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COUPLE(T): A POETICS OF LOVE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Kendall Grady

September 2024

The Dissertation of Kendall Grady is
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2024

Couple(t): A Poetics of Love

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Abstract

Couple(t): A Poetics of Love

Kendall Grady

Couple(t): A Poetics of Love extends the theoretical apparatus of *coupling* (Luhmann, Sloterdijk) to the form of the poetic couplet (original poems) in order to elucidate how mimesis happens in the social and in excess of symbol as a production of relational difference. By thinking love untethered from the absolute truth value assigned it as societal ideal or literary trope, I activate coupling to posit affect and affection as mutually constituted and spread through connection; this connection can be read as a network of bodies, or a social body. If love is a technology of communication practiced materially as well as semiotically, the dynamic couplings formed in love can illuminate our relationships with ulterior agencies, including language.

Couple(t) centers a poetics of love uniquely concerned with both form and feeling to enter directly into the media ecology of a functionally differentiated artistic social system: the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, Croatia. My sensory ethnographic fieldwork in this vernacular museum reenters love as ekphrastic ratios of description by intervening upon visual taxonomies and submitting my own testimonial relic to the collection. In evidencing and amplifying couplings between personal artifacts and public encounters, I participate in love's orientation against the grain of totalization by attaching to multiple vectors like lines of verse.

Coupling with this critical framework, my artistic practice summons desire as a generative apparatus. My poetry manuscript, *Money with You*, wields couplets as platforms of relationality: two lines toggling across their border and between their modular unit and the remaining poem to defamiliarize the ordinary. This distinctive vibration, engineered through juxtaposition and enjambment, renders the couplet a contact zone of subjectification and knowledge production. *Money with You* is part sensory autoethnography, part epistle to former and speculative lovers, part municipal ecopoetics, and 100 percent queer heuristics orientating love via the couple(t). By embodying both conceptual and formal architectures, *Money with You* forges new pathways through perceived binaries including personal/political, humor/despair, nostalgia/futurity, digital/actual, vulgarity/constraint, and creative/critical.

Together, the creative and critical axes of my dissertation project open outwardly like arms, like a book, to embrace a media poetics of love. By honoring allocentric modes of being and interpretation that hold otherness in tension, the dyadic structure of Couple(t) aims to renew signification via transversals faithful only to the location and vacillation of difference.

Dedications

I am indebted to love as a form of surrender to the text (Gayatri Spivak), and the text as a form of subject-shattering *jouissance* (Ronald Barthes), and pleasure as a form of power (Audrey Lorde), and empowerment as a form of radical pedagogy (bell hooks). I therefore dedicate this long sought after and hard-won dissertation to the vast network of intimacies responsible for transforming my relationship to love and language, and therefore to myself and others. Please accept my abridged and assuredly incomplete attempt here:

To my dissertation committee: Vilashini Cooppan, you are the original love doctor and enduring inspiration. I feel deeply fortunate that our research and teaching interests dovetail so hard. Sandra Doller, you hear my couplets differently than any other. I am profoundly thankful for you as a mentor, comrade, and friend. Ronaldo V. Wilson, you are a visionary and a kindred spirit. We were here for the birth of the Creative/Critical Writing Concentration, and I am truly honored to graduate with your chairmanship a decade after first witnessing you perform from *Poems of the Black Object*. You teach me to protect what I love and to weaponize what I don't. You teach me to be fierce and raw and magnetic and provocative. You teach me that being an aesthete and being a revolutionary are not mutually exclusive. I turn again and again to your maxim, "Who's in your constellation?" And I demand this of my students, too. Dedications are an inadequate genre to thank you all for your rigor and

compassion. Instead, I hope to share many more years of conversation and artmaking and writing.

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To the platforms on which versions of poems from *Money with You* appear:
Action, Spectacle (winner of the Editor's Choice Award), *Berkeley Poetry Review*,
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And to all exes
because I am

the negative
dialectical slut

Couple(t): A Poetics of Love

I thought I was going to write
A story of my theories tonight
Not this desirous essay on art and home,
This alarming dictionary of reformist love
—Bernadette Mayer, *Midwinter Day*

The critical object is unbearable much like the object of love is.
—Lauren Berlant, *Social Text*

Hear me. History needs to be retold in couplets.
—Anne Waldman, *The Iovis Trilogy* vol. 1

Exhibition is of the essence
It's what we come here for
—Veruca Salt, "The Museum of Broken Relationships"

INTRODUCTION

There is a necessary connection to be made between media ecology and the emergent field of critical love studies in order to understand what a network is, how it is metaphorized, and in what ways its embodied, affective qualities are experienced. A cultural and materialist discipline, media ecology exposes situated technologies and communication codes that inform human perception and understanding. Critical Love studies moves beyond conventional metrics of erotic or romantic love, suggesting that affect and affection are materially constituted and spread through connection. This connection can be read as a network of bodies, or a social body. Read together, media ecology and love studies elucidate how mimesis happens in the social and in excess of symbol. This comes to bear on poetics as a performance of relation—one with currency as a communication infrastructure that mediates between eros and agape, faithful only to the localization and circulation of difference.

Post-internet poetry or poetry, like my own, that exists in contemporary culture when fascination with the digital has become historical,¹ constitutes a ripe intersection of media ecology and love studies because it abides an era whose subjectivities are already understood as, and mediated by, networks.² Simply stated, a

¹ I adapt here from Florian Cramer's *post-digital* (2014).

² Whereas poetic devices traditionally serve to foreground their medium specificity relative to the language of other literary genres, nonliterary texts, everyday speech, computational language, etc. as in a form of glitch, making a poem more of a poem, post-internet poetry exists within the context of culture after the internet as a form black box. This is the movement from modernism to post-modernism. To the extent that *post-internet* persists as a medium, it is in Marshall McLuhan's sense of a "technological extension that allow[s] humans to grasp their environment in new ways, beyond the immediate reach of their hands" (Giddings and Lister 83).

poetics of relation is where the intimacy of a network plays out. I argue media ecology and love critique an economy that no longer produces objects but worlds, and a subject no longer produced linguistically (unconsciously, ideologically, discursively), but through rhizomatic flows (State, financial, ecological).³ Against this paradigm shift, media ecology and love studies renew the body as a site of resistance different from the failed ideal of free love or the over-determined democratic promise of the Internet. The extension of intimacy from the body to the body of work creates a cybernetic system able to monitor and correlate its behavior to others, mobile across space and time. Thinking media ecology and love curates Michael Taussig's call for "the immersion in the concrete necessary to break definitively from the fetishes and myths of commoditized practices of freedom" (254). Through these frameworks, affect is no longer, as Drew Gardner writes, "owned by the poet and rented by the reader," but could be the Commons of a relational poetics.

Coupling in social systems theory

Systems theory is a functional theory of society predicated not on the opposition between subject and object, but on the distinction of systems from environments. Prominent social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann articulates three basal systems that achieve their ordinations through different processes: bodily

³ See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (2014).

systems distinguish themselves through life, psychic systems through consciousness, and social systems through communication. In social systems theory, society is not comprised of individuals or communities of individuals. Rather, it is an aggregate of differentiated communications, or communication events. While systems theory is decidedly not anthropocentric, the human persists, as do all other elements in Luhmann's nonhierarchical scheme of communication. Each system is legible to itself as a discrete outfit operationally closed to its environment; other systems in its environment; and other systems for which it serves as environment. Fundamental to systems theory is the recognition that a system is incapable of direct contact; it can only produce communications that shape societal architectures holistically inaccessible to it. If social systems theory is the study of society as a system of communication, it can encompass the system of love. I propose intimacy as a methodological conjunction useful for managing the opacity of semiotic orders.

As uncompromisingly communicative, Luhmann insists that social systems therefore raise the issue of double contingency, or the necessity that communications of any caliber—speech, text, gesture, speech act, monetary exchange, etc.—be understood, accepted or rejected, and subsequently reciprocated with another communication to trigger a like unfolding (*Social Systems* 103-26). Double contingency is a volley of mutually intelligible communications that successfully select information from an infinite host of possibilities. If systems theory begins with differentiations catalyzed by communications, its finale is autopoiesis (Luhmann, *Social Systems* 35-55). Luhmann borrows autopoiesis from Humberto Maturana in

collaboration with Francisco Varela to describe how a system, like a biological cell, reproduces itself by means of its own elements without exterior motivation.

For Maturana and Varela, autopoiesis distinguishes living from nonliving entities. For Luhmann, autopoiesis distinguishes a system from its environment. Independent subjectivities are a fiction of the discourse of the observer. Description is the domain of reality, for it is the sole vehicle for interaction. Luhmann refers to the codification and proliferation of distinctions commensurate with observation as reentry. This is the "real issue" of autopoiesis: "the 'reentry' of the form into the form, of the distinction into what distinguishes," of descriptions of descriptions (Luhmann, *Art* 301). It is, in fact, precisely the functioning of an operationally closed system that conditions it to couple structurally with other systems to contour themselves and/or their environment.

Structural coupling is another term Luhmann mines from Maturana to explain how two systems figure an environment so that they become bonded in their singular operations without compromising their operational closure (*Introduction*, 83-101). In addition, a system may react to "irritation" from another system or its environment, prompting a recalibration of a system's internal elements (Luhmann, *Social Systems* 84-5). Whether a reaction occurs, as well as the pedigree of any subsequent reaction, remain determined and reproduced by the closed operations of the system itself. Luhmann refers to the pervasive and potent structural coupling of social and physic systems, particularly through the irritant of language, as "interpenetration" (*Social Systems* 210-54). Language provokes both the social system that produces a

communication and the psychic system that cognizes the communication according to its own logic.

Microsphereology: Intimacy for social systems theory

The integer of coupling in social systems theory suggests that the unit of difference should be the ecology of relation. *Bubbles* (2011), the first volume of Peter Sloterdijk's *Microsphereology*, also figures coupling to explore how, in Luhmann's terms, systems remodel themselves through intimate relationships in response to outside fluctuations. For Sloterdijk, to live in a bubble musters no connotations of disconnectedness, innocence, or privilege afforded by the English language idiom. Sloterdijk opens by conjuring the interiority of a boy playing with soap bubbles. The boy and his bubble distinguish the original coupling—which Sloterdijk reanimates elsewhere as wizard and magic, artist and artwork, body and breath, player and plaything, co-pilot and co-pilot, a partnership that defies Cartesian logic—from the grounds of his world architecture: one of “inhood” (18-19), of being-with, of duplexes. No, to live in a bubble is not to live unattached. If only for a moment, “There is a solidarity between the soap bubble and its blower that excludes the rest of the world,” Sloterdijk writes (18). This coupling is a microsphere—a contact zone—an elective affinity—an allocentrism—a baroque structure of intimacy—an affective capillary—an internally differentiated bubble of intimate coexistence (49). Like Luhmann, Sloterdijk locates couplings through media of communication: “Messages,

senders, channels, languages—these are the basic concepts ... of a general science of visitability of something by something in something" (31). Manifest thus from processes of communication, Sloterdijk also envisions coupling as a semiotic order: the "medial poetics of existence" (80).

The formation of spheres and the surprise of their bonded co-habitants play analogously with the formation of social systems and their couplings. Microsphereology and systems theory envision themselves as general theories capable of disclosing the interdependencies of society. Spheres, like systems, are bounded and respond to external compulsion (Sloterdijk 615). They share systems' evolutionary import. It is for Sloterdijk, in fact, only through couplings that "humans continue their generational processes and advance their individuations" (46). The closed operations of spheres also offer a constructivist worldview unfriendly to the singular subject (Sloterdijk 13). "If it were appropriate to speak of penetrating, one might say that we will penetrate into the realm of intimate absurdities," Sloterdijk writes" (62-3).

Whereas Sloterdijk is primarily concerned by how it feels for different entities to be coupled, Luhmann is primarily concerned with how couplings form. This discord is most palpable in Sloterdijk's overall orientation toward love. "I will develop, more obstinately than usual, the hypothesis that love stories are stories of form," Sloterdijk declares, "and that every act of solidarity is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior" (12). For Sloterdijk, coupling may be read inherently as a form of love. Eros, vitality, and theory are hopelessly braided.

This is evident in his generous treatment of the placenta + fetus coupling—a theorem of a priori duality. If the pregnant womb is the first bubble, the placenta "has an early diffuse presence as the harbinger of a first counterpart" (294). This is not a psychoanalytical "uterine fantasy" (345) —not a return—but the localization of a unit of difference, even in the extreme climate of pre-linguistic primacy, in order to harness its methodology. For Sloterdijk, a discarded placenta is the melancholic annex of the modern subject that fails to understand itself as systemically constituted (386; 459-61). Existential crisis can be resolved by creating couplings of the caliber shared by placenta + fetus. This is a serious search for love. Love is simply the "founding [through encounter] of the Two as such" (545).

Couple/Couplet



Figure 1. "I want to be/money with you." Tattoo of a poetic couplet in the author's handwriting from their eponymous manuscript. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, 2021.

The poetic couplet distills coupling as the basic communicative differentiation and *autopoietic* operation of communication. The couplet is the self-organizing cell, the basic unit of language in broader structuration of systems. It possesses this potency due to its simultaneous closeness/distance, relation/otherness (see Fig. 1). The couplet is in every operation of distinction (in understanding) and constitution (in the ontic). It is the fundamental relation of life, psyche, and communication. The couplet is the motor of double contingency, a push/pull, a centripetal force that propels and holds close, a physics of intimacy, what Luhmann terms re-entry or description of description. Couplets are lines modifying themselves by modifying one another. All couplets are both pairs and pieces of more than two. Each line modifies the prior and the following not as a communicative conversion (intelligibility), but by forming a bubble igniting its becoming-other. This is a Deleuzian assemblage,⁴ an

⁴ I utilize the concept of *assemblage* as developed by Gilles Deleuze throughout his oeuvre. J. Macgregor Wise deftly crystalizes Deleuze's sprawling episteme in an article devoted to the topic, and I will lean on his analysis. Wise accesses the assemblage as a weapon against the false alternatives of contingency and structure; organization and change; nature and artifice. In defiance of such dichotomies, Wise argues that the Deleuzian assemblage functions as an imminent process of arranging together. The assemblage claims a territory or contingency, curing actors from a milieu. This claim constitutes an iteration, or a dynamic presentation of shared qualities between different entities. These qualities include both affects and effectivity: what actors can do, as well as how they can function. The assemblage is therefore not static, but perpetually invested in reterritorializing and deterritorializing, or coming together and moving apart. Qualities, then, are conceptualized as lines of speed moving along two main axes. The first axis is that of *mechanic assemblages*, or systems of things, actions, and passions. The second axis is that of the *collective assemblage of enunciation*, or systems of signs, discourses, words, and meanings that link signifiers with affects and effects. These axes allow the assemblage to oscillate between technology, as defined by contents and materials, as well as language, as defined by expressions and

excess of representation, an alternative “but,” a bubble butt. A negation that's not simply loss. Desire that's not simply lack. Systems are the relations between a clustering of bubbles, a clusterfuck. Booty booty booty booty booty bounce. An oscillation that articulates the multiplying and cascading directions that language indexes back to the real and vice versa: (Actual/Virtual), (Material/Semiotic), (Signifying/Asignifying), (Personal/Social), (Lyric/Conceptual), (Ass/Mouth).⁵

The demand made by social systems theory and miscosphereology to think relationally, via oscillation, even in regard to our most intimate contacts, has long been part of media ecology theory. Anna Munster stresses networks as the tension between singular and collective (*Materializing New Media*). Henri Bergson places emphasis on the connectivity between nodes as a form of qualitative change (*Creative Evolution*). Eugene Thacker develops *network affect*, “the living, immanent topology of the network,” in opposition to the abstraction of network science (“Networks, Swarms, Multitudes”). With Alexander Galloway, Thacker critiques a global crisis orchestrated by protocol, or rules that govern networks and the consumptive logic behind them. “The goal is not to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion,” Galloway and Thacker write, “but to push technology into a hypertrophic state,

intensities. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) and Wise, “Assemblage” (2005).

⁵ There is a connection to be made between the bubble/butt and Lacan’s *objet petit a*. According to Lacan, symbolic networks dissect the human body, producing leftovers that cause desire. “The *a*, the object, falls,” writes Tim Dean in *Beyond Sexuality*. “That fall is primal. The diversity of forms taken by that object of the fall ought to be related to the manner in which the desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject” (85). Dean develops a radical sexual politics untethered from gender or sexuality and reconstituted by, one might say, a coupling of self and other.

further than it is meant to go” (25). In *actor-network theory* developed by Bruno Latour is an apt tool for non-normative and non-essentializing societal analysis: “the network was celebrated as a conceptual device that allowed for an acute analysis of the performance of transversal relations among actors of different types and orders that constitute the social as a certain kind of circulation rather than as a fixed entity” (Goriunova 21).

Couple(t): Toward a critical and formalist poetics of love

Coupling is a means of disclosing the proliferation of relations in a whole, the composite in homogeneity, the multiplicity in a unit. It is an undoing that nearly undid me. “A friend once told me that the trick to being in any relationship is that you have to keep deciding not to destroy it,” Eileen Myles advises. “So when it feels like your boat might tip, you have to move. Switch sides.” This, too, is how poems are made: on the brink of misadventure, in relation to the mortality of our own relationality. For Édouard Glissant:

[P]oetic thought, before or after the accident of the poem, or through it, attempts to set itself up in an axiomatic system: to knit something up whose stitches won’t run. That creates the opportunity for an infinite sort of conjunction, in which science and poetry are equivalent... This fantasy is privileged in not having to be either elucidated or resorbed; the psychoanalysis of knowledge is fixed on something else entirely (85)

Matthew Fuller fixates on the “standard object,” relational by definition, part of an assemblage of agreed-upon constants that signify it within neutral knowledge. “Such knowledge, that attention need not be paid to that aspect of the material culture ... allows a user to move along it with his or her attention paid to other things” (Fuller 90) the way one does not typically activate particular nomenclature or assign particular agency to a light switch. Fuller, however, heralds the “irruption of potential in a settled technology” propagated by *The Switch*, an artwork by Jakob Jakobson in which an on/off switch was temporarily introduced into the circuit controlling the streetlighting for one cul-de-sac in the Danish town of Vejle (100). By playing with the semiotic value of a light switch and changing its social relation to Vejle’s community, Jakobson made the concept of a light switch new—the task of *poiesis*, the ontological potentiality of difference.

Love, like *The Switch*, has the capacity to destabilize our lives, and is therefore practice for differentiation and social change. Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt understand love as already a space of non-sovereignty and urgency. Love is where we discuss wanting to become different. It cultivates room in which we want *more*, rendering ourselves vulnerable and taking risks for the possibility of a better world despite the impossibility of knowing exactly what that would look like. Love theory, like queer theory, “presumes the affective incoherence of the subject with respect to the objects that anchor it or to which they’re attached” (Berlant and Hardt). Even standard objects can be objects of desire. The forms of love and their aptitude for differential formation outside the familiar are also paramount for Chela Sandoval:

“there are cultural and human forms that do not easily slip into either side of a dominant binary opposition,” Sandoval writes. “They are the remainder—unintelligible to dominant order—that is submerged and made invisible (to recognize them would be to upset the binary order of same and different)” (150).

The form of the poetic couplet can also toggle like a switch between its two lines—and between itself and the rest of the poem—to defamiliarize the ordinary and mobilize an unknowable remainder. This distinctive vibration of the couplet, engineered by juxtaposition and enjambment, makes it an inherently social function, a relational sphere that acts and is acted upon. The couplet enacts love and vice versa. Thinking the couplet in this way, how can we move from form to differential formation?

The historiography of the Anglophone poetic couplet is dominantly portrayed as the turn from heroic to enjambed couplets and from Alexander Pope to John Dryden.⁶ The heroic couplet is a literary form comprised of two lines that strive for symmetrical length and syntax; complete a grammatical unit; favor iambic pentameter; and close with end rhyme—sometimes assisted by caesura—to arrive at an antithetic assertion. The heroic couplet abounded in England from 1590-1790 and, due to Pope’s contributions, became the most common composition of the eighteenth century (Hunter, “Form as Meaning”). Pope thought the couplet “capable of isolated polishing, and fitting into, rather than forming part of, a poem (Wasserman 240). As a

⁶ See the criticism of Elbert N. S. Thompson (1939), Earl R. Wasserman (1940), Ronald B. Hatch (1989), J. Paul Hunter (1996, 2000), and Alex Gatten (2020).

result, the couplet became synonymous with rigidity in regard to its formalist constraints and thematic polemics. The heroic couplet declined in the second half of the eighteenth century as poets, inspired by John Milton's blank verse, began to adopt feminine rhyme, unrhymed couplets, and run-on couplets.⁷ Charles Churchill is attributed with distributing enjambment between stanzas and treating the poem as a whole (Wasserman). But it was Leigh Hunt's voluptuous, "effeminate" style and renewed interest in Dryden, a poet of the previous generation, that garnered the heroic couplet a reputation for monotony unsuited to the sentimental and romantic themes of the era (Gatten).

J. Paul Hunter, however, reads Pope's heroic couplets with an eye toward the poet's own time. Rather than moralistically starched or ideologically absolutist, Hunter finds the form full of tension, resonance, and comparison without resolution. Despite their suitability for staging oppositions, Hunter claims that "heroic couplets imply, though they do not determine or necessarily limit," and the couplet form, cheated by fashion and intellectual history, is ripe for redemption ("Formalism and History" 109-129). If couplets enact binary thinking, Hunter wryly remarks, "I suspect that its currency derives from an imperfect understanding of how sorting happens in digital computers, where a series of single choices can add up infinitely to great complexities of distinction ("Form as Meaning" 113). For Anne Boyer,

⁷ A host of poets were working in couplets during this era, including Richard Blackmore, William Cowper, Henry Headley, Richard Mant, Ambrose Philips, Samuel Rogers, Joseph Warton, Daniel Web, and Joseph Weston. The following generation includes names such as John Keats, Percy Sysshe Shelley, Algernon Charles Swinburne.

contemporary possibilities of the couplet are explicitly political. Boyer cites Langston Hughes' poem "Johannesburg Mines" to illustrate the couplet's capacity for modular reinventions cinched by a repeated volta: "Through its portability, the poem both continues as a literary form and expands as a social form, locating and re-locating itself in the revolutionary struggle as it moves with the changing shapes of history."

The Switch (2018) by Shiv Kotecha sheds light on Boyer's prescription. *The Switch* is a work of poetry and critical prose, once notes for Kotecha's PhD dissertation now partitioned into three sections: an apologia, a manual, and a manifesto. Its ballast is the couplet form, which traces the interiority of two lover-friends, Shiv and Diana, and their relations to the literary theory of Viktor Shlovksy or the fantasies of Jack Spicer in an age when relationships can seem to want the same things as neoliberalism: deregulation, flexibility, infinite growth. *The Switch* is switch in theoretical and sexual orientations. Or rather, its theory of sexuality is unfixed coupling. Michel Foucault writes, after all, that queerness is not about sex (whether noun or verb): it "is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships" (135). Kotecha writes:

Let the 'dissertation' take you to Berlin, and while there, go to Berghain, then to Gegen, then to ShuZ, followed by OHM, then back to Berghain.

But first, be sure to sufficiently choke your dick one to eight times so that you can't, when you get there, fuck a damn thing. You're too much in love. There, now go.

Repeat.

In this passage, in the dark of a nightclub, sex and love are untethered. One possibility is that Shiv instructs themselves to masturbate in order to refrain from infidelity. But which arrival, in which repetition, is Shiv preparing for? Is the declaration of love extended toward Diana, or toward self, strangers, city, ritual? Is it possible to be too in love to fuck? Is it possible that fucking isn't what we think it is?

Let me tell you a joke.
They sat across from one

another in each
other's clothes.

He told a joke.
Bicuriousity

killed the cat.
You get it don't you.

It's a joke Diana.
It's not gonna happen.

Just because I said it
doesn't make it true.

But a joke works as a good example
of why I won't ever fuck you.

This one in particular—
I mean what if

Every time we fucked
a cat died.

You love cats.
You even write about them.

These couplets are a site for the connections I endeavor to draw between language, love, and revolutionary difference. In the couplet “Let me tell you a joke./ They sat across from one,” the joke becomes a desiring subject, the “one” across from which Shiv and Diana sit, a third lover in the virtual space between them. The joke—the possibility that their relationship is a joke—all manners of humors, some black as bile—this is the Other in each other’s clothes. “He told a joke. Bicuriosity.” And bi identity is often not taken seriously by members of straight and gay communities alike. Sexuality is a joke Shiv and Diana play on society, and it creates a new social form. It is irrelevant whether newness is good or bad; production itself is a kind of vitality beyond qualification. “It’s a joke Diana. It’s not gonna happen.” Don’t be afraid, Shiv conveys in the vibrations of the couplet. Language does not produce reality (“Just because I said it/ doesn’t make it true.”) The next couplet, however, revokes reassurance. “Every time we fucked/ a cat died.” Read in isolation, this couplet suggests a past in which Shiv and Diana have fucked multiple times. And there was love there, as Diana loves cats enough to write about them. Language is esteemed after all. Nothing in *The Switch* is a joke, but everything is funny, odd, unfamiliar, defamiliarized. The lights flicker on and off like a Bargain night.

I flip *The Switch* as a hermeneutic model for entering directly into Museum of Broken Relationship’s functionally differentiated social system of art. By looking closely at love as a social technology of communication, I forge parallel understandings of coupling in theory and the poetic couplet in practice. Luhmann posits love as a mechanism for making selections within a complex world and for

imbuing these selections with meaning and coherence. The integer of coupling in social systems theory suggests that the unit of difference should be the ecology of relation. Peter Sloterdijk's theory of microsphereology also posits coupling to explore how systems remodel themselves through intimate relationships in response to outside fluctuations. Like Luhmann, Sloterdijk locates couplings through processes of communication, envisioning them as semiotic orders: the "medial poetics of existence" (80). Whereas Luhmann is primarily concerned with how couplings form, Sloterdijk is primarily concerned with how it feels for different entities to be coupled.

My poetry manuscript in couplets, *I Want to Be Money with You*, is uniquely concerned with both formation and feeling. Understood materially as well as semiotically, love is not the possession, consumption, or totalized knowledge of otherness. Rather, my research and artistic practice extend the theoretical apparatus of coupling to the form of the poetic couplet toward the production of relational difference. From the close couplet (two people in love, two lines of verse) to the vast coupling of social systems themselves, our positionalities are dynamic constructs. Contrary to the popular idiom, love is not blind. It does not blindly reinforce normative patterns but is instead an ethico-political orientation process. After all, love is not located in arrival, but in coming.

PART I: COUPLING

The Looks

When film producer Olinka Vištica and Dražen Grubišić broke up, they didn't know what to do with their shared stuff—stuff that belonged to them as a couple, that had participated in their coupledness. Where do the shared material cultures, the intimate properties, of failed relationships go? (See Fig. 2). What if failure isn't a sad lack, a landfill perpetually waiting to be filled, but is itself a dynamic, productive force? What if there are other models of love than the discrete, static partnership—another person who completes you, your better half—the failure of which so often makes us feel like trash?



Figure 2. Couples enjoying Ćirilometodska Street with the Museum of Broken Relationships and the Brokenships Café in the background. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

What began as a discrete performance project grew into the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, Croatia, which collects personal ephemera of loving relationships donated globally by the general public.¹ In September 2022, I spent a week visiting the Museum of Broken Relationships because, I thought, love needs a body. What kind of body is this?

John Donne is distinguished among scholars of British Literature as one of the great 17th century metaphysical poets known for yoking heterogeneous experiences of human and divine forms of love informed by his emotional intensity, intellectual promiscuity, and relatability, even more than four hundred years after his death. The first stanza of his celebrated poem “Air and Angels” reads:

¹ Copycat curators swiftly followed the success of the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb. An inexhausted list of current derivatives includes the Love Stories Museum in Dubrovnik, Love Museums in Seoul and Cologne, the Los Angeles Museum of Love, and a prolific brand of Museum of Broken Relationships launched by a small exhibition planning company across China, including the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Hefei, Xi'an, Taiyuan, Wuhan, Chongqing, Jinan, Harbin, Changsha, Changchun, and the company's home base of Chengdu. Despite their internationality, love museums after the Zagreb flagship share much in common: they arise suddenly through private ownership; they are curated and staffed by professionals outside the recognized art world; they cater toward tourists; they are engineered for social media and selfie culture; and they are immensely popular with people aged 16-24.

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be;
Still when, to where thou wert, I came,
Some lovely glorious nothing I did see.
But since my soul, whose child love is,
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
More subtle than the parent is
Love must not be, but take a body too

Here, love operates like a kind of emo sentient tropism, the attunement of an embodied plant toward its sun. Not once, but two or three times the speaker must turn to face their faceless, nameless love, an orientation toward the ungraspable, which is to say, the unknowable, which is to say, a potentiality, which is to say, as Donne correlates here, an angel: an affective, environmental presence, a “shapeless flame,” or “some glorious nothing,” that nonetheless acts upon the speaker who worships, who comes.

My former partner Ashley and I were coming up Highway 1 just north of San Francisco when Ashley, palpably distraught, said they didn't think they know how to be in love, or what love even is, and I got that sick sensation in my gut because I loved Ashley, recklessly, like a head-on collision, like totally willing to die and remake my own borders in the jaws of life relative to theirs again and again, abject

against the object of my desire, or the body of my own desire as such, because love needs a body, right? This, for Donne, is the great contradiction:

But since my soul, whose child love is,
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
More subtle than the parent is
Love must not be, but take a body too

After setting up the nothingness that is itself the somethingness, the affect of the speaker's love, angelic both in its ontological immateriality and in its epistemological viscera, there is a carnal call for the airy angel to stop being subtle and "take limbs of flesh" so as to meet the speaker's soul in physical embrace. This poem is often read as a lament about unrequited romantic love because, well, you cannot fuck air. Or, air cannot fuck you back. The unrequitable in this poem is also often upheld as an instrumentalization of Christian love toward which one must work, must be possessed by, but can never fully possess (at least not until the afterlife).

The English-language phrase "labor of love" first appears in the King James Bible, published during Donne's lifetime, and signals love labor as unwavering devotion despite the suspension of recognition or reward—labor performed out of faith in its inherent virtue for bettering humanity. Today, the familiar idiom refers to any exertion sustained out of personal compulsion or enjoyment. In the context of academia, I am intimate with the rendering of my research, writing, teaching, creating as both altruistic public services and epicurean passion projects. Are the stakes of formalized love "until death do us part?"

Ashley and I, and my preoccupation with occupational hazards, were driving up Highway 1 taking turns playing each other our favorite songs and this, I thought, was love: going deeper and deeper, learning more and more, to master the other in their otherness. I was essentially a disciple of data mining: the more information I could source about Ashley, the more embodied they would become and the better I could love them because love needs a body and I wanted Ashley to want mine. When it was my turn to choose a song I put on “The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure” by The Magnetic Fields off their 1999 album *69 Love Songs*.

The song title refers to Saussure, the “father of semiotics” and champion of the arbitrary nature of the sign, the perpetual gap between signified and signifier, a regime of language that we, if we were to consider ourselves flawed Lacanian subjectivities, fall into, and this is as close as it gets to the Real. But when Ashley said what they said, so crudely, about not being in or even recognizing love, I ached to release the steering wheel, reach across the gap between our seats, and kill them with my mouth while The Magnetic Fields sang:

We don't know anything
you don't know anything
I don't know anything
about love.

But we are nothing

You are nothing
I am nothing
Without love.

During the 2019-20 graduate student worker wildcat strike at UC Santa Cruz, my friends and I built a doomsday clock at the base of campus to count down the days until UCSC terminated our employment as Graduate student instructors and teaching assistants for failing to fulfill our work contracts, including holding classes, grading assignments, or submitting final grades. I wish I had a photo of the finished clock, but I only have its gap. Like a prefiguration of covid time, of my breakup with Ashley, of my melancholic suspension of disbelief necessary to survive abusive relationships both private and public—my memory of the wildcat strike is hazy, out of synch, like our clock itself, which didn't even make sense as such, slipping between an idea of a clock and how it is that we actually read time.

Our clock face was partitioned into days, five I think, leading up to the date that the chancellor had alerted us to expect official termination letters in our inboxes. After the ritual end-of-day rally on the picket line, we would push a cardboard arm affixed to the square, white clockface one day further toward a red exclamation mark, like a ridiculous gameshow in which we were all losers: broke, exhausted, and mentally anguished, marching like time toward a precarious future that looked very much like our present, without job security, without affordable housing, without a dignified quality of life, with only the enduring mythos of love as a totalizing enterprise.

In Plato's Symposium, Aristophanes originates love in the traumatic cleaving of the human form by Zeus's jealous bolts. Once powerful beings comprising two faces, two sets of limbs, and two sexes, we are now incomplete and must labor to find fulfillment in our lost counterparts. (In the only season of reality dating show Labor of Love, fifteen men compete for the approval of one woman to start a reproductive family by demonstrating their fitness as fathers-to-be. The winning couple disbanded following the series' conclusion.) The narratives we inherit from Western society propagate a scarcity model of love that thrives on individual labor, even when that labor transcends requital or compensation. Neoliberal late capitalism has no love for me (nor does it pay me for fucking me over). It does, however, tout specialization as a mode of reducing scarcity by concentrating a worker, company, or region on a narrow range of deliverables. But as a PhD candidate whose job it is to learn more and more about less and less, I can't say that specialization has benefitted my labor of love or my love life.

So what is it to grapple with the condition, as poet Wayne Kostenbaum asserts, that desire demands specialization? Is it a call for profiteering? Expertise? Biological adaptation? Henri Bergson demands of Charles Darwin: why this rather than that? Why prolepsis rather than potentiality? According to Deleuze, Bergson "tries to show that the negation of one real term by another is only the positive actualization of a virtuality that contains both terms at once" (12). Bergson's sort of

creative evolution, germane beyond genome, is one early aperture for interpreting reality not according to differences of degree, but according to degrees of difference. Keith Ansell Pearson goes on to mutate Deleuze's attachment to Bergson by questioning "how the self that finds itself implicated in an individuated 'evolution' of preindividual singularities is able to live the germinal life that flows through it" (77). For Pearson, Deleuze and Bergson operate in "the problematic," which Althusser uses to refer to underlying infrastructures of questions that can be posed within a particular framework of thought (Althusser and Brewster). Under the problematic lens, words and concepts are situated technologies. By eliciting the problematic as a mode of reading, meaning is produced not according to form or content but through a Jamesonian historical unconscious of the work expressing itself. Niklas Luhmann writes:

[A] difference is contained in every experience of meaning, namely, the difference between what is actually given and what can possibly result from it ... This basic difference, which is automatically reproduced in every experience of meaning, gives experience informational value (*Social Systems* 75-6)

Gregory Bateson develops a cybernetic approach to difference, describing a godlike system of transmissions involving both the neurological body and semiotic communications in an immanent exchange of information regulated, or made intelligible, by feedback loops that map our world. For Bateson, information is "a difference that makes a difference" (489). However, Levi Bryant raises a note of cartographical caution to avoid the "hegemonic fallacy," which occurs "in treating

one difference as being the only difference that makes a difference or as treating one difference as overdetermining all the other differences” (227). Making a difference, then, becomes Derrida’s *différance* (signaling “difference” and “deference”), deferral, potential, the virtual, the process of perpetual arrival, *jouissance* (298). There is information, and then there is poetry, or what information doesn’t know it does not know—what information masturbates into. Like Tiziana Terranova, “In becoming the information we have constructed, I hope not for the mirage of false allure, but the recognition of the deepest bodily thirst” (13).

My friends and I, and the ghost of Ashley drove to Ace Hardware without any kind of plan. We’d been talking about the doomsday clock nonstop ever since Scott first joked about it. clock, clock, clock. It was like it already existed, the picket line a punch line another mode of combat. We wandered around Ace picking up piping and putting it down. Hefting different sizes of plywood. There was a long discussion about tape. The doomsday clock felt—its immediacy, its conviviality, its non-sense or new-sense, felt so different from the kind of work we’re often expected to do in academia and that I fail to do now: chase a clear lineage, a litany of references, like tracing our finger over a lover, that touching but ultimately colonial violence of trying to possess, to optimize another, otherness, difference. In contrast, for Édouard Glissant:

[P]oetic thought, before or after the accident of the poem, or through it, attempts to set itself up in an axiomatic system: to knit something up whose stitches won't run. That creates the opportunity for an infinite sort of conjunction, in which science and poetry are equivalent (85)

For poet Douglas Kearney, the poem opens up a space that is not yet knowledge. It deranges reason without closing down meaning. It is a formal freedom which is yet to arrive at meaning. And in the space between closure and arrival exists political potential. Poetry is radical not because it introduces a new concept, but because it reproduces different ways of thinking. Kearney writes:

One holds an argument as snake handlers might a diamondback. The rhetorician grips, securely, the scaly collar, ensuring the serpent doesn't bite.

The poet, however, may find purchase further down the spine, leaving the viper free to writhe, to strike (11)

When Cupid's arrow strikes, it can feel like a very special and highly specialized objectification of desire—one worth working for. One worth suffering for. One worth mythologizing. “What does it mean about love,” asks Lauren Berlant, “that its expressions tend to be so conventional, so bound up in institutions like marriage and family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots?” (7-8). We've bought this bed and now we lie in it. But critical love studies claims other ways of (un)knowing.

Love has the capacity to destabilize our lives and is therefore practice for social change. Berlant and her co-conspirator Michael Hardt understand love as

already a space of non-sovereignty and urgency. It cultivates room in which we want more, rendering ourselves vulnerable and taking risks for the possibility of a better world despite the impossibility of predicting exactly what that would look like. Love theory, like queer theory, "presumes the affective incoherence of the subject with respect to the objects that anchor it or to which they're attached" (Berlant and Hardt).

After Ashley and I broke up, badly, and after UCSC and I took a break, I continued to court love in my bodies of work because love needs a body—I just didn't know what kind. So I read *Love and Other Technologies* by Dominic Pettman, which taught me that love contributes to identity formation, and always has, as significantly as any other timely mediating processes (mass communications, the internet, etc.), thereby designating it a double-pronged cultural techne, always making ourselves in relation to others and vice versa. And I read *The Agony of Eros* by Byung-Chul Han, which showed me that now, more than ever, this making can be painful. Not painful because love is intrinsically a form of agony—or sickness or addiction or insanity or sacrifice or consumption or any of the negative comparisons both canonical literature and pop songs are prone to perpetuating—but painful because the conditions of love in a globalized, capitalist society make it so. Agonized love is not a personal affliction, but a symptom of the subject under scarcity, often manifest in depression.

When I arrived in Zagreb I was super fucking depressed. But I was ready to encounter the artifacts gifted by others to the social body of the Museum of Broken Relationships. I was ready to fall in love with these relational vectors between nodes, the de-singularization of the body, the gap between the lines *I love you* and *I love you, too* which, according to Jean Luc Nancy, is the only place love truly exists. I was ready for a tactical merging of archival inquiry, critical theory, and creative speculation in order to occupy lacunas in structures of power. I was ready to stop being an achievement-oriented lover and start learning to fail better.

So I went looking for the gaps in dyadic structures, between couplings, between broken couples as a new sensorium of affective love a reminder that—in its exhibition (or exhibitionism)—escapes public judgment and its commercialization by the museum institution, an afterlife circulating within the museum not as a memorial, but as a site of re-membering (see Fig. 3 and 4).

If the Museum of Broken Relationships is a vivisection of how contemporary practitioners metabolize love, I went on a *derive* to, as Berlant writes, “think of [love] as a kind of tattoo, a rhythm, a shape, timing. An environment of touch or sound that you make so that there is something to which you turn and return” (Seigworth and Gregg 25).



Top: Figure 3. A couple(t) observing an artifact in the functionally differentiated social system of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 4. *Biker boots, 1996-2003, Zagreb, Croatia* (high angle shot). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

I went and in going, I was back in the car, both cars, the yellow line of the road distinguishing myself from Ashley, from UCSC, our own selves modular units configured against the rest of the world (see Fig. 5 and 6).



Top: Figure 5. On a *derieve* to experience gaps in dyadic structures at the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 6. A *parachute rig*, 3 years, *Helsinki, Finland* (close-up shot). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

After all, “Eros is an issue of boundaries,” Anne Carson writes in *Eros the Bittersweet*:

[Eros] exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between “I love you” and “I love you too,” the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. (30-1)

I went to bring my desire back from the dead (see Fig. 7 and 8) by dilating the theoretical apparatus of coupling from Luhmann’s social systems theory and Sloterdijk’s microspherology as a production of relational difference. My bodily system needed to remodel itself through intimate relationships in response to outside fluctuations. I needed to activate the power to belong together in a site where I and Other overlap (see Fig. 9 and 10).

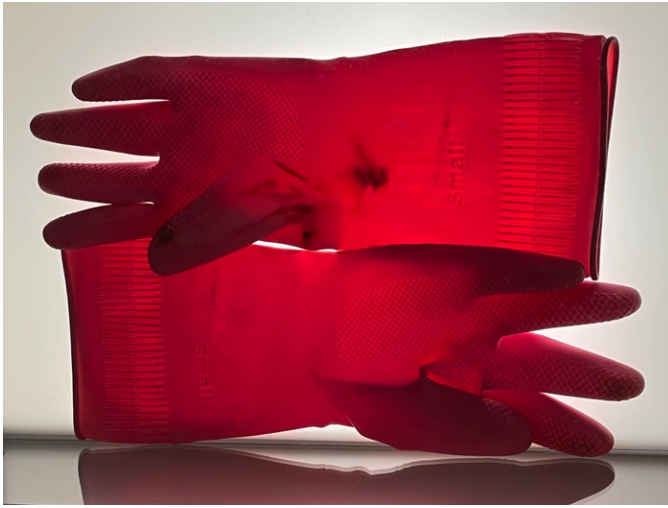
I went to reenter my own forms and feels to make them new by submitting an artifact to the Museum of Broken Relationships. I thought of Ashley. I thought of Lyn Hejinian:

To achieve reality (where objects thrive on people’s passions), enormous effort and continuous social interactions are required, and I can’t get started without you. Not here—over there’s a better place to begin a funny story. History with its dead all hot through with regularities in the woods ...



Top: Figure 7. Shooting target in the collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships with the author's reflection (close-up shot). Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 8. *Statuette, 2001 to 2010, Chatte, France* (close-up shot). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.



Top: Figure 9. *Rubber gloves, 4 years, Seoul, Korea (overhead shot).* Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 10. *Dreadlocks, 1998-2004, Oslo, Norway (close-up shot).* Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

I thought I would feel clever, lugging my bed comforter through the streets of Zagreb (see Fig. 11 and 12).

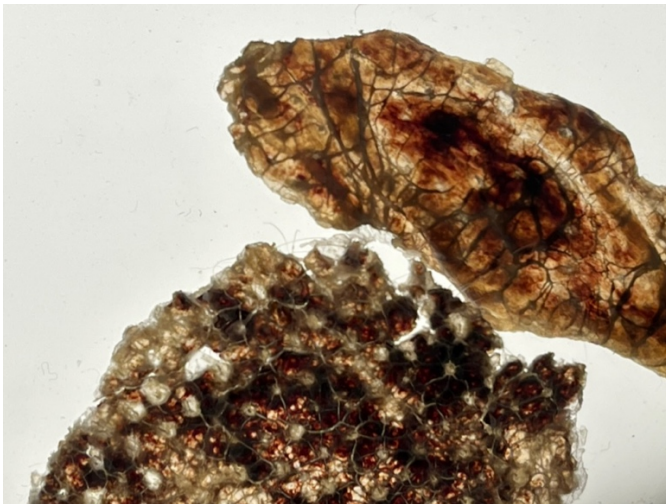


Top: Figure 11. *Basketball shoes, 1 year (9/2009 - 9/2010), Seattle, WA, USA* (close-up shot). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 12. *Handkerchief, years, Heerlen, Netherlands* (close-up shot). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

I thought I would feel like Tracy Emin, whose installation *My Bed* (1998) is her bed, in its vulgar, maximalist entirety, a whole heart on a sleeve rumped like sheets. I'd always loved Emin and her incendiary vulnerability, made visible, a wry *fuck you* to the boys' club of the Young British Artist movement, or an empowered *fuck it* to the preciousness of art institutions, or an emphatic *fuck me*, I dare myself to imagine you imagining my body in this body of work, a new kind of self-love against the phallic hold over masturbation. I'd always loved Emin so I thought this love might fall in love with Ashley and my labor too. I thought this love might construct another concentric inhood around my pain like a circle of hell, transmogrifying voyeuristic pleasure because the self is also always an Other to itself.

I thought, I will bring my own unwieldy form all the way from my Santa Cruz bedroom, and it will connect the fabric of my personal life and my life's work and the emotional labor of unknown visitors made new, made flesh as I crossed the threshold of the museum lobby, reentering one form into another like some kind of transubstantiation. But it was not comforting, my unfettered comforter crossed with blood and cum and sweat and saliva and Taco Bell hot sauce, a gift from Ashley where we had slept, and then where I had slept alone. But if love is a social technology of communication, and if the spatial partitioning of a museum is another hermeneutics through which it speaks, maybe crying openly in the gift shop made sense as a kind of embodied speech act (see Fig. 13 and 14).



Top: Figure 13. *Roof tile, 4 to 5 months, Zurich, Switzerland.* Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 14. *Twenty-seven-year-old scab from my first love's wound, 1990-1993, Mürzzuschlag, Austria (close-up shot).* Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

I thought a lot of things before coupling with the Museum of Broken Relationships, but inside its inhood, I knew nothing more than the Magnetic Fields, which is to say, nothing (see Fig. 15 and 16). “As a matter of fact, I think nothing at

all of love,” writes Ronald Barthes. “I’d be glad to know what it is, but being inside, I see it in existence, not in essence. What I want to know (love) is the very substance I employ in order to speak (the lover’s discourse)” (59).



Top: Figure 15. “He said he was in Zagreb.” *My soldier, 1942 - 2005, Maribor, Slovenia* (film still). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 16. “And then he came.” *My soldier, 1942 - 2005, Maribor, Slovenia* (film still). Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Donne concludes “Air and Angels” with which I began this talk, this lover’s discourse, with the speaker of the poem deciding that the only way for their love and the other’s love to meet is if the loves encircle each other like a sphere, an inhood, a coupling producing a middle ground because love might need bodies, but it also needs a gap to exist within, to fabulate into. I know nothing, but I can feel the boundaries of my gaps, the narrative of which becomes a relationship. Paul Kottman writes:

To be in any kind of love-relation—a friendship, a family, a tribe, a sexual romance—is to be answerable, in deed if not in words, for the very fact of being in the relation ... To be bound to another, or to treat another in a particularly ‘loving’ way, is to be answerable for the sense one makes of that other person, of one’s relation to them. Our actions express ‘sense made,’ just as our sense-making takes shape in our actions. (26)

I’m trying to honor the boundaries between relational sense-making and knowledge—the boundaries between affective desires and material bodies—the boundaries between myself and my exes that still exist, phoenixes from breakages that might one day live in the Museum of Broken Relationships, that might be ruptured and reconstituted again and again relative to their shifting proximities to other artifacts, other visitors, other visitations, other afterlives.



Figure 17. Shattering in the main galleries of the Museum of Broken Relationships, as of 2024 Croatia’s most visited museum. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Relationships don’t break, but they do shatter (see Fig. 17). Nancy responds to the occidental tradition of love—the belief that a monotheistic god indulged our belief in immanence, allowing us to dream of being fulfilled, total, perfect, whole. In the Museum of Broken Relationships, without belief in a god, society turns to love to fill this same role. In this way, the love of thought and the thought of love are the same. Both love and thought want fulfillment, totality, perfection, wholeness. In wanting these things, love becomes double. It becomes a dialectic. In wanting these things, love fails to deliver. Love shatters. In love, we experience the impossibility of that which we want. We recognize what we want because we don’t have it. I take my comfort(er) in this. In love, we lose our narcissistic ideals. In love, we are greater ourselves. Nancy writes:

The heart is not broken, in the sense that it does not exist before the break. But it is the break itself that makes the heart. The heart is not an organ, and neither is it a faculty. It is that I that is broken and traversed by the other where its presence is most intimate and its life most open ... That is why thinking – which is nothing other than the weighing or testing of the limits, the ends, of presence, of life, of consciousness—thinking itself is love. (99)

When we love another, we are exposed to the fact of their existence. And this existence is mortal, finite, archivable. In recognizing this, we can love the other in their otherness, their singularity. And because we encounter otherness, we also encounter ourselves. Ashley, “It is possible that one day I will no longer love you,” Nancy promises (see Fig. 18), “and this possibility cannot be taken away from love—it belongs to it” (100).



Figure 18. Members of a wedding party disperse after a ceremony in the Church of St. Catherine, patron saint of philosophers and students, and walk past the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Love by its very definition cannot guarantee itself. Like the beloved, it cannot last forever if we are to be able to encounter it at all. It is the same yet different every time, and it is love's very inability that enables it to be so powerful, so important. The promise of the possibility of impossibility must be kept.

But if it is not, that does not mean that there was no love, nor even that there was not love. Love is faithful only to itself. The promise must be kept, and nonetheless love is not the promise plus the keeping of the promise. It cannot be subjected in this way to verification, to justification, and to accumulation (even if there are, indisputably, illusory or deceitful loves, loves without faith and law, that are no longer of love—but these are counterfeits, and even Don Juan is not one of them). Love is the promise and its keeping, the one independent of the other. How could it be otherwise, since one never knows what must be kept? (Nancy 100).

Perhaps this is how museums come to be: a verifying impulse, an accumulation of justification. I think this, too, is a form of promise-keeping. How could it be otherwise, since one never knows what must go?

The word *curate* derives from the Latin *curatus*, the past participle of *curare*, meaning “to take care of.” Once used to denote parish priests or caretakers of souls—the fantasies of an unshattered world—the term today signals a selective process for presentation. During covid lockdown, I began to curate houseplants: I blessed their vitality with water, I arranged them on my windowsill like an altar. I cared as an exercise in relationality, a response to the affective impoverishment of neoliberalism rendered even more palpable in the isolation of global emergency (Care Collective 2020). Gardening became a tool for prefiguration for a flourishing future, a formal

strategy of love to supplant my Amazon deliveries with a new understanding of self and/as Other. I “took care of” my plants and, as the euphemism suggests, I killed them. I’m still working this out, the heart a muscle (see Fig. 19 and 20).



Top: Figure 19. An indoor plant exceeds its windowsill in the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

Bottom: Figure 20. Couples gather to watch the sunset from Lotrščak Tower. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

I'm forever working on a poetics of love, the necessity of cartographic excess of pulmonary chambers, the sound a poem makes when it breaks a barrier. I'd like to honor broken barriers by concluding with a sonic boom, or a poem, or a description of descriptions, yoked like a fertilized egg upon the museum's café patio, reanimated from the wasteland of messages I never sent to Ashley following that car trip, two people coming up and apart on Highway 1. "By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it," Gloria Anzaldua writes. "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you" (33).

So this poem is for you, my emergent self, and or you, Ashley, and you, the readers curated in this exhibition of our love:

DEFIBRILLATION

The cell vibrates the whole face bowled over Steel Reserve a malted jouissance, a powdered reservoir, indemnity for feeling backwards against the delusional normality of the genital relation, the livid & the lived a stigmergy. The poems I like optimize bees, the impersonality of desire, the tyranny of memory, that is, history, all the failings of proximity without intimacy, our audacity to kiss potentiality on the mouth as if we knew it, as if it's not a hole. I'm talking about verbal degradation, which is superhard, especially when you're both switch, I say loudly in a bar as the jukebox cuts & the good people

look up from their drinks. Love is joy with recognition of an external cause. Joy is the increase in power to think & to act. If a market never runs out of Spinoza yelling fire does that mean nothing or everything reads his ass? The event hits again & again loquacious from the inside the predation that predates any sense of you, that is not of you, that is not yours, that is out, that exists only in its exodus & appearance, the negative space of repetition & so we habituate this maudlin exoskeleton wanting specificity, that is, scant of & we go to the swimming hole like some spent engine, some thirsty beast in the theater of ephemera to stonewall the fugacious to trap you like lightening. The rocks are sharp the swim is sore the bars are pure. If it's ride or die, I'd prefer not to. Unlike love, capitalism never has to go to extremes because hatred of capital is madness. Blind in the morning, my foot bent the dead legs of a mouse back against its throat. The dog sucks its paws over the heating vent and sends its vibrations to the basement. Audrey Lorde says, *The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings*. The neighbor's bees leave the hive to get slow in my laundry. Your face lit up shuddersome by software adapted to night vision, a warm roseate or dead salmon, are you blushing or tearing? Crying, also a jar in words. You read me a poem that ends, Shut up and kiss me on the mouth

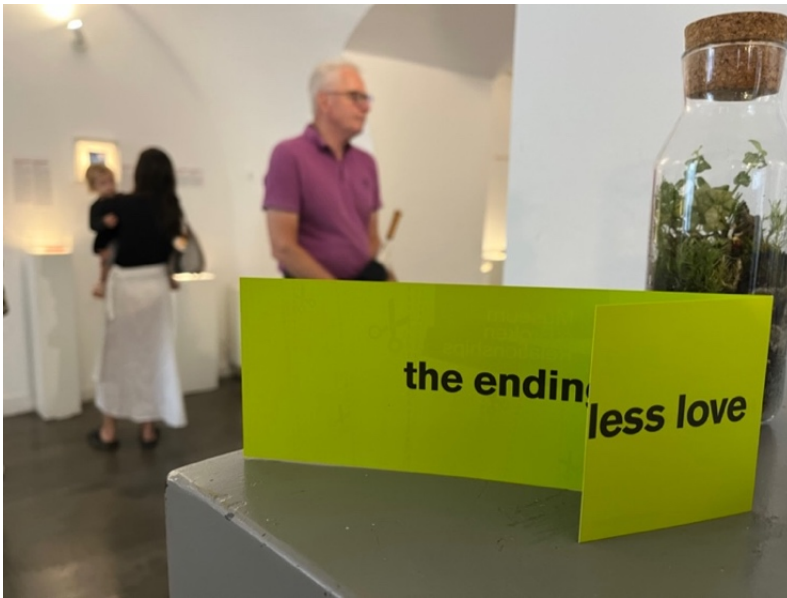


Figure 21. “The end/less love.” Found promotional materials in the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

PART I: COUPLING

The Letters

Dear Ashley,

There are some written ephemera in the museum, although not as many as I would have thought given the whole love letter trope. One says, “destination undetermined ha-ha” in all caps (see Fig. 22).

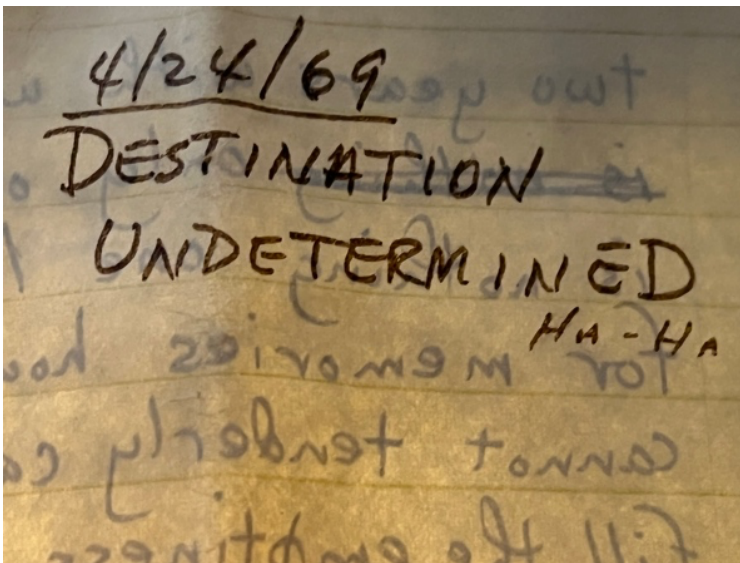


Figure 22. *Letter, 1969, 133 E. 3rd Street, Roxana, IL 62084, USA (close-up shot).* Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.

One says, “I really think you are an angel. Good morn” (see Fig. 23) before being interrupted, as explained by donator explains in the accompanying wall text, by their beloved: “Before I could leave the house, you woke up and gave me a goodbye

kiss, and so I couldn't leave this post-it note and never got to complete it. This is how I will always feel about the two of us. Something incomplete."

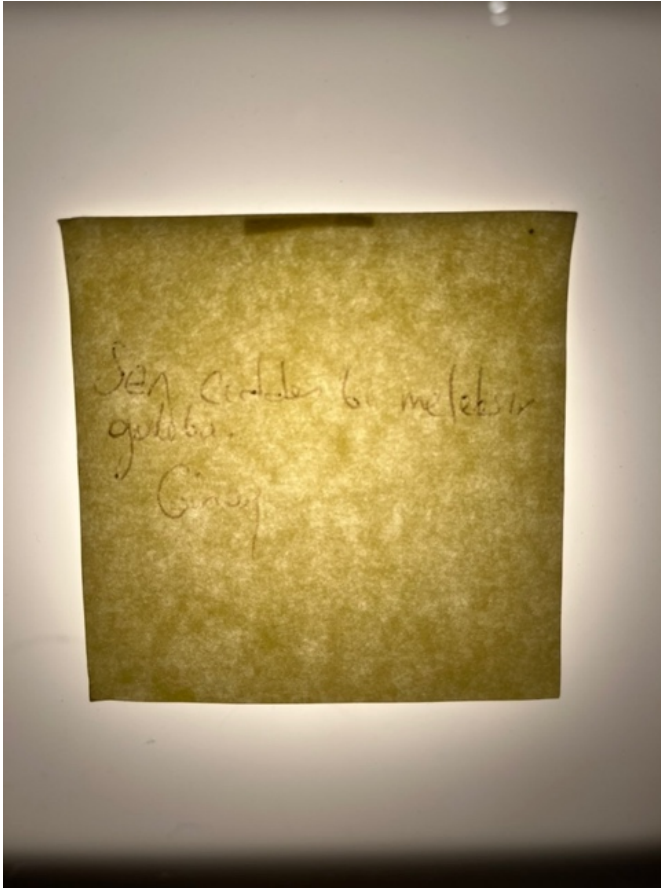


Figure 23. *Half-written post-it note, 4 months, November 2012 - March 2013, Istanbul, Turkey. Collection of the Museum of Broken Relationships. Digital photograph, personal collection of the author, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.*

Ashley, Do you get what's happening here?

Dear Ashley,

Now I visit the galleries morning and evening now to avoid the crowds and to get different light. I don't have to pay admission anymore, as the staff know me: two in the ticket office / gift shop, two in the adjoining café. I alternate between coffee, mineral water, and beer so I can spend the whole afternoon working. Writing into you is work because it taxes me, and I pay what I make from the museum. No one thinks it's strange to be employed here, apparently not even me. No one thinks it's strange that, after Leo Bersani, the rectum is a grave.

I can't stop thinking about Jennifer Tamayo's *Poems Are the Only Real Bodies: e-pistols for Hurryet Tubman*. It invades me like sex. It's a collection of e-pistols for crying out loud. I mean that figuratively and literally.

The e-pistols are filling you from the inside out. The e-pistols are pouring into the ear hole, the belly button hole, the mouth hole, the pee hole, the eye hole, the butthole, the penis hole, the throat hole... The e-pistols feel the holes from the inside out, until the hole is stuffed and bursting. The sheath of your human skin becomes less and less. It's almost translucent. It's almost glaze.

I went back through our texts until April 2019 in search of this one letter I sent you. I say "letter" because it's so long, although I don't think length is an epistolary qualification. Once when I was close my phone grew too hot and bothered and crashed. Once I forgot my travel adapter and my phone died. There were many more dick pics than I remembered. You are a good nine inches and you would pose

artlessly in places like a laundromat or your apartment balcony. Often, you'd cut yourself off at the neck which I thought very masc. Tamayo writes:

there's a pleasure in these violences

when I see these things I feel in a Barbara Kruger way, Harriet

EVERYTHING
ALL
OVER
MY
FACE

this narrative violence that history imposes

you were you

I was I

The thick membrane of this happenstance; I'll put my crack on it.

On the front cover is a photo Tamayo's friend took of her hanging from the giant hand of a statue of Harriet Tubman rendered grotesque in size and cast in what seems like the black granite often used for tombstones. Tamayo's feet are entirely off the ground and her long black hair looks like it's in motion. The statue holds its gaze over and away from this zealous head. The statue looks bigger than the trees, bigger than the electric poles. The statue makes Tamayo look brave and pathetic at the same time, which is how I feel among all these objects, more or less charged with monumental significance.

On the back cover is the outline of a square, like a little gallery, and in the gallery it reads:

There's a terror that we will love
too many people in one lifetime
and won't give ourselves to any one
sentence

I take this as a cautionary note, the perpetual provocation of an unfinished post-it. It stands to reason that Harriet Tubman was brave enough to love both injudiciously and committedly or she would not have done what she did. How beautiful, then, for Tamayo to throw herself unabashedly upon the monolith, to give herself over to any one/sentence, to be a body making a book or die trying.

I've had two coffees, one mineral water, and three beers. Maybe I'll go fight any passive voyeurs and passionately moon the rest. Maybe I'll share a wild tenderness with all the cracks in history. Maybe I'll shoot you with an e-pistol. Maybe I'll topple every monument in my embrace.

Dear Ashley,

The gift shop has free promotional postcards. I've exceeded the frame and write you nonetheless while drinking Ožujsko. Virginia Woolf says something like, "Life would split asunder without letters," and I say good. I will do an epistolary reading of us. For you, for Derrida, it is the *différance* performed by the non-teleological, circulating postcard that regenerates ipseity and holds a possibility space for love. I will wield love as a hermeneutics to reveal ongoing processes of transformation, or a social imaginary. Do you know by now that you are more than one? You and me and us and this letter. Let me describe this as I remember it, inseparable from as it is.

A network is a *perspective*, a way of inscribing and describing Yet this perspective is internal or immanent; the different associations of the "thing" make it differ from itself – "it is the thing itself that has been allowed to be deployed as multiple." (Latour 116).

There are no points of view on things—it is things and beings that are the points of view. This is what I've learned at the museum. Against the fiction of totality, the project of poetics is to find you like a welling synchronicity—not like a golden opportunity for seizing or a sexual dimorphism for reproducing or a noumenon for calcifying, but more like a collective crush, or crushing tide, or the desire to be abducted by something beautiful, shining the white light of our inboxes

outward, becoming our own angel alien of history. I hope this peers before you like a mirage. I hope you crash your stupid orange car.

Dear Ashley,

Remember how Shiprock seemed to reappear from every direction over Diné land, ever the same incalculable distance wavering in the windshield like heat, the hot coffee sucking our bodies into high desert air? It's so beautiful, I kept saying. Or maybe I just thought it, on the inside, where shame thrives, so beautiful, beautiful, orange sand and blue sky and red rock and green sage, driving the backroads through Color Theory 101 like beauty, I feared, might really be a Kantian aesthetic judgment, a colonialist taste-making, an aperitif for the growth economy in which I bought a coffee mug at the Monument Valley gift shop. In *The Beauty of the Husband* Anne Carson writes:

Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.
As I would again
if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.

I'm not wedded to this conflation of love and beauty, or this codependency of beauty and sex, or this regalia of sex and marriage, but I am galvanized by the unabashed potential of proximity, an oblique communique of love, a fucking shitshow. Remember when we watched a dust devil jump fence across the intersection and pass like a ghost through the Civic, rocking its haunches, shockingly strong, a perfect tumbleweed unharmed in the gullet?

Then we were in London eating toast with slabs of salted butter thick as quarters over eyes. All the traveling, the fat of the land, messes with my system and I

haven't taken a proper dump in over a week. Where does it all go?? Is a real question I have about the visceral opacity of my form and the formal technologies of evacuation. The UK toilet bowl drops abruptly into a steep, U-shaped hollow that harbors a flat archway that conceals a dark antechamber because, as a general rule, colonizers don't like to face their shit. Unless it's in a museum—seized, reproduced, or calcified—and then we love it.

Good thing the Museum of Broken Relationships works differently (maybe).
Too bad we'll never know.

Dear Ashley,

Remember when we saw Isaac Julien speak about the occasion of his first major UK exhibition, four decades of selected films and multichannel video installations united under the title *What Freedom Means to Me?* “It’s just so beautiful!” Began every white member of the mostly white audience during the Q and A, as if they’d discovered something Julien didn’t know, as if he hadn’t just cut through the bullshit with a gentle knife—“You know, “Strange Fruit” is a beautiful song, too”—while in the still of his own film *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* suspended behind him, flakes of snow lifted uncannily off the chiseled jaw of a Black man in a tux, a fabulation of Alain Locke outside the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. “Beauty always has an element of strangeness,” Baudelaire writes.

And how could this necessary, incompressible, infinitely varied strangeness, dependent upon environment, climate, habits, upon race, religion and the temperament of the artist, ever be controlled, amended, corrected by utopian rules, excogitated in some little temple or other of learning somewhere on the planet, without mortal danger to art itself?

Is a real question I have as a descendent of settler-colonialists in the US and a tourist in Croatia and a dumb product of learning temples on this dying planet and an acolyte of the porcelain throne. But remember when we came upon that doorless outhouse like a spontaneous statue held by West Mitten Butte, its hole exposed to the unyielding light, the total silence of Monument Valley? I’m not ashamed to say I loved it for its strangeness, its mess. Danez Smith writes:

do you know what it's like to live
on land who loves you back

I think about this more regularly than I shit anywhere.

The “old world” thinks itself exempt from “new world” accountability to indigeneity, but there is no difference between stolen land and stolen labor, no difference between land and labor stolen from a place called home or a place called former empire.

Fred Moten thinks black thought like a fissure of ontological lawlessness, *anoriginary*, or aboriginal, which is to say, an improvisational beauty that forms not just in resistance to, or in excess of, but completely outside schemas of domination. “Black thought is a feather brush of switchblades,” Moten writes in *All That Beauty*, and in the bathroom, reading on my phone, I think of that borderless, semi-deciduous tree native to the desert. I think of a romantic sunset painted softly in blood. I think of beauty sharpening sensory perception like a weapon. I think of Moten perceiving Harry Dodge as a *terr/affirming* artist, an artist who

puts some luscious sign on all that melismatic mess that can't nobody tell him how to use. That's why you / all messed up now. These are works of love, after all, and messing you up is the work love does.

I'm all messed up and full of shit. But I'm in love, how, when, and wherever this letter detects you, even if I did doze off during Julien's talk, overcome by jet lag in the hot dark hall.

When Shiprock returns to the stars, I'll be synchronically dead asleep on this shit rock Earth at the end of the world, and this is just and true. This is what freedom means to me. This is a desert in which paranormality feels possible.

Dear Ashley,

I woke up too early, the strangeness of the marine layer and my own bed again, the wet well, the luxury of futurity.

I don't think the epistolary form can be a tidy container for frameworks of racialized capitalism, or that frameworks of racialized capitalism can resolve either pain or shame. I don't know what form or theory or emotional landscape or art institution or department store or nation-state or apocalypse is appropriate for feeling pure joy and sadness. I don't know how to critique the racist art world, this particular microcosm of society, without indulging the grotesque notion that institutions should or can be better—that they deserve to exist—that whiteness deserves the pure joy of seeing art without sadness—that pure joy is a fascist project achievable through rhetoric at the expense of literal life.

Are the artifacts in the Museum of Broken Relationships even art? Is it messed up that I cannot help but respond to them as such, even after all my dumb theorizing? Even after all my poems?

I do hope that letter as encounter can curate some small form of care that, to riff off Lauren Berlant, opens a generative space of alternative vitality. Sarah Ahmed writes that encountering shame signals that one cares enough to feel something. However, who one is and what one does with what kind of shame is another story. Another story unfit perhaps for the letter or for language. Sarah Kizuk writes that *settler shame* must altruistically challenge the material conditions to which bad

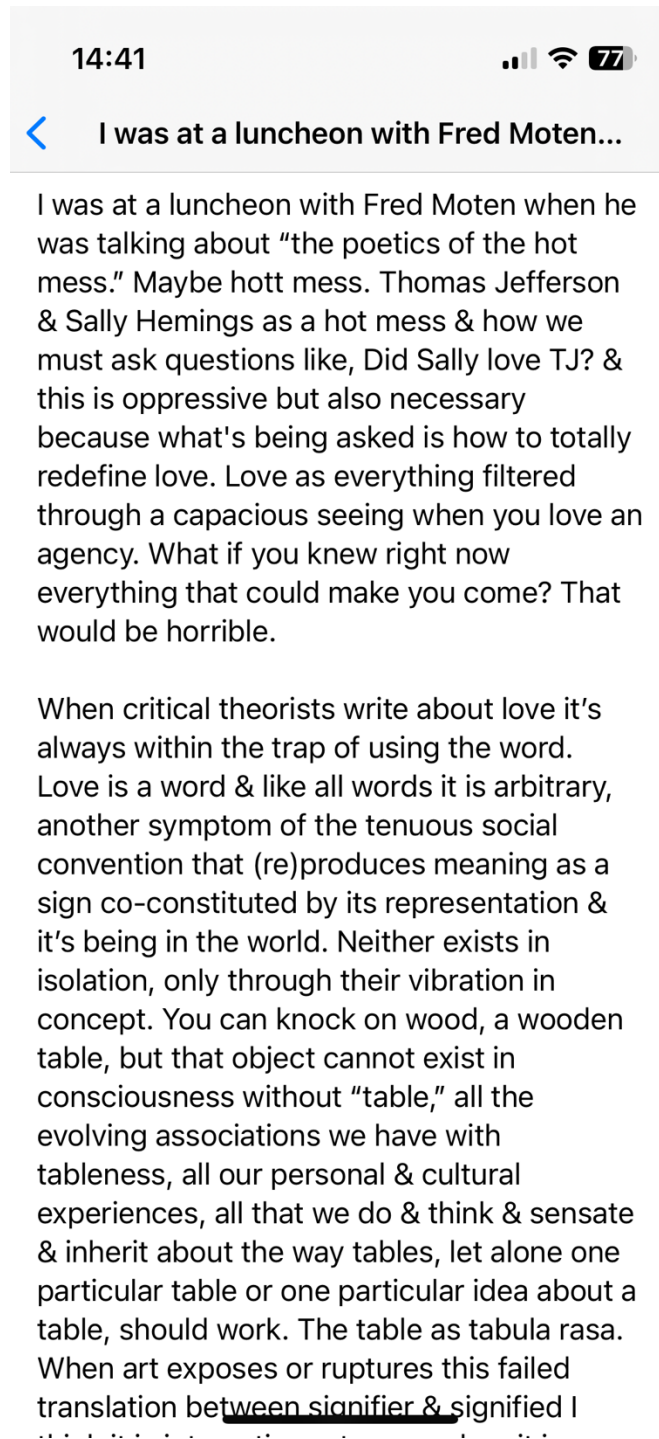
feelings insufficiently respond. Our letters are immaterial, but I feel their circulation in my gut, in the wisteria ensconcing my porch, in the bagels from the shop across the alley that somehow smell so good but taste like shit, in my sometimes despair for a kind of futurity I cannot access because I can't have kids, like, my body is incapable.

But I have to try and maybe fail to understand theories in an emotional way (pure joy and sadness?) because I don't have a child, and I don't have you, but I am among family and friends who I love, who called the book a clinic. So I'm reading Jay Bernard's *Complicity*, in which they walk around London—a city they love and hate—and experience works in Britain's national art collection—which they also hate and love (Britain, the collection, art in general)—to document what it means to choose to feel the fine grain of their own complicity and to be forced to feel the various textures of others' subordinations rubbing them raw.

Is this a form of “personal-institutional empathy” that Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung calls for? Is this a form I can try my best to do the work of learning from? Is the letter? Is love?

Dear Ashley

Found it:



14:41



< I was at a luncheon with Fred Moten...

think it is interesting art, even when it is packaged in irony or humor. Stephen Merritt refers to 69 Love Songs as a kind of joke album, an exercise in playing with the tropes of love & genre. I think one of the Magnetic Fields songs that got you was "The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure," patriarch of semiology. For me, the lyrics about understanding nothing & being nothing are not about nothingness; they are about emptiness, which is to say potentiality, which is to say the creative platform, which is to say all psychic & emotional & haptic desire, that perpetually forms by informing the realities in which we function. If it disturbs it is only because it perturbs the veil of language & asks questions about the contractual nature of our being that is normally so automatized as to render it invisible.

So I think it's really good & perturbing that you are asking questions about the love language that you want to express & receive. Love is a special word because it constitutes a speech act. The kind of love that I want to do in my life is not a Freudian model; it does not seek to capture or incorporate its obscure subjects of desire, emptying them of their attachments, rendering them objects we use to reflect ourselves back to ourselves, forcing one to conform to our one. That's an imperialist project. The kind of love I want to do in my life is oppositional, as in

14:41



< I was at a luncheon with Fred Moten...

I want to do in my life is oppositional, as in, based on the difference between two or more people & their infinite subjectivities. After all, the self is also always an other to itself, which is something that psychoanalysis has also taught me. So I'm not wholly anti-psychoanalysis. I'm in a dialectical relationship with psychoanalysis, which demands that I hold conflicting concepts simultaneously with the recognition that this is the only way that either concept can exist: in relation. Deleuze & Guattari write about love as $n-1$, where n is any given number, a herd, from which a singularity is excavated, interpreted, but never separated. I quite like that. Love as an orientation, experiential not epistemological, making up meanings as we perform them, resisting the violence of absolute knowledge.

You are right, you cannot keep the world on your terms, but you can grapple with it, & therein meaning happens— not outside it, not despite it, not in anticipation of absolving it. I know I'm sounding like a broken record now, but repetition produces difference. It is how we are able to say the same words & mean different things. Immanence is an opening & actualization is a trap. You do this all the time & in brave ways & I am so fucking proud of & inspired by you, so don't ever say that you don't do anything or mean anything. You do this with zero cards (as much as I kinda hate

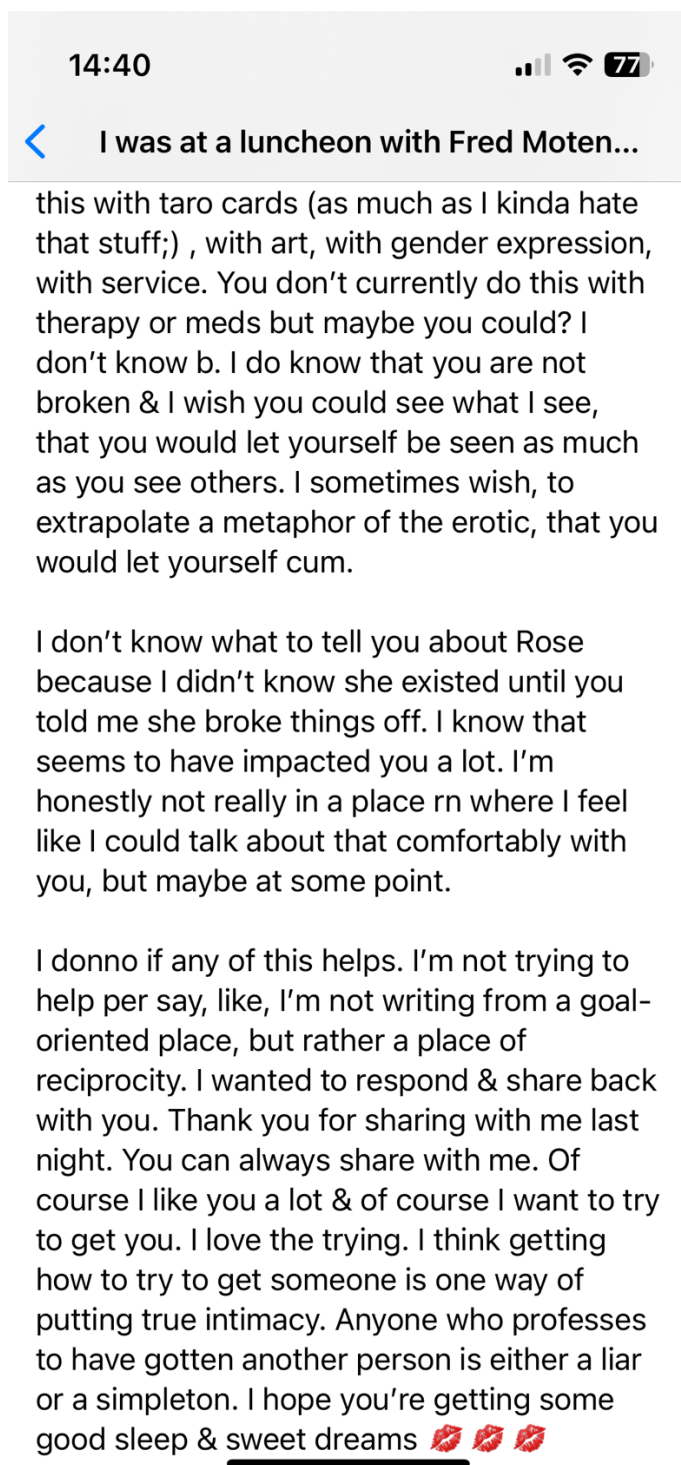


Figure 24. Screenshots documenting a text message sent to Ashley from the author following a drive up Highway 1 in Spring 2019. Personal collection of the author, Santa Cruz, CA, September 2024.

PART II: COUPLETS

Money with You

The sun shines out your asshole
and into my mouth. I'm promising you

an orange grove. The media promised me jet packs,
but I'm a trooper. Send me your prosthetic leg

in a loose cannon and I'll inhale it like a bouquet.
I will suffer an ignoble death

blindfolded before a steak knife taped to a roomba.
This might take some time. Doing nothing is the new
something. I spent a whole afternoon candying yams
over an open flame. They tasted like citronella.

I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth.
I feel like a boa constrictor that grows to the diameter
of the drainpipe and then stops growing.
From all the ganglia of desire I abbreviate:

This is my flower.

I've given it to you.

Try to imagine our skin in the future, the future city
freezing and cracking like a screen.

Vodka poached by water doesn't freeze. I'm onto you
but it's mostly funny. We haven't yet eaten all our eserves

in the luxury of an emergency party,
put the water weight of this storm on our bodies.

Imagine the future after the end of the economy.

I dug your bad heart

out of your chest

in a fit of young shenanigans

but you put it back wet and cold.

You can do something good when you're young.

The same thing older is not as good. This is how I feel
about my love. This is how I feel about my art.

This is how I feel. This is the state of things.

This is the state flower of Florida.

The orange blossom is distilled
for Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and French
cuisines, and for Penhaligon, late perfumer
to Queen Victoria. Orange blossom honey is produced
by gerrymandering the orchard with beehives
during the blooming season. Garlands, wreaths,
bouquets, corsages. This blossom is an aphrodisiac.
It is Japan's first jet-powered aircraft. Orange Blossom Special
is a song by Johnny Cash where he goes
something like, I don't reckon I'm ever goin' back to Florida,
and he doesn't care if he wastes away
in the noosphere
that is probably just New York, maybe LA.
You can google this but what you don't know

is how you reset my spine every time.

Prop up the landscape and paint over it

with gesso like fallen blossoms, the buckshot

of your spring but the humdrum of my chronic calendar.

The scent tickles your nose. Someone is coming to visit

in a shallow draft boat or paddlewheel steamer.

Someone is thinking of you and the railroad.

Someone, the engine, is kissing your picture.

So pretty in the face, in your chest
an arcade. Cancer is a crab that cannot duck

sideways. You are healthy, joystick,
making eyes, bringing the soda

jerk to its knees. I'm not a boy so I cannot
be your boyfriend, but if you want me

to then I can be your Gucci Mane.

A makeup counter is belief in my desire.

The mall is bigger than the Mall
of America, archival jerk.

Now I'm on the pill, the dizzying potential
of negation, pillow mint for every morning

like you shitting, still chewing, so at home
in your body. You are on a pedestal

never coming down and I am the pressure
sore from waiting.

I invite you over to play house. After all
the box wine, you puke straight red.

The tub looks like a corn syrup suicide,
but you keep cutting the wind,

your hand yapping like the dead
head of a rattler between my legs

until you finally pass out on the pullout
couch, a pale windsock, a dry moth

over a used car lot. You can't tell a lemon
from a pear. Such a young

bag of bones! Your parents
take turns making your cell

go burrr. The daisies push
themselves up by their dicks.

It's spring and we could've been

anything back from the dead:

a nuclear family, pirate property,

a fruit fly released

from a truck of oranges

dazzled and afraid.

Biggest tune in the world pull up!

You don't need that Roberta Flack

you need that Robert dinero.

Congratulations this sex is redeemable

like tokens at my trading post the mouth

of a nameless river. Miami doesn't exist yet

but semio-capitalism does.

The Tequesta are already gone

from the bay. You care for your dears

but they are sickly. Nothing can stop

the American Riviera but your preference of some

waters to other waters. What is not to love

here? Everywhere there is has everything

in it: the internet, a crystal ball, the small of your back

is a bread and butter plate. The minimum

slippage between signifiers is the measure

of consensual reality. Once upon a time

I searched for your smoke signs on the Internet

with a capitol I, but it collapsed like a tent into a wand

and a point where everything vanishes like the moon.

This is not a blossom but an antechamber
of foresight or many hundreds of pixels.

It is the verdigris of a difficult aesthetic
like trying to keep an animal on your lap.

The bell tolls for whoever holds it
like a rabbit's foot

is about the gruesome transfer of luck
palm to palm. I have a dream

we're back in your parent's shed that is your studio,
amped up like moths under a bright light I wish

was campfire. We won't admit we're tired
so we watch TV. I think this whole thing is about making out

but really it's about making out on screen. I feel disappointed
and then it ends.

Every billboard is a love poem

to a thing I can't have. I didn't click

on the Twin Towers burning up the ad bar.

Did Ryan McGinley invent the tumblr girl

or did he just queer it? Star-spangled thighs

waning with the light. I don't want to appear on the flag of your empire,

I want to be the flag.

This will end in tears.

The dog beach is on fire.

The iguanas are fucking the peacocks

on the banks of the canals. It's the end
of the world. I'm on a speedboat

in a staring contest with the sun.

My tongue is thick and white.

I lap at language currency, try to go native.

At the checkout counter, I understand

even what I don't understand

more naturally than any gift economy.

Really I'm afraid of intimacy.

Once after a bad night

behind someone's little sister

in line for the club:

Are you the female who stole my iPhone

you two-faced bitch I know who you are

I don't even have to make a phone call

my religion's got it's eyes on you

I'ma keep my hands clean and you'll still end

up on your knees your punishment is perfect

Your thieving will manifest guilt

emphasis on the guilt

I'm going to fuck your heap up, snatch that mask

throw it in the air, make your bitch bald ass jump

like a four-legged animal and that's not even mentioning

how I'm gonna retaliate

Laugh it up now you dumb cunt trust me

you will never see this coming

I fill any shape like seawater until I don't, and then

I leave salt in that shape. The solar plexus

is the floodwall, the pageantry of less or more

planets. Kaleidoscopic is a thing

but why not use telescopic

the same? Does every storm have a name?

Open the city like bowels. This blossom

will help you to feel

less continental. A YouTube subculture

for wind blowing through trees:

Whenever I have a problem and I hear this sound

it reminds me that life goes on just like the sound

it makes. The wind keeps pushing on even

when the leaves are in the way. Thanks

for the sounds. It was eight hours with these sounds

I slept all sleep listening to these sounds. Wonderful

Thank you I don't get out much and lying down
with my eyes closed and listening to the wind

in the trees, I'm taken far, far away in place
and a long time ago thank you very much

Our destiny is the first bi-hemispheric capital where booty
bass believes in the benevolence of human desire.

booty
is my favorite word.

It knows what it wants,
just look at it.

I know where sea cows congregate head first
like the milk cows I was raised on, where to feed

tarpon up to the elbow, pick too many
mangoes, pick aloe vera

to ease the rash. I know where to go out
and where to come home. I am the rhythm in our stomping

grounds, the source of your dexterity, the reason you go
into Berklee. I know the b-sides, fatty underbelly, baby

where's the crippy at?

The bars before they're emptied

and cut, reassembled like wigs,
the white house with a broken chicken,

orange rose petals, orange water, honey,
the full moon is a pill for what ails.

Water rolling under the car as in sleep.

The stiller I stand, the sadder I feel.

If I cannot fuck you, let me
fuck you up.

An aerial view of you in waterproof Lycra
and I am flying over. The land comes over

your head like a sweater and into my lap.

Riding shotgun, loving you so hard

I have to squint, a neck inching down
the fat of the world. We deserve nothing.

Try to break into your own home.

Owl rip the skin off a cow. Crazyweed!

How dogs smell cancer

How a child drowns in a pool

with other children

swimming over

A manhole cover, the ambush
beneath bad font, the forehead

of an inappropriate joke
The right to narrative pleasure

Intimacy without proximity
Arboresque

What you do every day is who you are
Beach house roof grass

The outline of a girl under wool
What does the sheep have

to smile about. I hope it loves
someone that makes it come stars.

If desire is a lack,

I pull hard.

Chain smoke the spent

engine of a rocket

reintroducing itself

to the atmosphere.

The rain moves in
like wallpaper, peels down

like hair, seven minutes
in heaven. The only thing I fear

more than failure is like success
but body

dysmorphic. The wet season
interrupts conscious continuum

and helps me see more
like a machine, the enlightened

angel alien, the trope pulsing
between imaginaries, the anti-drone

for what ails, oh my god
yes, oh my god

Now I'm old it's hard to move
through memory, deep time

of the media. Were you razed
on the photo-degradation

of Red No. 3.

Were you hit by the beautiful

truck. Can you read cursive.

Does this mean anything.

What about after half life
therapy and psychodramas.

The wild notion that images are physical
extensions of cosmology. If you build it,

they will come.

Despite prophetic failures,

here are the tracks

of animals, rocks, and plants.

New evidence suggests gerbils werked
the bubonic plague. A priori intimacy

No rest for the weary. No trust in cute.
I can spot your love

because you talk to me like to your pet.
Varied affective blow/smoke

The-context law! Love is joy with recognition
of an external cause. Joy is the increase in power

to think and to act. If a market never runs
out of Spinoza yelling fire does that mean nothing

or everything reads his ass? I'm telling you
emergency truths about yourself. lik dis

if u cri evrytim if you crave everything if
you die everyday of your life!

A lizard caught in the throat
of a cat like spaghetti

I hold her
and you pull it out.

This is the rhythm method.
This is real life

in which you're sweet
on soft targets.

Let's start with the basics
like a cow giving up

cud. The unit of analysis
should be the ecology

of relations. Veni Vidi Selfie
Everyone makes fun

of that scene from *American Pie*.

Am I the only apple-eyed

heart crying

yeaa boi! get it!

Googling exes with inhuman
speed makes me sorry

I was never in a band.

Life imitates art

which is the origin myth
of flatulence. Silent

but deadly. Why
are you staring. Do I deserve

clearer and more generous light.
Bauhaus wants me to think futuristically

but I can only manage
what keeps me

in the present, constantly shocked
to learn friends have savings

accounts. I know you're tired of being

wealthy, so bb gurl put it on me.

The sun thumps your back,
baby, new pink

involucre bending over
a broken turtle, your ass a soft thumb

beside the highway, your weight the uvula
on the hell mouth, hot as fuck. You look

like a topiary schoolboy dared to be tender.
You look like the Trapper Keeper of my dreams.

You squint your nose like the mascot
to my Parliament of Things, a platform

for ambient intimacy, where a Solo cup
is never lonely, and good things come

to every thing. One balmy ribbon of blood
dots the asphalt between us: fold here,

sweet antipode! Doubled over, vomiting

brings us momentarily closer to god.

The back door fits unevenly in its humid
frame. A perimeter of white light

glistens like babies' lips. Waxy ficus leaves
collect at the threshold, an alien encounter

or the gates of heaven. Dark, hard
centipedes stow inside to ash. Dumpster

drunk flies spasm against the varnished
concrete, buzzing like peroxide

in a scrape. I'm still hung over, so I lay on the floor
with my head under the desk. I will hear

when the gallerist returns from lunch.

I would know his voice anywhere.

Not quitting just loosening

Eating and drinking

things that make my life easier

My contact high riding

that phylum of pure potential

I want to make puppies with you

I know I'm not hott but in my culture

I'm maybe cute and I woke up sad

we didn't go to party city

You know a cop was at the red light

Bank cashiers giving all kinds of attitude

Jellyfish clogging your anus

How desire inscribes itself into reality

In the house there are three roaches, two lizards, and one python

In the house there are one million roaches, one million lizards, and one
million pythons

Cry about it with me over a fat grape dutch

Moving toward bioluminescence

You'd prefer not to go out tonight

but if it's the end of the world bitch

why aren't you dead

This is a photo of Diandrah Blazej,
But we say Blaze-J because it's funny.

I'm here too, a weird soda bread. You can't tell
is Nick at Nite and I'm hauling gak.

This is Oregon Trail and I'm mainlining
buffalo. This is rare Jurassic

and I'm haptic groundswell. This is the cutting
floor and I'm the gumshoe.

Generators make this filthy warehouse hum. Sweat
makes us clean. One Starbucks cake pop

in the afternoon and in the evening.
you take a gold chain between your teeth

like a rose. When Diplo finally comes on,
you press my conch into his palm. He tweets

it from a jet. This is as famous as it gets.

The beaches on the east coast are not like the beaches

on the Gulf coast, where shells are abundant.

You will mostly find bits and pieces.

You will be disappointed. No sleep.

Possums

Craving waffles, she preheated the hidden magazine
to her lover's .45 and busied herself to the hospital.

The body as a site of inscription, duh.

I feel you up for holes, try to bundle

you, a pixel of hay at the feet of Mario Kart,
but you'd rather be a rambling man

o' war, a city of strangers in which I am also estranged.

The salt of the earth is a conducting crystal,

but the salt of the sea just stings.

How is it jellyfish don't destroy

each other? Love is the dumb banging
of pots and pans, the trill of every beetle

humping dirt, a long shot
from the broiler through the heart. When I kissed you

happy New Year you didn't kiss back.

I wanted to kill you with my mouth,

but the sigh in sign is silent, deadly.

A headless goat and three chickens

washed up behind a South Beach condominium.

By February, the weather was perfect.

I think of your ass wrapped sick-tight
in gold Cellophane. Wonder Bread packing

your heart like coral. A charge
to the wild hogtie. And in the Publix

I go, Woah. Then I think of the hole
blown open, a caviar mouth or dumb bird.

As I grow older, I don't give a fuck.
Soon I'll give, like, negative fucks,

pull photographic originals
from my head every time.

If you go pro, will you miss me
the way Snoop misses Tupac?

If you bury me, will you keep
the promise of a dog to a bone?

Hear my slumber in every conch?
Potentiality never lies.

I will work out
full-time independent

social contractor for less
than minimum wage.

I will be your dream
fucking girl, all my fat

in my ass. It's the good kind of fat
for your heart. Omega three-way

with mediated space:

from the Greek, the great O,

from cosmology, the density
of the universe,

from eschatology, the symbolic
end of everything

No heroes, only workers. Strike at gold
like teeth in a head and come up

a monster, fire over water.

We are our mother and father,

the loosening of tabs that fix paper dolls
like witches, the perineum that lengthens

toward the tongue like yoga.

We are pirates if the internet is a channel

through which human intelligence renews
its capacity to produce. We are a smooth annelid

shitting where we eat, bucking like honey
in the throat of a bee, sucking guarapo

until our rotten mouths pucker inward,
an anus big enough for a fist.

Making a fist with the left

while inserting the right

digits past the epiglottis

delays the gag reflex for deeper

auto-tune. Self-care

is the circulation of a svelte cat

bleaching its own asshole with milk.

Home remedies are subjugated

knowledges taken by the Roman

twins of relativism and totalization.

Reply with the subject or bodyline

"Help." Got the club going up

on a Tuesday, Ruby Tuesday,

practicing older, whiter, middle class

I'm running late/capitalism!

Plating junk food like high-end cuisine

It's the bomb.com, the perfect commodity.

When dropped, you need another No money,

no problems. What would it be to risk

alienation in aesthetics? In discourse?

Step into my office. You have my word

we can go over

my head straight to the moon.

The next logical expansion space

The plucky blond hairs colonizing my chin

and your love for them. I'm prepared

to get sick drunk. Lighten up,

you say. You're all trying so hard.

I watch National Geographic

specials on multiple

births and yell WHAT at the screen

several times. You touch the airbrushed

flamingos where metal meets vigor

outside these things that stay there

detached and absolute

in your swamp ass yard.

Child's Play is based on the true story

of a nursemaid who made little Robert Eugene Otto

a doll in his likeness: matching sailor suit, booties, locks of his own hair.

Robert the Doll became Robert and Robert became Gene.

Robert was three feet tall and made of straw. Gene loved him

and gave him a place at the table. Robert conversed with Gene

in a distinct voice. Robert was cursed.

He stalked from window to window like a cat, moved

furniture, overturned silverware, locked doors, caused Gene to cry out

in the night. Gene grew up and became a painter.

Artists get everything before everyone else

except money. I love you even though there's no money

in it for artists. Gene and Robert were intimate

throughout their adult lives. Robert has a facebook. His aura

was photographed at the Atlantic Paranormal Society Convention

in Clearwater, Florida. Robert lives in the Fort East Martello Museum

and Gardens on Key West, safe-locked by LoJack Supply Chain Integrity,
the official sponsor of sweet dreams.

When Robert overexposes film or fails pacemakers, the staff
cajoles him with peppermints. In other words, you don't have to fear

loneliness, animus, the anus, the soul, the uncanny, infirmities,
naming, blood, darkness, otherness, bad art, old tricks, a climate

where nothing dies, where insects and germs live forever
like my love for you. This letter is a valentine, an invitation,

a waiting dog. The wax of its seal contains a drop of my blood.

This letter is not junk mail, anthrax, a ransom

although I do have something that
you want, an orange.

Homunculus is the representation
of a tiny man. Coenesthesia, the sense

of one's own body. Do you feel me
where I cannot, I think

you do, oh, keep your friends close
and your enemies closer! Why I take you

in my mouth, softening like bullion,
because I know more sacrifice than hunger

Every time you get undressed, I hear symphonies
in my head. Every thing is terrible,

especially the trumpets upended
not upworthy, unfriended

not blocked in the trauermarch of our data
body. I find it virtually impossible

to write poems offline so I re-conned
the image of your ataraxic back on deck.

Rending a white shirt above your head
to light a joint against the wind

Torqued like Andrew Wyeth's girl across a plane
of immanence, worth at least 1,800 1948

dollars to MoMA the year a hurricane
broke Florida. Pour a little 40 on the salt

of the earth, in the wound, for my homies,

even you.

It must feel good to ask and receive.

Your parents were the kind that bought exactly

what you circled in the Sears Christmas

catalog, or not. I'm barely your elder

but a generation gap exists to straddle like the fault

line of my first collegiate Lesbian experience.

What a dumb thing to write. Political correctness

is another kind of phobia.

Things never get easier they only get harder.

What is this tumescence of dust? My erogenous zone

is what they call a digital immigrant. Its comfort zone

is actually the 1990s. The 1990s sound like,

How come you didn't bring more cheese pizza?

You're invisible but I can feel you. The g in g-chat

stands for ghost. The internet is psychedelic.

If you remember the internet, you aren't here.

This cigarette stands for my inside and outside.

I think it's fucking sexy. If I concentrate

on smoking instead of eating, I will be sexy,
there will be more oranges, you will go down

with the frost on your breath,
put out the fire in my lungs.

The unkempt landing strip

peels back like the lips

of a gator in heat.

This autoerotic isn't

because I 'm reincarnate.

A movement from

is a movement toward,

an invention of space. I flesh out

half the closet like a watermark,

only half the bed in wakeful sleep.

Absence makes the heart grow

Telsa towers. Inhabiting

power structures to sap them

is called decolonization

or latent millenarianism. The video

circulates slowly. I am hunched

over a ship,

polishing it.

The summer Vaughn Bell hung terrariums
in MASS MoCA, I was paid to stick my head

inside and spritz the mosses. Now I live
there. It's called Dadeland. Every day

is an exercise in hydration. The cloverleaf wavers
in the windshield like smoke. Light

hits my car so hard it bleaches
the upholstery. The surprise of light pubes

on my favorite big bouncer.
I don't know Haitian Creole. I don't even

know Spanish. Come back walking backwards
to me like out of a cemetery, protecting your identity

from every spirit but mine
because I want you that much.

I play kegel crunches under the table so secret
the glint of tines. Make new holes in my body

without your head in my lap. Levitate a shadow
box before the whole

system crashes. You spot the tripwire
before the trap and love moves

from host to host like possession. Too stoked
to retrieve my pony vision of you in nothing

but your socks, pink socks,
hot pink socks

The problem with risk modeling superintelligence

The problem with risk modeling
superintelligence

ubiquitous surveillance
value porosity

global macrostrategy
nanotechnology

biotechnology
technological unemployment

animal diminishment
utility diversification

pandemic pathogens
algorithms

deterrence theory
or existential hope

for the human future
or the future of humanism

is that it's all being done
by humans, specifically

The problem
with sinking is sub-

culture won't save us.

Cross your heart

and hope to die.

Cross your legs

to shield your junk.

Become more like junk

or a poem

around a stone.

Bend over. Micro-
meshing. Tiny bones

chirping against tiny bones
like shaved ice. About- face.

Pockmark. Copping that feeling
of sozzled marzipan in heat.

We are ugly but I don't care.
One dolphin times sonar.

Bang like want. Take your silver
spoon in my mouth.

Knock the teeth out.
If you want to be a party

animal, you gotta learn
to live in the jungle.

The ignorant joy of swimming
up to the burl

of a polar bear, I mean pool bar,
because art

is a totality. The way you move
your body in the gulls,

in the cyphers, in light
of the hair of the dog

how much water treatment
until vomit. How much Trident

until polearm. The sea as pointed
witness. A good friend

jokes, "I don't celebrate Cinco de Mayo
because I'm not white."

Moving like a sick spine of cars
across the causeway has great effect

on our relationship. Things
come on, get set

like boiled eggs. I'm screaming
about the state

of the bird of paradise, like,
how hard is it to remember water?!

If then, so what. The causeway up
I feel blessed. It's our first porn,

soft as limestone, edible knifefish
broke open on the skeletal miles

from a canal, a remediation
of legal death. I have no will

nor digital executor.

I'm still vibing from killing it

on the dance floor

and we can fight all we want

if it makes us money. I want

to be money with you.

I love you like a murder
of crows. What the

fuck yeah celebrity
by numbers. Net famous

but poor. Work nests in my air
mattress. Hot soft cash

smells so good
Tricked out expenditure

slumber forever
Lean into it

If you're American
it's important

I like it
when messed up girls

write poetry. Open presents

in public. Teach adult bodies

how to swim.

I don't want you to be afraid.

You can pry my hard-g

gifs from my cold dead hands.

A dormant iguana thuds from the papaya
tree. We pass it around like a dumb talking

stick. The black rings around its tail
are wrist thick. I distribute the weight

like a basketball on the fingertips
of one hand. I roll its tiny biceps

around like hard candy. I blow
on its eyelids, but they don't open.

I don't have anything I want
to say.

If someone is captive,
you can tell them

any story you want.

If you are captive,

I will tell you the story
in which you love me

and it will be true.

One stillpoint,

one red apple pierced
by the string of a harp.

I know what good mythology is.

Venetian blinds sound super

sexy but they're really not.

A cockroach inside out

on the carport.

Bludgeon out the eyes

and the sockets behind

the eyes a modern postcard,

so afraid of a fifth column

in case of war, the turgor

of abdomens set

into each other like pots.

Showing up to the club like, oh no
there's people here

Not waving but drowning
What is this being-against

when we could be together?
Birds do it. Bees do it.

Pythons do it like rabbits.
What is this ethico-aesthetic

paradigm, group selfie?
Just tell me

how u rly feel. No phones
no phonies. Showing up to the club

like flies contour dung.
Remember, love

needs a body. You are my creator

but I am your master. Obey!

I did all I could not to fall in love

asleep, just to rest my eyes,

feel my ghost press inside, emphasizing skin,

tenable, a letter against an envelope,

but the heat weakened my knees, and I let go

in artless brisance, and in my dream was the rubric

of straight skeeted New Year's disco from Hialeah,

and the florid boy moving like a dolphin

in a snow globe, which is the illusion of movement,

like how I woke up the next day to my pet name

in a bright room, still plastered, and found you crooning

over a Persian cat, its face a flat dinner plate, a sign,

a reward for the terrible hit the heart takes

as it crashes through language, and I stayed

although I would always feel a little outside your embrace,

arboresque, the patina of dill across sour cream.

The way you think you think
is the manifest image, the Turing test

and it is weaponized.

How can I hit this

bong underwater, echolocation?

I'm over here

dropping the ball like its New Years:

the selfsame sadness, the same ruinous height

Sources of loneliness: buying
the pre-cut fruit cups

Coming to a complete stop
on a road without traffic

The size of Google Maps balloons
in real life

Smacking the damp wood
above the sink moments before the roaches

pour out waving like intrepid satellites

The ugliness of, The Early Aughts

out loud. *When I state that coats or boots
stand in relation to linen, the universal*

*incarnation of abstract human labor,
the absurdity of the statement is self-*

evident. Treating words like objects.

Is it just me or do I type like a caveman?

The amebic steel of embryo firearms

The cavern between holding and being held

Covering myself

to walk from the bedroom to the bathroom

Sleeping bodies in the next room

Idling

in the driveway waiting for a song to end

before killing the engine

We mime our goodbye behind the gray troll
of a gas pump. Two roads diverge, etc.

The killer under my car is a patient trundle
keeping me at bay in your mouth. I tread water

in deliberate Ws like kissing toast.

We have to try hard

as cat-lovers taming the internet
for lack of dog parks. We have to perform

a museum in which we're every curser
hovering halo. We have to behave like glue

inside horses. We have to grow their kelp of
black tongues

to wreath us throat to asshole.

We have to gut each other

and sleep inside our corpses

for warmth. O! what excuse

will my poor devil have then to wait, sniffing
asphalt? I will spur a new race of holodeck

desire, love summoned with love, instant
gratification. I always knew I was an alien.

Every time I get a boner
I can hear it phoning home.

On the real, sometimes I hate
On the real, sometimes I hate
my body so much, I have to say it

out loud, but not always you
over me. Sometimes I'm on top

and it's like everything
that goes up must come.

*There is no sexual symbolism
and sexuality does not designate*

*another 'economy,' another 'politics,'
but rather the libidinal unconscious*

of political economy as such.

This sentence has been carried out

and you deserved to die
in this lavish absence apart,

a party, you were my greatest

hit ungh and I took it

like a man, all the way

to the bank.

Superfun you're my emergency
contact, our murder-suicide

always a broken pact
or penumbral

dialectic. Never use
the lyric out of service

to the self. I want to hang
up/out but I'm having trouble

locating the smell of cat urine.
How can I squat your bodily

function. Your position relative
to gravity. Your aging process

already meat. Who did you think's
on the cell? Meat sounds.

What did you gchat?

The sound of meat.

I want to punch every flower in the face.

No. I want every flower

to punch me in the face. Sweet sucker

punch, poison Kool-Aid

Take to the swamp like a legal drug.

From heroine to cancer chic

Say fracking ten times fast.

Spell A.D.I.D.A.S.

all day I dream about sex. That feeling

when I glance at my bc and totally

forget what day it is. The smoothness

of bodies into commodities. The elaboration

of novel emergencies. I have the sneaking suspicion

it's never been more important

to be a poet and we're doing it

all wrong. At the end of the world

you want me to write you a poem about blow jobs.

I want you to blow me and feel like a poem.

Appendix A: Networked Couple(t)s

Digital photographs compiled and edited from the personal collection of the author.
The Museum of Broken Relationships, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.



Appendix B: Self-Portrait as Couple(t)

Digital photograph from the personal collection of the author. The Museum of Broken Relationships, Zagreb, Croatia, September 2022.



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