Petrarchial lover would defy love's apparent unspeakability with his eloquence, whose focus was a "cataloguing – and thereby objectifying – female body parts".[45] Duffy's lithic list offers a rendering of love's power relations; a fixing and stilling of desire's object, flesh hardened, voice silenced, forever crooning "diamonds are a girl's best friend". The poem continues to portion-up Monroe:

> action, cut, quiet please, action, cut, quiet please,
> action, cut, till she couldn't die when she died,
> couldn't get older, ill, couldn't stop saying the lines
> or singing the tunes.

The eternal promise of the lithic is recast here as a stilling of human life. As feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey observes, once Monroe had proven her box-office value in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the Hollywood studio system ensured that the "Marilyn look" would be (almost always) frozen, immutable in perpetuity.[46]

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44 Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

45 Jo Gill, *Women's Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 88.

46 Laura Mulvey, 'Thoughts on Marilyn Monroe: Emblem and allegory', *Screen*, 2017, 58(2), pp. 202–207, p. 207.

Figure 13.2 Untitled. Photograph by Flora Parrott.

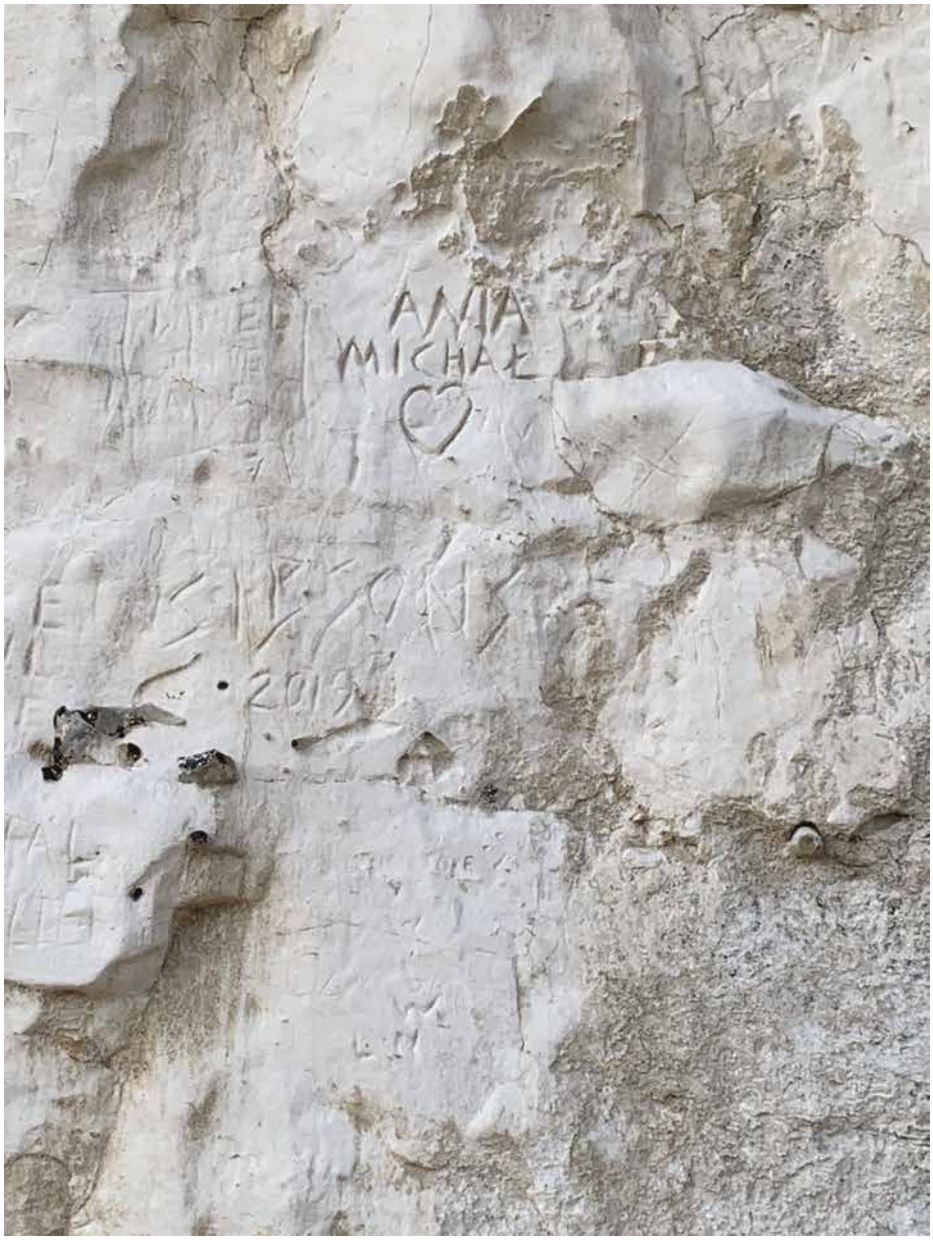

Figure 13.3 Untitled. Photograph by Flora Parrott.

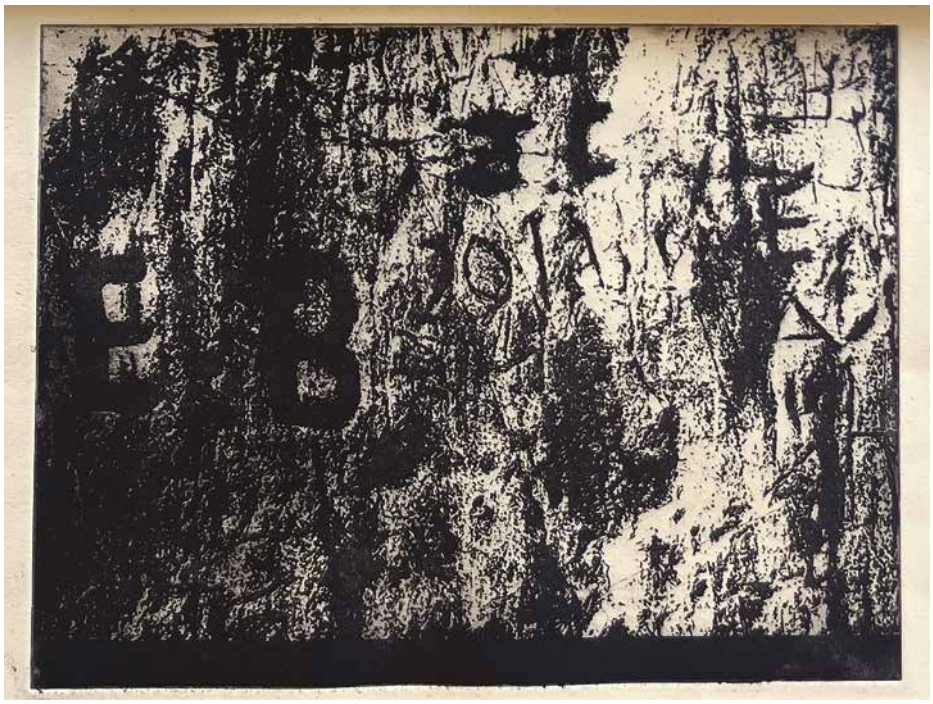

Figure 13.4 Untitled. Etching by Flora Parrott.

Seven. Anticipatory etchings?

Are Ania and Michal still together? Do they wander hand-in-hand on the beach below their love's lithic expression? Do their feelings still run as deep and wide as the edges of the heart they carved? Are their lives together as rounded and full? Or have the passions of that day fared badly in the storms of life, becoming mean and sharp, overwritten by other loves, or scoured away?

The gouges, grooves, and lines of the lovers' signatures cut into cliffs reflect a very human practice of mark-making. These expressions of love, like the practice of love-locking, carving on trees, or sticking coins in logs, are tangible traces testifying to the rituals of relational longings. There is a specifically maritime mark-making tradition that finds sailors carving names and dates on far shores, testifying to passage and safe arrival, marks of life rather than love.[47] Rarely do such carved testimonies appear in the singular. Rather akin to prehistoric archaeology's ritual deposition zones, such practices have a magnetic effect; inscriptions

47 U.K. Frederick, 'In loving memory: Inscriptions, images and imagination at the North Head Quarantine Station. Sydney, Australia', in *Encountering Imagery. Materialities, Perceptions, Relations*, ed. Ing-Marie Danielsson, Fredrik Fahlander, and Ylva Sjostrand (University of Stockholm Press, 2012), pp. 51–75.

attracting inscriptions in an accumulation of publicly displayed affection.[48] Such spontaneous gestures of affective attachment convene an imagined community of ghostly lovers, alongside, overwritten, and replaced by those they likely do not know; creating from the cliffs repositories of relationships' promissory possibilities, material etchings against the fragility of romantic relations.

The accumulation of love expressed lithically on the Kent coast is underwritten by millennia-long histories of such anticipatory etchings. An ancient trace of the lover's urge to carve is found in the nymph Oenone's imagined letter to her lost husband Paris, composed by Ovid for his *Herodies*.[49] Oenone's epistolic expressions of heartbreak accompany the imagined writings of fourteen other famously forsaken Greek and Roman heroines, among them Dido, Ariadne, and Penelope. Oenone writes,

> The Beeches still preserve my name carved by your hand; and 'Œ*none,*' the work of your pruning-knife, is read upon their bark; and, as the trunks increase, the letters still dilate. Grow on and rise as testimonies of my just claim. There grows a Poplar (I remember it) by the river's side, on which is carved the motto of our love. Flourish. thou poplar, fed by the bordering stream, whose furrowed bark bears this inscription: Sooner shall Xanthus hasten back to his source, than Paris be able to live without his Œnone. Xanthus, flow backward; backward flow, ye streams! Paris still lives, though faithless to his Œnone.[50]

Love and its promise are secured differently by the two sets of carvings. The first set widens and extends with a growing beech, symbolic of wisdom and knowledge, a growing witness to Oenone's claim and the once animated living nature of their love. The second set, on a poplar tree by a river, suggests a rather different elemental promise, the poplar is a liminal tree, symbolic of metamorphosis, the location of life-giving waters but also a marker of the underworld. Sooner, this carving suggests, shall the river flow backward than Paris live without Oenone.

If such ancient arboreal promises harness nature's power as living testimony, what of the lithic 'I love yous' carved in Kent cliffs? These cliffs are chalk, laid down 100 million years ago in Cretaceous tropical seas, originating in an ooze of plankton bodies. This is no enduring volcanic granite, carrying carvings for millennia to come. In place of a mineralogical fixity is a constantly changing lithology. The inscriptions sit between the shattered textures of the diurnal dramas of ice-age freeze-thaw weathering and the gentle lapping of daily tides, weathered

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48 Ceri Houlbrook, *Unlocking the Love-Lock: The History and Heritage of a Contemporary Custom* (Berghahn, 2021).

49 Sarah Lindheim, *Mail and Female, Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's* Heroides (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

50 Ovid, *Heroides* (Penguin, 1990 edition).

by wind and eroded by waves they are exposed to the full force of the weather coming across the North Sea. This is a highly dynamic part of the Kent coast, arches tens of metres high form and fall to nothing in human life spans. In the last 2,000 years the area has morphed from island to mainland, and in the next thirty might once again become surrounded by sea. Lithic loves carved in chalky cliffs are less the promissory love of diamond's apparently invincible form, than a scaling of love to human life, not unchanging, but durable nonetheless, dilating, stretching, scoured by life.

Eight. Lithics' new lyrics: SkyDiamond and synthesising love.

> Old-world styling set with new world values . . . a next generation diamond, man-made entirely from the sky to honour the Earth . . . our carbon is harvested from the atmosphere and held forever in a diamond, and our water is captured rain from the Cotswolds countryside. Wind and Sun provide our energy . . . this is innovation working in harmony with Mother Nature for a more brilliant tomorrow. (SkyDiamond website[51])

SkyDiamond turns to (a gendered) English countryside to create a new lyric for the synthetic lithic. Enrolling elemental forces to sell synthetic diamonds they replace the verticalities and temporalities of lithic appeals to deep-time and Earth's depths, with elemental imaginaries founded in a bucolic meteorology – sky, wind, and rain in the Cotswolds. In what risks sounding like pseudoscience they claim, "innovative processes . . . transmute the air we pollute into certified diamonds, inspired by space and the sky". What becomes of the lithic 'I love yous' if a diamond is stripped of the adamantine eternal?

In May 2024, industry leader Martin Rapaport declared that "synthetic's party is over [. . .] those that destroy the diamond dream do not deserve its benefits [. . .] they have discounted the gift of commitment to an exclusive relationship".[52] Lab-grown diamonds differ from other diamond look-alikes (like cubic zirconia) as their 'synthesis' reproduces the chemical properties and physical processes that 'naturally' form diamonds. This makes good lab-grown diamonds virtually indistinguishable from mined ones, even to highly experienced gemmologists. Synthetics were first manufactured for jewellery in the 1960s (after centuries of mining for industrial needs) and have become increasingly popular in the last decade. Whilst synthetics' sellers play up their ethical origins, reprising the taint of 'blood diamonds', natural diamond sellers emphasise the industrial, pushing the term synthetic over lab-grown, publicising images of dystopic wastelands of endless factories filled with arrays of metal tanks, and counting the environmental costs of reproducing the effects of millions of years of heat and pressure in weeks. Hardly the stuff of romance.

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51 See https://skydiamond.com

52 See https://rapaport.com/synthetic-diamonds/

In the meantime, De Beers also doubled down on the material and temporal valences of the lithic. A new series of adverts centred simplicity, a single piece of diamond jewellery on an all-black background with stand-out tag lines: "Artist credit: Mother Nature", "Good things take time, the best take billions of years", and, of course, the all-important "A Diamond is forever." Lest you miss the point that natural diamonds were birthed from Earthly forces and deep-time, not in a nasty metal tank with some waste-water, one advert proclaimed, "every great love story has a beginning, middle, and no end". In an early SkyDiamond advertisement a ridge of a snow-covered mountain appears out of clouds, in which hang a diamond with the question beneath, "At What CO_2ST? For every tiny caret produced, diamond mines generate an average of 110 kg of CO2 emissions. With Skydiamonds, the planet never pays the price." If mined diamonds mortgage the deep-time of the planet's past to guarantee love's eternity, SkyDiamond sells a love whose eternity is secured alongside the planet's future.

Yet, in attempting to sell sentiment though climate crisis, SkyDiamond's lyric for the lithic mobilises a far from innocent genre of landscape aesthetics. SkyDiamond might imagine its elemental aesthetics of the Cotswolds countryside is more palatable than De Beer's elemental sublime, but it is no less freighted. Born from English rain and harvested carbon, SkyDiamond's lithic 'I love yous' hark back to a bucolic rural idyll – an eighteenth-century version of the English Good Life – to sell its harmonious innovation.[53] In what might seem a masterstroke of middle-class marketing, we are told that these diamonds are seeded with a starter, "a bit like sourdough". Yet such rural idylls have long been inseparable from their dark side. Indeed, the artifice of the original painted evocation of peaceful, productive agriculture occurring under wide blue skies was popular precisely for its denial of the dire rural poverty and social unrest caused by industrial and political innovation. The mobilisation of these same rural geographies – updated via the rural gentrification of sourdough starters and innovative green-tech – to underwrite SkyDiamonds' planetary promises of love in times of climate crisis seems a hard sell.

Nine: Lithic 'I love yous'?

How does the lithic speak of love? Where do these lithic 'I love yous' leave us? What of the lithic's inseparability from the myriad genres and forms that create, reproduce, and perhaps even disrupt love's public and private intimacies? As Lauren Berlant asked above, "what does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so conventional, so bound up in institutions [. . .] and in stock phrases and plots"?[54] Across these seven entanglements of love and the lithic, the latter emerges as a force

53 John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

54 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 17.

of unsettling ambiguity and even disruption, the diamond both securing a promissory future but also highlighting love's misrecognition, the violent imperial geographies which overturn continents in search of stones bound up with complex forms of desire on the part of the miners. What too of the replacement of these violent geographies with the artifice of rural idylls evoking harvesting and harmony? What of love whose promissory time-spaces are rerouted from eternity forged in the centre of the earth, the apparent security of an elemental story without end, to love secured in times of crisis by futures built on human innovation and green-tech ingenuity?

These often unsettling, disruptive entanglements of love and the lithic are found across genres and mediums, from Surrealism to the modern novel and the silver screen, via the pages of a women's periodical and Broadway, from the carved love of ancient myths to the Petrarchian modelling of courtly love and its reworking in contemporary feminist poetry. If gemstones and diamonds are 'a form thing' disruptive of the genres they appear within, then this archive of lithic 'I love yous' demonstrates both the centrality of the lithic to the production and maintenance of love's diverse genres, but also to their unsettling. The lithic both affirms love, whilst asserting its misrecognitions, its failures, durabilities, and fragilities. Love and the lithic; entangled attachments and detachments, defying any easy sense of the stony and distant, of the deep and eternal.

Coda: heart-breaking

Paul Harrison, Anna J. Secor, and Mikko Joronen[1]

The thirteen chapters of this volume do not map a new terrain for cultural geographies of love. They do not territorialise. They do not stake a claim, draw a line, or plant a flag. You could say that *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* offers *nothing*, and we would be quite happy to hear it – if by 'nothing' you meant that the volume offers an interval, a *spacing*. Minimally, then, perhaps this is the event of love. Every love is an experiment in spacing. Every love is an attempt, for better or worse, to articulate anew distances, intervals, separations. An education in love, an education by love, is a geography lesson.

* * *

If the word 'love' denotes anything it is, each time, an excess, a surplus, something unwarranted. Just as one can find oneself in mourning for anything, one can fall in love with anything. Love is unaccountably polymorphous and always, each time in its own way, perverse. An excess, then, something beyond or adding a shimmer to any of the qualities on which a love may condense and which, in condensing, finds its surrogates and representatives, its supplements, its apparent 'object cause'.[2] Its surrogates and representatives are the knowable and nameable traits – the beloveds' beauty, generosity, danger, courage, vulnerability, wealth, and so on – on which *a* love may alight and come to fixate. The traits by which a love will come to make itself comprehensible to itself, to reassure itself, to rationalise and justify itself: 'I love them because of [x or y or z]'. Of course, the precise modes and rhetoric of rationalisation and justification vary greatly, depending on inherited expectations, canalising norms, licensed idealisations, each more or less inflected by preferences and idiosyncrasies. In this process a love can become a 'reasonable love', principled, sanctioned, recognised as such. A love institutionalised before God or Nature, for

1 Mikko Joronen's research has been funded by the European Research Council (ERC, HOMCRI, 101087950).

2 Jacques Lacan, *Transference. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VIII*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Polity Press, 2015). On the supplement and the supplementary, see Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's pharmacy', in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbera Johnson (Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.

example, or if not, before a few good witnesses, or maybe just before yourself, or just a part thereof. A 'reasonable love': a recognisable, well-mapped territory, lines clearly drawn, with an intelligible key, a sensibly calibrated scale, an appropriate title.

Today, of course, most geographers know that the 'map is *not* the territory' – that maps do not simply reflect or represent what is actually there but create those territories through selection, omission, motivation, desire, and anxiety.[3] If love is always already a surplus, an excess, it has something of the formless about it – a rustle, a murmur, a shudder, a yearning – that binds itself to and is bound by figures but is never completely subsumed therein.[4] Indeed, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, love constantly threatens – or promises – to undo them.[5] Let's go back for a moment to that list of qualities, of knowable, nameable, *mappable* traits. It ended, or rather didn't, with an 'and so on', an *et cetera*. The *et cetera* arises because such a list is potentially endless, and endlessly shifting, and so endlessly insufficient. Off the end of any such list, of any loving litany – which always seem to end with a sigh, a laugh, a cry, a kiss, or tears, or all – is always something else, unnamed. Something still to be said. Any 'counting of the ways' takes-place as a response to and gesture at the innumerable.[6] And so, each time, a love is always – if only minimally, by the slightest deflection or deviation, or maximally, by an

3 The phrase 'the map is not the territory' was first used by Alfred Korzybski in 1931 and has since then been adopted and adapted by many. Notable instances in this context are Gregory Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 2000) and famously – for geographers at least – by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi (Athlone Press, 1988). For reflections on cartographic reason, its geohistory, desires, anxieties, and im/possibilities, see for example: Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993); John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-Coded World* (Routledge, 2003); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Gunnar Olssen, *Abyssal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016); Stuart Elden and Jeremy W. Crampton (eds), *Space, Knowledge and Power* (Routledge, 2016); Steven Legg (ed.), 'Themed intervention – mapping', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2025, 50(1).

4 On the 'formless', after George Bataille's *l'informe*; see George Bataille, 'Formless', in *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Sokal with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr, ed. Allan Sokal (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31. On the 'rustle' (*bruissement*), see Roland Barthes, 'The rustle of language', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989), pp. 76–79.

5 "As soon as the supplementary outside is opened, its structure implies that the supplement itself can be 'typed', replaced by its double [. . .] a supplement to the supplement, a surrogate for the surrogate", Derrida, 'Plato's pharmacy', p. 109.

6 See Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'How do I love thee (Sonnett 43)', in Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Theodore Tilton, *Last Poems* (J. Miller, 1862), p. 25. We would venture that the 'beauty', or resonance, or pathos (or not) of such litanies – which themselves are innumerable, which take place all the time – lies precisely in how they articulate their insufficiencies, how they invent im/possible performatives, performatives of the im/possible. We could say, how well they fail or fall short or, to recall the Introduction, how well they betray love.

impassioned violence or sacrifice – in excess of any rationalisation or justification thereof. If the word 'love' denotes anything it is, each time, something unwarranted. Something unjustifiable. Something unreasonable. To act in the name of love is to do so for no reason at all. Love is not an alibi; rather, it is the starkest demonstration of the absence of one. Its taking-place is gratuitous, of nothing, for nothing – thus potentially terrifying, repellent, farcical, ecstatic, and full of grace.

In the Introduction, we wrote about how most treatments of love begin with the question 'What is love?', then never get past it. We described the difficulty in accounting for love, the cuts that must be made to turn love into something knowable, something acceptable, something actionable, or, if you are a cynic, something foolish, absurd, disposable. Hence the first (of many) catastrophes described in this book: the catastrophe of love for knowledge, and vice versa. Love and knowledge undo one another, decompose one another, while also taking route in each other. They set each other off again and again, the day rushing to catch up with the night even as the night crashes into day, a cat chasing its tail, a painting un/made with acid.[7] Bearing in mind the old banality that 'love is blind' – that is, has a tendency to idealise, to be indifferent to the potential imperfections in the loved – but also and importantly, that love is not fully under the control of a subject, that one's love is not quite one's own – 'What do I love when I love?' is perhaps the first question of both philosophy and psychoanalysis, and 'How could I love?' the first of ethics and politics, and of any therapy.[8] Where does this leave geography?

Reflecting on love, Jean-Luc Nancy asks what we are to make of a thinking that makes impossibility its condition of possibility.[9] His response concerns space. "Love", Nancy writes, "is not some possible mode of relation", rather "it designates relation itself at the heart of Being".[10] That is to say, at 'the heart of Being' is an interval: not some-thing, not a truth, not a meaning, but the gap in-between the beats. "The heart is not broken [. . .] it is the break itself that makes the heart".[11]

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7 *Recreation of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art*, 1960, remade 2004, 2015, Gustav Metzger. See: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/metzger-recreation-of-first-public-demonstration-of-auto-destructive-art-t12156

8 We use the first person pronoun here – 'I' – *not* to indicate any particular pre-existing subject but rather to indicate – as do, we think, all the chapters in this volume – that love, like geography, always disturbs and disquiets any apparent assurance thereof, such that a subject of some kind or other (the possibilities here are potentially endless) emerges precisely in and by, as a response or reaction to, this disturbance, this catastrophe, this chance.

9 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 80.

10 Ibid., *Being Singular Plural*. On Nancy on love, see Catherine Kellogg, 'Love', in *The Nancy Dictionary*, ed. Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morid (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 150–152; Aukje van Rooden, 'Jean-Luc Nancy, a romantic philosopher? On romance, love, and literature', *Angelaki*, 2021, 26(3–4), pp. 113–125.

11 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Shattered love', in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Conner, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, ed. Peter Conner (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 99.

Love, here, names a *'with' without qualities*, a 'with' in excess of any predicate or trait, a 'with' without a 'why'. A surplus, which makes and unmakes the space for everything else to gleam and glow and disappear. It is, simply, the event of space, of spacing: the interval which allows the appearing of singular others in their singularity, beyond any trait.

If love comes, it comes to undo you. Not to complete you, not to finish you, not to suffocate you – though it can always do this, should its turns tighten – but, with its touch, to open you once more to a difference: your difference from yourself, your difference from others, your difference from your situation, your difference from any here and now, your difference from the world, any world. Your catastrophic difference from everything. If it is anything, love is the gift of non-identity. The rustle, the murmur, almost silent, *unauffällig*: the pleasure of gratuity, of non-meaning.[12] The event of space: a gift of nothing, of nothing but the interval of a living-on. This is the break, the wound, that thought cannot but seek to touch, to bind. Or, perhaps, unbind.

* * *

The event of editing and writing *Cultural Geographies of Love and Catastrophe* is ending. Only the end of the end remains to be written, but the task is nearly impossible (one editor finds) with her son's music blasting through the house. Bruno Mars and Lady Gaga are belting it out again, the chorus of their 2025 hit song titled 'Die with a smile': "If the world was ending / I'd wanna be next to you". Permutations seem all too possible: The world is ending, *and* I want to be next to you. *Only* if the world were ending, would I want to be next to you. If I were next to you, the world would end. Love and catastrophe trip over one another, get tangled up, wrestle on the floor.

Perhaps it is this volume – that is, the volume of love and catastrophe in the air – that stands in the way of final words. When we embarked to speak of love, we considered that it would be enjoyable and it would be dangerous, but surely we expected it would *arrive* somewhere. But here at the end of the end, there are only more and more words, more threats and promises, claims and denials! Even the silences, the ghostings and the ghosts, are noisy.

All 'last words' drowned out in this great caterwauling, this great earthly howl of love.

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12 "The rustle [. . .] would be that meaning which reveals an exemption of meaning or – the same thing – that non-meaning which produces a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggression of [. . .] the sign"; "the rustle is the very sound of plural delectation – plural but never massive (the mass, quite the contrary, has a single voice, and terribly loud)", Barthes, 'The rustle of language', p. 78, p. 77.

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