

LOVE

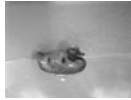


The entry on “Desire” mainly focused on the organization of the drives into object-anchored desires, orientations, and styles of relating. Explanations of desire were organized by various psychoanalytic accounts of attachment, identity and affect, and this book tells briefly the recent history of their importance in critical theory and practice. This entry, on Love, begins with an excursion into fantasy, moving away from the familial scene of psychoanalysis and examining the encounter of unconscious fantasy with the theatrical or scenic structure of normative fantasy. Whether viewed psychoanalytically, institutionally, or ideologically, in this entry love is deemed always an outcome of fantasy. Without fantasy, there would be no love. There would be no way to move through the uneven field of our ambivalent attachments to our sustaining objects, which possess us and thereby dispossess us of our capacity to idealize ourselves or them as consistent and benign simplicities. Without repairing the cleavages,

fantasy makes it possible not to be destroyed by all that.

We will pursue different notions of love by way of some of the workings of romance in personal life and commodity culture, the places where subjects learn to populate fantasy with foundational material for building worlds and lives.

§ FANTASY



Foucault's vision of a non-institutionalized mode of pleasure untethered to symbolization or norms brings us to a final form desire is said to take in psychoanalytic theory. This is the concept of *fantasy*. What Freudians and Lacanians mean by fantasy is not what one might expect. In popular culture, fantasy is a dreamy narrative that brackets realism and without entirely departing from it, connects up a desiring subject with her ideal or nightmare object, whereas in Freudian psychoanalysis fantasy takes the shape of unconscious wishes that invest images with the force of their ordering impulse and, in certain instances, convert them into symptoms; Laplanche and Pontalis then move through Lacan to call fantasy the *setting* for desire's enactment, a

setting in which desire gets caught up in sequences of image and action that are not the same thing as their manifest representation.⁴⁸

This means that to comprehend fantasy we need to move between unconscious structurings of desire and the conventions meant to sanitize them into an intention. After all, the fundamental gift-message of modern popular culture, “You are not alone,” pretends that this fact is a simple relief. Yet we know that this gift is overwhelming. It at once valorizes the subject’s uniqueness and her general qualities: it asserts that she is deserving of a kind of pleasure that feels both like recognition and a victory over something; and that she is sovereign and dependent on her objects to achieve that aim, among other things. The whole cluster of tendencies is fulfilled in all sorts of action films, whether the tenor of survival is at a large or small scale. If we think of romance as a genre of action film, in which an intensity of the need to survive is played out by a series of dramatic pursuits, actions, and pacifications, then the romance plot’s setting for fantasy can be seen as less merely

⁴⁸ See de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*; Cora Kaplan, “*The Thorn Birds*: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 142–66; and Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*.

conventional and more about the plotting of intensities that hold up a world that the unconscious deems worth living in.

Take, for example, the work marketed as “the greatest love story of all time,” *Gone With the Wind*. Readers of this novel and viewers of this film typically see the relation of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler as the perfection of romantic fantasy because each meets a passionate match in the other, and because even though their great love fails, it is a great love that stands the test of time and marks the lovers permanently.⁴⁹ It does not matter that the man understands the woman entirely, while the woman has no clue about herself, or him: indeed, Rhett is a better man *and* woman than Scarlett. *Gone with the Wind* may stretch gender norms in the characters’ pursuit of economic and romantic aims, but the novel maintains throughout the romantic rule that gives license to the man, who wears it as physical and psychological superiority. But a scene- and sense-oriented reading of the fantasy at play in this work might suggest that desire is played out in a *compulsion to repeat* variations on a fantasy tableau: a tableau of mutual love at first sight that always leads to a circuit of

⁴⁹ See Helen Taylor, *Scarlett’s Women: Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

passionate battle, seduction, disappointment, and desire (in this case, because whenever one lover feels love the other feels hard or defensive). The elaboration of this core in a spectacular epic tale of romance, devastation, and survival set against the backdrop of the American Civil War, and especially Sherman's scorched-earth march through the South, then mirrors the personal plot in the political one. All of this suggests that, in *Gone with the Wind*, heterosexual romance and sovereign nationality require fantasy to work its magic on subjects, generating an optimism that both plays out ambivalence and disavows complexity. *Gone with the Wind* narrates the compulsion to repeat as a relation between a sensual utopia (here, the Confederacy, romantic intimacy) and a jumble of obstacles that must be narratively mastered so that the utopia might be approached once again. *The scene of desire and the obstacles to it become eroticized, rather than the love that seems to motor it.* "Tomorrow is another day," the text's famous platitude, converts the fantasy scene of love for persons and worlds into a scene of the love of cliché, of repetition itself.

This kind of interpretive shift from couple-oriented desire to the erotics of a scene of encounter with the fantasy requires repositioning the desiring subject as a *spectator* as well as a participant in her scene of desire, and suggests a kind of doubleness the subject must have in her relation to pursuing her pleasure.

John Berger has suggested one version of this relation of doubleness: because women are the primary objects of sexualization in heterosexual culture, they learn to identify both as desiring subjects and as objects of desire. Berger illustrates this split with the tableau of a woman who walks across a room and imagines, as she does so, being watched navigating the space.⁵⁰ But the psychoanalytic claim about the subject as spectator to her desire is even more mobile and divided than Berger would allow. The centrality of repetition to pleasure and of deferral to desire indeed places the desiring subject *in* her story, and well as makes her a reader *of* her story. These two forms, acting and interpretation, enable the desiring subject to reinhabit her own plot from a *number* of imaginary vantage points, simultaneously.

Laplanche and Pontalis's "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" has been especially influential in establishing this view of the specificity of fantasy-work in the production of desire.⁵¹ They argue that fantasies are scenes into which the subject unconsciously translates herself in order to experience, in multiple ways, the desire released by the originary sexual

⁵⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁵¹ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Burgin, Donald, and Kaplan, 5–34.

trauma and the paradoxical, ambivalent attachments it generates. Fantasy donates a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject; provides a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments; and allows out-of-sync-ness and unevenness of being in the ordinary world at once to generate a secure psychotic enclave and to maintain the subject's openness to the ordinary disturbances of experience.

To think this way about the manifestations of fantasy is to change how we have been defining the sexual and desiring subject. We are no longer solely negotiating a passage of desire between the infant and her mother, or the adult and the sexual objects that later come to substitute for the traumatically lost mother. We are focusing now on the space of desire, in a field of scenes, tableaux, episodes, and events. Fantasy is the place where the subject encounters herself already negotiating the social. The origin of fantasy may still be the trauma of infantile separation — that's one theory. However we account for its origins, though, it's clear that the subjectivity desire makes is fundamentally incited by *external* stimuli that make a dent on the subject. The affective disturbance can reassemble one's usual form in any number of shapes or elaborations: in personal styles of seduction, anxious or confident attachment, confusion, shame, dread, optimism, self- or other-directed pleasure, for

example. Or in stories about who one is and what one wants, stories to which one clings so as to be able to re-encounter oneself as solid and in proximity to being idealizable.

It is often said therefore that the desiring subject is well served by the formalism of desire: although desire is anarchic and restless, the objects to which desire becomes attached stabilize the subject and enable her to assume a stable-enough identity. In this model a person is someone who is retroactively created: you know who you “are” only by interpreting where your desire has already taken you. But we have already seen that your desire does not take you to its predestined object, the thing that will repair the trauma (of maternal separation, of sexual difference) that set you on your voyage in the first place. Desire is practical: it takes what it can get. Desire has bad eyesight, as it were: remember, that the object is not a thing, but a cluster of fantasmic investments in a scene that represents itself as offering some traction, not a solution to the irreparable contradictions of desire. On your behalf, in an effort to release you from abandonment to autoeroticism — or, more precisely, to restore your autoeroticism to sociability — your desire *misrecognizes* a given object as that which will restore you to something that you sense effectively as a hole in you. Your object, then, does not express transparently who you “are” but says *something* about what it takes for you

to anchor yourself in space and time. Meanwhile the story of your life becomes the story of the detours your desire takes.⁵²

Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten," the master text for this line of thought, proposes that when the subject fantasizes scenes of desire she takes multiple positions in those scenes: in this case, a patient says she hears a young boy being beaten in the next room, and she identifies as the beater, the beaten, the spectator, the eavesdropper. Each of the positions in the scene of fantasy connects to a different aspect of the desiring subject's senses and sense of power; the grandiosity of the fantasy enables the subject to saturate mentally all experience and all feeling. Earlier I described the ways in which romance narrative turns erotic ambivalence into serial experience by spacing out desire, obstacle, and romantic overcoming in the intervals of narrative time. The post-Freudian model of fantasy as the scene of desire provides another way of representing ambivalence without its internal tensions: rather than tracking conflicting aims among the various kinds of attachment the subject feels, the scenic form of fantasy enables the desiring subject to produce a series of interpretations that do not have to cohere as a narrative, but that nonetheless make up the scene. This model of

⁵² See Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written."

the subject demands reading the way a photograph, or a hieroglyph does: it requires multiple strands of causal narration. This is what Freud meant by *overdetermination*: to be overdetermined is to see oneself and one's objects of interest as the point of convergence of many forces. This model of a thing's multiple causation explains how, despite our wild affects and thoughts, we retain a fantasmatic sense of reliability and solidity; it explains how we can maintain conflicting ideas of who we and our objects are without collapsing or going psychotic.

Take, for example, the scene of intimate ambivalence par excellence: infidelity. In the real life of normative intimacy the different relationships brought into competitive proximity in infidelity are frequently revealed via tableaux or scenic-ness. Someone walks into a room at the wrong time; or someone cannot get out of her mind the image of the adulterous sex; someone cannot forget the way the room looked when she came into the unhappy knowledge. The cheating lover may be occupying multiple positions in the scene: the lover, the beloved, the guilty one, the injurer, the agent, the victim. If the adulterer opines that she is cheating because her primary relationship has failed her miserably, she is using the logic of romance narrative to split apart the scene of ambivalence: distressed couple, happy infidelity. But if the caught or

confessing wanderer insists to her partner and her lover that neither relationship has anything to do with the other, she is arguing from the logic of fantasy, protecting all positions as sites of her own desire. Her explanation cannot be called *false* if the sexual wanderer experiences the scene this way: neither is it true in the sense that the interpretation adequately explains the tangle of motives and impulses that produced her acts. This is why fantasy and romantic narrative generally are best described as structures of *psychical reality*, neither true nor false where facts are concerned, but affectively true insofar as the compulsion to repeat that organizes it is the reality through which the subject projects desire and processes experience.⁵³

As with all animating forms, this model of fantasy implies a theory of the subject. But it repudiates completely the model of the subject whose desire is the truth of her identity and whose actions are the expressions of her desire. The subject (of fantasy) might be read instead as the place where the fragmentation of the subject produced by primal trauma is expressed through repetition: this is the Freudian view, and it directs our attention to the drama of

⁵³ See Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, and Kaplan, “*The Thorn Birds: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity.*”

small differences through which the subject attempts to master her “normal” and her “perverse” inclinations. But the scene of fantasy can also be said to reveal the fundamental non-coherence of the subject, to which violence is done by the demands of the identity form, and which may well play out a competition between the subject’s desire to be recognized by her object and her desire to destroy the object she desires.⁵⁴ Either of these models (mastery, destructive/reparative impulses) can be seen in the ways that the subject takes up patterning with respect to her objects. In any case, because people are distinguished to themselves, their intimates, and in history by their particular structures and styles of repetition, the subject becomes coherent and inhabits her identity only as she repeats an attachment to a scene that features her self-performance. But how do we understand this in more political or social terms? Foucault argues that ideologies of the *normal* turn certain subjects into a “population” by way of the taxonomic state, the corporealized hierarchies of capitalism, and medical, legal, educational, and religious practices. Subjects who become intelligible within these regimes of normativity are trained to repeat identification with particular fantasy forms, which is to say that they

⁵⁴ See Klein and Rivière, *Love, Hate, and Reparation*.

are incited to identify with some repetitions and styles over other ones. In this sense the promise of social belonging casts Enlightenment ideologies of happiness, individual autonomy and uniqueness, and freedom in terms of normative conventionality. As a result, some critics argue that even normalized or conventional social relationships can be perverse, in that their fulfillment can entail implicit or underdeveloped fantasies of bucking social convention: in this Marxist/psychoanalytic tradition of thought, conventions themselves are placeholders for desired political as well as personal transformation beyond the horizon of the ordinary appearances and immediate sensations of belonging.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See Lauren Berlant, “68, or Something,” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 124–55 and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 130–48; and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

§ DESIRE, NARRATIVE, COMMODITY, THERAPY



still image from *Marnie* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)

Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964) tells the story of a woman who appears to hate men, but who uses her competence and her beauty in a way that has the structure of a seduction. Efficient in the office and icily striking, she so bewitches her bosses that, vulnerable with desire, they relax their managerial rules around her: when they manifest this double vulnerability she absconds with their money. This is the back-story of the film's first scene: we enter as the police interview a Mr. Strutt, who has been both aroused and embezzled by Marnie (played by Tippi Hedren). Here is the first thing he, or anyone, says about her: "That little witch. I'll have her put away for twenty years. I knew she was too good to be true. Always so eager to work overtime, never made a mistake, always

pulling her skirt down over her knees as though they were a national treasure.”

You would call Marnie a plain seductress, were it not that her confidence game always bleeds beyond the scene of the crime to other disturbed places, spaces of antithetical power and abjection. Each time she steals she changes identity, takes a brief vacation to ride her prized horse, and brings gifts and funds to her mother, who thinks that she has triumphed legitimately in the financial world.

What to make of this pattern, this woman? At the start we think Marnie might be evil: in the five opening minutes before the film shows her face, it shows her body remaking its feminine style and choosing from among several legal identities. That femininity is the scene of her disruption is figured in the way she hides fraudulent Social Security cards in the secret compartment of a gold reticule. But we soon see that Marnie has been subject to trauma, and that her repeated routine is a circuitous way of seducing, not men, but her mother — to love her, protect her, accept her, repair her blockages to manifesting maternal love. It turns out that Marnie killed a man when she was young, a drunk and menacing client of her prostitute mother's, and that her mother took the rap for it: the memory half-repressed by Marnie's traumatic amnesia and her mother's cold and protective silence about the event is figured constantly by symptoms such as panic attacks,

nightmares, and sexual frigidity, which, unlike Marnie herself, never seem to lie.



still image from *Marnie* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)

But Marnie meets up with a man who is her match. Along with running a business, Mark Rutland (played by Sean Connery) studies animal instincts (zoology, entomology, and marine biology) and specializes in engendering “trust.” He falls for Marnie during the first panic attack he sees, and as he learns of the criminal ways in which she has made men “pay” for the sex they never had, he pays back the debts her robberies have incurred. Then Rutland focuses on fixing her sexual problem: he exploits her fear of prison to trap her into a marriage, and eventually rapes her in their honeymoon bedroom. Then, hastily acquiring some psychoanalytic expertise, through books

like *Sexual Aberrations of the Criminal Female*, *Frigidity in Women*, and *The Psychopathic Delinquent and Criminal*, he compels Marnie to renounce her aversion to intimacy and to beg him for help: in turn, he enables her “real” story to come out in the open, and accomplishes healing through the narrative conversion of trauma to love.

Marnie’s closing lines in the film, “I don’t want to go to jail, Mark. I want to stay with you,” confirm both parodically and sincerely the husband’s sense that romance and the psychological sciences use much the same contract to aid the impaired subject, the one who desires but cannot achieve entry into a love plot: in this contract, a masterful subject tells a more vulnerable one that he will enable her to assume a full and sustaining identity if she devotes herself entirely to inhabiting the intimate scene he prepares for her. At first Marnie refuses the terms of this exchange, designating them as tools that use money and institutional power to advance the sexual entitlement of men. As Marnie remarks mockingly, “You Freud, Me Jane.” But *Marnie* also suggests that to be healthy the woman must conclude that consent to the normative contract of intimacy is indeed the condition of her happiness, and that the terms of her earlier protests were a part of her mental illness. Marnie does this by coming to believe, nonsensically, that Mark’s judgment and love

will produce for her a clean break with the past, and thus return to her her “own” story. This fantasy of narrative repair suggests that psychoanalysis is the science of desire’s shattering and traumatic history, while romance involves magical thinking about desire’s future. It matters not that Hitchcock might have seen all of this resolution ironically or that he might have sadistically identified with both protagonists. What matters is that this transfer from the epistemology of symptom to that of repair through love’s genre is conventional, and does not read as avant-garde or unintelligible.

Marnie’s gendered distribution of therapeutic modes suggests that the conventional narratives and institutions of romance share with psychoanalysis many social and socializing functions. As sites for theorizing and imaging desire, they manage ambivalence; designate the individual as the unit of social transformation; reduce the overwhelming world to an intensified space of personal relations; establish dramas of love, sexuality, and reproduction as the dramas central to living; and install the institutions of intimacy (most explicitly the married couple and the intergenerational family) as the proper sites for providing the life plot in which a subject has “a life” and a future. That these forms are conventions whose imaginary propriety serves a variety of religious and capitalist institutions does not mean that

the desire for romantic love is an ignorant or false desire: indeed, these conventions express important needs to feel unconflicted and to possess some zone where intimacy can flourish. But in the modern United States, and the places its media forms influence, to different degrees, 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. The reduction of life's legitimate possibility to one plot is the source of romantic love's terrorizing, coercive, shaming, manipulative, or just diminishing effects — on the imagination as well as on practice.



Most important to this essay is addressing the ways that fantasies of romantic love and of therapy posit norms of gender and sexuality as threats to people's flourishing and yet themselves are part of the problem for which they offer themselves as a solution. It's not just that psychoanalysis has tended to organize the world around the scene that gives privilege to modes of embodiment, anxiety, and authority that serve straight men's interests in maintaining (even a contingent) privilege; at the same time, popular romance, pretending no science, arranges the world around hetero-feminine experiences and desires for intimacy.

In each discourse, the sexual other is deemed, *a priori*, to be emotionally inadequate. Of course, people of any gender rarely or barely inhabit these ideals fully or unambivalently,⁵⁶ but these ideals nonetheless mark the horizons of fantasy and fulfilled identity by which people come to measure their lives or process their confusions. The institutions and ideologies of romantic/familial love declare woman/women to be the arbiters, sources, managers, agents, and victims of intimacy: the love plots that saturate the public sphere are central vehicles for reproducing normative or “generic” femininity. In this next segment of our investigation of desire/fantasy, we will focus on its romantic commodities: first, on some of its popular narrative forms and second, on three related kinds of popular culture that organize the conventional meanings of desire, gender, and sexuality: therapy culture, commodity culture, and liberal political culture.



So far in this book desire has appeared as an ambivalent energy organized by processes of attachment. It manifests an enormously

⁵⁶ See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

optimistic drive to generate sustained intimate contact. But its typical forms are also said to be motivated by psychic trauma, associated with perversion and melancholic masochism, and structured by dramas of incest, castration, shame, and guilt. In the popular culture of romance such instability and ambivalence are always shaped by the girdle of love. These dramas are always formed in relation to a fantasy that desire, in the form of love, will make life more simple, not crazier. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl: this generic sequence structures countless narratives both high and low (sometimes with the genders reversed).⁵⁷

The fantasy forms that structure popular love discourse constantly express the desire for love to simplify living. The content of these narratives is, in a sense, just a surface variation on a narrowly-constructed theme: love's clarifying wash is expressed positively, in bright-eyed love stories, and negatively, in narratives that track failure at intimacy in the funereal tones of tragedy or the biting tones of cynical realism. Even when ambivalence organizes a narrative, keeping desire and negativity in close quarters, love is often named as the

⁵⁷ See the film *Boy Meets Girl* (dir. Lloyd Bacon, 1938), a tale about the representational conventions and effects of Hollywood's obsession with romance.

disappointing thing that ought to have stabilized these antithetical drives. Thus in the wish for romance, love plots insist on a law for desire. But the law is, as usual, contradictory. In the popular rhetoric of romance, love is a most fragile thing, a supposed selflessness in a world full of self; its plots also represent the compulsion to repeat scenes of transgression, ruthlessness, and control, as well as their resolution into something transcendent, or at least consoling, still, stabilized — at least for a moment.

The pseudo-clarities of sexual difference play a large part in conventionalizing this relation of risk and fantasy. Love plots are marked by a longing for love to have the power to make the loved one transparent, and therefore a safe site on which to place one's own desire without fear of its usual unsettling effects. The trope of "love at first sight" expresses this wish as well: when I saw you, it was as though I had lived my whole life in a moment — I knew, then, my fate. The contemporary bestseller *The Bridges of Madison County* expresses this set of desires, but not because they are conventional: the fictive author's frame narrative marks the story as a revolutionary repudiation of a culture that has hardened to love's transformative and self-realizing potential. Its protagonists, Robert Kincaid and Francesca Johnson, do not experience love at first sight, but feel so inexorably

drawn toward each other that they soon “know” that all of human history has worked to bring them together and given them instant mutual knowledge. To express the feeling that love has finally brought them what love is supposed to bring everyone, the book uses a language of ghostliness and haunting: for the feeling of love that they had both cherished and relinquished as they grew older and disappointed now returns like a ghost, a transparent body that haunts *them*, infuses their lives with a spirit. When they make love, which they do for just a few long days before Francesca’s husband returns, all of material life dissolves into “shape and sound and shadow”; their language breaks down into elemental “small, unintelligible sounds.”⁵⁸ The perfect asociality of their intimacy means that when Robert leaves Francesca they can experience their love for the rest of their lives as a perfect object, an animating ghost that was true to their desire.

The wish this novella expresses — that a man would come to a woman and understand her without aggressive probing; that he would be critical of masculinity without being ashamed of it or himself; that he would be capable of both hardness and softness, and that this would provide a context for the woman to

⁵⁸ Robert James Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 108.

experience herself as freely as he does — is the structural stuff of popular romance. The story that love is invulnerable to the instabilities of narrative or history, and is a beautifully shaped web of lyrical mutuality, is at the ideological core of modern heterosexuality. It enables heterosexuality to be construed as a relation of desire that expresses people's true feelings. It says nothing of the institutions and ideologies that police it (in *Bridges* the local community has a sharp nose for adultery). To the degree that a love story pits lyrical feelings about intimacy against the narrative traumas engendered in ordinary or public life, it participates in the genre of romance: the love plot provides a seemingly non-ideological resolution to the fractures and contradictions of history. The mix of utopianism and amnesia this suggests is, as we have previously said, the fetish-effect of fantasy.

But what about the many times when love fails to sustain a concrete life context and the identities shaped within it? What about the times when the intimate other remains opaque to the desiring subject? Why are the transparency and simultaneity promised by love not automatically considered a mirage and a fraud, given the frequency with which this wish is disconfirmed by experience? It should not be surprising to learn that narratives of romantic failure are dedicated, frequently and paradoxically, to reanimating the belief in love's

promise to structure both conventional life and the magical life of intimate mutuality across distance and difference. Toni Morrison's *Sula* frames two such moments, in each of which the fetish of a transparent, transcendent experience of desire is marked by an extreme, absorbing, death-driven melancholia.

Most famously, *Sula* has been called a lesbian novel, for the relations between Sula and her friend Nel organize everything good about their lives. (Not much is good about their lives except their friendship, really: they live during a period of severe economic distress and racial subordination in the United States between World War I and World War II.) Because there are no institutions or ideologies to give them sustaining language and contexts for their intimacy, and because heterosexuality names the structure of living for them, Sula dies before Nel realizes that Sula was her most intimate partner all along. Nel then releases an elemental howl (much like the murmuring sounds in *Bridges*) that figures the transparent truth of their mutual love, a love that can only be lived as the memory of something that did not happen, after history has reached its limit.

In contrast, Sula experiences this desire for transparency in the real time of love — but not with Nel. It is with her lover, Ajax, the man with whom, as a young adolescent, she had first experienced sexual excitement. Later in life they become lovers. To Sula this means want-

ing to know everything about him, which is the same thing as wanting him to be transparent. But Ajax's body is an obstacle to this, so during sex Sula fantasizes tearing off his skin, dissecting him layer by layer until she reaches the being beneath: rubbing his skin until the black disappears, taking a nail file or old paring knife to scrape at the layer of gold beneath, using a chisel to crack open what's left until the body is broken down to its earthly elements.⁵⁹ As she experiences this her body goes weak with a spreading orgasm: it ejects her from personhood, swallowed by the violent unboundedness of sex.

Directly after this event Sula becomes the most conventional beribboned feminine lover imaginable: Ajax sees this, and he flees her; she declines and dies of a broken heart. Once again love's promise violently fails, and once again it is women who experience the impossibility of optimism (and of femininity) in the overwhelming face of its failure. Yet one might also say that *Sula* signals a different horizon of possibility for desire, a form of intimacy made of sights and smells and inchoate intensities, more than sounds, identity, or language: this form of desire disregards the conventional institutions and ideologies of intimacy, in-

⁵⁹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 130–31.

cluding conventional heterosexuality and the reproductive family, which seem in the book to ravage the very desires they uphold and societies they structure.



This desire for love to reach beyond the known world of law and language enables us to consider the idea that romantic love might sometimes serve as a placeholder for a less eloquent or institutionally proper longing. A love plot would, then, represent a desire for a life of unconflictedness, where the aggression inherent in intimacy is not lived as violence and submission to the discipline of institutional propriety or as the disavowals of true love, but as something less congealed into an identity or a promise, perhaps a mix of curiosity, attachment, and passion. But as long as the normative narrative and institutionalized forms of sexual life organize identity for people, these longings mainly get lived as a desire for love to obliterate the wildness of the unconscious, confirm the futurity of a known self, and dissolve the enigmas that marks one's lovers.

The formalism of Sula's desire, apparent throughout the novel, finds its most visible evidence in her will to destroy the object she loves in order to understand it. This opens up another way to address the logic of romantic love. If, on the one hand, the desire for

transparency in love is associated with producing a deep internal calm about identity, on the other hand, desire frequently seeks out and occupies the extremes of feeling. Sula does not think she is having a violent fantasy about Ajax: she thinks that she is loving him, and that love means the emancipation from self, here figured in the materiality of his body. Yet Sula's desire to dissect her lover raises questions about the relation between romance and pornography: what if her fantasy were written as a man's desire for a woman, such that during sex, we read of the man's desire to slice away at the woman's body? What if this were a gay or queer fantasy, how would you read it then? Does an explanation that uses a paradigm of masculine sexual privilege to explain Sula's "confusion" of desire with fantasies of violence "solve" these questions of fantasy, power, ethics, otherness, and the effects of gendering?

Sharon Thompson and others argue that there is effectively no difference between pornographic representations of sex and romance conventions. Both of these are said to involve the overcoming of people by desires, and both fantasize scenes of sexuality using realist modes of representation. It has been suggested that women use romantic fantasy to experience the rush of these extremes the way men tend to use pornography, and that fantasizing about intensified feeling can be a way of imagining the thrill of sexual or political

control or its loss, or, conversely, a way of overwhelming one's sexual ambivalence or insecurity with a frenzy of representation. It can also be a way of experiencing one's perverse impulses without taking on the identity "pervert." It is true that romance approaches the extremes of feeling and desire by way of a discourse of love: but love can be thought of as a way of managing the sheer ambiguity of romantic language and expectation. These suggestions give narrative shape to our previous discussion of the psychoanalytic model of fantasy. In that context, as well as here, these alternative possibilities for reading the sexual genres of fantasy express tensions internal to sexuality, and heterosexuality in particular. But insofar as heterosexuality has become the primary site that organizes self-knowledge and self-development, gay, lesbian and bisexual narratives of desire must be in dialogue with the utopian expectations of conventional love, and its different motives for fantasy.



I have been using fiction to give us a sense of love's narrative conventions. Fiction provides models of the relation between love's utopian prospects and its lived experience; and modern women's fiction in particular seeks to create

subjects who identify with love's capacity to overcome the troubles of everyday life. This means that romantic narrative conventions argue for continuing to believe that femininity is defined through an unambivalent faith in the love plot while also developing a critical distance on that belief, as it measures the costs of women's submission to men (who are said to have less skill and investment in the project of intimacy).

This latter, critical, discourse has its own space outside of the novel: therapy culture. In the United States since the 1910s, love talk has been associated with therapeutic rhetoric in U.S. popular culture. Advice columns, self-help pedagogy, didactic short stories, moral exhortations, autobiographies, and case studies have popularized psychoanalysis, muted its discussions of the pervasiveness of perversion, and sought to help people, especially women, adjust their desires and their self-relations to the norms and forms of everyday life. (The gay and lesbian public sphere proliferates with self-help and advice literatures too: these scenes of representation and advice help non-normative sexual subjects trade information about the specificity of their practices of love and sex, which overlap without reproducing entirely the norms of heterosexual culture).

Self-help discourse has tended to reproduce the split romance ideology that we have been developing: valorizing the promise of love and

the mutual obligations of lovers, it presumes that problems in love must be solved by way of internal adjustment, to make certain that its conventional forms can remain and keep sustaining the signs of utopian intimacy. Individuals are told that: the normative ideologies and institutions of intimacy can work for them, but men and women are different species who will never experience the intimate other's desire in the same language or with the same intensity; there are "rules" of seduction and for the maintenance of the intimate other which should be followed, but about which it is bad to be explicit; romantic intimacy is an addiction that stimulates weakness and stunts growth, and yet is central to maturity; sex should be central, but not too central to love; the norms of propriety and responsibility that organize conventional lives are right, decent, and possible, but also boring, violent, and incomplete; and, within reason, anyone should get what she wants. This includes conventional norms about sexual practice itself: as discussions about sex have become more publicly available, it would seem that more varied practices have been normalized over the course of the twentieth century. Yet remaining remarkably stable has been the ideology that sex must seem natural: heterosexuality seems to require that any pedagogy between lovers must take place away from the sex itself, so that the image of the sex act as an expressive act of

an unambivalent individual can be preserved. This form of hypocrisy is, currently, conventional to sex. Generally this ideology is addressed to women, who are deemed responsible for maintaining the emotional comfort of everyone in their sphere: but the unstated presumption in much self-help culture is that heterosexual intimacy is constantly in crisis and that its survival is crucial for the survival of life as we know it (a claim which is not false, but which of course does not tell the whole story of how desires are served by the reproduction of heterosexuality as a norm that gets called Nature).

When people whose sexual lives do not assimilate to the norms that are organized by this pedagogy adapt the logics of romantic love to themselves, they too can adapt their lives to the ways its institutions and moral codes have historically steadied and screened out the threatening instability of desire. But since, as we have suggested, gays and lesbians have had, historically, no institutions to enable the kinds of stability and disavowal available to heterosexuals, a greater degree of public explicitness has characterized non-normative forms of intimacy. This threatens traditional sexual subjects.⁶⁰ But these kinds of rhetorical and

⁶⁰ David Sedaris confirms this in the opening of his autobiographical tale, "ashes": "The moment I real-

practical improvisations on the “normal” life of lived desire does not mean that queer sexual subjects do not fantasize about love and its rich stabilizing promises the way straights do: the couple in love is a seductive desire, a fantasy of being emancipated into form’s holding environment. But like all fantasies that might be lived, it requires a world that can sustain it, a context of law and norm that is only now emerging for gays and lesbians, just as it did not exist for women generally until the middle of the twentieth century.

Self-help consumers are exhorted to adjust themselves to these norms as though everyone, or at least all women, has the same, generic desires: and their failure to find a life to sustain their desires is the subject daily of interminable talk shows on television and radio, in gossip columns and fan magazines, on the Internet, and in the political public sphere. Yet that failure is not considered evidence of the impossibility of these theoretical statements about love: it is considered evidence of individual failure. As a result, an entire industry

ized I would be a homosexual for the rest of my life, I forced my brother and sisters to sign a contract swearing they’d never get married. There was a clause allowing them to live with anyone of their choice, just so long as they never made it official” (David Sedaris, *Naked* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1997], 235).

produces ever more therapeutic commodities offering strategies for surviving desire. Romance aesthetics is part of this strategy to link consumption to emotional survival. The huge industry of *things* that sustains itself on the reproduction of romantic fantasy (*Bridges*, for example, generated at least one film, two CDs, seven books, and reading groups worldwide) simultaneously de-isolates subjects who are suffering from desire, and yet names them as both the source of and the solution to their problems. (When was the last Marxist self-help book?) This emphasis pushes people to think of their private lives as the only material over which they might have any control (despite all the evidence to the contrary): as love and its intimate contexts come to bear the burden of establishing personal value generally, and especially for women, popular culture initiates a contradictory image set for establishing emancipatory agency. Love induces stuckness and freedom; love and its absences induce mental/emotional illness or *amour fou*; love is therapy for what ails you; love is the cause of what ails you. In that context, psychotherapy appears as that which can exacerbate or help you cure love sickness; popular culture genres offering wise conventionalities can cause and help you cure love sickness as well as or even better than psychotherapy.

Take, for example, the fantasy of romance as therapy that shapes the feminist “indie” art

film, *Ruby Sparks* (Dayton and Farris, 2012). Calvin (Paul Dano), a pale, white male writer in the J.D. Salinger tradition of ficto-autobiography, has a massive writing block. He has no life, and he cannot write. His therapist suggests that, to cure his blockage both to fantasy and living, Calvin write about a person who can see what is lovable in his scruffy, drooly, gender-confused dog (a male dog that urinates in a bitch-squat style). Calvin does not find this suggestion comic or allegorical, which it is. Instead, he dreams about a young woman named Ruby Sparks giving that kind of kind attention to the abject dog, and then writes her into existence as his own lover to love and accept him completely. After being briefly disturbed about the psychotic implications of bringing his Real Doll to life (and unaware of the aesthetic precedents from *Galatea* on), he becomes a happy man living in a bubble with his ideal girl.

But as time passes, Calvin finds Ruby (Zoe Kazan) insufferable. He writes her as strong and artistic, but cannot tolerate her autonomy when she develops her own story; he rewrites her as a slavishly loving doormat, but is also turned off by her subordination when she turns to want only him. As he revises her according to the specifications of his wish, he both desires and loathes her, feeling in and out of control: does this mean that he is a bad writer, or an ordinary lover? He can't bear any revision, any version of *what he fantasizes that he wants*.

Finally, in a climatic, *Tales of Hoffman*-like scene, Calvin reveals Ruby to herself as an automaton, a non-human under his power. Then, converting from mad scientist/slave master to sentimental revolutionary, he writes a final page of the novel that ends it all, but not exactly by killing her — or himself. In his closing sentences he proclaims that “history” hereby releases Ruby to herself, and he delivers her unto “freedom.” But this freedom from history and from Calvin’s control turns out, in the end, to amount to *her amnesia about his control of her*. In contrast, while Calvin loses Ruby, he retains control over the memory of her. (See, in contrast, the similar plot of the 2004 Charlie Kaufman film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, where the nebbish man and the dream-woman both erase their memories.)

As if to admit that she was nothing but a placeholder for his projections, Calvin then writes a successful “fiction” about this “real” woman, called, generically, *A Girlfriend*, which seems to be a hit. He then demands that his psychotherapist accept *his* fantasy of hetero-romance as real — that is, to accept that Ruby was flesh and blood real. This combination — to pretend to release control when he is exerting the most control; to demand that the judging world, in the person of his therapist, relinquish its control over the real to the patient’s personal fantasy; and to then hold his control over everyone and everything as his

enduring precious secret — is deemed a successful end of Calvin's therapy *and* the condition under which powerful art and love emerge.

Calvin's fantasy of an impossible love (whose structure is incoherent — contingent, contradictory, aggressive, passive, tender, and dissociated) occupies what Laplanche has called "a psychotic enclave." This separateness and misrecognition is just the condition of ordinary love, given the enabling structure of fantasy. What makes this particular film so revealing for our purposes is that popular therapeutic culture offers a form for seeming to repair the intractable fractures within and between people, by way of the demand for the very love that also intensifies these cleavages. But the film does not fall down once tied in these knots. Instead, in its habitation of the romantic comedy genre, the injuries of love are healed not by paying attention to the details of constancy and inconstancy love generates, and not by agreeing to try to live in love's awkward synchrony, but by insisting on the sovereignty of fantasy: accept *my* fantasy of love as *our* realism. This is like the conclusion that *Marnie* reached as well, but if in Hitchcock's film *Marnie* is the criminal/patient-as-lover who must accept Mark's fantasy or march off to prison, here the solution is deemed more just and satisfying for Ruby, because she has her "freedom" — from Calvin, memory, and consciousness.

What is the difference between Calvin's version of the lover's demand and a stalker's insistence that she is in a relationship with her unwilling object? The fantasy, which is at the heart both of popular culture and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is that love is the misrecognition you like, can bear, and will try to keep consenting to. If the Other will accept your fantasy/realism as the condition of their encounter with their own lovability, and if you will agree to accept theirs, the couple (it could be any relation) has a fighting chance not to be destroyed by the aggressive presence of ambivalence, with its jumble of memory, aggressive projection, and blind experimentation. This is not a cynical bargain, but the bargain that fantasy enables for any subject to take up a position in a sustained relation. At the same time, though, the film also calls on popular romance comedy genres to defang the violence and discomfort that inevitably ensue when the scene of love seeks out but never quite finds its resting form. The couple meets again in the film's final scene. When we meet Ruby at the beginning of the film, she is an unblocked painter who is untrained but has a lot of confidence in her art, and therefore she is all of the things that Calvin is not. At the end of the film, however, Ruby has no talent to distinguish herself. We encounter her lounging in the park, enjoying reading *A Girlfriend*, the book that is both her own story, and a story

that her amnesia bars her from recognizing as hers. She asks Calvin not to ruin the ending; he promises not to foretell and foreclose the ending, this time. Their agreement, to keep a secret and not to ask what it is, is the foundation of their love. The secret is the secret of their judgment of each other: but also he knows a story she will now never know. To not tell the ending is to not tell the beginning. It is a “happy ending” for the film, as amnesia and the closet are the conditions under which the lovers will take up positions as mutual fantasizers.

The film’s attempt to use romance comedy to heal the tragedy of what’s unbearable in love is predicted by its staging of their first real date at a zombie movie, which is followed by a scene where Calvin eats a dip that looks a lot like brains. This joke about the conditions for normative happiness sees the romance as more likely to revitalize the zombie fantasy of heterosexual romance — to dip into it after it’s dead — than is the psychotherapy that Calvin undergoes throughout the film. Psychotherapy admits that fantasy is unconscious; popular culture thinks it is all gesture, style, story, and mood. If experience and memory dent love, it argues, let’s try to retain its new car smell by foreclosing incidents that could become disturbing events. So if popular culture does dip into the scenarios of psychic fantasy that enable the subject to bear the disturbed relation

between what Eve Sedgwick calls the reparative and destructive gestures of attachment to one's objects (persons and worlds), that refuses any story that does not affirm love's fundamentally healing properties.



The use of the logic of romantic desire to neutralize, at least symbolically, the violence and attraction at play in hierarchical social relations implicitly suggests that structures and institutions of power can always be overcome by personal feelings, personal choices. It is not surprising, then, that the commodity form has a central place in the valorization of conventional or “normal” desire.⁶¹ The interactions of capitalism and desire, as we have already seen, are extremely complicated and contested. Capitalism could not thrive without an attention to and constant stimulation of desire, which means that the centrality of romance and sex to its persuasive strategies creates subjects

⁶¹ For histories of this relation see Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

simultaneously primed for conventional intimacy and profit-generating relations to consumption and labor.

Marx classically notes that the magical autonomy of the commodity form obscures the economic, social, and ideological relations that animate it in the process of its production: so, too, the mass cultural discourse of romance obscures, the way a fetish does, the relations between the hegemonic processes of collective life and what people typically imagine as love. People learn to identify with love the way they identify with commodities: the notions of personal autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfillment so powerful in love discourse seem to be the same as those promised by national capitalism. At the same time, romance is a vehicle for marketing heterosexuality as the very form of fantasy and also the normal context in which fantasy can be lived, but not in a generic way: the heteronormative love plot is at its most ideological when it produces subjects who believe that their love story expresses their true, nuanced, and unique feelings, their own personal destiny.

This idealistic and commodified aspect of romance has also inspired some ways of relating dominant and subordinate peoples to each other across fields of difference and ambivalence. As we described earlier, liberal political culture posits individual autonomy and self-development at the center of value in social

life. Romance ideology participates in this project by depicting sentiment or *feeling* as the essential and universal truth of persons. Feeling is what people have in common despite their apparent differences. Thus liberals have long responded to antagonism between dominant and subordinate peoples by saying to the dominant culture: the people you think of as Other only *appear* to threaten your stability and value by their difference; they have feelings too; they suffer too; therefore you are essentially alike. You desire the same thing “they” do, to feel unconflicted, to have intimacy. If you feel ambivalent, or in some relation of antagonism and fascination to the members of the population from which you feel intensely estranged, you can understand your unease the way you understand sexual difference under heterosexuality, as something that can be overcome by *desire* and cultivated *identification*. Many people argue that love of the other is a powerful tool for bringing marginalized groups into the dominant social world; on the other hand, sentimental identification with suffering created by national, racial, economic, and religious privilege has long coexisted with laws that discriminate among particular forms of difference, privileging some against others (see laws against interracial, interreligious, or gay marriage, for instance).

CONCLUSION

What are the relations among the world-building drives of love, the critical and utopian fantasies contained there, the project of psychoanalysis (the science), and self-help (its popular culture)? How does the constant return of the subject to adjusting herself and her intimate others at the scene of her conflicted desire enable and disable the difficult and risky parts of self- and social transformation? What is the relation between the aggressivity of desire and its need to protect and sustain its objects despite also exposing them to fantasy's projections, negations, idealizations — distortions? Apart from creating jealousy, threat, or moral superiority, what might it do to people to reveal to themselves and each other that their particular desires are unbearable in their contradictions, unknown in their potential contours, and yet demand reliable and confirming recognitions? How might it become bearable to face the ways visceral responses combine convention and something else, perhaps inarticulate or illegitimate desires? What does it mean that, unreliable in desire, we nonetheless demand the other to be perfectly attuned to what's out of tune? Where are the social infrastructures through which people can

reimagine their relation to intimacy and the life building organized around it in ways that are as yet uninevitable or unimaginable?



This little book has tried to say some things about desire and love: that there are no master explanations of them; that they destabilize and threaten the very things (like identity and life) that they are disciplined to organize and ameliorate; that there is a long history of using the abstractions and institutions of “love” as signs and sites of propriety, so that the “generic” subjects imagined in a love plot tend to be white, Western, heterosexual, and schooled to the protocols of “bourgeois” privacy; that these tacit proprieties have been used to justify the economic and physical domination of nations, races, religions, gays, lesbians, and women. Yet here the story must return to the happy ending in which desire melds with the love that speaks its conventional name. Even now, despite everything, desire/love continues to exert a utopian promise to discover a form that is elastic enough to manage what living throws at lovers. In telling the story of some things that have been touched by the intensities of desire, fantasy, and love, the project of this book is also to reopen the utopian to more promises than have yet been imagined and sustained.