

SPILOVER: FEMINIST LOVE PRAXIS

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



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On the 1st of February, 2021

ABSTRACT

Spillover: Feminist Love Praxis is a dialogical interplay with a cine-poem, *SpilLover* (2020), where both are inspired by the fragment as a mode of enquiry. The film fragment as mode is about ongoing processes of exploratory potentialities through which the artwork and knowledge reveals an open-endedness. This is enabled by a conception of the film fragment as “enunciation” which offers “a world that is constantly invented” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198); a fragment is mobile, responsive, malleable and mutable.

Spillover: Feminist Love Praxis is concerned with an exploration of love and love relations as political possibilities and acts “to envision, theorize, and compel politics” (Abbas, 2017, p. 200) towards liberatory and transformational conceptions and relations of love. The project disavows romantic love, which is love conceived through an “ethic of domination” (hooks, 2006, p. 289) as opposed to a “love ethic” (hooks, 2006, p. 290). Love, when conceived through a “love ethic” (ibid.), is an expansive, creative, transformational and a relational force.

I explore appetite in relation to love where love is conceived of as “abundance” (Abbas, 2017, p. 201) so that love has many forms. A consideration of appetite with respect to love is about an affirmation of love for love. It is an assertion of love: to be willful in love and be willing to love. But, appetite is also about a lack of appetite. It is about what you demand, refuse, insist on, and let go of. Love as “a series of propositions and objections” (Abbas, 2017, p. 201); love as a political possibility for itself: an erotic move through power (Lorde as cited in Sandoval, 2000). This is about a refusal of the innocence of love in order to consider it as a “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2006) and as a transformational space (Berlant, 2011) for feminist love praxis.

These ideas are explored and live inside the experience of the cine-poem film, which complements and contrasts with the written fragments. The intention is for the film to compel one towards the written fragments. But the writing is not in “service” of the film nor an exegesis. Rather, the film and writing *spill over* into each other, creating a relationship that informs one another. The writing world and film world come together to form sensuous spaces where different “enunciations” take place.

Keywords: experimental film practice, film fragment, love, love relations, feminist love praxis, enunciation, feminist love studies

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Thank you to my family, Thabisile, Richard, Samkelisiwe, Banele, Vuma and Sandra, for your continued love, encouragement and support.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Thabisile and Richard Levin.

LINK TO FILM

SpilLover (2020)

Duration: 41:15

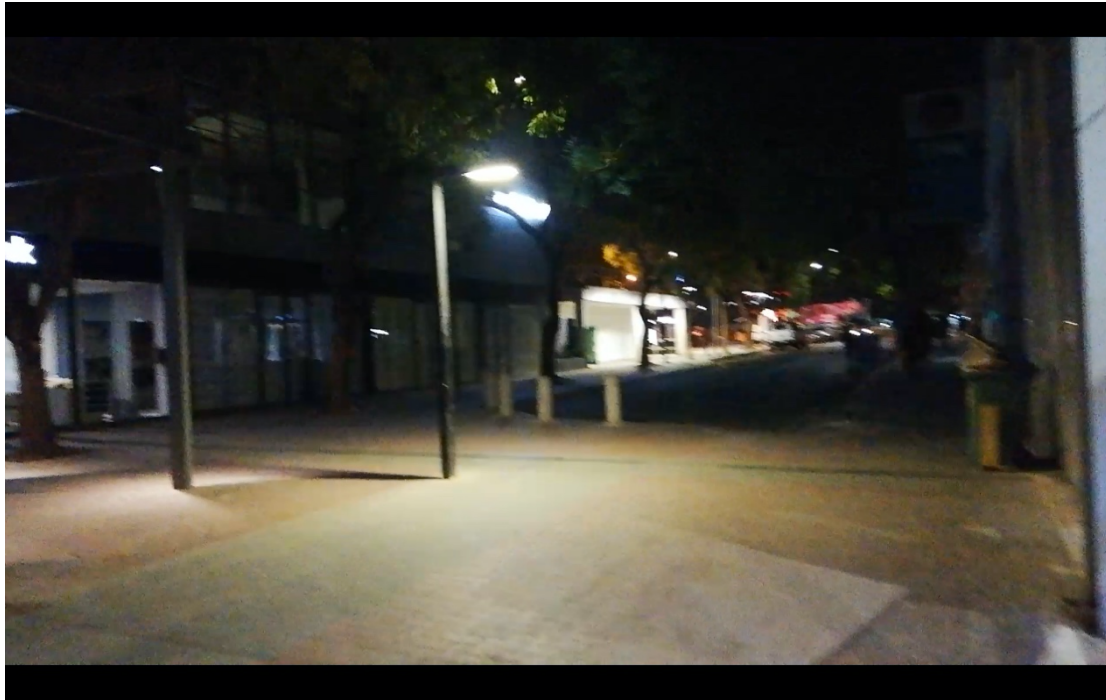
Link: <https://vimeo.com/474135338>

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Bridge

In song structure a bridge is a transitional section or passage: “Who is the woman on the bridge who in different places and in different guises continually reappears” (Maso, 1996, p. viii)?



Still from *Cellphone Video* (2018).

One evening while walking in a partly open-air mall in Johannesburg: faulty streetlights flashed on and off, creating a strobe like effect. I captured the dramatic scene with my cell phone camera for its cinematic quality. I walked towards the lights. And tried to keep the camera steady. People were headed home. A woman carried a bag of oranges over her shoulder as she walked alongside another woman. Others were still at work. A man pushed a long snake of shopping trolleys toward the entrance of the mall.

The image above is a remnant from that evening. Its focus is a working streetlight in the foreground of the main action. The flashing lights were visible as I approached the light in the still but intensified when I reached the street beyond the light.

The strobe like effect of the lights is lost in my capturing of the image as a still. It lacks the necessary movement to make the strobe visible. The still offers a more desolate image when separated from the joyous kineticism of the flashing lights.

I wrote of that video: “She walks the city with an electrifying charge...” (Mistry, 2018). The still offers an altogether different “look and feel.” A remnant that points towards something else.

I tried to incorporate the woman with the “electrifying charge” fragment into one of the fragments in my film *SpilLover* (2020). But it did not work aesthetically with the rest of the fragment. A disobedient fragment...perhaps meant for another time.

But the notion of walking women remained.



Still from The University of Arizona website, Geosciences page, Carapa projects: *Indo-Asia collision and the rise of the Pamir: new insights from detrital geochronology from Tajikistan and China* (2020).

The original image has been altered. A film grain filter has been placed over it.

a. By: Ekaterina Kravtsova, 2014

“I met him in a plane on my way to London. After a half hour conversation he asked if I would like to go with him to the Pamir Mountains.

He was very surprised when I agreed.

- Are you ready to stay in a tent?

- Yes.

How could he know that I was born there and had this dream for 30 years to come back”
(Kravtsova, 2014)?

b. My interpretation of Ekaterina’s story as a film fragment

Archival photographs depicting landscapes of the Pamir Mountains fill the screen. The images evoke a 1970s feel. They are presented as if in a slideshow. The photographs show desolate mountain ranges shrouded in clouds and snow. Accompanying the landscapes are the environmental sounds of the area. These slowly give way to the sounds of the interior of a commercial plane in flight, late at night. We hear the steady hum of the aircraft engine, coughs, hushed whispers, serving trollies rolling down the aisles, giggles, snores and the muted sounds of flushing toilets from outside the lavatory. A voice-over fades in. It is layered over the sounds of the interior of the plane. In the voice-over a woman speaks Russian, recounting Ekaterina’s story as if it were her own. As she narrates the story, the environmental sounds of the Pamir Mountains are reintroduced.

The three soundscapes: the voice-over, the environmental sounds of the mountains and the sounds of the interior of the plane – are interwoven into a tapestry of memory and sensation. The voice-over leads and dominates the soundscape. However, in its pauses or breaths it occasionally gives way, allowing for one or the other two soundscapes to dominate. The imagery of the Pamir Mountains continues to slowly appear as the soundscapes move and are articulated. The end of the voice-over gives way to the sounds of the interior of the plane. The environmental sounds of the Pamir Mountains fade in and for a moment are interwoven with the sounds of the plane’s interior. The sounds of the plane soon dissipate and we are only left with the sounds of the Pamir Mountains accompanying a static image of the mountain range.

Ekaterina submitted this story to me following a request for contributions that I sent out via email whilst on a residency in Berlin. I asked for a story/experience of love of either four lines or four sentences long. I requested written contributions along with an optional audio recording from the contributors narrating the stories submitted.

The request: a project that endeavoured to gather what I called “A Love Affair in Four Lines” was inspired by an encounter with a woman named Marie. I met Marie in a bar in Berlin. I can’t recall why but I asked Marie to write me a story. I wrote her a story too. I can’t remember if I stipulated that the story should be about a love affair but I think I said it should concern love. As a way to encourage her I said something like: “Just write anything, it can be four lines.” Marie wrote a story and called it “The four-line love affair.”

I didn’t make the Pamir Mountains fragment...a fragment at rest, meant for another time. But the use of sound to create a “world” remained and is apparent in the sound design in *SpilLover*. The “cinesonic” (Eshun, 2004, p. 41): an emphasis on the examination of the aural in relation to its filmic implications (Eshun, 2004).



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

INT - A BAR IN JOHANNESBURG - NIGHT

A woman looks and walks.

VO – AN UNNAMED MAN

"She loves too much of him that he hasn't yet discovered. Her love burrows in with the faintest of touches, like a surgical knife effortlessly cutting through him deep with the slightest amount of pressure. Past the fleshy white stuff right down to [the] bone" (Anonymous, 2014).

The voice-over, a fragment from the contribution made by Anonymous for the "A Love Affair in Four Lines" project is a fragment deployed in *Appetite*, a film fragment that forms part of *SpillOver* (2020). It is Anonymous' voice that you hear in *SpillOver*.

One afternoon I sat in the outside area of a charming café in Johannesburg. Tables and chairs were arranged around the periphery of the café on the pavement. It was an idyllic afternoon. I sat at one of these tables with P and A. In conversation with P and A, I grappled with the ideas for my film. P and A listened and offered advice.

P said: "why can't she be alone?"

INT – A LARGE SHOWER IN A SUBURBAN FLAT, JOHANNESBURG – NIGHT

A woman is embraced by her lover.



Stills from *The Woman in an Embrace* (2019).

“Thinking-making, making-thinking” (Mistry, 2017, p. 26): I will use the woman in an embrace fragment for something else. A fragment at rest, meant for another time.

In a process-driven approach to filmmaking, process reveals and informs methods of construction, form and content. Process, one part of a form of dialogical “world-making”: P and A listened and offered advice.

“Fragments that initiate thinking” (Mistry, 2020, np), fragments that are partly deployed, fragments that remain unresolved perhaps meant for another time, fragments at rest, clear in

their intention, waiting for their time. Fragments that leave something behind: “shards, remnants” (Mistry, 2020: np). Fragments whose remains contain the nexus of something shared with those fragments whose time has come.

Even those fragments, the ones whose time has come, are never finished. They are only at rest. Defying this logic: “For this to be a work of art, you have to finish it. It can’t be ongoing” (Bishop as cited in La Berge, 2015, p. 583). But artworks can be at *rest* rather than finished which is to say that they can be durational and consequently ongoing. This is about a consideration of the artwork as something that unfolds over time, in a non-linear manner and with an unknown trajectory; it can’t be determined in advance.

It is a consideration of the artwork that simultaneously describes a mode of practice: the film fragment as mode – which is about process – that produces the film fragment as artwork. An artwork that is ongoing: I presented a version of the film fragment *Appetite* at a conference in Johannesburg in 2018. After the panel presentation P congratulated me on my presentation but said that the film had felt like a beginning. I understood this to mean the beginning of something that was narratively missing its other parts. A beginning, perhaps in the way a set-up functions in classical narrative cinema: to introduce the main components of a story prior to the inciting incident. The inciting incident is the moment of conflict that produces disequilibrium and propels the narrative forward towards the required restoration of equilibrium or resolution.

At first I was offended by P’s comment; it felt like it inferred some sort of failure or lack in the work. But then, there was my realisation: P’s experience of the film pointed towards something else – an epistemic and political potential already embodied and felt in the work – the film fragment as partial, incomplete and uncertain, a consequence of its status as ongoing.

Fragments, as “permanently unclosed” (Haraway, 1991, p. 157) things, defy fixity, essentialisms, “dualisms” and “totalising” discourses (Haraway, 1991, pp. 158-177). As ongoing things, they are mobile and responsive and are always options/strategies rather than certainties. Fragments function according to a logic of impulse, change and drift. They are analogous to “outbursts of language” or “the body’s gesture caught in action” (Barthes, 2010, p. 3-4). They are spontaneous rather than schematic (Barthes, 2010).

Fragments function at the site of “enunciation” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198). “Enunciation” is a decolonial option that is produced through decolonial thinking; “thinking within the frame of the decolonial option” (ibid.). With each transformative iteration fragments create “a world that is constantly invented in the enunciation” (ibid.). The fragment *is* the “enunciation” and it is constituted through certain actors, languages and strategies of thought, belief, and sensing (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014). The “enunciation” – the fragment – is not “only enacted to ‘represent’ the world, but to confront or support previous existing enunciations” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 199). That is, the fragment, as “enunciation”, which is an option/strategy, “is enacted and framed in other options” (ibid.). “Options” could be different “systems of ideas” or “artistic conventions” (ibid.).

The fragment as “enunciation” offers “a world that is constantly invented” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198); a fragment is mobile, responsive, malleable and mutable. This “world” only exists in the moment of “enunciation” and seeks to “enunciate” rather than “represent.” Representation assumes that “there is a world out there that someone is representing” (ibid.), “outside of the speaking subject” (Mistry, 2020). There isn’t a world that is represented; rather, it “is constantly invented in the enunciation” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198). The “enunciation” is the fragment at rest but never finished.

SpillOver (2020) is a fragmentary cine-poem of feminist love praxis. It is comprised of a series of film fragments that were created using the film fragment as mode. As alluded to earlier in this bridge, the film fragment as mode is about “thinking-making, making-thinking” (Mistry, 2017, p. 26). A process-driven approach to filmmaking where in the process of making film fragments, fragments reveal and inform methods of construction, form and content. This is achieved through the film fragment’s function as a prompt to “initiate thinking” (Mistry, 2020, np) that can point towards a further exploration in an area of current thinking or movement towards the exploration of something else. It can also inform one that the fragment should be put to rest (perhaps meant for another time) or perhaps point to the partial deployment of a fragment, where part of the film fragment is retained and used to build a different film fragment.

The film is comprised of a series of “extensive”/ “developed” fragments that create scenes – sets of fragments that are connected by smaller fragmentary interludes. I describe them as more “extensive” because they were part of a broader conceptual undertaking which I describe in more detail in the ensuing written sections. The connective, interlude fragments, which all involve walking (as do some of the extensive fragments), function to connect the women to one other. The smaller, interlude fragments are **not** secondary to the more extensive fragments. They function to **connect**, to draw the women to each other. Furthermore, they could function elsewhere as something else, as part of another tapestry of thought, sensation and feeling, to be developed further, or stand alone as they are – they allude to the possibility of future extensive fragments but elude the extensive fragments alongside which they exist. The more “developed” fragments in *SpillOver*; they too can stand alone as they are. Such is the character of the film fragment: mobile and mutable. In its sum *SpillOver* is a tapestry of thought, sensation and feeling – produced through connection and departure amassed from various film fragments, to produce a fragmentary yet connected experience, an experience of affinity within difference.

SpillOver is a fragmentary cine-poem. It is constituted via the film fragment and cinematically mobilises “the techniques of poetry” (Rankine as cited in Ulin, 2016, np), namely, repetition and elision (Rankine as cited in Ulin, 2016), with repetition sometimes taking the form of repetition with variation. *SpillOver* is in dialogical interplay with a series of written fragments; the written fragments that follow in this dissertation work in the form that is explored in the cine-poem. *SpillOver* and the written fragments constitute a research project that is concerned with an exploration of feminist love praxis.

The title of this research project is *Spillover: Feminist Love Praxis*.

Love

In its critique the project disavows notions associated with romantic love and the term itself. Contemporary and historical discourses of romantic love are constituted through capitalist, Euro-American, male, patriarchal, heteronormative and heterosexist “assumptions and models” (Ferguson & Toye, 2017, p. 1), which are constituted as the norm. “The fantasy world of romance is used normatively - as a rule that legislates the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others” (Berlant, 2012, p. 87).

Romantic love's normative function operates in a number of terrorising, reductive and oppressive ways through its reduction of love to "one plot" (ibid.) and a particular set of "characters" allowed to participate in this single plot. Film as a mass media form has been, and is, implicit in the reproduction of this single plot (Berlant, 2012).

Dear Reader,

Romantic love is and has been used against women, normatively, and also exploitatively. Under patriarchy and capitalism, loving is constituted as women's work so that women are exploited for their love labour and also made to bear the burden of that work.

Romantic love produces a hegemonic determination of what love is, love as "ready-made" (Bauman, 2003, p. 6): a crippling of the imagination (Berlant, 2012, p. 87) and the notion of love as praxis.

Romantic love regulates who is worthy and unworthy of love and whom one can love and how, and how much (Roy, 1997). A single story should not be told as though it is the only one (Berger as cited in Roy, 1997).

Sincerely,

Nobunye

I do not seek to revise romantic love, appropriate or reclaim it for women. I explore love and the love relations that romantic love seeks to determine through refusing the term and its terms and, I do not aim to provide another more "appropriate" term. I am not interested in a singular way of shaping love. Offering a more "appropriate" term works towards articulating a singularity.

Instead, I am interested in an exploration of praxis and relation, the relations between ideas and the potential of relation itself, relation as praxis which defies singularity and also suggests mobility, creativity, uncertainty, incoherence and constant transformation. I explore women in relation to love and love relations through a consideration of the erotic – the capacity to feel (Lorde, 2007) – the sensual, the sexual, willfulness, self-love, relation, love labour, work and praxis. An exploration that offers objections and assertions as I go...

Paramount to *Spillover: Feminist Love Praxis* is the exploration, privileging and self-determination of women's subjectivities with respect to love and love relations, and their exploration in terms of the aforementioned themes. A privileging of an exploration of women's self-determination in the construction of their subjectivities and how they interact with love and love relations is critical to counter and disavow romantic love's normative and exploitative function, both in the construction of women's subjectivities and how those subjectivities interact and are constituted through love relations. A focus on women's self-determination is a rejection of love's rule(s) under patriarchy and privileges women's desire in its multiplicity.

In addition, a focus on *exploration* is important because my project seeks to defy fixity, essentialism and certainty in the construction of knowledge. Fixity, essentialism and certainty produce "missions and truth without parenthesis" (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198). The notions of "the mission" and "truth without parenthesis" (ibid.) are central to the construction of coloniality and were key to colonial discourse and the colonising mission. Exploration as a strategy for knowledge production is mobile, responsive and concerned with the partial and "permanently unclosed" (Haraway, 1991, p. 157). It produces knowledge as an "option"/strategy, rather than a certainty, an "option"/strategy that is located at the site of "enunciation" (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198).

In my project, the formation of women's subjectivities is articulated from the site of "enunciation" (ibid.). It is not cohesive and does not seek to "represent" women as a "category". Rather, it is partial, incomplete and ephemeral, and deals with sets of imagined women and their subjectivity as they imagine it.

Following this, the project does not seek to offer a cohesive and singular discourse on love and love relations regarding the political elements that comprise the women's subjectivities. This is, for example, with respect to aspects of race, gender, sexuality and nation. Rather, the project, a film in dialogical interplay with a series of written fragments, is concerned with fragmentary expression that emanates from the utterances of the imagined women so that the utterances function as the site of political exploration and interrogation.

The utterances are the imagined lives and subjectivities of the imagined women as they pertain to their experience of love and love relations, which is also the space where their subjectivity is made and where the relation is defined – the relation with oneself and the lover. In their exploratory composition they form the particular conversations about race, gender and sexuality which are considered in relation to each woman's utterance where there are both connections and departures across their utterances. So, although a primary concern of the project is a critique and disavowal of patriarchy and the normative, oppressive and exploitative ways that it interacts with and constructs women's subjectivities and their relations to and in love, the project does not offer a cohesive and singular discourse in response. Instead, it is the utterances in their fragmentation as well as in their connections and departures that offer the political work of the project. The same can be said of the response that the project offers to another central area of critique which intersects with patriarchy. This is the critique of romantic love as produced by capitalism where love labour is imagined as women's work and the work they are best suited for.

In film, whiteness often functions as an invisible signifier; the “property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power” (Dyer, 1997, p. 45) and what produces it as the norm in contrast to blackness which is always marked as black. In part, *SpillLover* explores the articulations of black women's subjectivities through love and desire where black women are imagined as agentic in spaces and discourses where they have previously been excluded or subjugated.

My exploration considers love as a political possibility for love and love relations. Romantic love is love conceived through an “ethic of domination” (hooks, 2006, p. 289) as opposed to a “love ethic” (hooks, 2006, p. 290). Love, when conceived through a “love ethic” (ibid.), is an expansive, creative, transformational and a relational force.

My project explores appetite in relation to love. An exploration of appetite in relation to love infers a conception of love as “abundance” (Abbas, 2017, p. 201), so that love has many forms. Love as “a shifting form” (Abbas, 2017, p. 204) that “compels other forms to shift, not a fixed form to be deployed to reassure a given order” (ibid.).

A consideration of appetite with respect to love is about an affirmation of love for love. It is an assertion of love: to be willful in love and be willing to love. But, appetite is also about a

lack of appetite. It is about what you demand, refuse, insist on, and let go of. Love as “a series of propositions and objections” (Abbas, 2017, p. 201); love as a political possibility for itself: an erotic move through power (Lorde as cited in Sandoval, 2000). This is about a refusal of the innocence of love in order to consider it as a “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2006) and as a transformational space (Berlant, 2011) for feminist love praxis.

These ideas are explored and live inside the experience of the film, which is in dialogical interplay with the written fragments. The intention is for the film to compel one towards the written fragments. But the writing is not in “service” of the film nor an exegesis. Rather, the film and writing *spill over* into each other, creating a dialogical interplay through forms that complement each other. The writing and film “worlds” come together to form sensuous spaces where different “enunciations” take place.

The written fragments

Reader,

Here are some notes, a lexicon of sorts for your walk through the fragments that follow.

1. Composition

The written fragments explore the more “extensive”/ “developed” fragments of the film *SpilLover*. The title of the film fragment under discussion is provided in the written fragment, which also serves as the title for each of the ensuing sections. The titles are as follows: *Willful Walking*, *No Ordinary Love*, *Love is a Distraction*, *Appetite* and *Caesura*.

In the film, these titles for each “developed” or “extensive” fragment are absent, because I didn’t want to create these sections as chapters which is how they would be read in cinematic convention. Instead the fragments spill over with the connective fragments and then into the more “extensive” fragments. I was concerned with creating a complex connective web, a tapestry of thought, feeling and sensation and not marking a set of differentiated actions or events.

As mentioned, the writing in dialogue with *SpilLover* constitutes the explorative substance of the research project. The world of the film is constituted through a tapestry of thought,

sensation and feeling, a world where thought is expressed in its cine-poetic form and is the “enunciation.”

Similarly, the writing employs the sensuous poetic cadence found in the film as well as the poetic techniques of “repetition” and “elision” (Rankine as cited in Ulin, 2016, np), which is echoed in the film. I use these poetic devices to activate language’s physical and emotional potential (Maso, 1996, p. viii). The poetic is employed to produce an erotic language –a language of the body (Maso, 1996) and feeling, so that one is moved. This is used in conjunction with argument, observation, musing, strategies of film writing – with respect to film theory and practice – elements used in narrative prose, and musicality (also a feature of the film) in order to evoke and invite contemplation and reflection on ideas, sensation and feeling in the reader similar to the experience of the viewer.

The *Love is a Distraction* written fragment perhaps departs most from this use of the poetic, in terms of its overall construction and tone. The majority of the fragment is concerned with offering a set of notes that critically reflect on different material seen on the internet. To this end, I offer five notes that provide fairly direct as opposed to poetic descriptions of aspects of the material that I observed. This is in order to take on the “voice” of a set of notes where there is a rendering of a set of observations which clearly situate the reader in an observation of the material. This partly produces an observational rather than poetic tone in the writing. I am concerned with situating the reader in an observation because I would like the reader to experience the observation alongside me so that the critical points made appear more vivid as they emerge from the situatedness of observation.

The writing also invites, you, dear reader, into the processes of thinking that generated the corresponding film fragments, as a means to further their expression and moves in dialogue and to augment with the writing.

“She picks up the book. She picks up the book: she picks up the book” (Maso, 1996, p. 18). Repetition or the poetic refrain is an important device in the writing. It acts as an evocative transitional device that evokes emphasis, both emotionally to arouse, and on the level of utterance. It is inspired by the refrain: “Didn’t feel it the first time? Here it is again” (Rankine as cited in Ulin, 2016, np).

The fragments are conceptual pieces; the reader learns their structure (Root, 1998) as they read. The writing structure deploys different moves appropriate to the “enunciation” of each fragment in relation to the “enunciation” of the film fragments from *SpillOver*. The “enunciations” of the written fragments in dialogue with the film fragments are assembled from “pieces” (Barthes, 2010, p. 8).

The “pieces” (ibid.) are “put together” (ibid.), connected by an exploration of similar themes and are structured and anchored in relation to the sections/parts of the written fragments. This approach at times highlights the fragmentary attribute of what constitutes the fragment in a context. But it is the nature of the fragment that is at stake in this tactical move between the conceptual aspects of the sum of the broad project in its written and film form.

The fragmentary nature of the written fragments can also be attributed to the use of musing and intuition in their assemblage, which sometimes produces departure and discontinuity, producing them as fragmentary. Fragmentary but always coherent with coherence in the internal logic of the fragment itself.

Some “pieces” used in the fragments are drawn from film stills, song lyrics, letters, excerpts from conversations, written theoretical texts and novels. The “pieces” come together to produce the “enunciations”, which reflect my thoughts, feelings and the sensations always imagined through and in conversation with other voices and “options” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014).

2. *Structure/Relation*

The relation between the fragments is generated through an exploration of a shared set of themes, although each fragment has its own discrete conceptual intention as it relates to the film fragment with which it is in dialogue. This shared relation to the same set of themes is characterised by connection and departure. For example: sometimes connection is experienced via repetition with variation or as an unfolding of what has been mentioned prior (in another fragment) and functions as echo, while departure is sometimes experienced as productive contradiction.

Also, the structuring of fragments, in relation to each other, is inspired by call and response. As one moves through the successive fragments, ideas and thoughts mentioned in prior fragments, things called out or brought up, are responded to by providing further elaboration in later fragments.

The order of the written fragments does not correspond to the order of the film fragments in *SpillOver*. Instead, a different order is offered and its ramifications are experienced in the act of reading each successive fragment, in the act of reflecting as one moves...

3. *Feeling*

Employing “feeling” and the language of emotions is a direct intervention in the academic discipline of writing, with the insistence here on writing in first person which further troubles the disciplinary expectations of academic writing. A “discipline” that privileges reason and the empirical which produces a hierarchy that diminishes and sometimes invalidates feeling and its attendant formal divergences as well as its political potential.

4. *Film practice, knowledge production and scholarly writing*

Scholarly writing on film tends to theorise *about* rather than in dialogue *with* film. This has the effect of disregarding film as a form with its own language: “Film is not just the material object or the content: it’s a language with a grammar (or multiple grammars) available for the expression of research” (Mistry, 2017, p. 9). Film is a site of “knowledge production” (ibid.).

The following fragments theorise, in dialogue and from within *SpillOver* and are in citational dialogue with other films. They demonstrate how *SpillOver* was partly created through a citational practice by reflecting that practice in the writing.

In my filmmaking practice, images and moving image sequences act as references to build sequences in *SpillOver*. Images and sequences from other films serve as prompts or references in my filmmaking process and as evidenced from my discussion earlier in this bridge, (of the woman with the “electrifying charge” and the woman who is embraced in the shower) I gather my own film references or fragments. This citational practice is also reflected in the written fragments.

Images and film stills, mobilised individually or as a series of images, to mimic the movement of sequences under discussion, further function as citation. They are used to construct arguments or articulations as well as moods and feelings in conjunction with the written theoretical texts, where words from novels and song lyrics also function as theoretical texts. The images and stills are references from *SpilLover* and other films, and, other forms of media.

Dear Reader,

The use of images is to further situate you in the films. To further offer a world of feeling. A sensuous and evocative experience facilitated by the images and their composition...their moves, mood and tone...to arouse and evoke...

Willful Walking

Premise



Stills from *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

Mrs. Chan in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

Walking as an act of longing.

The camera moves alongside, watches and follows.

Imitating the slow waltz of two people dancing (Kar-wai as cited in *Interview with Wong Kar-wai*, 2001), never touching, only longing. The camera: a participant in her subjectivity, a participant in her longing. It dances with her (Doyle as cited in *In the Mood for Doyle*, 2007),

so we dance with her too. The use of slow motion produces the erotic – the capacity to feel (Lorde, 2007) articulating an aesthetics of desire that is felt in duration. A haunting score, “Yumeji’s Theme”, composed by Umebayashi Shigeru, accompanies her melancholic walk.



Still from *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

Mrs. Chan walks, she goes out to buy noodles. Her longing and the unhappiness it produces permeate the environment of the marketplace and the street. Her mood soaks the city streets.



Still from *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961).

Marceline in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) walks. Walking as an act of remembrance.

Marceline walks through Paris. A wide shot, she is positioned towards the edge of the frame. The camera tracks back as she walks towards it. The city street is infused by her grief.

The cause of Marceline and Mrs. Chan's sadness is different.

But it is felt and experienced as they engage in the activity of walking. The city streets form the backdrop of their sadness.

The idea of the city, as steeped in the sadness of a character, reminds me of Sara Ahmed's discussion of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. Mrs. Dalloway is a white woman. Ahmed describes Mrs. Dalloway's walk through London as she goes to get flowers and the sense of unhappiness that seeps through this everyday task (2010). She describes it as a feeling that is felt as "almost a thickness in the air" (2010, p. 70).

Mrs. Dalloway's sadness is caused by her disappearance (Ahmed, 2010). During her walk she disappears:

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (Woolf as cited in Ahmed, 2010, pp. 70-71).

Ahmed shows that "becoming Mrs. Dalloway is itself a form of disappearance" (2010, p. 71). This disappearance is produced through "living somebody else's life (...) going through motions that were already in motion before you even arrived" (ibid.). Mrs. Dalloway has achieved the milestones that seemingly "promise happiness" (Ahmed, 2010) yet they have led to her disappearance and sadness.

However Ahmed demonstrates how sadness is a form of consciousness raising that can inform women of what they've given up for happiness (2010). In Mrs. Dalloway's case, she has given up herself. The link that Ahmed makes between sadness and consciousness raising is about making a link between feminism and unhappiness (2010). Ahmed argues: "Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. The word *feminism* is thus saturated with unhappiness" (2010, p. 65).



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

1

A black woman walks through Cyrildene, Johannesburg. In the midst of a troubled love affair she walks. Walking to ward off waiting. Willful walking. Walking as a consciousness raising activity, a transformation of subjectivity. Walking as an erotic exercise. The erotic is the capacity to feel, therein lies its power for women (Lorde, 2007). Dissatisfied with waiting here comes what Sara Ahmed terms the “feminist killjoy”, disrupting “the promise of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010) through willful self-recognition.

Waiting



The walking woman walks for an indeterminate number of days. She walks day and night. Walking to ward off waiting. Waiting for reciprocity; permission to love. She looks up. A child plays, carefree.

There are others who do not wait; “in this café, I look at the others who come in, chat, joke, read calmly: they are not waiting” (Barthes, 2010, p. 38).

¹ All stills that follow in this fragment, *Willful Walking*, are from *SpilLover* (2020).



In seeing those who do not wait she is reminded of her own waiting: “Later that night we had sex, now my desire was useful to him” (*SpilLover*, 2020). She desires love with a force of appetite. Her appetite comes from a connection to her capacity to feel. The beloved admonishes her appetite for love through his lack of reciprocity and his ambivalence towards love. He reciprocates her desire but only where it can be contained and where it is useful to him. His reproach is illustrative of how women “are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of [their] lives other than sex” (Lorde, 2007, p. 55).

When a woman waits, she often relinquishes something. There is loss involved in the activity of waiting. Much like Mrs. Dalloway, you can disappear (Ahmed, 2010); you can lose yourself in waiting: “Waiting! It empties out your life. Your thoughts are more with him than yourself. You become your own afterthought” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 88).

You can be driven insane by waiting. Like Mamello/ Patience in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*:

The fifth breakdown came. It was my mind shutting off once more, protecting itself against the pain of its own thoughts. But I’m fine now. Fine. But insane. Mamello! The girl of Letlala. Mosia. Daughter of the clan of the cat. Waiting! Crouching, stalking the future for hope. He will come back. Will he ever come back? He will remember me. We go way back, don’t we (Ndebele, 2003, p. 27)?

“When you are waiting, you know the meaning of desire” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 44).

Sometimes waiting produces a kind of death, eroding desire, the desire to begin again: “I do not have the strength to wait anymore. Nor do I have the strength to start a new life” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 28). So much can die in you while you wait (Ndebele, 2003).

The end of waiting can signal your disappearance. The assimilative reward of the heterosexual couple restored under patriarchy. In Pascale Lamche’s documentary *Winnie* (2017), following events that depict Nelson Mandela’s release from prison and his reunion with Winnie Mandela, Winnie says in an interview: “I was horrified when I realised that I had lost my identity and suddenly I was nobody, Mandela’s wife.”

But, did Winnie wait? Winnie was willful. She reunited with Nelson Mandela after his release from prison, demonstrating a kind of waiting. But, she was *always* Winnie *not* Mrs. Nelson Mandela. She willed in “the wrong way” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3): she waited, but in “the wrong way”; she pushed against her erasure so that she was never erased.

Winnie, constantly in conflict with “the movement” (the ANC), with Nelson Mandela, with the patriarchal order; Winnie, this is the “correct” behaviour of women-in-waiting (Ndebele, 2003), this is how the “mother of the nation” should behave. A “woman-in-waiting” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 41) must be silent and wait. The “mother of the nation” must nurture, never instigate. But Winnie knew that “your silence will not protect you” (Lorde, 2007, p. 41).

Winnie, I’m not sure you really waited?

Certainly not in the way that Penelope apparently waited for Odysseus. It is said that Penelope’s fidelity was only to Odysseus. So much so that she became “the ultimate symbol of a wife” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 2): “so loyal and so true” (Homer as cited in Ndebele, 2003, p. 2).

Winnie, your sense of fidelity was so much more complex. It also reached beyond Mandela and even beyond “the movement” and the anti-apartheid struggle. It always included a fidelity to a sense of self, and self-determinism.

Winnie, I yearn to know how you felt.



In heterosexual relationships of love, waiting is often gendered. Barthes states: “historically the discourse of absence is carried on by the woman” (2010, p. 13).

It is the woman who waits, “woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises)” (Barthes, 2010,

p. 14). “(...) The blurb of an imaginary book about a South African woman during the long years of struggle against apartheid” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 1):

So what does a woman do in the absence of her husband, who is in jail, in the mines, in exile, or is dead, or away studying, or spends most of the time on the road as a salesman, or who, while not having gone anywhere in particular is, never home because he is just busy fooling around? This woman has seen all kinds of departures, has endured the uncertainties of waiting, and has hoped for the return of her man. Departures, waiting and return: they define her experience of the past, present and future. They frame her life at the centre of a great South African story not yet told. This book tells the stories of unknown women, and that of South Africa’s most famous woman, who waited.

South Africa’s most famous “woman-in-waiting” (ibid.): Winnie Mandela (Ndebele, 2003). I’m not sure she waited, at least not in the way that is patriarchally required of women-in-waiting (ibid.).

“Winnie does not wait. She goes and gets what she wants” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 87). It was in the interest of the nation yet to come to partly conceive of her as a “woman-in- waiting”. One of the many roles she was made to play: the villain to Nelson Mandela’s saint, the wayward adulteress to Nelson Mandela’s restrained stoicism.

Winnie was conceived of as a “woman-in-waiting” who “waited in public” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 39). Part of this conception was due to her being a public figure. She was a political leader in “the movement.” “Her presence was active and pervasive” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 40). But more importantly for the nation yet to come: she was married to the most famous political prisoner in South Africa, possibly in the world.

Winnie was the mother of the nation yet to come, and Nelson, its father. Accordingly, it was required that she be made into a “woman-in-waiting” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 41). The nation yet to come depended on it. Through her body they enacted their love for Nelson Mandela. As the nation yet to come waited for Nelson Mandela, it was required that Winnie assume the waiting of the nation, that she become the “woman-in-waiting” (ibid.). Exemplifying the appropriation of women’s bodies in male-driven narratives of the nation (Hayward, 2000, p. 98). Women’s bodies narrate the life and death of a nation, or, its rise (ibid.), as was the case for the nation yet to come. A patriarchal discourse that frames agency and power as a trait of masculinity (ibid.) and points “to the gendering of what the nation takes to be as itself (the masculine subject) through what it has (the feminine object)” (Ahmed, 2003: np).

The nation demands certain things of *other* bodies “in the name of love” (ibid.), thus Winnie Mandela, the “woman-in-waiting”. “What are we doing when we do something *in the name of love*” (ibid.)?

But, Winnie, she was willful.



“To wait is to extend one’s investment and the longer one waits the more one is invested, that is, the more time, labour and energy has been expended” (Ahmed, 2003: np).

We see this in the story of Delisiwe in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Ndebele, 2003).

Delisiwe’s husband acquires a scholarship to study medicine overseas. At first, he is diligent in finding ways to bring her and their children along. “But after three years of effort, he tires” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 14). Delisiwe, tired “(...) of living in a state in which she is just about to go” begins to wait but never abandons “(...) hope of departing one day” (ibid.). “It becomes a way of managing the state of waiting” (ibid.). “So, she never really waits” (ibid.). “Hope and uncertainty define her consciousness” (ibid.). “She comes and goes, in limbo. Waiting. Not waiting. But waiting” (ibid.).

So much time, energy and labour invested in an “absence without duration” (Ndebele, 2003, p. 1). “*The failure of return extends one’s investment*” (Ahmed, 2003: np).

“The project of her love and devotion to her absent husband” gives Delisiwe hope (Ndebele, 2003, p. 14). It “tells her definitively to start waiting” (ibid.). “Woman is faithful (she waits)” (Barthes, 2010, p. 14). “*To make someone wait*: the constant prerogative of all power” (Barthes, 2010, p. 40).

In the tenth year of her husband’s absence, Delisiwe discovers she is pregnant (Ndebele, 2003). A rupture in waiting. A momentary refusal to wait.

As she walks, the walking woman declares: “I want to play the part of the one who doesn’t wait” (Barthes as cited in *SpillOver*, 2020).

Walking

Task driven wandering



Feeling herself disappear into waiting, the walking woman walks to the market to buy vegetables. There is no necessity to buy vegetables. Walking to complete the task provides her body with a use other than waiting. Walking counters the inactivity, the disempowerment of waiting.



The task provides the orientation for her walk but it does not provide the intention. The intention of her walk is the need to be busy; there is “so much sadness in the very need to keep busy” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 75). Like Mrs. Chan and Mrs. Dalloway, she walks immersed in sadness. The need to keep

busy is also about wanting something else for yourself, even though you might not know what it is or, how to acquire it. This is about walking as an act of desire. So that even task driven walking becomes wandering.

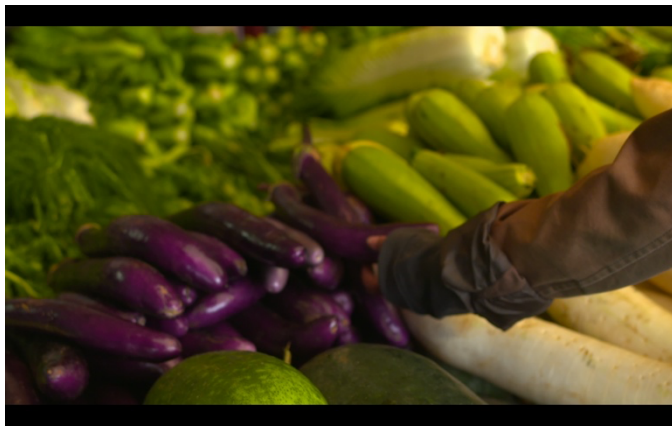


She walks, perusing the vegetables. Inspects them for defects, feels their firmness and considers which of them to purchase. As she does this, she feels her waiting change proportion. Previously she felt herself engulfed by waiting and had no sense of its proportions (Barthes, 2010). Now she

is able to discern some of herself beneath its heavy shroud.



Walking to complete a task directs her to her body's capacities; the walking woman battles with the woman who waits.



Here we see how the capacity of the body can direct one towards becoming someone else, the capacity of the body to enact a transformation of subjectivity. In the act of walking you can re-make yourself or remind yourself of who you are.

Wandering



The walking woman walks to ward off waiting. She feels restless. She walks with her sadness rather than sit with it. Sometimes her walking takes on the form of wandering. She willfully wanders as she seeks something other than the disempowerment of waiting. Wandering facilitates seeking because it

is a contemplative activity. Wandering is thinking in motion that can direct a seeker.

The walking woman is a seeker.



Hence, what is seemingly directionless wandering can provide orientation. It is in the directionless nature of wandering, in its ability to facilitate and privilege contemplation through a lack of direction, that orientation can be attained.

While wandering, the walking woman is directed towards the cause of her unhappiness, which is waiting. While she has always known that this is the cause of her sadness, her body's capacity to move allows her to examine this cause anew.



She had always deemed waiting a necessary sadness because she is in love: "Am I in love?

Yes, since I am waiting" (Barthes, 2010, p. 39).

She believed happiness would find her if she waited: "Happiness follows for those who will wait" (Ahmed, 2014, p.

4). But in her walking, she begins to question the form of this waiting and thus waiting itself.

Her waiting is contingent on a repression of her appetite, an inactivity or refusal of her desire. This was in the belief that the beloved's reciprocity was necessary to permit the experience and expression of her desire and appetite. She waited for the beloved's reciprocity, denying *her* feelings and *her* capacity to feel. This denial of self resulted in her disappearance into waiting.



In willfully wandering she re-locates herself: she will no longer wait for permission to feel.

Reciprocity



The walking woman loves. The erotic functions as a “source of power” (Lorde, 2007, p. 53) for her. She moves “erotically through power” (Lorde as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 164,5) employing “*desire-in-resistance*” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 164,5). The walking woman loves, expresses

her love, and has an appetite for love in spite of a lack of reciprocity.

The beloved refuses to reciprocate her love, fearful of love and of her appetite for it, fearful of her clarity of feeling and purpose. He is ambivalent towards love: “We fought. He said he didn’t know” (*SpillOver*, 2020). Yet he exploits her love; he receives it without reciprocity; demonstrating the patriarchal asymmetry (Gunnarson, 2017, p. 189) that often informs heterosexual love. An asymmetry that is legitimatised through the idealisation of the romance plot (Cooper as cited in May, 2017): women provide love while men receive it.

With this appropriation of love without reciprocity, this exploitation of women’s love (Jonasdottir as cited in Gunnarson, 2017), men gain “surplus worthiness” (Gunnarson, 2017, p. 187). In this patriarchal non-reciprocal framework, where women provide love but do not receive it, women’s self-worth is diminished and men are positioned as more worthy. Men matter more and they come first, they set the terms that women must follow in order to be loved.

In this unequal non-relational framework, love and happiness is contingent on those who come first. “Those who are positioned as coming after” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 56) must follow the terms of those who come first. “For those who are positioned as coming after, *happiness means following someone else’s goods*” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 56). The walking woman may only experience and express her love if the man, the beloved, reciprocates. These are the terms that she must follow. His happiness, needs and confusion (confusion surrounding his ambivalence to love) come first and the walking woman must follow, on his terms so that she may be happy, so that she may be loved.

His power to enforce these terms, even if this enforcing and the production of the terms themselves is unconscious, comes from the love he non-reciprocally takes from the walking woman, through this he gains “surplus worthiness” which produces his power. Her disappearance into waiting is a consequence of this non-reciprocal appropriation of her love. In this asymmetrical exploitative non-relation, it becomes difficult for her to conceive of herself as “self-evidently worthy” (Jonasdottir as cited in Gunnarson, 2017, p. 187). So, she feels less self-assured; her capacity for self-recognition, her connection to what she feels is diminished. It must be denied or repressed. She participates in this denial because her self-worth is diminished owing to her exploitation; an exploitation that produces an asymmetrical need for the man (Gunnarson, 2017), the beloved: love’s rule under patriarchy.

Willfulness



The walking woman is unwilling to be seated at the table of waiting² (Ahmed, 2014, p. 2) any longer. She recoups her capacity to feel through willful wandering. Walking as an act of desire. Desire as a mobile technology that motivates us to go further; as capable of driving the body and will

beyond their limits (Foucault as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 164,5).

Willful walking.

She loves.

She loves by refusing the prison of the dream of romance (Ndebele, 2003) that patriarchy enacts upon women. In this particular romance dream, which is also a prison, the walking woman is imprisoned by the beloved's ambivalence to love, believing that she must wait for reciprocity in order to feel. "Romance and its attendant norms have been constructed as damaging, unequal relations requiring women's self-abnegation" (May, 2017, p. 42): romantic fantasy encourages self-annihilation in the name of fulfillment (May, 2017).

To be clear, this is not about a disavowal of the necessity for reciprocal love relations. Instead, it is about a disavowal of the patriarchal use of reciprocity as a condition for the expression of women's feelings or their ability to feel at all. It is a disavowal of reciprocity as a tool of domination where reciprocity is used to instil fear, so that women are afraid to feel or express feeling unless reciprocity is offered. It is a disavowal of reciprocity used as the horizon for ambivalence to love where that horizon works to suppress women's feeling.

Consequently in this instance, "self-annihilation" (May, 2017, p. 42) speaks to the inability to feel what one feels when one does, a refusal of women's desire and agency. The walking woman reconnects to how she feels, she loves: an affirmation and expression of her desire and agency.

² I have changed 'happiness', which appears in Ahmed's text, to 'waiting'.

She does not decide to *provide* love without reciprocity, which would produce the conditions of her own exploitation. Rather, she loves through walking, through a reconnection with how she feels; self-recognition through a reconciliation, recognition and affirmation of what she feels.

The walking woman is willful: “someone becomes willful insofar (...) as they will in the ‘wrong way’” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3). She fails to comply (Ahmed, 2014). She loves in spite of a lack of reciprocity, refusing happiness as “a shared object” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 56); “if one person’s happiness is made conditional on another person’s happiness, such that the other person’s happiness comes first, then *the other person’s happiness becomes a shared object*” (ibid.). She is a “feminist killjoy”: a willful woman, “unwilling to get along” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 2). Willfulness and unhappiness share an itinerary (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3). “We learn from our traveling companions” (ibid.).

Mannete goes in search of her missing husband who left Lesotho to work in the mines in South Africa. She does not find her husband. She decides to return home out of concern for her children who she has left behind. Unknown to Mannete, her husband has settled down with another woman and started a family (Ndebele, 2003). Mannete breaks Penelope’s Law as imagined via patriarchy; she searches for her husband rather than sit and wait (ibid.).

The walking woman walks, wanders, searches...searching for herself.



She locates herself through reconciling with herself. A reconciliation with herself that is about a reconciliation with her capacity to feel. An erotic exercise: a reconciliation with oneself that is about a reconnection with repressed feelings. Reconciling with oneself, “a special kind of

reconciliation” (Ndebele, 2017, p. 117). An exercise in going “inward” (Gunnarson, 2017, p. 188) where love provides a certain kind of knowing (Ferguson and Jonasdottir as cited in May, 2017): a knowing of oneself.

Love: as a way to attain self-recognition through reconciling with one's feeling of and desire to love.

A decolonial move. "It is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political '*movidas*'—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 140,1).

The walking woman is willful, she wills "too much" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3) towards love, allowing herself to be engulfed by love, an expression of her appetite for it. Here, in the inside of herself, which is also the space of being engulfed by love, there is no such thing as loving too much, disavowing "historical alliances between love and reason", a "revolutionary possibility" (Davis as cited in May, 2017, p. 35).

The space of our interiority is "a space inside *and* outside the whole" (Irigaray as cited in Gunnarson, 2017, p. 190, *emphasis added*). Going into ourselves gives us access to a space "that dissolves dualisms between self and other, inner and outer" (ibid.). Going inside ourselves, being engulfed by love is to enter "the gentleness of the abyss" (Barthes as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 140,1). In the abyss "consciousness becomes transformed in so far as it has moved into and through what Barthes calls the 'zero degree' of all meaning, the place in which the obtuse third meaning emerges to haunt all we think we know" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 140,1).

"Third meaning": that which "haunts any other two meanings in a binary opposition" (Barthes as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 143,4). Sandoval argues that Barthes's notion of the "third meaning" is analogous to her concept of "differential consciousness"; "not consciousness in its usual mode, but not unconsciousness either" (2000, p. 144,5). "Rather, Barthes's work invokes another (differential) consciousness" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 144,5). Moreover "differential consciousness refers to a process Derrida describes as 'unnameable' even as he interprets its processes" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 4,5).

Enabled by willful walking, this is what it means to go "inward", and between the "inner and outer" space, to be engulfed by love which, in this instance, provides access to self-recognition via reconciliation with repressed feeling.

Self-recognition through the feeling of love.

Loving as you will, love that is "unnameable", evading capture and resisting containment.

No Ordinary Love

Premise



Stills from *je tu il elle* (1974).

Near the beginning of Chantal Akerman's film, *je tu il elle* (1974), the central character, played by Akerman, although the closing credits name her as Julie and do not include Akerman's name, writes a letter. To be more accurate, she writes several letters.

The film opens with: "And I left" (*je tu il elle*, 1974). Voice-over articulated by Akerman's character. Aside from the pseudonym offered in the closing credits, the character is not named in the film. In the sequence "the voice-over provides a running commentary on her activities, more frequently it alludes to what is seen on the image track without necessarily describing accurately what we see" (Mayne, 1990, p. 127). The voice-over is often out of sync with the image track; events are alluded to with a temporal delay (Mayne, 1990).

"And I left" (*je tu il elle*, 1974).

While we hear this, we see her sitting on a chair with her back to us. Julie sits in a small room. The room contains a bed, a rug, an armchair covered by a blanket, and a chest of drawers with a mirror attached to it.

Soon all these items will be gone save for the mattress. She paints her furniture blue, she tells us, then green. Moves it into the hall. Then moves her mattress. She does this on the first, second, third and fifth day respectively. She empties her room; empties herself out, "starts over", "unmasks" (Mayne, 1990, p. 127), attempts "to process"/ "deal with it".

Loss.

We see her writing.

On the sixth day, she tells us, she writes a letter. While writing, the screen fades to black. After some time, we hear the rustling or moving of paper. Then, a little while later the voice-over: "I made it clear what I meant" (*je tu il elle*, 1974).

"First I wrote three pages" (ibid.). The rustling of paper returns. "Then I wrote the same thing on another six pages" (ibid.).

Fade in to see Akerman's character kneeling on her mattress writing. A piece of paper, crumpled into a ball, lies in front of the sheet of paper she writes furiously on. Another sheet of paper lies beneath this sheet. She continues to write for a while, mouthing words as she goes. Cut to Akerman's character (Julie) leaning on the glass

door of her room.

She continues to write.

She pauses to eat castor sugar from a brown paper bag. She continues to eat the castor sugar while writing. She begins to eat the sugar obsessively, one spoon after the other. She does not write as she does this. She stops and begins to cross out words on the paper in her lap. She drops the pen, leans against the door and looks, direct address to camera.

Voice-over: "On the eighth or ninth day I re-wrote the second letter...while eating a lot of castor sugar" (ibid.).

"And I crossed out...and crossed off..." (ibid.).

"A few lines remained" (ibid.).

"I stopped eating and remained silent" (ibid.).

As she says this, cut to her placing what we assume to be the letters on the floor. As she does this, she says: "A few days later I started over" (ibid.).

We see her pinning the letters to the wooden floor.

"After a few days I re-read everything I had written" (ibid.).

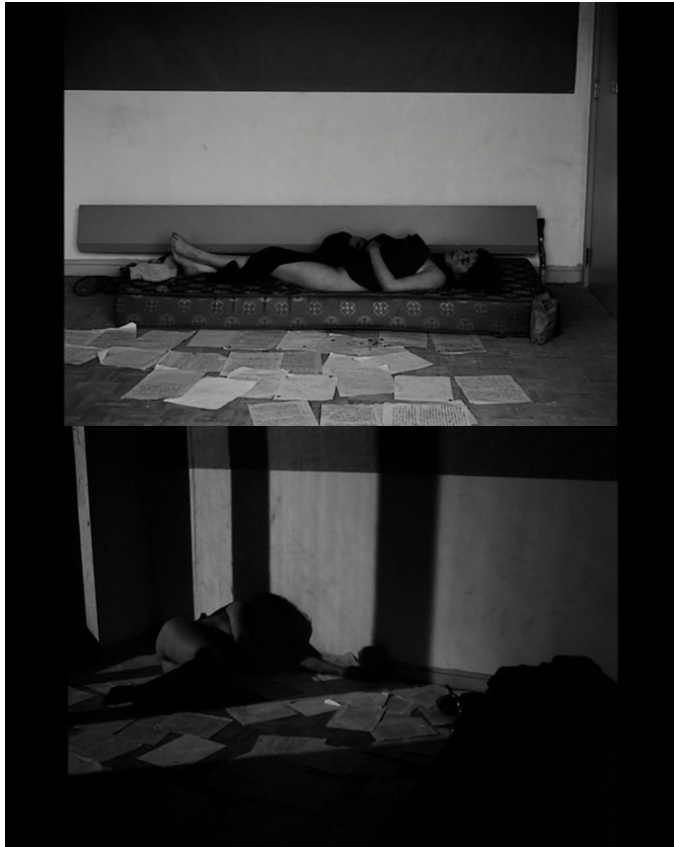
She walks off-screen, continuing to place the letters on the floor. She walks back on-screen. She lies on the mattress. She brushes her sock clad feet erotically against the mattress.

"I went to lie down on my mattress...and after a while I got undressed" (ibid.).

"Naked I went back and lay down" (ibid.).

She undresses.

"I placed my clothes on top of me and waited" (ibid.).



Stills from *je tu il elle* (1974).



Stills from *je tu il elle* (1974).

In various stages of undress, her clothes partially covering her or not at all, she lies on the letters, eats while lying on them, lies and eats before them, walks on them, stands on them, sits with her back turned towards them, let's sugar fall on them, tells us her clothes land on them, scoops sugar up from them. She lives with them.

We see a person walk past. The person appears to be a man but it is unclear. He pauses to look in. She gets up. He turns to walk away. She walks to the glass door naked. She looks out. It begins to get dark. She gets dressed. She moves off-screen.

Voice-over: "I heard footsteps" (ibid.).

Cut to her sitting on the mattress fully clothed.

She continues: "Someone was looking at me" (ibid.).

"I stood still, motionless, nude...so that other passers-by could see me" (ibid.).

"Few people walked by" (ibid.).

“After that, no one” (ibid.).

“It got dark” (ibid.).

“I got dressed” (ibid.).

As she says this, the film cuts to her lying on the mattress fully clothed, aside from her shoes and socks, which lie strewn alongside the mattress. A little further up from the shoes and socks, lies the brown paper bag of castor sugar and the spoon she eats with.

The letters are gone.

After some time, she says: “Only later...much later, did I see myself in the window” (ibid.).

The section described above forms part of the first section of *je tu il elle* (1974). The film is comprised of three parts. Judith Mayne (1990, p. 127) says of the first part:

There is a ritual quality to this section of the film, an almost meditative tone of quiet contemplation that characterizes Akerman’s movements and the fit between her voice and her gestures. Yet there is, simultaneously, undeniable obsessiveness as well, particularly insofar as the compulsive eating of the sugar is concerned. The scene suggests both calm and torment, peaceful solitude and turbulence.

The feeling of ritual and contemplation is palpable in Akerman’s relationship to the letters. This is evident in my description above. The letters form part of the inscription of an overall feeling of ritual and contemplation. They also function as *sites* of ritual and contemplation themselves. The letters are fundamentally geared towards a processing of emotion, “calm and torment, peaceful solitude and turbulence” (Mayne, 1990, p. 127), and, reflection. In the company of her letters, Akerman strips her room bare and undresses, “submitting her body to the same process of unmasking as the room” (ibid.).

The treatment of the letters in *je tu il elle* (1974) displaces the focus on letters as primarily a form of correspondence. Rather, the film privileges letters as a form of “dialogue with the self” (Naficy, 1995, p. 55).

Akerman repeatedly states that she waits. But it is not a response to the letters that she waits for. There is reference made to her beloved:

I let the sugar fall on the letters...and went to lie back down. I waited. I waited until it had passed or until something happened. That I would believe in God or that you would send me gloves for the cold (*je tu il elle*, 1974).

She waits, in part, for affection from her lover, “that you send me gloves for the cold” (ibid.). But the waiting in the sequence seems to be more concerned with the waiting involved in

processing something or waiting for a feeling to pass, “I waited until it had passed”, waiting for something to be different, “or until something happened” (ibid.).

The letters function as debris that she lives with, and in. They accompany her as she waits, as she reflects and realises:

It had started snowing. I realised that life stood still no matter what...that nothing would happen...and that I had to wait until it stopped snowing and the snow melted (ibid.).

Then, later: “And one day it stopped snowing. Shortly after that the snow melted and I got up” (ibid.).

In *je tu il elle* (1974) the letters act as generative sites of reflection and realisation which also infers a process of “self-evaluation” (Naficy, 1995, p. 55). This is similar to the function of letter writing in Chris Kraus’ book *I Love Dick*. The letters to Kraus’ object of infatuation and love, Dick, turn into pieces of feminist art criticism and cultural analysis. They offer a mediation and discourse on love. They function as sites of self-reflection and realisation that extend to the patriarchal constitution of her marriage and the constitution of herself as a woman and artist. In the book she says, “through love I’m teaching myself (...) to think” (Kraus, 2016, p. 116).

Chantal Akerman, a white Jewish Belgian woman, writes letters. Chris Kraus, a white Jewish American woman, writes letters.



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

A black woman lives in an apartment in Braamfontein, Johannesburg: “a window to look out from, where I see something” (Sontag, 2018, p. 107). She sends her lover letters detailing reflections and observations made on her daily walks. Her musings turn into reflections on promise-keeping and love. “Every letter is a love letter” (Kraus, 2016, p. 155). “Language and Eros. There will never be a separation in her mind” (hooks, 1999, p. 118). Walking and letter writing are generative sites; they are erotic sites of reflection and realisation. The ecstasy of reflection and realisation, of coming to understand something or oneself, to know something. She writes to keep in touch and to touch: “[my] letters are my diary” (Sontag, 2018, p. 109) and “I want you to know me, which is why I am writing you, my dear” (Sontag, 2018, p. 105).

Epistolary Affect³

dear t⁴

while walking “I compose letters to you in my head” (Sontag, 2018, p. 102), diary entries (Sontag, 2018). “a letter in the head is a letter, too” (Sontag, 2018, p. 97).

through love I’m teaching myself to think (Kraus, 2016).

c

The woman who writes, writes to keep in touch and to touch.

“My letters are my diary” (Sontag, 2018, p. 109) and “I want you to know me, which is why I am writing you, my dear” (Sontag, 2018, p. 105). Here we see “epistolary affect” as a sensuous critical dialogue with the self that is also about a sharing of the self.

The epistle formulated as a “brush with words” (Steyerl, 2011, p. 58) functions as a generative site of reflection and realisation for the self, and as metonymic and metaphoric displacement of desire, “(...) the desire to reimagine an elsewhere” (Kauffman as cited in Naficy, 1995, p. 55). This epistle, “like other discourses of desire, is inherently critical and political” (Naficy, 1995, p. 61). It is generative: expansive rather than closed, immense rather than claustrophobic (ibid.). The “desire to re-imagine an elsewhere” is about the conception of promise as “sensually lived potentiality” (Berlant as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 196). A potent political possibility for the promise-keeping that love entails.

Kafka writes (as cited in Gurkin Altman, 1982, p. 2):

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced - from a purely theoretical point of view - a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with the spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one’s own phantom, which evolves underneath one’s own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.

In *SpilLover* (2020) the phantom underneath the woman’s hand in the letters she writes is not the “dislocated soul” that Kafka writes about. Instead, here, phantoms are powerful affect

³ This phrase is derived from an essay written by Hito Steyerl: Steyerl, H. (2011) Epistolary Affect and Romance Scams: Letter from an Unknown Woman. *October*. (138) pp. 57-69. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41417906> (Accessed: 01/10/19). The phrase is repurposed here in order to speak to my own imagining of epistolary affect.

⁴ All letters that appear in this text are derived from *SpilLover* (2020). The letters are reproduced here in lower case to reflect how they are presented in the film.

beings that can never be dislocated souls. We are sensuously connected to ghosts, both our own and others, and we too are those other ghosts sensuously touching others while we touch ourselves. Ghosts reside within us and amongst us, like letters, always through the force of keeping in touch. Ghosts are erotic and inseparable from us. Through the erotic they function as oracles, critical informants and companions. These are the ghosts beneath the woman's hand as she writes.

As she writes she is made larger, as is the recipient of her letters; through her "language, cadence, heart and mind" (Kraus, 2016, p. 191) they are both expanded. She falls deeper in love through writing (Sontag, 2018, p. 110), her love reveals things to her about herself and love itself; "words make worlds" (Steyerl, 2011, p. 67).

Promise

dear t,

I've been thinking about that Sade song again, the one I wrote to you about before, *no ordinary love*. I know you said that you didn't like it because it had not aged well. but, I've been listening to it on repeat during my walks.

c

In the music video for *No Ordinary Love* (1992) by British band Sade, the frontwoman, Sade, plays a mermaid who falls in love with a sailor. The sailor is white and she is brown/black. He is human and she is a mermaid. The video opens with Sade sitting on a rock on the seabed looking forlorn. The camera tracks in. A classic staging of female vulnerability ensues. Her hair sways in the water. She draws her tail towards herself, buries her head in her lap, her arms wrapped around her tail, she hugs herself. Her head nestled at an angle towards one of her elbows, her hair falls down her arm. The camera continues to track in. She slowly lifts her head and we hear: "I gave you all the love I got. I gave you more than I could give" (*No Ordinary Love*, 1992). We now see her face as she sings. She exhales in the song. Cut to a splash, the sailor plunges into the water. Cut back to Sade. We hear: "I gave you love. I gave you all that I have inside. And you took my love" (ibid.). Cut back to the sailor swimming. Then back to Sade. She sings: "You took my love" (ibid.).

The sailor appears intermittently throughout the video as if in flashback. We imagine the mermaid's forlorn state to be a consequence of amorous loss or absence. As if the moments we see of her and the sailor – in embrace, kissing – have already passed.

At some point the mermaid looks at a magazine: 1950s Americana. In the magazine a blonde white woman in a wedding dress leans back in a man's arms. They're just about to kiss or have kissed: a pose from classical Hollywood cinema. Just below the man's turned back there is a caption. It reads: "Take this woman" (*No Ordinary Love*, 1992). After she sees this, we see the mermaid sewing a wedding dress. She tries it on. All the while we hear: "I keep crying, I keep trying for you" (ibid.).

Then: "There's nothing like you and I baby" (ibid.).

As she sings this, the video cuts to her and the sailor in embrace, then to her swimming. She now has legs and is wearing the wedding dress. She sings: "This is no ordinary love" (ibid.). As she does this the video rapidly cuts between shots of her legs as she pushes to the water's surface. We then see her walking on a city street, still in the wedding dress, throwing salt into the air and catching it in her mouth.

For the remainder of the video we see her moving through the city. She goes to a bar, orders salt and water. She runs through rundown, garbage-strewn city streets, a bag of salt in her hand. She throws the salt in the air, holds the bag as she runs. A veil covers her face: a bride with no altar. We see her walking, just ahead of a man on the street. The veil still covers her face.

Finally, we see her running on a port. The veil no longer covers her face. She holds a bottle of water and the sailor's hat in her hand. She arrives at the edge of the port. She sits on a ledge by the water's edge. She drinks from the bottle. Then she is standing up, moving restlessly looking out to sea. She sits on the ledge, pours water onto her hand from the bottle. During these events, the video cuts three times to her and the sailor in embrace. They sit on a rock on the seabed. The video ends with her sitting on the ledge in a static pose: her head down, her hand clasping the bottle of water that sits on the ledge before her. The camera tracks out, then, fade to black.

The video ends where it began: the mermaid, now with legs and above water, sits alone on a rock. Her seeking, her amorous plea, remains unanswered.

dear t

a list of wildlife in the city: birds, love ghouls, and vampires.

c

Love ghouls (*n*):

1. Those who have “lost the use of their heart” (Adu et. al, 2010) due to the ravages of love. The undead.
2. Those who non-reciprocally feed on another’s love.

Sometimes love ghouls of the first order (as defined in (1.) above) can become second order love ghouls (as defined in (2.) above).

In the face of love ghouls, we must assert: “Love isn’t like that. Love is (...) people mutually feeding each other, not one living on the soul of another, like a ghoul” (Head, 2011, p. 5).

dear t

“no one is sovereign in love” (Davis and Sarlin, 2011).

this is no ordinary love.

c

“No Ordinary Love” (Adu and Matthewman, 1992) by Sade seems to be about an extraordinary yet non-reciprocal love. This is no ordinary love, is Sade’s plea. This is a very ordinary scenario, love ghouls abound.

What is required to make it extraordinary is a re-interpretation of the refrain, “no ordinary love”, into an assertion of love as non-sovereign. *This* is no ordinary love. In love, no [*one*] person should know, have the vision and make the plans (Kraus, 2016, p. 115). Love is produced through conversation so that something unknown may happen (Bauman, 2003).

Lauren Berlant tells us: “The thing I like about love as a concept for the possibility of the social, is that love always means non-sovereignty” (as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011, np). When considering love as a political possibility for itself, in which a consideration of “love as a concept for the possibility of the social” (ibid.) is paramount, non-sovereignty must come into play. Love as a politics of non-sovereignty demands relationality, mutuality in decision-making and the elasticity and multiplicity/incoherence of the individual. It infers the non-sovereignty of “both the self and the social” (Hardt as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011, np). It is a politics of the “non-one” (Hardt as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011, np), disavowing the one who decides, the person as one, the one who need not consider another.

dear t

don't you find that love is one of the few situations where we have patience for what isn't working, where we try incoherence (Berlant, 2011, pp. 685-686)?

love, c

We arrive at love assuming a certain knowing. This is who I am, accept it or leave. This *is* what love looks like, this relationship does not fit. I am only capable of loving this “type” of person and not *that* one. This is how I love; I have discovered my “love language” (Chapman, 1995).

Relationships are entered into as problems, they “present a difficulty which spawns confusion and brings about unpleasant tension, which in order to be fought against and chased away needs a certain amount of knowing” (Bauman, 2003, p. 23). *Or* a certain knowing: love as “ready-made, complete and finished” (Bauman, 2003, p. 6). Instead, let's consider confusion and unpleasant tension as a certain knowing, as love is “another name for creative drive and as such is fraught with risks, as all creation is never sure where it's going to end” (ibid.).

Love is about entering into relationality: a creative practice, attitude and orientation. When one adopts relationality as a practice of love, love becomes a transformational space: you “desire to have patience for what isn't working, (...) affective binding that allows you to iron things out, (...) be elastic, or (...) try a new incoherence” (Berlant, 2011, pp. 685-686). When we enter relationality, we are willing to become different. It is a form of change without

trauma, but it is not change without instability; there are no guarantees because we do not know what is on the other side (Berlant as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011).

But incoherence makes us anxious, we are fearful of it. Instead, we strive for control, mastery and static ready-made models of being and doing. Tools to ward off the darkness. But too often these are avatars of patriarchal vision, consumerist epiphany and racist fantasy.

In *SpillOver* (2020), a woman writes letters to an unnamed lover only identified by their initial. The lover's gender is not specified. The letters are not dated. We do not know how long the woman looks out of the window for. It could be a ritual performed every day and night or something that takes place on a single afternoon and night.

We slip between snapshots of things observed and experienced during her walks, photographs of the woman at varying shutter speeds, and footage of her looking out the window. These are expressions of observation, reflection, feeling and realisation. They are experienced through the incoherence of temporal-spatial disjuncture and brought together by the woman's letters to her lover. In bringing together these fragments, the writing woman writes a letter to the audience too.

"Love (...) is a mess-making force (...) as its aim is to dissolve toxic sureties" (Berlant, 2011, p. 685). It is a creative act. It is experiential and "could have discontinuities" (Berlant as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011). It is an experimental on-going practice. Consequently we need training in our incoherence (Berlant as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011), "affectively speaking, we are not trained in the arts of awkward, generous, investigative patience" (Berlant, 2011, p. 688).

We need "a way that situational clarity can be produced without negating the incoherence of the subject" (Berlant as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011, np). Fidelity to love as a practice of relationality, creativity and transformation might be one way to do this. Love can bear the weight of ambivalence and contradiction (Berlant, 2011, p. 690). It *should* involve ambivalence and contradiction because as Bessie Head tells us there is so much of it to create (2011, p. 57). Love's complexity and contradictions should never be resolved by the political (Berlant as as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011) because then it ceases to be alive to its participants.

What I am proposing is not the incoherence and ambivalence that is generated by ambivalence *to* love. This is an entirely different practice. My proposition emanates from an affirmation of love as a political practice for itself. I am proposing fidelity to love involving a particular practice that in turn offers itself as *a* form of practice for fidelity to love. This practice does not determine duration; it does not dictate that this is for forever or right now. The duration can only be determined by the practice of the relation, which is itself a leap of faith. Consequently the duration cannot be pre-determined; it is made as the relationship is made. This is love as a mode of reflection and action and as a description of what it would take for people to take the risk of new relationality (Berlant as cited in Davis and Sarlin, 2011).

dear t,

“I think I’m [understanding] risk for the first time” (Kraus, 2016, p. 115).

love, c

I am proposing risk as indispensable to the practice of love. An affirmation of risk, because “in any desire (...) there’s always risk and the possibility of loss (of comfort, privilege, or knowing how to live)” (Berlant, 2008, np). But it is not risk without expansion:

Love is about adding to the world - each addition being the living trace of the loving self; in love, the self is bit by bit, transplanted onto the world. *The loving self expands through giving itself away to the loved object* (Bauman, 2003, p. 9).

Risk requires desire to propel it. Inertia is not its habitat.

Desire breathes life into risk and makes it feasible.

dear t

a promise is “sensually lived potentiality” (Berlant as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 196).

love, c

The notion of promise is integral to the practice of love; it provides the desire for love and the impetus for commitment to and within love. Promise partly provides love’s content and form. In conventional narratives of love, the “till death do us part”⁵ promise, for example, is seen as

⁵ This is not a contention with love that lasts until “death do us part”. It is the idealisation of this type of love as

something that will be achieved in a known future when the promise, as something already determined, will be fulfilled. This infers a privileging of futurity as “promise-keeping locks the future in the present and the present in the future” (Illouz, 2012, p. 100). It also suggests, temporally, that love follows a “continuous straight line” (ibid.) towards an already known future.

The idea of promise as something already determined and charting a known course towards an already known future produces love as “ready-made, complete and finished” (Bauman, 2003, p. 6). Derrida offers a different conception of promise. He suggests that “(...) promise is always excessive. Without this essential excess, it would return to a description of knowledge of the future. Its act would have a constative structure and not a performative one” (Derrida as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 100). In love, promise cannot function as a “description of knowledge of the future” because “eros is a relation with alterity, with mystery, that is with the future” (Levinas as cited in Bauman, 2003, p. 7). This relation with the future as unknowable is produced as a consequence of relation:

in (...) love, there are at least two beings, each of them the great unknown in the equations of the other. This is what makes love feel like a caprice of fate-that eerie and mysterious future, impossible to be told in advance (Bauman, 2003, pp. 6-7).

The conception of promise as “excessive” and structurally performative and of a relation producing an unknowable future is crucial to the idea of promise as “sensually lived potentiality” (Berlant as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 196), which a politics of love as non-sovereign relational creative praxis must attend to. Here, promise is premised on contingency and possibility. It is not known until it is created.

Promise is sensuous activity that is lived as it is created. It is imaginative, experimental, movement-based work that emanates out of shifting practices of relationality. It functions through various temporalities as it is made through experiential relation. It is made and re-made, in sometimes contradictory ways, so that promise-keeping is an exercise in relationality and love is a creative endeavour. Sometimes it mobilises promise’s opposing force, forgetfulness, (Sontag, 2018, p. 104) so that it might make itself anew.

well as its hegemonic formal characteristics that I take issue with. More of a concern with the medium not the message and with the message’s idealisation that produces a single “love plot” (Berlant, 2012, np): this is what “true” love looks like.

Eva Illouz argues that the structure of commitment in modernity results in the difficulty of articulating promises producing “the future as open-ended and radically inalienable. It cannot be given to someone else” (Illouz, 2012, p. 100). In promise as “sensually lived potentiality” the future is open-ended and *potentially* inalienable. The future cannot be given to someone else from the onset because it is unknown.

Rather, what is given is an on-going act of creation.

We create promise as we create love.

It can be given and received,
received and given, given and received...

An endless gift of potentiality...

Love is a Distraction

Preamble: Five notes and reflections on things seen on the internet

1.



Still from Sarah Langa's (@sarahlanga) Instagram account (2020).

In a looped video posted to her Instagram page, Sarah Langa sits on a set of stairs. The stairs seem to be part of a constructed set. The words “EMPOWER” and “WOMEN” are emblazoned on the surface of the shiny black stairs, inferring the phrase “EMPOWER WOMEN.” The background of the set slowly sways. As it sways, we catch glimpses of other people in its partly mirrored surface. In the foreground of the frame Langa moves and poses seductively. Her movement is accompanied by the Nicki Minaj track “Yikes” (Maraj et al, 2020). Minaj is a prominent American rapper. Langa holds a Louis Vuitton bag. Her ensemble is a combination of 1970s Pam Grier – at least with regards to the leather pants and the wide lapel of her trench – and Kim and Khloe Kardashian of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007 – present)⁶ fame.

The caption accompanying Langa's performance reads: “Live to empower @tresemmesa #PowerYourPresence #Tresemmesa” (Sarah Langa, 2020). Langa visually and textually associates herself with what seems to be a campaign run by the South African franchise of the American hair product brand, TRESemmé.

⁶A globally successful reality TV show focusing on the lives of the Kardashians, a wealthy American family.

Prior to the caption, just after her Instagram username, is a “blue badge” or seal (Aynsley & Newberry, 2019, np) with a white tick in the centre. The “blue badge” (ibid.) means that Langa’s account has been verified by Instagram, establishing her account as the “authentic presence of a notable public figure, celebrity, or global brand” (Instagram as cited in Aynsley & Newberry, 2019, np).

Both those with a personal or business account can apply for Instagram verification (Aynsley & Newberry, 2019, np). The “blue badge (...)” “helps people avoid imposter accounts and easily find the brands or public figures they want to follow” (ibid.). It is also a status symbol, “according to Instagram (...), the verification badge is evidence that you’re ‘notable’” (ibid.). The “blue badge” is difficult to obtain, consequently it is coveted (ibid.). “Instagram verification is reserved for accounts that Instagram deems ‘in the public interest’” (ibid.); “(...) you must be a public figure, celebrity or global brand” (ibid.).

Additionally in order to be verified, you must also adhere to Instagram’s community guidelines and terms of service and your account must conform to a number of parameters as set out by Instagram (ibid.). For example: “Verified accounts must ‘represent a well-known, highly searched for person, brand, or entity’” (Instagram as cited in Aynsley & Newberry, 2019, np).

Sarah Langa is verified by Instagram, thus it is confirmed she is “notable”. She is a “public figure” — a celebrity who is also a brand and her account is “in the public interest” (Aynsley & Newberry, 2019)

A Google search in May 2020 of Langa’s name yielded results from well-known South African digital and print publications and tabloids such as: TimesLive, *Good Housekeeping*, *Sunday World*, *Cosmopolitan* and Channel24. In an article titled “Sarah Langa is gatvol of getting hate: I’m so done with humans!” Sarah Langa is described as an “influencer” (Kekana, 2020). The article appears in TshisaLive. TshisaLive describes itself as “South Africa’s biggest online entertainment and celebrity news hub, serving both TimesLIVE and SowetanLIVE” (TshisaLive, 2016), which are online newspapers.

Professional social media influencers in the Langa sense are “internet users” (Abidin, 2016, p. 3) or if thinking in terms of the framework of consumption, “ordinary consumers” (Iqani, 2019, p. 232) “who monetise their following” (Abidin, 2016, p. 3) through doing “brand ambassadorial work” (Iqani, 2019, p. 232). Professional social media influencers are considered “fit” for “brand ambassadorial work” (ibid.) on account of their “ability to influence the opinions and ideas of their circles” (Katz as cited in Iqani, 2019, p. 232) via their conception as “nodes within social networks” (ibid.). They are remunerated for this work through monetary compensation or offered compensation with “goods and services” either “permanently or on loan” (Advertising Regulatory Board, 2020, p. 2).

Kandy Kane’s brand partnership with Volvo exemplifies the latter form of remuneration mentioned above. Kane, a make-up influencer, whose real name is Marelize Libenberg (Nkanjeni, 2019), stated that her partnership with Volvo was “not a financial paid partnership” (Libenberg, 2019). Instead, she said she “signed a contract to drive” the “Volvo XC40 T5 R” and to share her experiences of it online in return (ibid.).

In her video post, Langa visually and textually associates herself with a TRESemmé campaign. However, based on a visual analysis alone, it is unclear whether the performative, visual and textual work done by Langa constitutes “branded content” (Dolinschek, 2019, np) for TRESemmé, which would establish her as their brand ambassador. However a post made on her Instagram feed on 12 September 2019 (Sarah Langa, 2019) displays the following:

#Ad
 Another day in “Serving serious hair goals with @tresemmesa” Rounding up my
 #TresNYFW experience with behind the scenes hair tips from various shows, learning how to create
 the perfect hairstyle for every occasion.... even Fashion Week!
 Check out my highlights page for a full run down of how we do @nyfw
 What an experience New York Fashion Week has been!!! #Sponsored
 #TRESPartner
 #PowerYourPresence

The South African Advertising Regulatory Board requires influencers to “mark all sponsored social media posts” (Dolinschek, 2019, np). Marking “branded content” with “#ad”, “#advertisement” and “#sponsored” allows followers “to distinguish between organic or branded content” (ibid.).

Following this, the hashtags “#Ad” and “#Sponsored”, featured in Langa’s September 2019 post, appear to confirm the post as “branded content” and also infer that Langa was a brand

ambassador for TRESemmé. Langa's relative celebrity seems to further confirm that Langa had a partnership with the brand.

A post on *Bloss*, a self-described “international media platform for South African women who live all over the world in the age group 20 – 35 years” (Bloss, nd, np), further indicates Langa's celebrity. In the post, she is featured, alongside Victoria's Secret model, Candice Swanepoel, as one of the South African “beauties” “spotted” at New York Fashion week (Bester, 2019): “This girl is just on another level. She has been sporting some #hairgoals hairstyles around New York in partnership with TRESemmé SA. We love the quirky natural hair⁷ look together with this printed blouse, jeans and (again) a mini Louis Vuitton see through handbag” (Bester, 2019). The post makes reference to one of the photographs in Langa's September 2019 post cited above.

In a more recent branded post⁸ for Lifebuoy soap, posted on 28 March 2020, comprising of a video accompanied with text, Langa washes her hands with Lifebuoy soap in what seems to be her expensive looking kitchen. One of the comments posted in response to her post features three heart-eyed emojis followed by the phrase, “stunning kitchen” (Busisiwe Ndlovu, 2020).

Langa washes her hands wearing a deep orange shorts suit. She wears a black bralette beneath the jacket. Her make-up look is coordinated with her clothing. Her lipstick is a similar shade of orange to the suit. Her lipstick and suit are coordinated with the colour of the orange bar of Lifebuoy as well as the other white and orange Lifebuoy products; bars of soap and a bottle of liquid soap lie in the foreground of the frame near the tap.

Part of the posted text that accompanies the video says: “Regular hand washing and and [*sic*] healthy hygiene habits are very important. And of course, no one said not to have fun and dress up in the process” (Sarah Langa, 2020)! In the video, Langa, head back in laughter and anticipation, catches a bar of soap that is thrown at her before briefly gazing into the camera in a somewhat alluring fashion. Cut to a close up on her hands as she washes them, jewellery adorns her wrists.

⁷ Note the racist description of Langa's natural hair as “quirky”.

⁸ I have identified it as a branded post due to the signifier #ad, which forms part of the textual component of the post.

Langa's expensive looking kitchen in conjunction with her outfit and make-up and the performance in the video work to present her as desirable, fun, fabulous and aspirational to her demographic of followers. Hand washing with Lifebuoy soap is presented as fun, fabulous and what a successful celebrity does to inspire aspiration to succeed.

Langa's brand is Langa: her account features a textual and visual narration of her personal life and lifestyle (Abidin, 2016, p. 3), evident even when posts are marked as "branded content." The Lifebuoy promotion takes place in what seems to be *her* kitchen. This is constitutive of the advertising strategy of professional social media influencers who "appear to [*personally experience*]" the product or service being endorsed (Abidin, 2016, p. 3).

Both her personal life and lifestyle are offered as aspirational due to their performance of, and relation to, affluence. This is apparent, for example, in her accessories (the Louis Vuitton bag she holds), her expensive surroundings (her kitchen) and her personal aesthetic that generally conforms to the beauty norms and aesthetic of affluent black South African and American women celebrities as represented in mainstream media culture. Moreover, the overall "glossy" and "professional" aesthetic of the photographs on her page simultaneously convey an aspirational lifestyle, "professionalism" and affluence.

Arguably, the Langa brand, which is Langa herself; her appearance, her affluent personal life and lifestyle, which is constructed and perceived as aspirational, attracts followers. She currently has 403 000 followers (Sarah Langa, 2020) which confers her celebrity status as an influencer which in turn attracts brands which produces her as a professional social media influencer and celebrity. Her role as an influencer, professional social media influencer and celebrity are mutually co-dependent and cyclically produce each other.

Langa's brand is Langa: self-commodification as labour that produces her.

Within the framework under discussion, as an influencer who is also a brand, she performs self-commodification in the commodified labour of "brand ambassadorial work" (Iqani, 2019, p. 232). This work is partly about producing branded content. In this context, branded content mobilises the self. A self that is commodified by the work of the self (and on the self), through the labour inherent in producing branded content that involves using the self as both the labour and the product of that labour.

My intention is not to judge Langa's choices or her decision to undertake this profession. Rather, I am concerned with the type of professional social media influencer that Langa exemplifies. My consideration is of the type of influencer in relation to processes of branding towards attaining celebrity and the "brand ambassadorial work" (ibid.) that typifies and defines this profession. This is in order to show how women's subjectivities are constructed or denied in the processes of commodification involved, both implicitly and explicitly, in this internet-based form of moving image and visual culture.

A "discourse through and about objects (...) permeates the spaces of our public and private domains" (Jhally as cited in Iqani, 2019, p. 40) and it becomes "the lens through which we come to understand the world that surrounds us" (Jhally as cited in Iqani, 2019, p. 240) as well as ourselves, and the construction of ourselves.

High Fidelity (1995) is a novel by Nick Hornby. It was adapted into a film, of the same name, released in 2000, directed by Stephen Frears and starring John Cusack, as Rob the lead character. The television series adaptation *High Fidelity* (2020) stars Zoë Kravitz. Kravitz plays Rob, the lead, who owns a record store in Brooklyn, New York (St Félix, 2020). Rob compiles a "desert island all-time top 5 most memorable heartbreaks" list (*High Fidelity*, 2020). Using this list "she embarks on a quest of tracking down her exes, to understand why they rejected her" (St Félix, 2020, np). Presumably this quest is intended to aid her in making sense of her most recent and significant break-up with Mac. She and Mac were engaged. The series begins a year after their break-up. She is heartbroken (Lyons, 2020) and has not dated anyone since. The heartbreak list is compiled in chronological order and Mac is number five on it. Rob says of her relationship with Mac: "Oh man, this was the real fucking deal" (*High Fidelity*, 2020).

In the fourth episode of the series Rob contacts one of her exes, Kat Monroe. Kat is a white woman who, as Rob tells us, prefers white blonde women (ibid.). Rob is black. Rob direct-messages Kat on Instagram. Rob notices that Kat has a blue checkmark next to her name. She asks Cherise, her employee and friend, what that means. Cherise: "It means she's verified dude, she is internet royalty" (ibid.). Simon, another one of Rob's employees as well as one of her exes (he appears on her list and broke up with her because he is gay) adds: "She's been anointed a public figure by the Insta gods" (ibid.).

Later in the episode, Kat calls Rob and invites her to her place. When Rob arrives at Kat's place, there is a party in progress. At the party, a young woman hands Rob her phone and asks Rob to photograph her. She tells Rob to make her look "very fucked up and vibey" (ibid.). While Rob photographs her, the woman asks: "Does it look real" (ibid.)? With reference to a can that she's holding up while posing she also asks: "Wait, can you see the can" (ibid.)?

Later, while eating dinner at the party, a young white woman asks Rob how she knows Kat. Rob tells her they used to date and guesses they're now friends. In return, Rob asks the woman how she knows Kat. The woman responds: "Well, to be honest we've actually never met IRL, but I've followed her for months" (ibid.). The woman also reveals that it is actually her first time meeting anyone at the party. Rob responds to the latter reveal in surprised confusion: "What" (ibid.)? The woman responds:

Don't get me wrong, I'm usually averse to doing these Instagram influencer meet-ups, but we're getting paid so much to hawk this soju shit. Korean money runs deep (ibid.).

As she talks, she reaches out for a can of what is presumably the soju. The woman photographed by Rob earlier in the scene held a can that looked the same. The woman, now holding up the can, says: "Take a selfie" (ibid.). She begins to take selfies of herself and Rob, posing with the can in her hand.

After everyone has left the party, Rob and Kat talk. While they are talking Kat pulls out her phone and looks at it. Something has alerted her to the fact that she needs to leave.

Kat: Oh fuck, I gotta go, I need to be, out, by 10, or I'm screwed.

Rob: What do you mean?

Kat: Oh my god you thought that I lived here? Fuck, you're funny. Honey, this is an events rental (...)(ibid.).

"Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord, 2005, p. 7). We see this in the party scene in episode four of *High Fidelity* (2020). A young woman asks if a photograph taken of her looks real. The people at the party only know each other virtually, primarily through images. They attend the party to capture images intended for virtual representations. The virtual representations are predicated on capturing images of "real" social interactions and relations.

They enjoy the party, enjoy each other at the party, enjoy eating together, and enjoy the beautiful apartment at the party. An apartment rented for the party and made to look as if it is Kat's apartment. They enjoy the soju, which they drink together and which they also present to others through virtual visual representations. So that others "out there" can share in their fabulous lives by purchasing the soju, which orients and produces the fabulous time they are having. The images of their "experience" at the party furnished by a particular brand of soju aim to "trigger mimetic desires and make people want to become like the products represented in them"(Steyerl, 2012, p. 165); "the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 2005, p. 7).

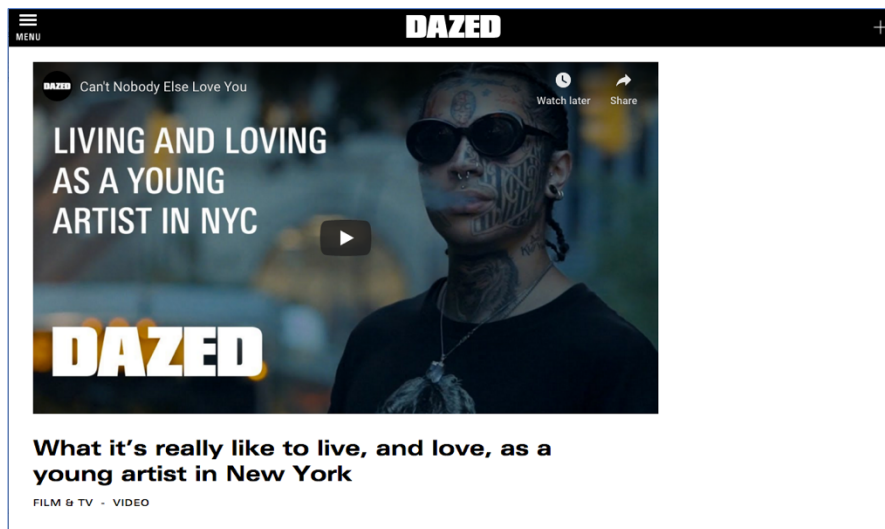
The products are the people and experience represented, intended to sell the soju brand, which is the product that generates the people and their experience as products. The brand ambassadors, already imagined as products themselves (because they are brands), are offered through their close association with the soju brand, which in turn produces them as commodities. Their experience is therefore commodified because it is produced through and for a commodity that validates their commodity value. Consequently "hegemony infiltrates everyday culture and spreads its values by way of (...) representation" (Steyerl, 2012, p. 165).

In the example of the party scene from *High Fidelity* (2020) the camera functions as a "(...) [tool] of disappearance. The more people are represented the less is left of them in reality" (Steyerl, 2012, p. 168).

A scene in a short documentary film called *Can't Nobody Else Love You* (2018) further exemplifies these preceding arguments concerning disappearance. In the scene a montage of Instagram videos is accompanied by an unidentified male voice. He says:

The only connection anybody has with each other is social media. Out of Instagram, no one really talks to each other. It can be a room filled with Instagram famous people just filming each other, making it look like they're having a great time, and nobody would communicate with each other (*Can't Nobody Else Love You*, 2018).

2.



Still from the Dazed Digital website (2018).

Jason, featured in the still directly above, is one of the central characters of *Can't Nobody Else Love You* (2018).

Can't Nobody Else Love You (2018) had its premiere on the online magazine *Dazed Digital*. It ran with the tagline: "Living and loving as a young artist in NYC" (*Dazed Digital*, 2018).

Director Ivan Olita describes the film on his Vimeo page (2018):

Can't Nobody Else Love You is a documentary that takes a dreamlike plunge into the freedoms, uncertainties and radical creative expressions of New York City's youth. In *Can't Nobody Else Love You*, the surreal and loose-limbed non-fiction film follows 9 individuals as they wander through a layered narrative that combines vérité [sic] footage from the street of New York interspersed with vividly staged scenes that ultimately provide a sense of dislocation yet uncanny attachment. Can we be loved if we don't love ourselves first?

A company led by Olita primarily produced the film and it describes itself as follows:

BRAVÒ is a multidisciplinary team of creatives, led by Ivan Olita, specialized in developing films for both editorial and commercial outlets. Drawing upon the better aspects of both worlds, we combine commercial accessibility with editorial experimentalism and bend toward form-discovery. The vision is defined by a tailor-made approach providing media-friendly assets ranging from documentaries to commercials, branded content and fashion campaigns (BRAVÒ, 2018).

According to the article that appeared alongside the film's premiere, the film focuses on six young artists (Manatakis, 2018). As opposed to the nine individuals offering "radical creative expressions" as described in the synopsis of the film on Olita's Vimeo page. In watching the

film, the film is generally closer to what Olita describes⁹. This is in terms of its focus on nine individuals offering expressions. If, in this instance, creativity is measured in relation to a departure from hegemony, their expression can sometimes be perceived as “creative” whereas in other moments it reproduces hegemony. Whether it is “radical” is another matter entirely, which includes a discussion of what “radical” might actually mean.

In the film, the expressions offered by the individuals are principally in relation to their observations, experiences and relationships to New York City and their production of self and relation to others, in terms of, for example: relations to social media, gender relations, sex, sexuality, identity and love.

For instance, an unnamed individual¹⁰ explains their relation to social media and also how it produces relations to others by explaining their ambivalent yet indispensable relationship with Instagram and how it distorts their generation’s sense of “reality”:

I have a love-hate relationship with Instagram, and I feel like for my whole generation it kind of warps our sense of everything, how we look at each other, hierarchies, it can leave you really sad sometimes, it can kind of affect your mood more than it should. I wish I could live without it, but I probably couldn’t, to be honest (*Can’t Nobody Else Love you*, 2018).

As they say this, they scroll through Instagram.

3.

In “How Dating Became a ‘Market’” (Fetters and Tiffany, 2020) featured in the online magazine *The Atlantic*, a 30-year-old Alaskan named Liz¹¹ is interviewed. Commenting on dating via the Internet dating app, tinder, Liz says: “It’s like, ‘If this doesn’t go well, there are 20 other guys who look like you in my inbox.’ And I’m sure they feel the same way – that

⁹ Only one of the characters in the film refers to themselves directly as an artist via a comment they make about obtaining their artist’s visa to legally reside in the US (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018). The film does not generally specify which of the characters who appear to be the central characters are artists, although this is alluded to in certain moments. It also does not specify what kind of artists they are. Recognising the artists is generally predicated on insider knowledge. For example, the article accompanying the film’s premiere makes reference to the film featuring “social media artist John Yuyi and musician Hirakish” (Manatakis, 2018). The people are not identified as such in the film nor are their roles as artists explored. You do not know who John Yuyi and Hirakish are in the film. It is only once you visit their Instagram pages that you are able to identify who John Yuyi and Hirakish are.

¹⁰ Their name is provided in the closing credits, where individuals are listed in “order of appearance” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018). However the names listed do not accurately correspond to the appearance of individuals in the film so it is difficult to discern the name of each person.

¹¹ Liz requested that only her first name be used in the article, in order to avoid harassment (Fetters and Tiffany, 2020).

there are 20 other girls who are willing to hang out, or whatever (...). People are seen as commodities, as opposed to individuals” (Liz as cited in Fetters and Tiffany, 2020).

People conceived of as commodities: “interchangeable products available for acquisition or trade” (Fetters and Tiffany, 2020), products that can easily be disposed of. Further, in a conception of online dating where “people are seen as commodities” users might sort “people into broad categories” after “only a few hours” on an app (ibid.). Filtering people according to a “checklist” (Ury as cited in Fetters and Tiffany, 2020) of requirements. “Shopping” for the “right” partner. Producing people as “types” who fulfil the criteria of a “checklist” so that app users are constituted as consumers seeking “consumer-to-good matches” (Fetters and Tiffany, 2020), in a process facilitated by what an algorithm shows them is “the market of possible partners” (Illouz as cited in Fetters and Tiffany, 2020).

An expression of love relations imagined through capitalism and its relations, characteristic of subjectivities subjugated by the economy (Debord, 2005, p. 10).

4.

Reality shows are ubiquitous, syndicated and franchised. Different formats traverse borders. For example: *The Bachelor*, a love and dating reality TV show originated in the US, becomes *The Bachelor SA*, the South African franchise of the show. “Warhol’s prediction that everybody would be world-famous for fifteen minutes (...)” (Steyerl, 2012, p. 67) has found a vast avenue of expression. Hairdressers, florists and businesspeople are routinely turned into reality TV stars or internet celebrities. Thrust into the limelight, their social media following grows, they attract product endorsement deals, are paid to make “public appearances”, and become the subject of tabloid scrutiny, all of which are contemporary markers of celebrity status.

Garnering these rewards is predicated on their ability to withstand hours of being filmed as well as, for example, their ability to publicly perform confessions and a willingness to subject themselves to different kinds of assessments and inquiries (Steyerl, 2012, p. 166).

In this clamour of reality TV shows is the love/dating game show subgenre. *Are You the One?* is a love/dating game show that has run for eight seasons and is produced by MTV in the US. I watched abridged episodes of its eighth season online. The eighth season featured a cast identified as “sexually fluid” (*Are You the One?*, 2019). This was a first for the show

(Dries, 2019, np).

The show's format is as follows: the show's creators match the cast into pairs (ibid.). These pairs constitute a "perfect match". "Perfect matches" are arrived at through carrying out "some inscrutable calculus involving high-level matchmakers, numerous interviews, conversations with family and friends, an IQ test, and a meeting with a therapist" (ibid.).

The matches are determined prior to the actual game. The aim of the game is to ascertain who your "perfect match" is. This is determined both individually and as a group. Successfully determining one's "perfect match" results in acquiring love and "a monetary reward: a collective split of \$1 million" (ibid.).

The show takes place in "a mansion in Hawaii or New Orleans or the Caribbean" (ibid.). Presumably part of the allure of the show, for those who enter in the hopes of becoming a cast member, is spending time in beautiful locations where activities are comprised of trying to figure out who your "perfect match" is, "hanging out", eating and drinking, partying, "flirting" (ibid.), having sex, sometimes exercising, and participating in challenges where the winners get to go on dates which may sometimes involve helicopter rides.

Aside from these activities, which occupy the majority of each episode, episodes include matchup ceremonies. "Most episodes end with a matchup ceremony. There are 10 spread out over roughly six weeks of filming" (ibid.). In these ceremonies, "each person picks who they think their Perfect Match is, and the number of couples that are correctly matched is revealed through massive beams of light shined [*sic*] into the sky" (ibid.). "Once an episode" the group can also elect to "send a pair to the Truth Booth, a room equipped with lasers and a TV screen that will reveal whether or not the couple in question is indeed a Perfect Match" (ibid.). Correct matches leave the house "to stay in the Honeymoon Suite for the duration of filming, returning only for matchup ceremonies; their absence means that the other contestants can cross a name off their list of potential partners" (ibid.).

The matchup ceremonies also feature "the concept of a 'blackout'" (ibid.): "if the cast gets zero matches in a matchup ceremony, they lose money off their total possible compensation"

(ibid.). The Season Eight cast received one “blackout” thus reducing their total compensation to \$750 000.

Are You the One? is a high stakes game with mathematical probability built into the premise (ibid.). “Alexander Wang, a software engineer who runs the blog [*Are You the One? Math*]” (ibid.), offers weekly recaps breaking down each possible couple’s chance of being a match based on mathematical probability alone (ibid.). Since the beginning of the show Wang and his computer programme “have accurately predicted the end of each season before it airs” (ibid.).

Facilitated by an algorithmic solution to a “love equation” (ibid.), “like a dating app, *Are You the One?* purports to make finding *the one* simpler” (ibid.) and more expedient. Dries (2019) elaborates: “The show’s creators have already chosen your perfect match for you (...). You just have to find out who that person is (...).”

This search for *the one*, takes place within a select group of 16-22 people who are also seeking their “perfect match”. The relatively small “sample size” of the group is supposed to make it “easier” to determine one’s “perfect match” as is the collaborative effort of the group.

Are You the One? provides expediency and efficiency in relation to how love relations are lived and secured. Cast members must be efficient in determining their “perfect matches.” The show takes place over a limited period of time and for each matchup ceremony they must produce at least one match in order to prevent a “blackout”. Additionally, their ability to identify matches at each ceremony is imperative towards establishing who might or might not be a “perfect match”.

In *Are You the One?* love relations are manufactured through the “speedy” (Freeman, 2010, p. 9) production of “commodity-time” (ibid.) as well as through an ethic of expediency and consumption rather than love. An ethic of consumption is produced via the premise of the show: a love game show where attaining love is oriented towards a monetary reward. A comment from a co-executive producer on the show: “Their only incentive is to find someone that they connect with and experience those feelings, and then hope that they get rewarded at the end with some money” (Jade as cited in Dries, 2019, np).

In *Are You the One?* love is conceived of as “ready-made”(Bauman, 2003, p. 6) through a pre-manufactured, algorithmically determined and externally allocated “perfect match” and also through the notion of the “perfect match” itself. Love as “ready-made” undermines the transformative potential of love as ongoing experiential creative praxis.

Love as an experimental praxis is imagined as decommodified labour in its praxis. The conception of love praxis as decommodified labour is vital for subjectivities labouring in love under capitalism, where subjectivities along with the love labour they perform are often subsumed by capital. *Are You the One?* is indicative of this.

It is impossible to know what the cast members felt whilst on the show as well as their motivations for participating in the show without talking to them. However, statements can be made on the level of representation, in terms of the cast members’ performance and their function in the show. Within the commodity form of *Are You the One?*, love is also conceived of as a commodity, and cast members function as entrepreneurs of the self (Foucault as cited in La Berge, 2015, p. 572).

They function as entrepreneurial subjects embracing “the activity of self-capitalization rather than passively acquiescing to or struggling against it” (La Berge, 2015, p. 579). In this framework *Are You the One?* cast members are conceived of as entrepreneurial subjects who act as “human-capital” investors (La Berge, 2015, p. 572); they are entrepreneurs of the biopolitical terrain of their own subjectivity (La Berge, 2015). An expression “of the real subsumption of labor to capital” (La Berge, 2015, p. 573) that is apparent in how subjectivities operate in general and specifically in relation to their performance of love labour in *Are You the One?*. Jason Read offers an assessment of the status of labour after real subsumption (La Berge, 2015).

Read writes:

This [real] subsumption involves not only the formation of what Marx referred to as a specifically capitalist mode of production, but also the incorporation of all subjective potential, the capacity to communicate, to feel, to create, to think, into productive powers for capital. Capital no longer simply exploits labor, understood as the physical capacity to transform objects, but puts to work the capacities to create and communicate that traverse social relations (as cited in La Berge, 2015, p. 576).

In *Are You the One?* love labour is used as productive power for capital (Read as cited in La Berge, 2015). Love labour incorporates the capacities that Read discusses in relation to “subjective potential”: “the capacity to communicate, to feel, to create, to think” (Read as

cited in La Berge, 2015, p. 576). The cast members, imagined as entrepreneurial subjects, deploy their “human-capital”; their “subjective potential”, which also includes their self-constitution as, for instance, queer or “sexually fluid”, in the performance of love labour that is mobilised as productive power for capital. Love labour functions in this way because it is performed to gain a monetary reward in the context of the commodity form of a TV show where love itself also functions as a commodity.

The performance of love labour towards a monetary reward has the further effect of diminishing the value of love. Love is imagined as an instrument or a vehicle for gaining a monetary reward rather than having value on its own terms, for love itself, as opposed to its market value. Given all this, it is in fact questionable whether the show is concerned with love at all.

5.

Love and sadness is a luxury that most people can’t afford nowadays, it’s not a thing that most people should be going through cause, like Jason said, it is a distraction, love is a big distraction¹² (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018).

Let us return to Jason in *Can’t Nobody Else Love You* (2018). The man featured in the promotional still of the film as it appeared on *Dazed Digital*.

In the film, Jason sits in a room with what we assume are his friends. The articulation above is expressed by one of Jason’s friends. It comes immediately after Jason says:

(...) I feel like, because like New York is so busy, there’s always something to do. You feel what I’m saying? There’s like females is just like a bonus [*sic*]. It’s like, oh, you made it to the bonus level. Like here, come have some fun over here, like but at the same time, it’s like, I know the bonus is there, but I don’t want to do the bonus, I want to keep going on the mission, you feel what I’m saying, cause once you get to the end of the mission, you beat the boss, you got the bonus too, you know what I’m saying, so all come together (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018).

Women imagined as objects to be accrued, as prizes, once professional success (“you beat the boss”) is attained. Women are imagined as a bonus, something nice and fun but not necessary. The corollary of this is that love relations with women are imagined as something nice and fun but not necessary. They are viewed as less important than getting “to the end of

¹² We do not see Jason explicitly saying “it is a distraction, love is a big distraction” in the film. So it could either be something that he has said in footage that was not used in the film or his friend’s interpretation of the statement that Jason makes directly prior to his friend speaking. The statement that Jason makes is referenced on the following page of this dissertation.

the mission” and beating the boss, as something that will be acquired only once this (the professional mission) is achieved, which also speaks to the “quality” of the object acquired.

The articulations of Jason and his friend imagine love in a particular way in relation to time while also offering an expression of love’s value.

Jason’s friend understands love as a luxury (along with sadness) that “most people can’t afford” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018). He says: “it’s not a thing that most people should be going through” because it is “a distraction”, “a big distraction” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018). While Jason’s articulation imagines love relations as less important than getting “to the end of the mission” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018), he views them as something that will inevitably be acquired once professional success is achieved.

Jason’s friend infers that love is “costly” while also offering it as something valuable through describing it as a luxury. But its status as a luxury also suggests that it is not necessary or urgent. Not only does he suggest that it is not necessary, he also says that it is something that most people shouldn’t go through. Implying that it is overwhelmingly taxing on one’s time. It is “costly” because it is a distraction.

Jason and his friend imagine love as something that is not urgent, there is a time for love and it is not immediate to their social concerns. Jason says it will be acquired at “the end of the mission” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018). The lack of urgency pertaining to love assigns a particular value to love. It is perceived as having lesser importance. Jason’s friend’s assertion that love is a distraction which Jason agrees with: “very much so” (*Can’t Nobody Else Love You*, 2018), cements its level in the hierarchy of importance.

Love is a distraction and consequently it is perceived as having lesser value, as distracting from other more important acts of labour and it is perceived as dispensable in relation to other acts of labour.

Jason and his friend in their expressions reveal their “implantation” in the “chrononormativity” (Freeman, 2010, p. 3) of the “work society” (Weeks, 2011, p. 16). An “implantation”, and consequently a subjugation, that is made possible by capitalism’s expropriation of time (Debord, 2005, p. 91). Elizabeth Freeman asserts:

Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls “hidden rhythms,” forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege. Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time (2010, p. 3).

Consequently “time binds” (ibid.). “Naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery” (ibid.).

In the exchange between Jason and his friend “the value of (...) time” (ibid.), its preferred/privileged function, is organised in a chrononormative (ibid.) manner towards the “mission” and getting “to the end of the mission” where one will “beat the boss”. Beating the boss, as I mentioned prior, suggests that the “mission” is work-related. So that in Jason’s speech, time spent towards the “mission” conceives of time expended on work or towards a professional goal as a more valuable use of time. This indicates the centrality of work to Jason and his friend’s lives; his friend essentially extends Jason’s argument via his expression that love is a distraction.

The centrality of work in their lives illustrates their “implantation” in the “chrononormativity” (ibid.) of the “work society” (Weeks, 2011, p. 16), as “the concept of the work society” (Weeks, 2011, p. 8) signifies this centrality (ibid.). The centrality of work as found in the “work society” involves temporally regulating (Freeman, 2010, p. 3) or binding bodies to time through “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (ibid.).

In this framework work is conceived as the central point of productive orientation, where one must spend most of their time to ensure maximum productivity, which will produce one as a successful and valuable human being. Consequently, work is produced as valuable and its value is privileged over other value producing activities. So love is a distraction because it does not contribute to work.

It is unclear based on what is represented in the film if the work-related activity that is suggested in Jason’s “mission” is waged work, which is central to Weeks’ conception of the “work society” (2011). Nevertheless, Jason’s description and relation to the “mission”, the

assumed work, conforms to the ethos of work in the “work society”.

Jason’s privileging of the “mission” centralises work, which is primary to the conception of the “work society.” His articulations concerning beating the boss and acquiring the bonus, the “female”, speaks to the dominance of certain values that are associated with waged work in “the category of the work society” (Weeks, 2011, p. 11), namely that of work as an essential source of social recognition and status (ibid.).

Additionally in Jason’s articulation social recognition and status are imagined through capital. Beating the boss signifies an ethic of competition and individual accomplishment. Acquiring the bonus, the “female”, relates to the possessions that one acquires as a consequence of the status and social recognition that comes with individual accomplishment. Women are patriarchally imagined as goods/ possessions, exemplifying how gender relations, shaped by patriarchy, are interconnected with the “ongoing maintenance and reproduction of an overall capitalist social formation” (Ferguson, nd, np).

Jason’s “mission” is imagined in the ethos and ethics of work as found in the “work society”. Jason as well as his friend, through his corroboration, reveal an internalisation of hegemony in this regard.

“The willingness to live for and through work renders subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes” (Weeks, 2011, p. 11). This is not to claim that “work is without value” (Weeks, 2011, p. 12) or to “deny the necessity of productive activity” or its possible pleasures (ibid.). Rather, “it is to suggest that there might be a variety of ways to experience the pleasure that we may (...) find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate, and enjoy” (Weeks, 2011, p. 11). It is to encourage us to, as Weeks further asserts, “insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute [productive] activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work” (2011, p. 12).

Love praxis is one of these creative endeavours, a generative and resistant praxis; love, is not a distraction.

Premise



Still from *SpillOver* (2020).

A white woman has a studio in a beautiful old house. She is an artist, a performer. She loads a tape onto a reel-to-reel player. It takes some time. She plays the tape. Manipulates the sound with pause and delay. Stops it, starts it again. Sets down a speaker. Untangles cables. Changes the tape. Watches the reels as they rewind the tape. Changes the tape again, back to the tape that she started with.

Plays it again.

She is in process.

We are in process with her.

The performer's lover has left her. In a letter to the performer she writes: "Love is a distraction. I don't have time for it" (*SpillOver*, 2020). The temporal delay of waiting for the letter is undercut by the efficiency of the letter's content, there being no room or time provided for the artist to reply due to the finality of its content. An efficiency further felt in the expediency of sending a letter as opposed to having a conversation in person. The letter is a broadcast with no feedback permitted.

The artist's lover conceives of love as a distraction for which they do not have time for. Love is perceived as having lesser value, as distracting from more important acts of labour. Love is perceived as dispensable in relation to other acts of labour.

The performer takes the time to process her loss.

She processes loss through the process of practice.

We are in process with her.

A tribute to the value of that love and *to love* is an affirmation of love. In practice she processes but also points to something different because “the work of practice is always coupled with improvised sound” (McKittrick, 2015, p. 159). “One cannot improvise without practicing and arranging and rearranging memory patterns developed through partly unconscious repetition [*and creative innovation*]” (ibid.). So her practice involves repetition to enable improvisation which functions as an analogy to a facet of love praxis: how to return without repeating (Nietzsche and Deleuze as cited in Barthes, 2010, p. 24). You can return to the encounter of being in love without repeating a previous encounter:

what I have affirmed a first time, I can once again affirm, without repeating it, for then what I affirm is the affirmation, not its contingency: I affirm the first encounter in its difference, I desire its return, not its repetition (ibid.).

“I affirm the first encounter in its difference” is a refrain, a tool to deal with loss and an affirmation of love which also points to its possibility.

Women and men's voices emanate from the reel-to-reel player towards the end of the film fragment. In different tones they utter what is expressed in the letter from the lover albeit with some addition and variation. These voices can be read as either the recipients of the news, or as the broadcasters, or even, as witnesses to the performer's event. They make visible a callous act that should not be repeated. They serve as a reminder of this act. They (the voices) represent the unconsolated who the performer seeks to console through the recognition and articulation of shared experience. They are bodies that are connected with the performer's body through their voices, “seeing and being seen, calling and responding” (Freeman, 2010, p. 10). The voices are put in relation to her body through the act of recording and are then emitted from the reel-to-reel that she plays: bodies are intelligible only through their encounters with other bodies (Freeman, 2010).



Stills from *SpilLover* (2020).

Appetite

Loss

On the album, *Nina Simone: The Definitive Rarities Collection – 50 Classic Cuts* (2009), Nina Simone sings the jazz standard “You Don’t Know What Love Is”, a song originally “composed by Gene de Paul, with lyrics by Don Raye” (Goia, 2012, p. 467).

Other great women jazz singers, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington also sang this song.

Nina Simone sings:

You don’t know what love is
‘Till you’ve learned the meaning of the blues
‘Till you’ve loved a love you’ve had to lose
You don’t know what love is

How could you know how lips hurt
‘Till you’ve kissed and had to pay the cost
Baby, ‘till you’ve flipped your heart and you have lost
You don’t know what love is

Do you know how a lost heart fears
the thought of reminiscing?
And how lips taste of tears
Oh, they lose their taste for kissing

You don’t know how hearts burn
For love that cannot live, yet never dies
‘Till you’ve faced each dawn with sleepless eyes
You don’t know what love is

You don’t know what love is
How could you know how lips hurt
‘Till you’ve kissed and had to pay the cost
Baby, ‘till you’ve flipped your heart and you have lost
You’ll never know what love is

Do you know how a lost heart fears
the thought of reminiscing?
And how lips taste of tears
mmm, they lose their taste for kissing

You don’t know how hearts burn
For love that cannot live, yet never dies
Baby, ‘till you’ve faced each dawn with sleepless eyes
You don’t know
No, you’ll never know
What love is (de Paul and Raye, 1941)

“Why is the measure of love loss” (Winterson, 1993, p. 9)?

Premise



Still from *SpillOver* (2020).

What if we were to momentarily consider appetite as the measure of love?

A courtesan burns her garden down and eats the ashes: “a woman moving along the relentless trajectory of her desire, transformed by it, again and again” (Maso, 1996, p. viii). This is about “a woman who wants” (ibid.). She loves too much, defying the laws of love. She wants love and language:

Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no. It will break out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashes the glass and spills the liquid (Winterson, 1993, p. 9).

Language that hovers “at the outermost boundaries of speech” (Maso, 1996, p. ix): “a logic of the body dramatised by where the line breaks, or the paragraph. A logic of passion created in the caesuras, in the gaps where unexpected tensions can produce palpable sensation” (Maso, 1996, p. x).

Appetite is also about a lack of appetite.

It is about what you demand and refuse.

A brown/black woman goes to a bar one night, to look.

Appetite.

Here is a woman who looks and walks.

Her body's movement producing a series of ephemera, pieces from a heterogeneous temporality: one lover calls up another (Maso, 1996, pp. ix-x), they call up each other, now and before, and those still to come.

She loves too much

In the film *The Lure* (2015), a mermaid named Silver faces a predicament. She has fallen in love with a human and he has married someone else. If she does not eat him by daybreak, on the day of his wedding, she will turn into sea foam. She will die. Unable to eat him, she turns into sea foam while dancing in his arms (*The Lure*, 2015).

Lust, Caution (2007): Japanese occupied China (Abeel, 2007, np), Wang Jia-zhi, disguised as Mrs. Mak, becomes Mr. Yee's mistress with the intention of leading him to his death. She is part of a former theatre group turned Chinese intelligence cell that seeks to assassinate Yee, "an intelligence chief working for the Japanese" (ibid.). Wang Jia-zhi and Mr. Yee fall in love. Wang Jia-zhi falls in love with Mr. Yee.

Wang Jia-zhi and Mr. Yee sit in a jewellery shop where Yee purchases a ring for Wang. Wang tries on the ring and the jeweller says: "Congratulations miss." She looks in his direction, open-mouthed, then down at the ring, smiling. She looks at Yee, and then back down at the ring, she moves to take it off.

Yee says: "Wear it" (*Lust, Caution*, 2007).

She responds: "I don't want to wear such a valuable thing on the street" (ibid.).

He moves in towards her, says: "You're with me" (ibid.), then takes her hand looking at the ring.

Melancholic music. Wang overcome with emotion, her face is framed in close-up as she looks over at Yee. Her eyes glisten with tears. Cut to a tight close-up on Yee. He looks at Wang tenderly, smiling slightly. An exchange of glances, then a sound, Wang is startled. She starts to say something.

Yee: "Mmm" (ibid.)?

She says: "Go, now" (ibid.). Yee's expression changes from tenderness to realisation. He rises quickly and runs outside to the safety of his car.

Wang alerts Yee to the fact that he will be assassinated. Wang and her former theatre colleagues are executed after she alerts Yee. Yee signs the execution order.

She loves too much.

She loves too much.

Two women, Silver and Wang, choose to die for the men they love. What would you do “in the name of love” (Ahmed, 2003, np)? In the name of love: gendered self-sacrifice; a woman’s life for a man’s? One valued more than the other.

Self-sacrifice is seen as a noble act: the ultimate expression of love. But a sacrifice of the self is different from a conception of the self as non-sovereign, the self as multiple/incoherent and constituted through relation. Self-sacrifice infers a foregoing of the self as opposed to the elasticity of the self as found within a conception of the self as non-sovereign. It infers a relinquishing of the self in order to give oneself over to the other. Here a relation of power is inferred, where the other’s needs or life are perceived as more important or valuable. Self-sacrifice in love is not part of a politics of relation because it is a cannibalistic practice. One sacrifices the self for consumption, rather than negotiating, rather than sharing with the other.

In heterosexual relationships women are more frequently called upon to self-sacrifice. Sometimes, with their lives. A patriarchal conception of appetite is the measure of love, of loving too much, if she loves too much.

When do we have conversations about men loving too much?

Crimes of passion.

We have to reject this term. Another patriarchal conception: murders, called crimes of passion; he loved her too much and in an amorous rage he killed her. Patriarchal sanctified murder justified by and misnamed as love.

Appetite is also about a lack of appetite.

It is about what you demand, refuse, insist on, and let go of.

She loves too much.

She loves too much.

Excerpts from Eva Illouz's book *Why Love Hurts*:

1.

"A woman in her late twenties, currently not in a relationship, described herself as an 'obsessive documenter': 'whenever I begin to have feelings [for someone], the wish to document awakes.'" Yet, she "wouldn't photograph anyone until [she] was confident in the relationship, so [she] wouldn't panic him": she "doesn't want to make him run away, to put pressure, to look too much in love" (Schwarz as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 131).

2.

Interviewer: So to say to a guy you want a serious, committed relationship is needy?

Irene: Absolutely. I would love to say freely "I love you," "I want to spend my life with you," but if I did it I would feel like the inferior party. You want to remain cool (2012, p. 134).

3.

Jill: "Randy told me once not to pressure him or he would just disappear. I got so scared. It was all up to me. I was supposed to love him and leave him alone at the same time" (Norwood as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 139).

There are women who are perceived as *Women Who Love Too Much*¹³. "Women who love too much" are those self-defeating women who are "too" emotionally available and provide "too much" recognition to the beloved. They have an appetite for love. They want love and are willing to love. They are not afraid to express this and are constant in their expression. In patriarchy, loving is constituted as loving too much, and it is women who love too much because they make too much of love: "The men in my life have always been the folks who are wary of using the word 'love' lightly. They are wary because they believe that women make too much of love" (hooks, 2001, p. 3).

Thwarted expressions of love: "she 'doesn't want to make him run away, to put pressure, to look too much in love'" (Schwarz as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 131). Irene: "I would love to say freely 'I love you', 'I want to spend my life with you', but if I did it I would feel like the inferior party. You want to remain cool" (as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 134). Jill: "I was supposed to love him and leave him alone at the same time" (Norwood as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 139).

She loves too much.

¹³ A best-selling book by psychologist Robin Norwood (Illouz, 2012, p. 139).

In modernity, the principle of individual freedom is central and autonomy is the prize. Hegemonic identities possess autonomy, while marginal identities seek it. The relations between men and women as constituted in patriarchy are both constituted within modernity and are constitutive of it, exemplified by: “male domination takes the form of an ideal of autonomy to which women, through the mediation of the struggle for equality in the public sphere, have themselves subscribed” (Illouz, 2012, p. 137). This is transferred to love relations such that, in relations of love, autonomy becomes contested terrain where autonomy and recognition are in tension and become the site for painful power struggles in which women are often the losers (Illouz, 2012).

In this dynamic the demand for recognition that is intrinsic to love relationships must be monitored so that it is “performatively successful”; “the demand and the performance of recognition must be carefully monitored” (Illouz, 2012, p. 131). This includes “the expression of feelings” (ibid.), both a “bestowal of recognition on another” (ibid.) and an expression of the self.

“Autonomy is established by a very careful monitoring and even withholding of recognition” (ibid.). “I was supposed to love him and leave him alone at the same time” (Norwood as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 139).

Amanda: “I stayed with Ron for two years and in these two years, I never told him ‘I love you’. He never told me ‘I love you either’, ‘I did not want to be the first to say it” (Illouz, 2012, p. 136).

Recognition is monitored to ensure that the autonomy of the self is unthreatened, “in both the person giving and the person receiving recognition” (Illouz, 2012, p. 131).

Patriarchy seeds and nurtures autonomy for men. In patriarchy men are constituted as autonomous and their autonomy is privileged and fortified. Consequently, men are in greater possession of autonomy and have “internalised and most forcefully practiced the discourse of autonomy” (Illouz, 2012, p. 136), resulting in women feeling that they have to worry about their own autonomy as well as men’s (Illouz, 2012 p. 137) in a structure where men’s autonomy and, therefore power, is always already there and unalterable. Women often feel that they have to defer to and act in accordance with men’s autonomy by performing autonomy, in order to “win” men over, while also trying to retain or accomplish their own sense of autonomy (Illouz, 2012).

In this structure men are *only* concerned with maintaining their autonomy rather than considering what the consequence of this maintenance might be. Men's internalisation of the discourse of autonomy "has the effect of exerting a form of symbolic violence" (Illouz, 2012, p. 136). Women's endeavours to maintain the autonomy of men, in an attempt to "win them over" or "keep them", denies women's need for recognition (Illouz, 2012, p. 137), which is, in part, about their ability to express love and be loved. It is "a characteristic of symbolic violence that one cannot oppose a definition of reality that is to one's own detriment" (ibid.). In addition, and importantly, it is a structural violence that men cannot see how the maintenance of their autonomy, above all else, is a violation of women.

"Men dominate the rules of recognition" (ibid.) in relations of love. These rules stipulate a woman's worth predicated on how well she performs autonomy, which is about the "display of one's autonomy and one's capacity to respect another's autonomy – i.e., *not* to make demands on another" (Illouz, 2012, p. 135). A woman must not apply "pressure" as this is perceived as a threat to the man's autonomy and her own. In this framework, there are many "pressures" that one can apply but none is more threatening than expressing love:

(...) signs of autonomy function as signs of value, the self becomes the site of an economic calculus, whereby it can depreciate itself by, as it were, recognizing ("loving") another "too much" (Illouz, 2012, p. 140).

Here loving becomes loving too much as it functions in "a model of exchange in which unavailability functions as an economic signal of value"; "recognition must always be balanced by autonomy" and it must not be "over-supplied" (Illouz, 2012, p. 139). Loving is "over-supplied" recognition, loving is loving too much, loving diminishes a woman's value.

Appetite.

The woman who looks, loves.

She loves too much, which is to love, defying the laws of love.

Appetite is also about a lack of appetite, it is about what you refuse and insist on. Willfully, she is a "woman who loves too much."

Appetite is about an assertion of a love ethic; “a love ethic makes (...) expansion possible” (hooks, 2006, p. 290). “The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others” (hooks, 2006, p. 298).

Appetite as the measure of love, which is both an orientation and a critical practice, is about love as a “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2006). Here, freedom is not constituted through the ideal of autonomy as produced through the notion of individual freedom found in modernity. Rather, facilitated by “a love ethic” (hooks, 2006, p. 290), it is about a simultaneous consideration and care for ourselves and others. When we adopt an “ethic of love” (hooks, 2006) we are guided away from an “ethic of domination” (hooks, 2006, p. 289).

An “ethic of love” (hooks, 2006) orients women *differently* in their love relations. Their struggles for equality move away from the mimicry of an ideal of autonomy as produced by male domination. By loving, women refuse to participate on this terrain produced by patriarchy which conceives of love as a threat that can only be expressed when men decide.

An “ethic of love” (hooks, 2006) in love is a critical practice because it is love as a “practice of freedom” (ibid.). It is not naïve; it does not view love innocently. Following this, the insistence on loving and expressing love as and when women feel it, refuses the overwhelming inequality of love labour performed by women under patriarchy. It refuses the continued “emotional exploitation” (Claire Fontaine, nd) of women. Loving, here, is not conceived of as women’s work. The conception of love as women’s work is partly produced through a specific ideology of love established by capital (Dalla Costa as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd). Mariarosa Dalla Costa (as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 7) explains in *The Work of Love*:

(...) since [the second half of the 19th century] it has become of fundamental importance to represent “love” to the woman as the unavoidable necessity, for her own survival, of satisfying through her work the needs of the entire family and above all those of the husband. We say that such a necessity to satisfy the needs of others in order to satisfy her own was mystified in the minds of women as “love” because it is a specific ideology of love that capital established and sustained to justify housework as unpaid work. (...) We can synthesize this ideology of domestic work as that of a “labor of love” (nd, pp. 7-8).

This ideology of love produced by patriarchy and capitalism constituted within the marriage contract and the nuclear family and home, is a general extension of heterosexual love relations. Love labour is seen as women’s labour that women feel they must perform at their

expense as the satisfaction of men's needs is privileged and also conceived of as the satisfaction of women's needs.

This is exemplified in the aforementioned description of the tension between autonomy and recognition. Love labour characterised by a privileging of men's needs that becomes what women need to do in opposition of a fulfilment of their needs, is performed by women so that they may attain love/recognition from men. It is constituted as love labour even if the expression of love is disallowed or monitored, because it is activity carried out to secure a love relation.

“(…) In the name of love” (Ahmed, 2003, np) “she who loves offers herself without measure” (Dalla Costa as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 8) so that she may realise herself and her desire.

Appetite as the assertion of a “love ethic” that facilitates the insistence on loving and expressing love as and when women feel it, disavows this conception. It refuses love labour as women's work. “Everybody's soul must be put to work” (Bifo as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 2). Patriarchal domination is “a systematic destruction of life in common” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 2). An “ethic of love” (hooks, 2006) demands that all souls are put to work in the labour of love and that love labour should be guided and infused by an “ethic of love” (ibid.). In addition, what I am proposing disavows self-sacrifice, as it is a cannibalistic practice rather than a loving one.

For women, a critique of love as women's work should not mean a disavowal of love from their lives, which many women have turned to, due to the incredible disappointment and pain experienced in heterosexual love. It is possible to love and assert one's love for someone while simultaneously refusing terms that are detrimental to oneself¹⁴. Appetite as a measure of love is partially about a lack of appetite. It is about what you refuse and insist on. This is loving with conditions rather than unconditionally because the terms of heterosexual love under patriarchy are so unequal and damaging to women. For women loving unconditionally and self-sacrifice/self-abnegation can be seen as analogues, an expression of the inequality and violence of patriarchal heterosexual love.

¹⁴ Relations of love that are characterised by gender-based violence are excluded as these are not relations of love.

In this work of setting conditions some conditions are fixed and “everybody’s soul must be put to work” (Bifo as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 2); women’s self-sacrifice must be rejected, while other conditions are predicated on contingency and relation. Here conditions are mobile and responsive; they change and respond to the situation at hand. It is not easy work. But the alternative, a disavowal of love when one desires to love or is in love, is a denial of the self and a reproduction of the suppression of women’s desire; one part of women’s oppression.

Additionally, a disavowal of love is partly about an appropriation of the discourse of male autonomy as produced by patriarchy, which is partially about a renunciation of love and its value. This is about the disavowal of love for other *more* important activities and also about the instrumentalisation of love. The instrumentalisation of love is evident in how men have historically perceived “heterosexual love as an empowering tool, as a way of being supported, assisted and accompanied in their productive journey through life” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 8) rather than as a valuable transformative activity to be mutually created and shared. “(...) the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 2007, p. 123).

Art and feminist critic Carla Lonzi expressed to her then partner artist Pietro Consagra: “I want a love (...) that is a love of my autonomy, that isn’t a love of my service and dependency” (as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 3).

“I want a love (...) that is a love of my autonomy.”

Lonzi’s demand highlights one part of thinking and doing autonomy differently *within* love. To extend this further, “we need a politics of love of each other’s freedom (and not of each other’s usefulness)” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 10) within love. This is enabled by an “ethic of love” (hooks, 2006) and a politics of relation, which both make a “politics of reciprocate recognition” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 10) possible, so that we may love each other’s freedom while loving each other.

This is autonomy constituted through love and relation rather than at the expense of another towards the one.

Moreover, for women, replacing self-love with self-sacrifice refuses women’s self-abnegation granting women autonomy and self-worth while also making love conceivable. Self-love is a process and state of deep self-valuation so that one “feels themselves”, both an

articulation of self-worth and being in touch with oneself. Self-love enables the self as well as relation. It is a process of constituting the self and reaching out of the self; it is about “ordering the self *and* transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self *and* for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood” (Nash, 2011, p. 3).

When I love myself, I can love your freedom and mine and I can ask for recognition without being cannibalised because I love myself. Importantly, loving each other’s freedom does not mean we cannot ask each other for things or demand or refuse things, or depend on each other. Rather it is being able to do all those things which are love acts, while also loving each other’s freedom.

She loves too much.

She loves too much.

The woman who looks who is also the woman who loves too much is a radiant and creative being. She is in touch with herself, touches others and is touched by others. Her desire sets her alight from within.

She says “clarity: give love words” (hooks, 2001, p. 1).

Language

In *SpillLover* (2020), the things men say: “I feel bulldozed by your conviction.”

“She loves too much of him that he hasn’t yet discovered.”

Once again, but differently, “words make worlds” (Steyerl, 2011, p. 67). Worlds that we inhabit, that reside within us or that are produced on the surface of the skin, between bodies: “Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words” (Barthes, 2010, p. 73). But words also take apart worlds, creating apocalyptic landscapes and active war zones. These are areas that we inhabit as well as our own internal topographies altered. Words can dismantle interior worlds leaving only wind and desolation.

Still, the woman who looks wants love and language. “Clarity: give love words” (hooks, 2001, p. 1)

“love demands expression” (Winterson, 1993, p. 9).

He reacts: “I feel bulldozed by your conviction” (*SpilLover*, 2020).

She tells herself: “they’ll need to brush up on the language being spoken out there” (Maso, 1996, p. 8).

There are no throwaway words for her, attentive as she always is, to the relation between language, meaning (Maso, 1996, p. 17) and world-making. Her love of language is, in part, an ancestral gift. The women she grew up with “continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world” (Christian as cited in Cooper, 2015, p. 8). Her love of language, created by and amongst women. Gossip and storytelling: “words make worlds” (Steyerl, 2011, p. 67) while also revealing worlds; imperative acts of world making.

“She loves too much of him that he hasn’t yet discovered.”

They write poems about her (*SpilLover*, 2020) and she gives “him poetry, to recite for him as they lie in the dark in the sweaty aftermath of sex. Language and *eros*. There will never be a separation in her mind. They make one another happen” (hooks, 1999, p. 118).

“I feel bulldozed by your conviction” (*SpilLover*, 2020).

Appetite.

In Maya Deren’s film *At Land* (1944), waves crash towards a beach. In the first two shots, the beach is out of sight. Then, in shots three and four we see the waves rushing towards a woman, Maya Deren, lying on the beach. Shot three, a mid-shot that rapidly cuts to a close-up, shot four, of the waves crashing onto Maya Deren’s face. Then begins a series of reversed shots of the waves. The close-up is followed by a highly sensuous series of shots that rapidly cut between different shot sizes of her body as the waves recede (in reverse) back into the sea. A depiction of ecstasy: the waves provide erotic embrace while giving way to Maya Deren. Then, close-up on her face followed by an eye-line match to the receding waves.

Later Maya Deren in mid-close up, reaches up. Match cut to a mid-shot of her holding a tree stump with one hand, while the other hand reaches up for it. She uses the stump to pull herself up with both hands. She pauses, glances to the side, erotically into the distance. The action, rendered in slow motion, produces both an epic and erotic quality to her movements. Match cut to a close-up on her hand; she continues climbing up the tree stump. Her eye peers through a gap in the branches. She looks to the side, then, continues up.

Match cut to a mid-close up: Maya Deren's hand on the edge of the frame partially cut off, as is the glass in the foreground of the frame. Maya Deren clasps the edge of a table. The table is covered in a white cloth. Her other hand reaches up, holds onto the table and she pulls herself up. We see her face looking up in curiosity. Cut to a chandelier hanging from a ceiling. Smoke rises up, the camera tracks down to reveal people sitting at a long table, seemingly at a dinner party. A man smokes a cigarette. Cut back to Deren, she looks upon the scene, still with curiosity. Then, her attention is drawn to something. She looks straight ahead. Cut to a point-of-view shot from Deren's perspective. We see a man at the end of the table. He briefly looks up, appearing to glance at Deren. Then he looks down, hand on head, at what appears to be a chess piece. As he looks down, the camera seems to track in slightly. Cut back to Maya Deren as she begins to move in with her hand and head moving her forward along the surface of the table.

As she moves, cut to Deren's feet climbing up the tree stump. She is both at the dinner party and at the beach. The past, the beach, is dislocated from that past while also being associated with the (beach) past and, simultaneously, it is read as part of the present, Maya Deren at the dinner party. A cinematic temporal-spatial collapse of past and present. Her feet continue up. Match cut to Maya Deren's hand reaching out onto the tablecloth, followed by her knees as she begins to crawl on the table. Match cut to Deren's head emerging from leafy foliage. Another change in space and time: a merging of three different spaces unfolding in a heterogeneous temporality enabled by Maya Deren's desire.



Stills from *At Land* (1944).



Stills from *At Land* (1944).

Maya Deren in *At Land*, pushes her body through and beyond the frame. The match cuts facilitate her movement all the while creating a heterogeneous temporality. Defying

cinematic conventions of space and time as found in continuity-edits, match cuts here are used to create a seamless yet juxtaposed relation between heterogeneous time and space. In *At Land* the match cut, a primary device for cinematic realism, is used to contrast the continuity of time and space by privileging the movement of Maya Deren's body. The film's realisation in its execution depends on "the structuring trope of *At Land*, [where] the edit between disparate spaces [is] joined by the apparently continuous movement of a single body" (Butler, 2007, p. 10).

Here we see how Maya Deren produces film form as "the changingness of things" (Deren as Cited in Butler, 2007, p. 15), "the constant becomingness of something" (ibid.): the desirous body enacts transformation.

A radical gesture: a woman's agency and desire determine movements and transformations in cinematic time and space.

Appetite: film language functioning as "*desire-in-resistance*" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 164,5).

In *SpillOver* (2020), a woman propelled by her desire to produce a heterogeneous temporality determined by the movement of her body.

In *SpillOver*, she looks and walks.

Looking

A woman goes to a bar one night, to look.
Appetite.



Stills from *SpillOver* (2020).

1. *The Gaze*

Jean-Luc Godard: “Cinema is mostly boys filming girls” (*Histoire(s) du Cinema*, 1988-1998).

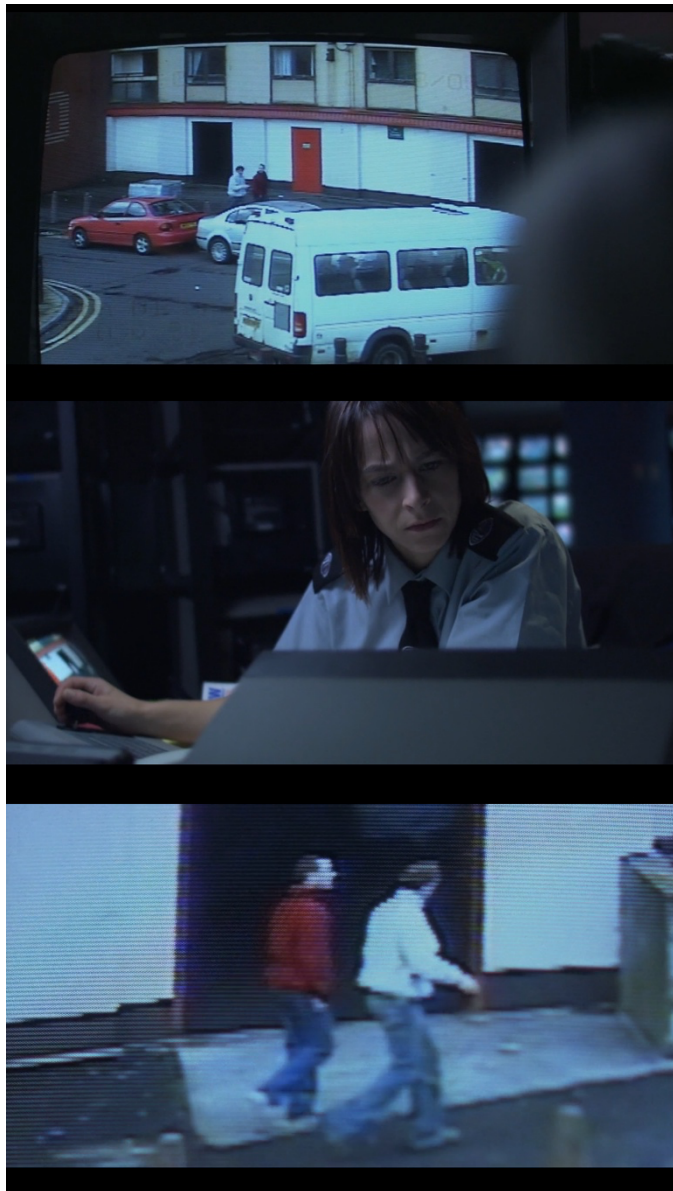
Andrea Arnold looks.

Andrea Arnold’s *Red Road* (2006). A woman CCTV operator surveys Glasgow from up high. Her name is Jackie Morrison. Her husband and child are dead, killed by a car while waiting at a bus stop. The car drove into the bus stop. Jackie watches and follows Clyde, the man who is responsible for the deaths of her husband and child. He was high on crack and lost control of his car. She watches him from up high, through the cameras, but also follows him on the streets down below.

Red Road “is exceptional in its portrayal of a woman who conducts surveillance” (Lake, 2010, p. 231). Films that employ surveillance as a formal device and central narrative concern, such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), overwhelmingly represent the watcher as a white middle-class man (Lake, 2010). A mirroring of the white male gaze found in dominant/hegemonic cinema (Hayward, 2001). “Dominant modes of looking in capitalist and patriarchal culture have been linked to surveillance and control over those perceived as inferior: children, servants, workers and women” (Betterton as cited in Lake, 2010, p. 231)¹⁵: “disparity in power [as] the very essence of surveillance” (ibid.).

Jackie Morrison disrupts this distribution of power, “rejecting the traditional conceptual coupling of surveillance and male voyeurism” (Lake, 2010, p. 237). She watches, disavowing patriarchal “ideas about who is allowed to look and at whom” (ibid.).

¹⁵ Betterton’s assertion problematically omits a consideration of race. Looking relations are integral to the construction of race and racialised power dynamics.



Stills from *Red Road* (2006).

Jackie traverses the CCTV screens to inhabit the space of the street, “voyaging” (ibid.). She moves from one side of the screen to the other. She watches and follows Clyde through the streets she previously observed on the CCTV screens.



Stills from *Red Road* (2006).

Andrea Arnold looks at Jackie (Katie Dickie) who looks at Clyde (Tony Curran). Arnold: “I made a decision that the camera would never be ahead of the character, that we would go with her” (Arnold as cited in Guerrasio, 2007, np). Jackie Morrison, a white woman, is a woman who looks, like the looking woman in *SpilLover*. The looking woman is a woman who looks. A brown/black woman looks. We go with the looking woman in *SpilLover*. Shallow depth of field, her body fills the frame. It is both the focus and guide. We look as she looks. The looking of the woman who looks produces a gaze that slips between various temporalities and spaces. Appetite. Looking as an expression of appetite.

Claire Denis and Agnès Godard look.

Claire Denis and Agnès Godard are both white women. In Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* (1999), Agnes Godard's camera tracks across a group of French legionnaires exercising in Djibouti. It tracks as a legionnaire hangs washing on a line. Godard's camera watches, still now, as a group of legionnaires iron shirts. Everyday routine turned into an erotic act of looking.





Stills from *Beau Travail* (1999).

In *SpillOver* the looking woman, a brown/black woman, looks. She looks at a man ironing and at another reading. Everyday routine turned into an erotic act of looking. Appetite.



Stills from *SpillOver* (2020).

2. *The Listening Eye*

In the looking woman fragment in *SpillOver*, a woman's gaze organises the *mise-en-scène* of her desire. The *mise-en-scène* is organised within an overall structure of repetition as movement. Repetition that is generative: the woman “continually reappears”, “moving along the relentless trajectory of her desire, transformed by it, again and again” (Maso, 1996, p. viii).

Repetition with variation facilitated by corporeal motion and language produces a kind of musicality where time also functions as texture (Beugnet as cited in Murphy, 2012). The looking woman fragment offers a privileging of “the visual and the rhythmic” (Murphy, 2012, np), while also producing images as sites of contemplation and observation (Beugnet as

cited in Murphy, 2012). The fragment is partially “a sound-film requiring a kind of listening eye, a gaze mutated into the conditions of hearing” (Connor as cited in Murphy, 2012, np).

A film fragment that offers a multi-sensorial gaze situated in and producing heterogeneous time.

Appetite.

3. *Desire*

“And the world low-lit” (Maso, 1996, p. 180): the looking woman goes to a bar one night to look.

The looking woman looks and looks *for*.

In *Red Road* (2006), Jackie watches on her CCTV screen. She watches a woman running while a man walks hastily after her. From afar, and briefly, we see the man enter what seems to be a field, a fence in the foreground. Jackie thinks the woman is in danger. She calls in to report the incident. As she is on the call, the film cuts back to the field, both the man and woman are revealed. They are in a derelict field. The woman staggers ahead while the man follows. Cut to Jackie on the phone. Then to an over the shoulder shot from Jackie’s perspective looking at the screen. The woman has stopped. She looks at the man as he walks towards her. They begin to kiss. The man takes down her skirt while she opens a condom wrapper with her teeth. Cut back to Jackie. She leans back in her chair watching the man and woman having sex. Close-ups on her hand caressing her leg and the joystick that operates the CCTV camera show her arousal.

Jackie looks in arousal, unseen. Like Frannie (Meg Ryan) in Jane Campion’s film *In the Cut* (2003). Frannie looks, unseen and in arousal as a woman with long blue painted nails gives a man a blowjob in the basement of a bar.

Then, in *Red Road*, as the man leans back his head in climax, Jackie looks, suddenly recognising him; with curiosity and calm at first. The man turns around to pull up his trousers. She gasps, no longer calm, her recognition confirmed. We later learn that the man is Clyde. He is responsible for the deaths of her daughter and husband.

In *In the Cut* the woman with the blue nails ends up dead, killed by the man she gave a blowjob to. He is a serial killer with a penchant for romance. The police discover the woman's severed hand with an engagement ring on her finger. He proposes to his victims before he kills them. *In the Cut* offers a potent critique of the danger of patriarchal romance myths and fantasies through the serial killer's proclivity for romance¹⁶. But, in this instance of looking, the film's plotting towards this critique works to undermine the political potential of the look.

In these moments of aroused looking Frannie and Jackie are provided with "the power to look" (Lundy, 2012, p. 50), undoing the male gaze. Their desirous looks are produced through the tension between danger and arousal. Danger because they look voyeuristically: they should not be looking; they may be caught and they have usurped the power to dare to look and to look unseen. Associations with death challenge this sexual play and along with it the women's "power to look" (ibid.). In Frannie's case, later in the film, controlled and suggested violence as well as the threat of death function as part of her sexual play with her detective lover Malloy. However, the actual death of the woman with the blue nails causes a rupture of sexual play and fantasy through the fact of death.

The political potential of these moments of looking are troubled. Women as voyeurs, erotically looking, undermined by memories of death and loss and the threat of death and death itself.

The looking woman in *SpilLover* is a voyeur, she looks, in the world of the bar, "the world low-lit" (Maso, 1996, p. 180). She looks for a fuck. Not unencumbered by memories of loss but these memories reside among other times, words and states and do nothing to diminish her appetite and voyeurism. She has an appetite for sex and love. She looks, and looks for both. Sometimes she may only receive sex without love but that doesn't diminish her desire for either.

¹⁶ While the film successfully critiques the patriarchal construction of romance myths it reproduces racist stereotypes so that "mythologies of romance and race become entangled in one another" (Lundy, 2012, p.57). This reproduction occurs in relation to two characters in the film who interact with Frannie, a white woman. The Latino character Rodriguez, who is the partner of her detective lover Malloy and is revealed to be the serial killer at the end of the film, and Frannie's student Cornelius, a black man whose sexuality is depicted as "pathological, predatory, and bestial" (Lundy, 2012, p. 61). *Black Bucks and Don Juans: In the Cut's Seductive Mythologies of Race and Sex* (Tiel Lundy, 2012) offers a detailed discussion of this.

Women are told not to look for love, that when they look, love will not come to them.

B looks for love.

Z says to B: “Don’t look, it will come to you. I was not looking and it came to me.”

bell hooks says:

In the last two years I have talked a lot about love. My topic has been “true love.” It all started when I began to speak my heart’s desire, to say to friends, lecture audiences, folks sitting next to me on buses and planes and in restaurants that “I was looking for true love.” Cynically, almost all my listeners would let me know that I was looking for a myth. The few who still believe in true love offered their deep conviction that “you can’t look for it”, that if it’s meant for you “it will just happen” (2001, p.179).

Like hooks, B looks for love. She doesn’t look for *true* love because of the relation between *true* and an essentialist notion of love. But she and hooks both look for love and are told in different words the same thing; not to look for it. Instead, love will come to them. There’s a condition though: only “(...) if it’s meant for you” (hooks, 2001, p. 179).

She must be passive and she will receive.

A woman’s agency is not viewed as useful or meaningful in attaining love. In fact, it must not be expressed or exercised; women do not get what they want by looking for it. She must not look nor want.

Or if she wants, she must not look. Although, looking is an expression of wanting and wanting is an expression of looking.

She must wait.

But, once again, this waiting woman: “*To make someone wait*: the constant prerogative of all power” (Barthes, 2010, p. 40).

Are men also told not to look?

Wait.

Wait, wait for him to call.

Wait for him to find you.

Women who look are shamed. They are made to feel ashamed of their desire. They are called desperate. Then, there’s this: ““you can’t look for it’, (...) if it’s meant for you, ‘it

will just happen”” (hooks, 2001, p. 179).

Who are those that love is meant for?

Is it those who wait, who don't look for love?

In part, “love’s occurrence is a mystery – (...) it happens without any effort of human will” (hooks, 2001, p. 180). But, you “do not lose love by looking for it” (ibid.). Nor are there those that love is meant for and, those that love is not meant for.

Looking and looking for it is integral to a consideration of appetite as the measure of love. To have an appetite for love is about an affirmation of love and its political possibilities because looking is about having an open heart, which is itself an act of seeking, an open heart so that love can enter (ibid.), an important political act; a connection with the capacity to feel; an erotic act (Lorde, 2007). When we look, we also look for something else. Looking for something else is a refusal and demand, a transformative act. Looking for something else concerns a lack of appetite: an appetite for something else.

Like all political work looking requires energy. Disappointments suffered in love result in exhaustion, leading some to think that perhaps too much is made of love (hooks, 2001, p. 178). But this might be a case of misdirected energy, energy directed at a conception of “love as compelling fantasy or myth” (ibid.). Patriarchal, capitalist and racist constructions already set up to disappoint any looking woman.

Rather, let us situate looking in the “art of loving” (ibid.) in which looking is an essential practice. The “art of loving” requires energy, mutuality and will also probably include some disappointment but it also offers expansion. Loving as an art infers creation and practice. We may look here and elsewhere or look away, drawn to something else.

4. *The Look*

In South Africa “apartheid prescribed (...) whom one could love” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 12). The “Immorality Acts No. 5 of 1927 and No. 21 of 1950” and the “Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act No.55 of 1949” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 93) forbade interracial love and sex. These laws no longer exist yet the norms they enshrined persist in the hearts and minds of many.

In *SpillOver* a brown/black woman looks at a white man and at a brown/black man, they are former or current lovers.

What does the looking woman look like?

“The look” (Erasmus, 2017): “although meanings of race and its markers change, ‘the look’ as a technology of racial differentiation and identification remains constant” (Seshadri-Crooks as cited in Erasmus, 2017, p. 50).

Does she look bi-racial, mixed-race, coloured, black, brown, métisse, mulatto, “café au lait” (Smith, 2018, p. 219) or actually does she look “decidedly” black because of her hair? Can she be both incoherent and specific?

Cautionary tales of incoherence, two South African stories: Happy Sindane and Sandra Laing.

In 2003, Happy Sindane, a racially “ambiguous” looking man, went to a police station in Bronkhorstspuit and told officers that he was white and had been abducted as “a child by his family’s domestic worker” who “had put him to work as ‘a slave’”(Erasmus, 2017, p.51).

Sindane was born in 1984. “The story is that he (...) was abandoned by his biological parents when they left him with Betty Sindane” (ibid.). Betty Sindane reported this to the police who asked her to take care of him until the case was resolved (ibid.). The case was not resolved. “Betty Sindane became his informally adopted mother” (ibid.). When Happy was sixteen, she died, and Happy was transferred to the care of her father, Koos Sindane (ibid.).

After the police station reporting, Happy appeared on television and appealed for his “true parents to step forward” (ibid.). Four white Afrikaner couples came forward to claim him as their son (Tadjo, 2005). “But DNA tests supposedly revealed that Happy was ‘not white’” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 51). “He was, perhaps, the son of a German immigrant (white) and his housekeeper Rina Mzayiye (a black woman)” (ibid.).

People lost interest in Happy when it was “discovered that he was supposedly not white” (ibid.).

In a print advert, Dulux paint used a picture of his face without his permission “alongside swatches of colour ranging from light to dark shades of skin” (Hope as cited in Erasmus, 2017, p. 52). The advert’s tagline: “Any Colour You Can Think of” (ibid.).

Happy Sindane died in 2013 (Erasmus, 2017, p. 52). “His body (...) was found in a ditch close to the township pub that he frequented” (ibid.). “He had apparently been beaten to death” (ibid.).

The biopic *Skin* (2008) and the news documentary *Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*¹⁷ (2000) depict the story of Sandra Laing.

Sandra was born during apartheid to two white Afrikaans parents. She was *visibly* darker than them and had different hair texture. Her external appearance seemed to suggest that Sandra was the child of a black and white union. However, Sandra’s mother insisted that she had been faithful to her husband (*Skin*, 2008). A researcher offered evidence at a trial that sought to determine Sandra’s race (ibid.). He explained that her appearance is due to a “throwback” gene, a genetic occurrence where dormant black ancestry from previous generations “re-surfaces” (ibid.).

Sandra is classified white at birth (*Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*, 2000). Parents at the all-white primary school she attends petition to have her expelled. A school committee refers the case to the Department of Home Affairs. Sandra is re-classified as black (ibid.). The administrator of the then Transvaal province authorises her expulsion. At eleven she is expelled from the school (ibid.). Sandra’s “lighter” skinned brother is allowed to remain at the school and complete his schooling (ibid.).

Following her expulsion, Sandra is home schooled. For two years, her father tries to get her re-classified as white (ibid.). Then blood tests are taken. The tests prove that Sandra is the child of Sannie and Abraham Laing. She is classified as white again (ibid.).

An *Ebony* magazine article from 1968: “it was Sandra’s *appearance*, not her *legal classification*, that had aroused the bigotry of white parents two years before” (1968, p. 88).

¹⁷ The documentary is useful insofar as it has an interview with Sandra Laing.

The article underlines how Laing's appearance acted as an over-determinant that surpassed her legal classification as white. While she may have been classified as white, she did not "look" white.

But her father persisted. When Sandra tried to apply for a coloured identification document he refused to sign a document that one assumes would've allowed her to be re-classified as coloured (*Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*, 2000). Her father didn't want his white daughter who was once classified black to be re-classified as coloured (ibid.).

Sandra Laing ran away from home at fifteen with a black man from Driefontein named Petrus Zwane¹⁸ (ibid.). Sandra tells us her father once said if he got hold of Petrus "he would shoot him dead" (ibid.). When Sandra ran away, Sandra explains, her mother phoned her father. He wanted to phone the police. Her mother said no, he should leave her alone (ibid.).

In *Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*, three months after Petrus and Sandra flee, they were arrested. Sandra spent time in prison. After she was released from jail, she went back to live with Petrus. They had two children. After the death of their third child, Petrus began to drink. He became violent and abusive. Sandra left him. She lost her children. They were put in care. But, at some point, she is reunited with her children. She has a new husband, Johannes Motlaung. Sandra, in her interview: "He is quiet" and takes care of her (ibid.).

Sandra's father died. They did not speak to each other for many years (*Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*, 2000). She sees her mother again before her mother's death (Caroll, 2003).

Sandra Laing and Happy Sindane.

Did Happy *look* whiter than Sandra? Four white couples claimed him when he appealed for his true parents to come forward. Sandra's parents were both white and so it was argued, scientifically, that Sandra was white too. But she did not *look* white to the parents at her primary school.

Perhaps the absence of Happy's parents upheld his claim. Perhaps the gaze of the four couples was obscured by grief. They all disappeared when the DNA tests ruled that Happy

¹⁸ Petrus' age is not mentioned in the documentary.

was “not white” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 51). Perhaps the presence of Sandra’s parents meant she could not be white, with their visual appearance in contrast to hers, only one of them could feasibly be her parent. A game of comparing and contrasting predicated on “the look” (Erasmus, 2017) as it meets visual appearance and expectations.

Happy and Sandra could not be “*both* black and white” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 52). What did Happy and Sandra look like, what did they not look like? What is clear in both their cases is that it was better to be white; an expression of white supremacy and the privilege that whiteness produces.

What they looked like, to be specific, if they looked white and were white, was a key determinate of whether they would be loved.

Happy: four couples came forward then disappeared when it was ruled that he was “not white” (Erasmus, 2017, p. 51).

Sandra: her father’s love was contingent on her classification as white, on her loving a white man (*Sandra Laing: A Spiritual Journey*, 2000). Her mother loved her but had to do so from a distance.

Why couldn’t they be both incoherent and specific, which is about making “definitive statements about why race matters ‘while depriving it of its lethal cling’” (Erasmus, 2017, p. xxiii); “race-specificity without race prerogative” (Morrison as cited in Erasmus 2017, p. xxiii).

To be clear, what I have expressed here about Happy and Sandra is not a reproduction of the narrative of the “tragic mulatto” nor is it a tale of “mixed-race” exceptionalism, another version of the “tragic mulatto” trope. It does not affirm the phenomenon of the “mulatto millennium” (Senna, 1998, np), a fetishistic fixation, idealisation and celebration of the “biracial”, as a means to supposedly bring “about the end of race as we know it” (ibid.). It does not affirm this politics or a similar politics that is about the ideal of “multicultural love” (Ahmed, 2003, np) that coheres around the image of the “mixed-race” woman as the image of the nation (ibid.). Sara Ahmed shows how this operated in Britain through a newspaper article that celebrated Genevieve Capovilla as the new “English Rose”:

Her mother is Italian. And she is British. She has golden skin, and soft, even features. She combs her hair into a healthy, curly semi-afro. Her racial mix is ambiguous – neither Afro-Caribbean, nor southern European. (...) Genevieve is the new English

rose.... At the turn of the twenty-first century ... England's rose has become more of a bronzed, burnished sunflower, equally at home in the Arabian Gulf, the Caribbean or the South China Sea (Blanchard as cited in Ahmed 2003: np).

Ahmed argues (2003, np):

This ideal image can be described as a 'hybrid whiteness'; the nation's whiteness is confirmed through how it incorporates and is 'coloured' or 'bronzed' by others. Her ambiguity - 'not quite the same, not quite the other' in Bhabha's (1994) formulation – becomes a sign of the nation, and the promise of the future.

Importantly, Ahmed asserts that this does not mean, “that mixed-race heterosexual love has become a form of national love” (ibid.) rather “the mixed-race woman ‘appears’ as a fetish object; her value resides precisely insofar as she is cut off from any visible signs of inter-racial intimacy” (ibid.). Consequently, Ahmed shows how this discourse essentially keeps “inter-racial intimacy” at bay by erasing it from the figure of the mixed-race woman and further, how the figure acquires value as an object or symbol through this.

But there is also another discourse that affirms the ideal of interracial love and sex as producers of a mixed-race future so that racism might be overcome, so that we may become “post-racial” because we are all “mixed-race.” This is also not my discourse. Rather what I am proposing is an insistence, in this instance, on the necessity of the simultaneity of incoherence and specificity, “race-specificity without race prerogative” (Morrison as cited in Erasmus 2017, p. xxiii).

This is about a disavowal of ideals, affirming process and contingency in the practice of “humaning”: a lifelong process of life-in-the-making with others (Ingold as cited in Erasmus, 2017, p. xxii).

A room of one's own

At the beginning of *Toute une nuit* (*A Whole Night*) (1982), a white woman in a red dress walks into a room. The frame is static.



Still from *Toute une nuit* (1982).

The woman paces around the room in restless contemplation. She holds a beer and glass in each hand. Diegetic music plays in the background. She sits down in an armchair. After a moment, she gets up. She places the beer and glass on a table, briefly paces, and then walks off-screen in the same direction she entered. The camera remains static, fixed on the room. We hear the woman's footsteps off-screen. Shortly after, she re-enters from the opposite side of the screen. Her mood remains the same. She walks in the direction of the armchair, seems briefly about to walk to the side of the room but continues walking. She pauses before the armchair and then sits.

She gets up again and momentarily leaves the frame. When she returns, she is carrying a telephone. She sits in the armchair. As she lifts the receiver, cut to a mid-shot. She dials, to make a call. The phone rings once. Then we hear a man's voice: "Hello" (*Toute une nuit*, 1982). She drops the phone and says, as if confirming: "I love him" (*Toute une nuit*, 1982). She gets up and leaves frame, leaving the phone on the armchair.

The room facilitates the woman's contemplation. As she traverses it, sits in the armchair and acts in it, she gains clarity: "I love him" (*Toute une nuit*, 1982). The room, "as a partition, a place and time adjacent yet cut out from the rest" (Margulies, 2007, np) functions as a

“demarcated space for the self” (ibid,) by facilitating the space to process the self before an act, before enacting an action. The scene demonstrates how one’s interior is constituted from both within and without, “the interior as at once a physical and (...) subjective space” (Lajer-Burcharth, 2016, p. 435).

In *Wounds of Passion* (1999), an experimental memoir, bell hooks writes:

My obsession with aesthetics I inherit from Baba, mama’s mother. Her house is this incredible place of magic and creativity (1999, p. 91). Baba is an artist. Although she cannot read or write, she is a maker of beautiful and exquisite quilts (ibid.).

(...) I long to climb the “stairway to heaven” with her (that’s what I call the upstairs in her house - cause it’s there that she has her special sewing room). It’s a huge room with material everywhere and a sewing machine with a pedal (1999, p. 92). (...) Baba is an eccentric. She is the woman I most want to be like in the world when I am a girl, because she lives like a free spirit flouting convention. That’s why she has those chickens and goats and other animals in her backyard even though there is a city ordinance forbidding their presence. And she grows gardens of vegetables and flowers that folks come to see. She believes in the power of beauty to sustain us (1999, p. 92).

Later, hooks writes:

(...) I need a space that is all mine. That has nothing in it that I have not chosen – a space for precious things. In my space I bring quilts, coils of braided tobacco, the stuff from Kentucky that means nothing to nobody else but me. Everything in my room reminds of who I am and where I am coming from (1999, p. 96).

Then, Audre Lorde in *A Burst of Light: and other essays*:

In my office at home I have created a space that is very special to me. It is simple and quiet, with beautiful things about, and a ray of sunlight cascading through a low window on the best of days. It is here that I write whenever I am home, and where I retreat to center myself, to rest and recharge at regular intervals. It is here that I do my morning visualizations and my eurhythmics.

It is a tiny alcove with an air mattress half-covered with bright pillows, and a low narrow table with a Nigerian tie-dye throw. Against one wall and central to this space is a painting by a young Guyanese woman called *The Yard*. It is a place of water and fire and flowers and trees, filled with Caribbean women and children working and playing and being. When the sun lances through my small window and touches the painting, the yard comes alive. The red spirit who lives at the center of the painting flames. Children laugh, a woman nurses her baby, a little naked boy cuts the grass. One woman is building a fire outside for cooking; inside a house another woman is fixing a light. In a slat-house up the hill, windows are glowing under the red-tiled roof. I keep company with the women of this place (2017, pp. 211-212).

Baba’s “stairway to heaven”, her yard filled with animals, flowers and vegetables (hooks, 1999, p. 92). hooks’ space filled with “precious things” – quilts and tobacco (1999, p. 96). Lorde’s office at home, a space “very special” to her, “with beautiful things about” (2017, p. 211). In each space a communion with others. People come to see Baba’s gardens of flowers

and vegetables, the objects in hooks' room remind her of where she comes from and Lorde in communion with a Guyanese woman painter and the women she depicts in her artwork.

Black women with rooms of their own: Baba, hooks and Lorde. Virginia Woolf, a white woman, wrote in *A Room of One's Own*: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (2015, p. 3). "A room of one's own" is a physical space that one has but it must also be created so that it may be called one's own:

When I leave home, I carry with me an understanding of the world I want to create in my home - an aesthetics of existence that will express my needs. Every room in Baba's huge house is different and every room has its own story. Later when I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* I think about my grandmother's imagination – the world she created for herself and her own (hooks, 1999, p.94).

Baba, hooks and Lorde's rooms function as expressions and inventions of the self through an "aesthetics of existence"¹⁹ (hooks, 1999, p. 94) that is concerned with beauty, self-care, the imagination and relation. The rooms facilitate transgression and independence – Baba lives her life flouting convention (hooks, 1999, p. 92). "A room of one's own" is about "women choosing and making life as they want to live" (hooks, 1999, p. 95). It is about interiority. Contemplating and cultivating one's interiority, expressing it and creating it, not only through adornment of one's surroundings but also through acts of creation, like quilt-making (Baba) and writing books and poems (hooks and Lorde). These acts of creation are also acts of relation and, world-making.

This is how having "a room of one's own" functions as a space for the self, as a space of self-care, of self-love.

¹⁹ Foucault, M. (1997). Self-Writing. In: Rabinow, P. (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol.1. Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: New Press. pp. 207-222.

Premise



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

In *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon, a Japanese writer and “gentlewoman” (McKinney, 2006, p. 17), a fragment from “Things that make your heartbeat fast” (Sei as cited in McKinney, 2006, p. 113):

To wash your hair, apply your makeup and put on clothes that are well-scented with incense. Even if you’re somewhere where no one special will see you, you still feel a heady sense of pleasure inside.

Techniques and everyday strategies used to generate self-love.

A black woman puts on a beautiful black dress and adorns her neck with beads. Wearing the dress and beads, she lies in the sun, floats in a pool, takes a shower and dreams of herself. She creates a poem of herself for herself; an “aesthetics of existence” (Foucault, 1997, p. 207) produced through self-love.

Through the *mise-en-scène* of this poem she creates a “room of her own” (Woolf, 2015, p. 3): a demarcated space for the self where she can *feel* herself. To feel yourself is intrinsic to an “arts of oneself” (Foucault, 1997, p. 207) that is predicated on self-love. In part, self-love is a process and state of deep self-valuation so that one “feels themselves”. Feeling oneself is an articulation of self-worth and being in touch with oneself: “(...) I’m very confident in my

feelings about what I should do” (Akerman as cited in Martin and Akerman, 1979, p. 28).

In this cinematic room of interiority expressed and in the making, “(...) we are the women we want to become” (Jordan as cited in Lorde, 2017, p.106) of poetry and pleasure. She dreams herself into existence through self-love, employing tools in the arsenal of self-love:

introspection, imagination, beauty and self-care. Tools, or technologies, that are partially mobilised in the critical practice of “soulcraft” (West as cited in Cunningham, 2018, np).

“Soulcraft” forms part of the practice of feeling oneself: a critically sensuous, cognitive and creative activity. “Soulcraft”:

(...) The formation of attention that gets us to attend to the things that matter (...). It’s the cultivation of thinking critically for yourself so you’re willing to speak in such a way that you exercise what Socrates called *parrhesia*, which is clear speech, frank speech, fearless speech, unintimidated speech, speech that flows from your soul (...) (ibid.).

“Speech that flows from your soul”: a courageous activity in which “your silence will not protect you” (Lorde, 2007, p. 41) is enabled by “soulcraft” and a part of a practice of self-love.

Caesura, a gap (Maso, 1996), a pause, created by the woman in the black dress. In this time, her time, she creates a poem of herself for herself. Time to contemplate, enjoy, express and produce the self through poetry. She creates a poem of herself for herself to be in touch with herself so she can touch others too.

Love’s Rule

In 2019 Greta Gerwig released the film *Little Women* (2019), which she wrote and directed. The film is an adaption of the two-part novel *Little Women* (1868-69) (Acocella, 2018) written by Louisa May Alcott. Alcott’s novel was loosely inspired by her own biography (Gilbert, 2018).

In Gerwig’s film, Jo March (Saoirse Ronan), the central character of the film, tells her mother in sobbing frustration:

I just, I just feel, I just feel like, women. They, they have minds and they have souls as well as just hearts and they’ve got ambition and they’ve got talent, as well as just beauty, and I’m so sick of people saying that, that love is just all a woman is fit for. I’m so sick of it (*Little Women*, 2019)!

Jo March is frustrated by the conception of women only being fit for love (*Little Women*,

2019), of their sense of self only being constituted through their ability to love and perform love.

Little Women (2019) deals with white femininity in the context of 19th century white American society during and post the American Civil War. The film represents the plight of a group of sisters, Meg, Amy, Jo and Beth (*Little Women*, 2019), “living in genteel poverty” (Acocella, 2018, np). The sisters have different personalities and potentialities that shape their responses to a social and political milieu that is constructed and determined by patriarchy. Within this milieu, a woman’s economic fate as well as her ontology is determined by her ability to secure marriage, preferably with someone wealthy (*Little Women*, 2019).

Jo is a writer and willfully pushes against patriarchal convention both in the construction of her self as well as in her attitude towards the imperative to marry. She turns down the first marriage proposal she receives from Laurie, her wealthy friend and neighbour. Her marriage to Friedrich Bhaer, a German philosopher whom she meets during her time living in New York (Brody, 2019), is shown to be a construction of fiction that Jo is pressured to include in her novel (*Little Women*) (*Little Women*, 2019). The novel’s written inspiration is drawn from her family and her publisher says that Jo’s character must marry (*Little Women*, 2019).

Jo is frustrated and hurt by the conception of women as solely predicated on their ability to perform love. A patriarchal ideology of love based on the emotional exploitation of women that was established in the 19th century to serve the intertwining forces of capitalism and patriarchy and remains constitutive of hegemonic heterosexual love in patriarchal modernity.

The decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo argues: “coloniality is (...) constitutive of modernity — there is no modernity without coloniality” and “if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot be either global modernities without global colonialities. That is the logic of the polycentric capitalist world of today” (2009, p. 39). Consequently, this ideology of love was and is formative of different women’s subjectivities beyond its initial implication in the production of gendered identities fundamental to the construction of the white heterosexual bourgeois nuclear family, one part of the construction of the discourse of “modernity/coloniality” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 43).

Within this ideology love is seen as intrinsic to women's constitution exclusively, and as the work that they are best suited for. This is used to justify and naturalise love as not only women's work but also as the only work women are fit to do. "Patriarchy has always seen love as women's work, degraded and devalued labour" (hooks, 2002, p. xvi). Love re-fashioned to serve the ideology of domination (hooks, 2002, p. 37) is to serve patriarchy.

Jo asserts that women have souls, minds, talent and ambition (*Little Women*, 2019), she expresses a desire for the recognition of the multiple facets of women which are denied.

Jo's words function to counter a disappearance. Like the disappearance Clarissa feels in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: "(...) this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (Woolf as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 71) or the disappearance that Nicole feels in the film *Marriage Story* (2019).

Marriage Story is a film about a white middle-class American couple in the midst of an impending divorce and custody battle. While discussing her relationship with her soon to be ex-husband Charlie (Adam Driver), Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) tells her divorce lawyer, Nora Fanshaw (Laura Dern): "I got smaller. I realized I, I had never really come alive for myself, I was just feeding his aliveness" (ibid.).

In *Love Jones* (1997): Darius Lovehall and Nina Mosley are two young black people living in Chicago. Nina (Nia Long) is a photographer and Darius (Larenz Tate) is a writer. The film centres on the love affair between Nina and Darius and their on, off, and on again coupling, they reunite at the end of the film (*Love Jones*, 1997).

Darius is part of a tight knit group of friends, a group of young black intellectuals. One of his friends, Hollywood (Bill Bellamy), is also his rival. This rivalry is established early on in the film in a scene in a poetry club, which is also the first time that Darius meets Nina.

Wood, as Hollywood is known to his friends, makes fun of Darius when he accidentally tips over Nina's wine glass at the bar. Later in the scene Darius performs a poem that he dedicates to Nina, "A blues for Nina", which is enthusiastically applauded by everyone at the club except for Wood. He sarcastically says "Wonderful, absolutely wonderful" (ibid.) while slowly clapping. Sheila (Bernadette L. Clarke), one of Wood and Darius' friends, says:

“Come on Wood, you’ve got to give him props for that one” (ibid.). Wood replies: “I don’t need poetry to get women” (ibid.). As he says this, he touches his face indicating his good looks.

Later in the film, when Nina and Darius have broken up, Wood starts dating Nina. He takes her to a party, a party that he knows that Darius is likely to be at unbeknownst to Nina. Darius is at the party. After the three encounter each other Nina tells Wood she needs to talk to him outside. Wood says to his friends, with some self-satisfaction: “I’ll be right back” (ibid.).

Once outside, Nina says to Wood: “Take me home now” (ibid.).

He says: “What’s wrong” (ibid.)?

Nina: “You embarrassed the shit out of me and I don’t appreciate it. Now, if you and Darius want to see whose dick is bigger, you can do it without me, alright” (ibid.).

Women instrumentalised to affirm men in their rivalry with other men is another form of disappearance. Wood sees Nina as a possession, he instrumentalises her and their relationship in order to affirm and prove himself as superior in his rivalry with Darius.

Nina counters this disappearance: “Now, if you and Darius want to see whose dick is bigger, you can do it without me, alright” (*Love Jones*, 1997).

In *I Love Dick* (2016), Chris Kraus’ book of “theoretical fiction”, when “theory becomes an intrinsic part of the ‘plot’” (Hawkins, 2016, p. 247), Chris writes letters to Dick. At first Chris and her husband Sylvère write to Dick. Chris is a white woman and both Sylvère and Dick are white men. Sylvère writes the first letter, then they write both separately and together. Chris leaves Sylvère:

“Who’s Chris Kraus?” she screamed. “She’s no one! She’s Sylvère Lotringer’s wife! She’s his ‘Plus-One!’” No matter how many films she made or books she edited, she’d always keep being seen as no one who mattered by anyone who mattered so long as she was living with Sylvère. “It’s not my fault!” Sylvère yelled back (Kraus, 2016, p. 100).

“In ten years, she’d erased herself. No matter how affectionate Sylvère [had] been, he’d never been in love with her” (Kraus, 2016, p. 101).

“And the next day, Monday, January 30, she left him” (ibid.).

Then, only Chris writes to Dick.

Dick finally “writes” back to Chris in a chapter in the book called “Dick writes back” (Kraus, 2016, p. 242). But his “letter” to Chris is a photocopy of a letter that he has sent to Sylvère. In his letter, Dick seems “mostly concerned with salvaging his damaged relationship with Sylvère” (d’Adesky as cited in Hawkins, 2016, p. 252). He apologises to Sylvère for not communicating (Kraus, 2016). He discusses a book he has sent, presumably in the same package containing the letters, “Here’s the book on altered states and trance that I told you about” and promises to send another book, which they seem to have discussed but that he can’t find (Kraus, 2016, p. 243). He says he’ll send it “if and when it turns up” (ibid.).

Also, while “he expresses regret, discomfort, and anger at being the objet d’amour” (d’Adesky as cited in Hawkins, 2016, p. 252) in Chris and Sylvère’s “private game” (ibid.) of correspondence with him and expresses that his relationship with Sylvère is damaged, he does not write it off. Dick writes:

In the circumstances it may be that, for now at least, too much damage has been done on all sides for the kind of negotiated rapprochement that would be needed if we were to restore the trust in which real friendship thrives (Kraus, 2016, p. 244).

“For now at least” (ibid.) is a phrase that expresses the potential for reconciliation and the potential for the relationship to continue in the future. In the same passage Dick also expresses admiration and warmth towards Sylvère: “That said, I still have immense respect for your work; I still enjoy your company and conversation when we meet (...)” (ibid.).

Dick is disparaging towards Chris. He misspells her name three out of the five times it is mentioned. One time is in the expression of admiration towards Sylvère cited above. In this same sentence he paternally admits that Chris has talent: “(...) I still have immense respect for your work; I still enjoy your company and conversation when we meet and believe, as you do, that Kris has talent as a writer” (ibid.). Chris’ talent is “validated” by the two “legitimate” male intellectuals.

Moreover, in the letter Dick acts like he doesn’t know Chris. Referring to the letters that her and Sylvère sent, he expresses confusion at “being taken as the object of

such obsessive attention on the basis of two genial but not particularly intimate or remarkable meetings spread out over a period of years” (Kraus, 2016, p. 240). This is despite the fact that he appears to have had sex with Chris at least twice (Hawkins, 2016) and seems to have also “shared several lengthy conversations” (Hawkins, 2016, p. 260) with her; “long distance bills fill the gaps left in my diaries” (Kraus as cited in Hawkins, 2016, p. 260).

Dick “reinforces Chris’ peripheral position” (Hawkins, 2016, p. 253), both intellectually, in relation to him and Sylvère, and with regards to the relationship he shares with Sylvère. In addition, he ignores everything that has passed between him and Chris (Hawkins, 2016). “Dick-when he finally writes back-erases Chris” (Hawkins, 2016, p. 251). An erasure that is enacted in the letter itself and in Dick sending Chris a photocopy of his letter to Sylvère when he finally “writes” back. Acts of erasure that demonstrate “(...) the degree to which women (...) function as a conduit for a homosocial relationship between men” (Sedgwick as cited in Hawkins, 2016, p. 252).

In this patriarchal framework, women’s beings are made into a conduit; Chris, like Nina in *Love Jones* (1997) disappears.

Nina counters this disappearance and Chris does too. She (Chris) writes at one point: “Dear Dick, I guess in a sense I’ve killed you. You’ve become dear diary” (Kraus as cited in Hawkins, 2016, p. 251). In this diary, her letters which “become an art form in and of themselves” (ibid.) become a site to explore and reflect on the self, a site of self-realisation and works of cultural criticism on a myriad of topics including love.

But these moments pertaining to Chris and Nina, illustrate how “even in the most enlightened circles” women continue to function as objects of exchange (ibid.). An exemplification of the experience of agentic women in a world that is not yet fully accepting of their freedom (hooks, 2002, p. 7).

Happiness is a Four-letter Word (2016) is a South African film based on the 2010 novel of the same name by Cynthia Jele. The film centres on three friends as they navigate romantic life in contemporary Johannesburg. Nandi (Mmabatho Montsho), Zaza (Khanyi Mbau) and Princess (Renate Stuurman) are successful, upper middle-class black women who almost

have it all (Mupotsa, 2017).

Nandi, the central protagonist, and her fiancé Thomas (Tongayi Chirisa) are in bed. Sometime prior to this, Nandi has slept with her ex-fiancé Chris (Chris Attoh). Chris comes back into Nandi's life when he hires her to represent him legally. Nandi is a corporate lawyer who has just been promoted to partner at the law firm she works at. Chris' case is an important one for the firm. It is high profile and presumably involves a large amount of income for the firm. Chris and Nandi sleep together after Nandi successfully closes the business deal that Chris has hired her for.

Chris and Thomas are black men with differing levels of financial success. Chris is wealthy while Thomas, although clearly middle-class, is represented as less financially successful and struggling in his business venture.

Nandi and Thomas in bed.

Nandi lies awake. She wakes up Thomas and asks: "Where do you see us in twenty years" (*Happiness is a Four-letter Word*, 2016)?

Thomas laughs and says: "Is that what you're thinking of first thing in the morning" (ibid.)? Nandi gently smiles. All the while tender music plays in the background.

Thomas replies jokingly: "Okay, um, in twenty years, you'll be fifty-three and I'll be thirty" (ibid.).

Nandi laughs and playfully slaps Thomas: "Come on, I'm being serious" (ibid.).

Thomas: "Okay", as he says this he throws the duvet over their heads creating a cocoon from which to narrate their future. The scene proceeds as follows:

Thomas: Okay, so you'll be 53 and I'll be 57. Lunga²⁰ will probably be living on his own by then.

Nandi: Yeah by 27, I hope so.

Thomas: The rest of the kids will be in university, hopefully. We'll be settled in our careers and businesses. And I'll probably be running my entrepreneurial school in the township by then.

Nandi: Maybe Lunga can be the principal?

Thomas: Yeah, maybe. But you, you'll be heading up your own law firm but not working 24/7. We'll be settled. Then we'll travel. We'll do that tour of the African seven wonders like we've always wanted to do. We'll just hang out, eat nice things, go to jazz concerts like old timers do. And we'll drink merlot under the avocado tree that I would've planted for you in the garden.

Nandi: And drink merlot under an avocado tree in the garden. You've really given this some thought, haven't you?

Thomas: I've had a vision of our lives together from the first time I met you (ibid.).

²⁰ Lunga is Thomas' son from a previous relationship.

Nandi, moved, reaches out and touches Thomas' face. Thomas kisses her palm, looks at her, smiling, and then closes his eyes.

Later on, Thomas finds out about Nandi and Chris. They fight. Thomas asks Nandi what she wants. She is unable to answer.

Later Chris appears on the cover of a magazine called *The Afropolitan*. As he hands Nandi the magazine:

Chris: Guess who made it to the no. 1 spot, front cover?

Nandi: Wow, congrats.

Chris: Thank you. All we need now are a few key properties around the world. Lighthouse investment offices, Tokyo, London, New York.

Nandi: And where will I be during this global take-over of yours?

Chris: Well, right by my side. Making sure that all these deals happen without a hitch.

Nandi: That's all?

Chris: What more could you ask for (ibid.)?

Nandi walks over to where Chris is standing and places the magazine on the table beside Chris. She looks at Chris and says: "Merlot" she pauses, "and avocado trees" (ibid.). As she says this, she reaches into her handbag and places a box containing an engagement ring on top of the magazine cover. A ring that Chris gave her earlier on in the film.

She says: "That's what I want" (as if responding to Thomas' earlier question), then: "Goodbye, Chris" (ibid.).

Nandi leaves.

Nandi is a woman who "almost 'has it all'" (Mupotsa, 2017, p. 249). In an earlier scene, immediately after her fight with Thomas after he finds out about her and Chris, Nandi arrives at work. She is surprised with champagne and applause from her colleagues and bosses who celebrate and congratulate her for closing Chris' deal.

After everyone has left the narrator, a voice-over throughout the film, asks, seemingly mirroring Nandi's own questioning:

You've worked hard. You've kept your eye on the prize. You've made sacrifices. But, what's the point of having it all if you don't have the one thing you really want
(*Happiness is a Four-letter Word*, 2016).

In this context having it all infers success in one's career as well as the possibility of marriage to Chris who presented Nandi with the engagement ring in an earlier scene;

to have achieved all forms of success with a powerful and wealthy man. Success at the expense of love, “the one thing you really want” and where Nandi “[almost] ‘has it all’” (Mupotsa, 2017, p. 249). What she really wants is Thomas and the love they share.

Nandi rejects Chris and the life he offers: a life of disappearance as the woman at his side facilitating the achievement of *his* desires and goals. It is unclear to what extent her rejection of Chris will impact her work situation. But, her selection of a life with Thomas, a life that he has narrated for her before it has begun does not preclude a successful career, “but you, you’ll be heading up your own law firm” or financial prosperity – merlot, avocado trees and travel (*Happiness is a Four-letter Word*, 2016). So that if Nandi was a woman who “almost ‘has it all’” at different points in the film, by choosing a life with Thomas, whom she reconciles with, she most certainly ends the film as a “woman who has it all”.

This is illustrated by her marriage to Thomas at the end of the film. A wedding ceremony that provides narrative resolution, a “happy ending” that for Nandi also signifies a transition into the promise of the life that Thomas has imagined for them and the promise of “the good life” (Berlant, 2012, p. 21).

Nandi’s storyline fulfils the conventional romance narrative while also reproducing the aspirational trope of the “woman who has it all.” Nandi asks Thomas where he sees them in twenty years. He narrates their life together, which he has had a vision of from the first time they met, love as already made (a ready-made) rather than a creative act. Through his narrative of love, he also imagines the kind of woman that Nandi will be, a “woman who has it all” – a successful career, marriage, children, property, financial prosperity, leisure time and worldliness. “We’ll do that tour of the African seven wonders like we’ve always wanted to do” (*Happiness is a Four-letter Word*, 2016).

Thomas’ narrative of love produces a kind of self-making for Nandi through its implication of the kind of woman that she will become and is imagined as. Through love she will become the “woman who has it all.” Love will ensure happiness, *happiness is a four-letter word* through a particular, pre-determined script of love

and self-making.

The “woman who has it all” is analogous to what Pumla Gqola calls the “New South African woman (NSAW)” (2016, p. 120). Gqola shows how “the intersections of post-apartheid class, gender, and race aspiration produced a range of possibilities” (ibid.) with the trope of the NSAW being “one of the most highly circulated” (ibid.). Gqola states:

(...) The “new” in NSAW refers to one of a range of highly circulated aspirational subjectivities in post-apartheid South Africa. Consequently, the “new” in the NSAW trope refers to the labeling of commonplace usage of “new South Africa” for South African society after 1994 (2016, p. 119).

She situates the trope in literature concerning how “historically societies in transition have produced new identities, and specifically femininities, at once contesting values of the past and charting new ways of existing as a woman, and as women in the emerging societies” (2016, p. 120). She points out that while “the NSAW shares some attributes with the historic performances of femininities explored in this literature” (ibid.) she “stands apart in very marked ways” (ibid.). Gqola argues:

She is linked to the growth of women’s entry into public and politically powerful spaces in various capacities, to women’s and Black Economic Empowerment to make financially independent decisions and also grow their consumer status. The specific coupling of financial freedom with demonstrable class mobility ultimately leads to the NSAW being a highly corporatized and monetized figure (2016, p. 121).

The “New South African woman” is often described as a “‘professional, wife and mother’ who needs ‘a supportive husband’” (Gqola, 2016, pp. 123-124). She works, is urban and upwardly mobile. “She has a career, and she is ambitious and driven” (Gqola, 2016, p. 123). She aspires to “two cars, and travel outside the continent for business and leisure” (ibid.). She also “lives in the suburbs”, “aspires to reproductive marriage” and “is a cisgendered heterosexual woman” (ibid.). If she fulfils all these criteria and acquires the listed accretions that produce her as the NSAW, she becomes the “woman who has it all”.

While “the NSAW marks a departure from earlier conceptions of women’s status in colonial and apartheid legislation and cities” (Gqola, 2016, p. 122) the trope “exists in an ambivalent relationship to historical femininities: simultaneously challenging and reinscribing them” (ibid.) A notable challenge is to the “economic alienation” (Gqola, 2016, p. 120) that women, particularly black women, suffered under apartheid, through the NSAW’s positioning in the

upper strata of professional life. For example, Nandi's promotion to partner at her law firm. But the challenge to "economic alienation" as expressed in the trope of the NSAW is also aligned to hegemonic neo-liberal principles. "The specific coupling of financial freedom with demonstrable class mobility ultimately leads to the NSAW being a highly corporatized and monetized figure" (Gqola, 2016, p. 121).

Moreover, this trope of aspirational femininity works normatively to reproduce hegemonic ideas of reproductive marriage, heterosexuality, class mobility and respectability, "(...) the NSAW trope relies on respectability through appropriate coupling and hard work" (Gqola, 2016, p. 123).

This trope also demands a specific aesthetic that reproduces hegemonic ideals of beauty: "She has smooth skin, straight, shiny hair and 'tastefully' manicured nails, and an arched brow, all of which communicate through the body a specific location within a global economy and a very controlled feminine esthetic whose transgression is ridiculed" (ibid.). Gqola asserts: "although the NSAW has other assumed attributes, such as assumed professional qualifications, religious affiliation, English language fluency, and worldliness, she is constructed primarily visually (as body) and relationally (to assumed heterosexual men)" (ibid.) which is an indication of the patriarchal constitution of this trope.

My intention is not to criticise women who inhabit aspects of this subjectivity to varying extents or to prescribe ways of being. Rather, my intention is to show how particular attributes that constitute subjectivities in different ways are packaged to produce idealised subjectivities that function in normative ways and circulate as aspirational tropes. I want to problematise the idealisation of the NSAW trope, which is predicated on particular sets of attributes that are aspirational, and to show how it is patriarchally constituted as evidenced by Gqola's assertion above. I want to show how the "woman who has it all" trope is analogous to the constructs of the NSAW trope, which are idealised and consequently produced as the aspirational norm so that other ways of living and being are invalidated and in some cases made deviant.

Tracing and contesting processes of idealisation is important because while people "rarely or barely" inhabit "ideals fully or unambivalently", they "mark the horizons of fantasy and fulfilled identity by which people come to measure their lives or process their confusions" (Berlant, 2012, p. 88).

Film and television are central to the production and dissemination of aspirational ideals. Gqola argues that the NSAW is “constructed visually and textually” (Gqola, 2016, p. 122) and is consequently “cast as consumable” (ibid.) while simultaneously embodying “economic progress, consumer status, and achievement as a mode of self-assertion” (ibid.). The trope is highly circulated on television and is “the aspirational woman that television dramas and popular soap operas seek to celebrate” – “in the two most popular soap operas of the new democracy, *Generations* [SABC-TV] and later *Isidingo* [SABC-TV]²¹, the NSAW is produced and held up as ideal” (ibid.).

Nandi in *Happiness is a Four-letter word*: through love she will become the “woman who has it all”, an analogue to the “New South African woman”. Although Nandi most noticeably departs from the NSAW trope through how she chooses to wear her hair, as an afro styled in different ways, which is in opposition to the NSAW who has straight hair (Gqola, 2016, p. 123), the self that is imagined by Thomas through a narration of their life together conforms in significant ways to the NSAW trope.

Moreover, the production of these tropes as ideal via romance narratives is indicative of “the reduction of life’s legitimate possibility to one plot” (Berlant, 2012, p. 87), which “is the source of romantic love’s terrorizing, coercive, shaming, manipulative, or just diminishing effects-on the imagination as well as on practice”(ibid.).

Certain forms of film and television produce aspirational ideals that form part of the process of self-making for women. Cinematic renderings of conventional romance narratives or love plots, that also work to produce normative ideals of the “good life” (Berlant, 2012, p. 21), function “as central vehicles for reproducing normative (...) femininity” (Berlant, 2012, p. 88) which is also imagined as aspirational, such as the NSAW trope that is analogous to the “woman who has it all” trope. These tropes coupled with the narratives that produce them legislate “the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others” (Berlant, 2012, p. 87).

Women who do not conform to the script and attributes required to inhabit the “right” side of this boundary are constructed as the “unwanted sisters” (Gqola, 2016, p. 133) of the NSAW

²¹ The South African Broadcasting Corporation is the public broadcaster which makes the circulation of these images and the trope of the NSAW more visible, accessible and hence more influential.

or “woman who has it all”, they are perceived as “the failures” and “train-wrecks” (ibid.).

Wayward women: Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (2004). Pilate has no navel and her mother died in childbirth. She has a man’s name chosen by her illiterate father from the Bible – he “chose a group of letters that seemed strong and handsome” (Morrison, 2004, p.18), “Christ-killing Pilate” (ibid.). Her father loved her (Morrison, 2004, p. 244). Pilate lives in a “wine house” (Morrison, 2004, p. 39), she makes and sells home brew, she wears one earring, a brass box strung through her ear, inside of the box is a piece of paper with her name written on it, written by her father who carefully copied it from the Bible (Morrison, 2004). She made the “contraption” when she was twelve (ibid.). Pilate looks “like a tall black tree” (ibid.) and “wears unlaced men’s shoes” (ibid.). Circe, the woman who delivered Pilate says:

She borned herself. I had very little to do with it. I thought they were both dead, the mother and the child. When she popped out you could have knocked me over. I hadn’t heard a heartbeat anywhere. She just came on out (Morrison, 2004, p. 244).

In Pilate we hear Audre Lorde: “(...) I learned that if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive” (2007, p. 137).

I have tried to show some of the oppressive ways that women’s selves are constructed in relation to love. Ways that are also acts of erasure. Women constructed as exploited love labourers, as a tool to affirm men’s identities and enable their aspirations, as conduits of homosocial relationships between men. Women’s selves crunched and coerced into idealised subjectivities; self-making as static and already made, as an activity that ensures that “there are those within our borders who are still outsiders” (Muholi as cited in Gqola, 2016, p. 126). While also being illustrative of how “the mass cultural discourse of romance obscures (...) the relations between the hegemonic processes of collective life” (Berlant, 2012, p. 109) and the production of the self through love.

“A room of one’s own” is about “women choosing and making life as they want to live” (hooks, 1999, p. 95).

Self-love



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

In *SpilLover*, the woman in the black dress makes a poem of herself for herself: an expression of self-love. She creates space and time for herself through herself: her body's activity through space and time, the *mise-en-scène* of this poem; the room she creates for herself through herself to *feel* herself.

Freedom

In Helen Oyeyemi's short story "The Tell Tale Heart" (2006), a girl is born in Osogobo, Nigeria. She is born "in a small off-white hospital a few feet away from a stone shrine to love" (Oyeyemi, 2006, p. 198).

The girl's parents are disappointed that she is not a boy but her docility more than makes up for this (Oyeyemi, 2006).

The disappointment of the girl's parents is due to patriarchal culture where femaleness²² is marked "from the very beginning as unworthy or not worthy" (hooks, 2002, p. xi).

²² I am hesitant to use the word "female" given what Maria Lugones (2010) points out regarding the colonial constitution of indigenous and enslaved Africans as "female" in relation to their conception as non-human. I discuss this in greater detail further on in this fragment. However, I have used the word when referring to hooks' articulations because her use of the word does not conform to this colonial constitution and discourse.

Consequently, “in the school of patriarchal thinking and values”, a girl “must earn love. She is not entitled. She must be good to be loved” (hooks, 2002, p. xii), the girl was an amenable character, she was good – “she clambered over her milestones with unassailable, business-like calm, as if it were her job, to be in order, and she had a mental checklist to get through” (Oyeyemi, 2006, p. 198).

In patriarchy from girlhood on, women worry about whether they’re worthy of love (hooks, 2002, p. xi). An anxiety produced by the patriarchal understanding that women matter less than men (hooks, 2002, p. xii). This intrinsic feeling of unworthiness, generated by patriarchy, results in women feeling that their value and worth, and whether or not they can be loved, are things that are always determined by someone else (hooks, 2002, p. xiii), someone outside of themselves. Resulting in women’s need for recognition: “desperate for the recognition (whether from male or female partners) that would prove our worth, our value, our right to be alive” (hooks, 2002, p. xv).

In dominant practices of heterosexual love, women seek men to validate them as worthy, valued and loveable, which produces a dependency on men for the generation of women’s self-worth as well as their right to be loved and to love. This dependency, produced by patriarchy, is not about love at all. Rather, it is about “patriarchal approval” (ibid.): “most of us were and are slaves of longing-yearning for a master who will set us free and claim us because we cannot claim ourselves” (hooks, 2002, p. xvi).

Patriarchy does not care when women fail to learn how to love (ibid.). In patriarchy men give love an instrumental value (Claire Fontaine, nd); “the source of men’s social power and energy is the love women provide for them and continue to provide for men” (Firestone as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 5). Patriarchy is not concerned with love or a love ethic or with people learning to love, “love and domination do not go together” (hooks, 2002, p. 6).

Men retain their sovereignty in love while women aim to abandon themselves (de Beauvoir as cited in Illouz, 2012, p. 5).

Freedom: “I want a love (...) that is a love of my autonomy, that isn’t a love of my service and dependency” (Lonzi as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 3).

hooks (2002, p. 32):

(...) I realized that the proper place for love was as the solid foundation on which I would invent self and create a life. Uniting the search for love with the quest to be free was the crucial step. Searching for love, I found the path to freedom. Learning how to be free was the first step in learning to know love.

And what of the girl from “The Tell Tale Heart”?

Unbeknownst to all, the girl had a powerful heart that was the opposite of docile. Her heart was heavy, “too heavy”; “(...) from the first moment she understood that she could feel, she had felt that weight, a gravitational pull that invited her to her grave” “Her heart was heavy because it was open, and so things filled it, and so things rushed out of it, but still the heart kept beating, tough and frighteningly powerful and meaning to shrug off the rest of her and continue on its own” (Oyeyemi, 2006, p. 203).

Her docility belied by the strength of her heart. Her strength.

Women need new ways to think about love. Feminist thinkers ripped apart and threw “away out-moded, patriarchal ways of thinking about love”²³ (hooks, 2002, p. 15) such as patriarchal narratives stating that it is “the woman’s place to be the nurturer and caregiver” (hooks, 2002, p. 37). But some feminist articulations, rather than offering new ways to think about love, “told us that we were better off if we stopped thinking about love” (hooks, 2002, p. xv). Told us to live our lives “as though love did not matter, because if we did not do so we were in danger of becoming a member of a truly despised female category: ‘the woman who loves too much’” (ibid.).

The woman who loves too much loves.

“Power feminism”:

Many of us have been afraid to acknowledge that “love matters” for fear we will be despised and shamed by women who have come to power within patriarchy by closing off emotions, becoming like the patriarchal men we once critiqued as cold and hard-hearted. Power feminism is just another scam in which women get to play patriarchy and pretend that the power we seek and gain liberates us (hooks, 2002, p. xvi).

“(...) the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 2007, p. 123).

Instead, an “ethic of love” moves us away from an “ethic of domination” (hooks, 2006); love

²³ This is also an on-going process of disavowal for feminists.

as a “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2006), “self-love as a practice of freedom” (Nash, 2011, p. 8).

Self-love is a process of claiming oneself through shifting processes and articulations of self-actualisation, one part of women’s liberation (hooks, 2006). “Love exalts” (Kristeva, 1987, p. 4) so that loving oneself, self-love, is an expression of self-valuation allowing women to claim themselves as worthy and valuable, a practice of freedom that refuses the choke of patriarchal approval.

Self-love is feeling oneself, which is constituted through a “concern for the self” (Foucault, 1997, p. 211) so that one may get in touch with oneself, live with oneself, rely on oneself, benefit from and enjoy oneself (ibid.).

Self-love is not narcissism. Rather it is a critical practice that informs the constitution of the self and a reaching out of the self; it is about “ordering the self *and* transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self *and* for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood” (Nash, 2011, p. 3).

It is a critical practice of self-making and a political practice that enables different kinds of relation. Self-love forms part of being attentive to the “private” which is integral to feminist politics where the “‘private’ doesn’t mean ‘individual’” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 9). It is “the history of everyone of us, in which it is possible to read each other’s history” (Francescato as cited in Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 10). Self-love forms part of “a politics of reciprocate recognition” (Claire Fontaine, nd, p. 10) because it forms part of a feminist discourse that is concerned with “a politics of love of each other’s freedom” (ibid.).



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

SpilLover: a black woman floats in a pool in a beautiful black dress. She dreams of herself: a time for oneself that also reinvents time, something beyond, but appreciative of, “2001 Space Odyssey time – the past dreaming the future blooming real and tasty into the present, now” (Lorde, 2017, p. 79) because it is her time.

In Wangechi Mutu’s video installation, *The End of Carrying All* (2015), a black woman, played by Mutu, walks across an eerie savannah-like landscape. The landscape is sunset orange and yellow but seems set aglow as if on fire. Flocks of birds intermittently fill the sky with varying degrees of murmuration which appear to mark an apocalypse.

The woman begins the video carrying a large basket on her head. She walks across the landscape. The camera tracks alongside her pausing when she does. As she walks the basket fills and gets larger. Debris falls from it. The woman attempts to catch it. As the basket fills and gets larger, the woman gets increasingly bent over with its weight. She continues to walk while the basket fills and grows. The basket fills with large objects: a wheel with spokes, buildings and satellite dishes attached to buildings – “an abnormal-size outgrowth of buildings, industry, and manmade disaster” (Mutu as cited in Sculpture Magazine, 2019, np).

As the load gets larger and the woman more bent over, the landscape grows darker and the birds when present, intensify. Night-time falls and the buildings that the woman carries light up. She staggers, moving more slowly under the weight of the objects and all the while the burden increases, more structures sprout and she gets increasingly doubled over and yet she still continues to walk. “The whole world is in that basket” (Hirsch, 2019, p. 430) becoming “more impossible to bear” as the video progresses (ibid.).

At some point, the load turns into sludge or a larva-like substance and overwhelms her as she continues to struggle to walk. She is dissolved into the substance as it morphs and grows. Neon green and purple light radiate through the substance. The woman’s body completely dissolved, the substance slips over what seems to be a cliff or hill that the woman has been walking up, while still carrying the load. As it slips over, it reaches out and touches the edge of the cliff. But ultimately, it slides over and disappears, along with the dissolved woman. Once the substance is over the cliff, the earth itself begins to erupt, volcanically as if the substance had an influence on the landscape. The eruption begins and then there is a stillness. The landscape is briefly unsettled but remains intact.

The landscape is very dark now with only a slit of orange-purple sky in the horizon. A baobab tree that the once woman passed while walking, remains standing. The image then briefly fades to white then to black. As it fades to white stars appear in the sky.

“Responding to the theme of the 2015 Venice Biennale, ‘All the World’s Futures’” (Hirsch, 2019, p. 431), where it was first exhibited (Hirsch, 2019, p. 428), *The End of Carrying All* (2015) “was received as a critique of capitalism and environmental disaster, of the violence done to indigenous landscapes by the consumption and waste resulting from colonization and globalization” (Hirsch, 2019, p. 431).

Moreover, Marianne Hirsch partially reads the work as expressing “either a personal desire for closure or an apocalyptic ending to inexorable Sisyphean repetition” (2019, p. 428). She says the work could be seen as a feminist re-vision “of the Sisyphus myth, read not as an abstract human condition, but as a historically and politically marked and gendered one” (ibid.).

In an interview with *Sculpture Magazine*, Mutu says that she often paints women's bodies "carrying other people, animals, animal parts, or objects" (as cited in *Sculpture Magazine*, 2019, np). She says that *The End of Carrying All* (2015) is an example of this (as cited in *Sculpture Magazine*, 2019, np). Commenting further on the signification of these figures, she says: "these figures were always simulations of caryatids; they are symbolic of the work of holding up a weight" (ibid.).

In *The End of Carrying All* a black woman walks across a landscape – "the woman who carries all" (Hirsch, 2019, p. 428), she is engaged in the actual and "symbolic (...) work of holding up a weight" (Mutu as cited in *Sculpture Magazine*, 2019, np). A weight that is a consequence of her class, race, nationality and gender. A weight that overwhelms, dissolves and then kills her. Her death unsettles and alters the landscape.

The burden that the woman carries is also indicative of an ontological burden, that of being black and a woman, resulting in a double oppression, a double negation.

In her essay, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" (2010), Maria Lugones demonstrates this double negation. She asserts that she understands "the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity" (2010, p. 743). This "dichotomous hierarchy" began with the "colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean" and "was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man" (ibid.).

Lugones argues further:

It was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women. This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species-as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild (ibid.).

Additionally Lugones points out that the European bourgeois woman was not understood as the complement to "the European, bourgeois, colonial, modern man" as a "subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a being of civilisation, heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason" (ibid.). Rather the European bourgeois woman's role was to reproduce "race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man" (ibid.).

Consequently Lugones argues, “women” were understood as “the human inversion of men” (2010, p. 744), antithetical to “men” and conceived as inferior in their ontological inscription as servers.

Lugones asserts that “colonized people became males and females” as they were perceived as non-human (Lugones, 2010, p. 744) with colonised women suffering a double negation by being judged in relation to “women”, the category ascribed to white European bourgeois women. Lugones explains:

I propose to interpret the colonized, non-human males from the civilising perspective as judged from the normative understanding of the “man”, the human being par excellence. Females were judged from the normative understanding of “women”, the human inversion of men. From this point of view, colonized people became males and females. Males became not-human-as-not-men, and colonised females became not-human-as-not-women (ibid.).

“In the western imagination, European Man came to personify the human” (Erasmus, 2017, p. xxiii). Such that the processes of dehumanisation described by Lugones were also implicated in European colonial projects in Africa and South Africa, and in the apartheid project in South Africa, which was an “extension of its colonial history” (Erasmus, 201, p. 24). The apartheid state was “the epitome of a colonial state” (Erasmus, 2017, p.15), an exercise and expression of settler colonialism.

The far-reaching impact of these processes of dehumanisation are exemplified in the “colonial stereotypes of the sexually promiscuous and lascivious African body used to justify colonial, slavocratic and apartheid rape” as well as the “lynching and murder of African subjects globally” (Gqola, 2005, p. 8).

These stereotypes can be found in the colonial projects in the Americas and the Caribbean, which are the focus of Lugones’ discussion. With regards specifically to women, Lugones describes how the sexuality of colonised “females” was conceived of as evil, “as colonized females were understood in relation to Satan, sometimes as mounted by Satan” (2010, p. 745). Therefore the sexuality of colonised women was constructed as deviant by association and sexual engagement with Satan; a sexual engagement that could be construed as rape. They were also constituted as hypersexual through this relation and judged against the category of “women” who were imagined as “pure.”

However, Lugones stresses: “Instead of thinking of the global, capitalist, colonial system as in every way successful in its destruction of peoples, knowledges, relations, and economies, I want to think of the process as continually resisted, and being resisted today” (Lugones, 2010, p. 748). Black women are resistant and agentic, they create and invent, making and re-making themselves; “Feminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it” (Lugones, 2010, p. 747). Self-love in the construction of black women’s self-making is one of those materials. Given the double negation and processes of dehumanisation that black women suffer, both historically and now, self-love is more urgent for black women than it is for white women.

This assertion pays careful attention to the power relations that exist amongst black women, emanating from hierarchies produced by coloniality and “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1997, p. 7) which is partly constitutive of coloniality. These hierarchies, which stem from the aforementioned framework, are produced by factors such as class, sexuality, nation, colourism, age and education, and result in differing levels of privilege, which produce the hierarchies themselves.

It is the work of those possessing privilege in different ways to undo hierarchies through refusing them and refusing to succumb to them, and further by rejecting the processes of power and domination that enable and sustain various hierarchies amongst black women. Intrinsic to this labour is the awareness that “differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115) and domination.

Black women “have many different faces” (Lorde, 2017, p. 28) and should “not become each other in order to work together” (ibid.); “when we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I’m not excluding you from the joining – I’m broadening the joining” (Lorde as cited in Bereano, 2007, p. 10).

Black women, in their difference, share the experience of being black and women. They share the ontological experience of being constructed as beings who are loathed and treated with contempt (Lorde as cited in Bereano, 2007, p. 8) albeit in different forms and with different registers. Different black women and their subjectivities are viewed in the political contexts they find themselves in and the extent to which these contexts depart from or affirm

oppressive discourses and practices. Contexts could be as broad as the nation or as intimate as the bedroom or a love relation...

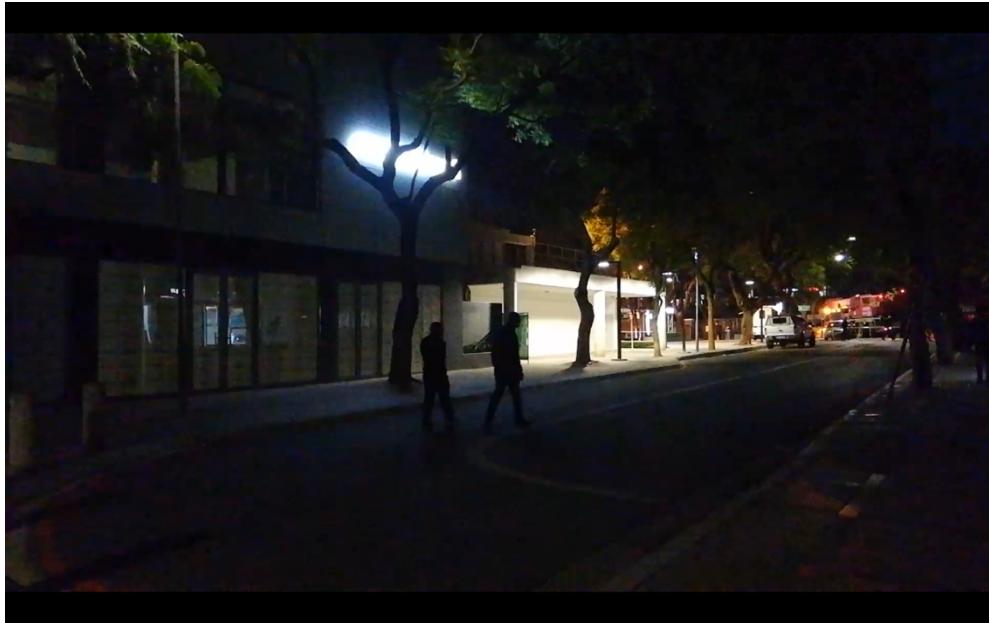
In short, black women share the experience of being “twice stigmatized” (Jordan as cited in Nash, 2011, p. 2). They share the experience of double negation so that self-love is imperative towards black women’s self-making.

My conception of self-love towards black women’s self-making conforms to my earlier articulations in this fragment concerning “self-love as a practice of freedom” (Nash, 2011, p. 8) and self-making for women, which further includes two additional dimensions. One is an emphasis on self-love as “a practice of self-valuation” (Nash, 2011, p. 2) so that love “is a resistant ethic of self-care” (ibid.) for black women. This addresses black women’s ontological “status as (...) twice stigmatized” (Jordan as cited in Nash, 2011, p. 2) while infusing black women’s selves with self-love, which has the consequence of acknowledging the status of black women “as (...) twice stigmatized” and also simultaneously going beyond it through re-making the self in the act of self-love itself.

The other additional dimension argues for self-love in black women’s self-making as it relates to generating affinity between black women so that affinity is produced through a radical ethic of care and love as opposed to “shared injury” (Nash, 2011, p.15) which has the effect of reproducing black women as victims. This is furnished by an interpretation of self-love as a political practice that enables different kinds of relation through an ethic of love, because once again self-love is about “ordering the self *and* transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self *and* for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood” (Nash, 2011, p. 3).

In Palesa Shongwe’s film, *uNomalanga and the Witch* (2015), we see how self-love acts to facilitate a loving relation between two different black women. In the film, two women, the central characters, sit on a set of stairs outside the one woman’s house. One woman, Salome (Ferry Jele), is considered an outcast in the community, while Nomalanga (Mmabatho Montsho), the other woman, is considered an upstanding member of the community. They sit on a set of stairs outside Salome’s house. Salome sits on the stair above Nomalanga. Nomalanga sits below between Salome’s legs. Nomalanga gets her hair done by Salome; a desire for relation enabled by an everyday strategy used to generate self-love. Self-love generates a loving relation between the two women. Salome oils Nomalanga’s hair, Nomalanga leans back in comfort and pleasure.

Bridge



Still from *Cellphone Video* (2018).

“Who is the woman on the bridge who in different places and in different guises continually reappears (Maso, 1996, p. viii)? (...) A woman moving along the relentless trajectory of her desire, transformed by it, again and again” (ibid.).



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

This project began with a woman walking.
Willful walking.



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

After a night out, a woman walks along a promenade.

She has not slept and still wears the same clothes.

She walks, takes down her hair and pauses to watch the waves.

Later she lies on the beach. She lies there for a long time. She dozes on the sand.

At sunset, she gets up and continues walking.

She walks along the beach, looking out at the sea every now and again.



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

A well-dressed woman walks through a motorcycle clinic.

The clinic is called “The Bike Hospital.”

It is packed with motorcycle parts.

Some parts to be re-used.

She walks, looking and taking it all in.



Still from *SpilLover* (2020).

A woman walks down the middle of a city street.

She does this at least once a day.

She is dressed entirely in red.

Around her, life unfolds.



Still from *SpillOver* (2020).

A woman walks.

She traverses a rooftop at dusk.

Music plays from the bars down below.

She looks out at the city as she walks, all the while thinking and feeling.

She, the woman, is not alone in thinking and feeling while walking.

The woman in red too and the woman on the beach together with the woman at the bicycle clinic are not alone in their thoughts and feelings.

Thoughts and feelings in action: “walks as moments of solitary thinking” (Bal as cited in Klumpen, 2017, p. 11) and feeling.

“How can I explain how extraordinary it was that she was walking alone in that place”

(Maso, 1996, p. 146)?

The women walk alone but also in relation to each other so that walking-thinking-feeling²⁴ is both a singular or solitary activity but singular and communal activity.

These film fragments function to connect *SpillOver* and are not the extensive fragments (which have been named and explored in the writing). They are cited here to point towards something else, they cue to the imagined potentiality of the film fragment. That which

²⁴ Walking-thinking is a phrase derived from the description of a still from *Reasonable Doubt* (2016), a film by Mieke Bal (as cited in Klumpen, 2017, p. 13). I have evolved and reinterpreted this phrase to include feeling.

remains open-ended and unresolved in fragments. In the context of *SpilLover*, they function structurally to connect the fragments that have been expanded upon because they are put in relation to each other. But they bear the latent potentiality of the fragment yet to be discovered in their other relations.

In this bridge as a way to transition, I am interested in cueing you, dear reader, towards a further set of possibilities by way of emphasis, elaboration and nuance. I move along the tapestry “from one nuance to the next” (Barthes, 2010, p. 3).

The woman walking on the beach, the woman who walks in the middle of the road, the well-dressed woman who walks through the glitter of transformable parts, and she who traverses the roof looking out at the city – all these women are lovers.

As are all the other women in *SpilLover*’s extensive fragments: the woman who walks through the market, the woman who spools the audio, the one who looks and walks at the bar, the woman in the black dress floating in the water and the one who looks out the window of her apartment and writes letters of when she walks through the city – these women too are lovers.

Lover: “a useful, strong and accurate word” (Walker, 2005, p. 357). “Someone who loves” (ibid.), “could be a lover of music, a lover of dance, a lover of a person” (ibid.) or people.

Lovers can be and are the beloved too.

Both lovers and the beloved because they love and are loved, but also so they’re always able to determine what it might mean to be loved, what it might mean to be the beloved, what love might and might not mean, and how it should or should not be expressed. In relation with their beloved/s, who must be lovers too, love is made and re-made. In this expansive and ongoing process of creation, this process of love praxis and relation, lovers and beloveds have the capacity to be both the lover and the beloved; they are sometimes the lover and sometimes the beloved but always with both capacities...

Love is “a series of propositions and objections” (Abbas, 2017, p. 201). Love is a political possibility for itself, an erotic move through power (Lorde as cited in Sandoval, 2000) towards love as a transformational space (Berlant, 2011), as a “practice of freedom” (hooks,

2006) for feminist love praxis.

The women in *SpillOver* are lovers and beloveds.

For them, love, like poetry, is not a luxury.

“Poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde, 2007, p. 36).

In *SpillOver* the poetic is felt in the aesthetics and form in conjunction with an exploration of the everyday and experiential as it relates to women. This exploration of women’s experiential and everydayness is in relation to the poetic, with “poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience” (Lorde, 2007, p. 37).

“The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (ibid.). “Poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience” (ibid.) is “poetry as illumination” (Lorde, 2007, p. 36). “For it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (ibid.).

“Poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience” (Lorde, 2007, p. 37) forms the “light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change” (ibid.). It is a political practice for women. A political practice that forms part of feminist love praxis.

“Poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde, 2007, p. 36).

For these women poetry like love is not a luxury.

SpillOver’s conception is attentive to Lorde’s words:

Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me” (1984, p. 37).

“It feels right to me”: “poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde, 2007, p. 36).

The walking women: on the beach, in the motorcycle clinic, in the middle of the road and on the rooftop, think, feel and create, as they walk.

Perhaps they all walk after a night out at a bar or club. Here I recall the opening scene of *Beau Travail* (1999) where a group of French foreign legionnaires stationed in Djibouti dance in a club with a group of women from Djibouti.

I am also reminded of the opening scene of *Félicité* (2016) where the central character, Félicité, sings to a group of people at a bar that she regularly performs at in Kinshasa.



Still from *Beau Travail* (1999).



Still from *Félicité* (2016). This image has been cropped.

What are the oppressions of and in these spaces, bars and clubs, for the walking women who are both lovers and beloveds?

What are the possibilities? How could the walking women move “erotically through power” (Lorde as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 164,5) in these spaces?

Dance perhaps, may be considered.

Dancing can produce a kind of hypnosis when the dancer is connected to their capacity to feel; when they are connected to the erotic (Lorde, 2007). When “my body stretches to music” (Lorde, 2007, p. 56) and opens in response I sometimes momentarily experience a lapse in consciousness.

A lapse because I experience something “unnameable” (Derrida as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 4,5) as I abandon myself to feeling and sensation enabled by a connection to the erotic (Lorde, 2007). Perhaps I experience “differential consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 144,5): a lapse in consciousness when “meaning cannot find a solid signified” and escapes from what “is tamed and known” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 146,7).

This is analogous to the “moment of ‘hypnosis’” one experiences “when one is first overwhelmed or engulfed by love” (Barthes as cited in Sandoval, 2000, p. 140, 1).

Lover, “someone who loves” (Walker, 2005, p. 357), “could be a lover of music, a lover of dance, a lover of a person” (ibid.) or people.

What is the potential of these sketches of thought and feeling in relation to the walking women?

How could they be thought and felt in and through the film fragment as mode and site of “enunciation” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198)?

There may be other connections and departures produced...perhaps allowing for other political possibilities to emerge...

The walking women walk: “two women walking opposite ways on the beach” (Maso, 1996, p. 48), “the woman on a well-deserved break, walking” (Maso, 1996, p. 41), “two women finding themselves on the same beach in winter” (Maso, 1996, p. 48), “the long walkway away” (Maso, 1996, p. 51), “walking faster now” (Maso, 1996, p. 41).

“There is something (...) so lovely here” (Maso, 1996, p. 39), “she thought by walking she might dispel certain things” (Maso, 1996, p. 41).

The obsessive circling of a subject (Rankine as cited in Ulin, 2016), love and love relations as they relate to women; “many positions are inhabited” (ibid.) which produce (as an act of process) different angles, variations (ibid.), discontinuities and sometimes repetitions.

Practices that are necessary to imagine love as shifting form where form is sometimes “unnameable”, even though its processes can be interpreted (Derrida as cited in Sandoval, 2000).

“In the liminal space between whatever happens next” (Maso, 1996, p. x), I wonder about what I have done, and what it could become.

In my current exploration, in *Spillover: Feminist Love Praxis*, love acts “to envision,

theorize, and compel politics”²⁵ (Abbas, 2017, p. 200) towards liberatory and transformational conceptions and relations of love.

I have written and made what I know, feel and sense right now in the time I have had and that is what I have made. These are my various “enunciations” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198) that you have experienced in film and words.

I have thought, sensed and felt my way through film to create a film that mobilises “multiple grammars” (Mistry, 2017, p. 9) of cinematic expression to articulate and arouse thought, feeling and sensation.

My filmic mobilisation of sensuous vocabularies of feeling and sensation in conjunction with contemplation is itself a sensuous activity which is imperative for a creative project that seeks to explore transformational and liberatory “enunciations” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198) of love and love relations; for a project that explores feminist love praxis. Moreover this mobilisation intends to express feeling and sensation as sites of knowing, of knowledge, where knowledge is conceived of as process, which it always is, “knowledge is a process, (...) it is never finished” (Bal as cited in Klumpen, 2017, p. 23).

The film fragment as mode and artwork corresponds to this conception of knowledge as process and ongoing. The film fragment as mode is about an ongoing process of exploratory potentialities where the film fragment as artwork and knowledge reveals its open-endedness.

These conceptions of knowledge and the film fragment as mode in conjunction with the employment of everyday aesthetic practices with the senses (Mignolo and Vázquez as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014) and the erotic (Lorde, 2007) is experienced as “enunciation” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 198) and offer decolonial articulations, which work towards an exploration of feminist love praxis. The decolonial operations of the film project are amongst the myriad options. Options similar to other “non-imperial options” (Mignolo as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 209). The project employs these options in relation with other “non-imperial options” in relation to “decolonial love” (Sandoval, 2000).

²⁵ “Not the other way around” (Abbas, 2017, p. 200).

Dear Reader,

I work, I love, I rest, I see, I learn (Lorde, 2017).

I hear, smell, feel, touch, and am touched.

And, I share.

I have produced the words you have read.

I am the maker of the film you have watched.

I have made these things always in collaboration and conversation with others.

I hope that you have felt in conversation with me.

Sincerely,

Nobunye

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