



A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE: Three Approaches in Ten Pages

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ONE: LIP (INTRODUCTION TO AMBIVALENCE)

There's a part of me that wants to give a little lip and simply reject that we have never had a properly political concept of love. It's been floated by so many as a solution—literally, a loosening or an unfastening, a dissolution—to the problem of social antagonism, or fractured community. I take the genre of Michael's essay to be propositional, though, as it references only a sliver of what our conversations suggest he actually thinks might be done with love. But I will focus on what's here, because to love is to deal with what's here amid the noise of projected out pasts, futures, and states. But “dealing with” might point too much toward exchange and bargaining, the forging of false equivalences. Maybe I should say what I always say, which is that I propose love to involve a rhythm of an ambition and an intention to stay in sync, which is a lower bar than staying attuned, but still hard and awkward enough.¹ The anxiety to define—a key feature of being in proximity to all magnetic ideas—especially cleaves to love, and so the conversion of a love into a properly political concept must induce attention to what to do with the freight the term ports with it: in this case, quite a huge dust ball.

Michael proposes to release the sensorium from capital, which means from the habits of attention and mediation that translate objects immediately into property, equate possessive individualism with sovereign freedom, and conflate narcissism with recognition, ethics, and justice. He begins with a question of equivalence: if not the money form as the engine of social exchange, then what? What mode of

relation could be the alter to the “accumulation drive” that promotes both spending and hoarding?² What could interrupt the translation of all social relations into propertied ones? What other kinds of infrastructure for proximity can develop that will bind us to the world in which we find each other; or bind us to each other and, in such binding, make a world? It’s hard even to lasso the right phrases together to get the rhythms of sociality in sufficient sync to render a habitable material present, or world.

The option that presents itself to him is love. “I wouldn’t do that for love or money” means to him that neither seduction by love or money would provide enough pleasure to balance out the risk of some social action. This suggests to him that love might already have the alter-power so far mainly given over to the money form to provide the kind of pervasive virtual infrastructure in which a mass of people could flourish, imagine mobility optimistically, and seek genuinely to be in relation in real time, making an alive life. “We lose ourselves in love and open the possibility of a new world,” he writes. Right now love is a prisoner of that money form’s pedagogy of possessiveness, as Marx would say, but it could be released into the world when no longer copying property, so that we, through our senses, would belong to the world, rather than it belonging to us. I have also loved that in Marx.³ I also like the pastoral of self-loss on behalf of a nonrepetition of the world as it presents itself. It is a leap of faith to seek the end of a world on behalf of a fantasy. Mostly people can’t bear too much of a leap, though, and hold on for dear life to toxic anchors, even when they’re demanding change. But the revolutionary kernel of the impulse to throw it all over through the leap of coordinating oneself with virtual strangers, and then to become a part stranger to oneself in the emerging atmosphere of the new relation, cannot be denied.

But like so many social theorists of love, Michael is faced with separating bad love (narcissism) from good love (openness to transformation). He is trying to imagine a social and affectual world organized by processes of being-with and not profiting-from. This is where what he means by love becomes something other than love, as I understand love. Many kinds of interest are magnetized to the rhythm of convergence we call love. Because interest brings us there, no amount of pushing out narcissism—the subject’s aggressive desire to reencounter herself through her objects—can stanch the fierce tendency of love to express a desire to know and be known, to have amoral curiosity and incuriosity, to be excited but not too much, to be transported but not too far, and to feel held in the world without having any obligation to hold the world back. Love is not entirely ethical, if it has any relation

to desire, which it must, if it is to be recognizable as love. If in capitalism “greed is good,” so too in love the inconvenient appetites must be given their genres.

Of course this is the energy that Michael wants to convert: In *Commonwealth*, he and Toni Negri also write about “the element of force” in love to “set in motion” the work of normative negation that a revolutionary project must assume as its burden.⁴ If love is force, though, it is a mess-making force, as its aim is to dissolve toxic sureties. There are no sureties on the other side of surety. Such a process does not clean up the world well, but neither should social theory try such a thing. I don’t think that Michael intends such a pastoral outcome. But then is love sufficient, or: how could it be made to be so? I am not suggesting that we rescue narcissism with some form of self-sacrificial nonnarcissism, or a good narcissism, such as the inculcation of “impersonal narcissism” that Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani have so movingly offered. In that affect relation one sees oneself loving not a copy of oneself but the “thatness” or singularity of the other, the beloved, the world. This is also basically Zygmunt Bauman’s argument in *Liquid Love*.⁵ I’m on the side of loving “thatness.” But we have to factor in the overdeterminations of interest, of being interested.

The world has to survive the long episodes in which one or one’s people do not know what to want, apart from something vaguely affective; then there are episodes in which crisis threatens survival norms and everyone’s scrambling to find an anchor and the resources seem limited, except for those of aggression, which are unlimited;⁶ and then there is the ordinary in which incompatible needs and fantasies are always on the table, related to structural crisis or the singular chaos people bring to relationality. My point here is this: Incompatible needs and fantasies induce ambivalence. Internal chaos produces external chaos that expresses it without copying it. Any social theory worthy of its ambition requires a space for enigmatic, chaotic, incoherent, and structurally contradictory attachments; it needs a way to assess the attachment needs that put people in relation without promising to deliver “a life” that feels cushioned. There is no cure for ambivalence. This is what it means to move within an object world. Maybe what Michael would claim is that taking the upside of love, the desire to induce change without trauma, to become revolutionized and open and yet more oneself, which is at the heart of the concept of its motivating force, is what he means by love, and not the other things. On his behalf I could add that love is one of the few situations where we desire to have patience for what isn’t working, and affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence. This is the

main upside of making love a properly political concept, it seems to me. A form of affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment.

So, let's take on his desire, for a moment, before returning to mine. He must be asking, what would we do for love? Or, what would we allow love to do to us? If money is the thing that increases our power under the current regime of value, how would our relation to desires and worlds become increased by exchanging, or circulating on the principle of love? How would such a shift, such an experiment, induce "a renewal or extension of the existing human senses"?

I could respond to this offer of love by offering to include other anchors for unlearning possessive individualism and taking up the relationality rhythms and modes that also already obtain. In previous work I have considered advocating for "intimacy" and "attachment" as substitutes, in tune with the way Foucault offered up friendship. When I turned intimacy into a resource for queer theory my purpose was to defrock the normative emotions on which good life worlds were built. Intimacy involves relations that largely proceed by way of what goes without saying, (*L. intimus* "inmost" [adj.], "close friend"): the intimated, the *intime*. But many more sustaining relations than the normative ones go on without saying, because they provide reliable rhythms. Queer theory is a training in paying attention to all that, the multiplicity of beats and points of convergence that correlate the surprise and contingency of relationality and desire with threat, delight, and ongoingness, world making and world building (incl. the sustaining rhythms of irregular encounters). But the problems of the social are various: the problem of what counts as a resource for living; the problem of greed and defensiveness; and the problem that our objects for achieving happiness are all stand-ins (this is what makes love ordinary as well as revolutionary), which doesn't make them false, but objects of ambivalence. We all know that we are replaceable. We all know that we have crossed wires and incoherently magical thinking about the objects in relation to which we endure.

Then there are other "affective facts."⁷ The too-closeness of the world is as much a factor of social life as the alterity of the world, and those descriptions are not antinomies. If we began with a notion that the social is a burden and necessary, a positive and negative magnet, a thing we cannot bear to murder or preserve, then the question of attachment to the collective project of making worlds looks quite different. Attachment as a concept does not carry with it the sentimentality that love does: a sentimentality that a hegemonic ambition requires, providing the seduction for the risk of convergence.⁸ But attachment more accurately describes the affective dimensions of being propped on and relying on an object onto which fantasies of flourishing are projected, such as those of what a good life is, who one's

people are, what kinds of politics, ethics and value make things make satisfying sense. After all, one attaches to the world, or not, not in the mode of decision or emotion, but thrown into architectures of trust that are built from within in the process of being in life (incl. from desperation when there are no reliable anchors for trust).⁹

These arguments do not mean that love is a useless concept—its normative utility is that love allows one to want something, to want a world, amid the noise of the ambivalence and anxieties about having and losing that merely wanting an object generates, even when the object is a political one. But I would rather begin my thought looking at the whole field of what it takes to sustain an attachment to the world. The ambitions and capacities of love would be magnetized to attachment, but other modes of relating would be too, the ones involving proximity, solidarity, collegiality, friendship, the light touch and intermittent ones, and then the hatreds, aversions, and not caring (the pleasure of the city: to be proximate without a plan).¹⁰ I want a bigger imagination of the affective dimensions that it would take to (re)build a world.

TWO: WHEN MY “LOVE IS IMPOTENT—A MISFORTUNE” (BEYOND RECIPROCITY)

Here are some questions in return. We must admit that the essay takes love on in its vernacular form. It does not state where its concept comes from: Marx, Christianity, Spinoza, and Romance are in the air. Not so much psychoanalysis (which has its own problems moving between vernacular love and the structural love I prefer to call attachment). But this is what love demands: to take on the baggage that comes with the optimism of attaining an attachment, a point of convergence.

So, what does it mean for the ambition to make love a properly political concept that it is much easier to imagine dying for or from love than living for or with love? Also, is Michael’s version of love a love we would feel as love? Or is it a structure or principle that would animate us while we might be having other strong and or diffused feeling events hooking us to the world and the world to us? If we bracket the version of love that fetishizes reciprocity in kind, which Michael attaches to narcissism, how else can we think about reciprocity, and how will we sense it and agree on forms for it? This question haunts my entire engagement with relationality and social theory at the moment, as the question of what will count as reciprocity traverses sexuality, labor, political economy, and the whole ecospectrum of commensality.

So I fear that love asks too much or too little—I can't tell, I'm ambivalent—for it to ground a social theory. But thinkers I admire do keep returning to it: for example, along with Michael, and those we've previously cited, Chela Sandoval and Frantz Fanon are rigorous and inspiring predecessors to our conversation.¹¹ They try to articulate love's various forms of binding (prophetic, erotic, aggressive, singular, collective) to deal with all the structural ways that we are not beginning from an "all things being equal" ground, which it isn't. And what if the ground for love includes the form of difference that inequality produces, insofar as our objects have qualities we don't have that we want to be around? Fanon worries about this, and Jane Gallop claims it.¹² For them, and for me, we cannot leach from love that it requires interest and attention and disinterested self-discipline, in reparation for the over-absorption that leads to inattention and destructive will. Love requires a lot of patience for forcefully conflicting aims, and for working out what forms satisfaction will take. I know that "satisfaction" might seem like too high a bar when the Earth's and so many populations' survival are at stake, but there has to be an index alongside survival that attends to flourishing as well.

A training in that relation of patience to need is the training love can provide, but love usually does not achieve the emancipatory relationality of the ignorant schoolmaster.¹³ Affectively speaking, we are not trained in the arts of awkward, generous, investigative patience. But this exercise in thinking love as a properly political concept reminds me of Rancière's scenario, as I have brought everything I know to the table, and then proceeded in optimistic ignorance.

THREE: *PALINDROMES* (A FANTASIA ABOUT AN INFINITUDE OF TRANSITIONAL SUBJECTS)

I think collaboratively, scavenger that I am. So as this conversation is extended and virtual, I'll close off thinking with a film. Todd Solondz's *Palindromes* (2004) is a film about a child named Aviva Victor. Aviva wants one object: a baby to love and to be loved by. She is inspired to this after the suicide of her cousin, Dawn Wiener, whom Solondz had introduced in *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995). Dawn was nerdy, awkward, hostile, and tender, willing to love and abuse her potential rapist (a similarly abandoned child) so that she could have an attachment to something that might respond to her in an unautomatic way, not like the always jarring piano keys she plays or her highly normative parents and siblings. In *Palindromes*, Aviva is trying to keep off the harsh Normal that defeated Dawn. Also, Dawn is white and Aviva is African American, a difference on which there is no comment, because one question of the film is whether "casting" *X* specific being in

the role of the exemplary object really matters when we are talking about love. But because she represents this very question, Aviva is more than a little uncanny. She is like a living doll programmed with a small cluster of gestures through which she keeps cycling. But having the baby—whatever that stands for—and therefore a shot at a peaceful, reliable, reciprocal love is also the core organizing factor of her ambition to be. It makes her reckless, fearless, adaptive, and accepting of partial happiness, ordinary scavenger that she is.

She organizes her worlding energy to achieve what she wants, or its approximation. Solondz is not really a fan of humans. He finds them squishy and monstrous and cognitively disabled by their too-intense attachment to their appetites and habits of accumulation, which produce stupid ambitions: but this is mainly because the world does not offer felicitous objects, only precarious and perverse ones. There is love in this film but it is degraded in the way that Adorno and Horkheimer would say that popular forms are degrading: tinny, sentimental, conventional, damaged, and damaging substitutes for being in relationality such that any openness to the possibility of genuine transformation in the event of the encounter is either a defense, a false openness, or a road to catastrophe. Aviva refuses to accede to these judgments: Her relation to her optimism is to hold on to a phrase and make the world remake itself around it, and when it does not, she finds substitute objects and tries again. This might be cruel optimism, or not: The film is at once so flat and melodramatic it is hard to tell. But the structure of the film refracts this process and in so doing opens up, I think, something like what Michael wants done.

Aviva is played by eight actors. Their genders, races, and degrees of fatness and tallness change, as do their normative attractiveness and class-related comportment: they're graceful yet grotesques, even when they're played by a movie star.¹⁴ But they enact the same style of encountering the world, a dreamy, aleatory longing, and a slightly catlike stealthiness on their way to getting what they want and adjusting when necessary. For us watching the film, Aviva's substitutability holds what's tender and loving in the fiction's advocacy for loving "thatness," the stubborn singularity of personhood she represents without solidifying it in one body. (It's the same queer pedagogy as in the serial substitutions of Bob Dylan's embodiment in *I'm Not There* [Haynes, 2007].)

In the last scene Aviva has sex; and as her sovereignty dissolves into a recessive *jouissance* all of the actors who have played her cycle in ghostly fashion through the place her body holds in the image. Sex is what retains those pockets of freedom to be oneself but unsovereign; to be in nondestructive relation without requiring a full-souled performance of relationality or world-building duration. As her bodies

appear and fade during sex, we don't know what it means—is she dissociated or fulfilled? But until the principle of beloved thatness reigns as a social principle, we won't know. There is something else missing, too—a vision of the impersonal world, of the conditions of the reproduction of life, beyond the ambition to forge some semblance of a social flesh. We know that love, suffusing our bodies and our interest, can lead us meanwhile to the impersonal, the structural vision, and that it can bear the weight of ambivalence and contradiction. But how far can the membrane stretch?

If *Palindromes* does not demonstrate love as a properly political concept—whatever that means, and more could be said—what we see there is that in the vernacular of love it is impossible to tell the difference between destructive and world-building impulses. We see that revolutionary impulses are destructive, too, but the spin it puts on that points to productive destruction (of the mommy–daddy–me machine, and yet families are still the fundamental imaginary and economic unit). A properly transformational political concept would provide the courage to take the leap into a project of better relationality that would give us patience with the “without guarantees” part of love's various temporalities; a properly transformational political concept would open spaces for really dealing with the discomfort of the radical contingency that a genuine democracy—like any attachment—would demand; a properly transformational political concept would release courage and creativity about how to make resources for living available to all objects in their thatness. Advancing a single vernacular term that converts the normative force of affect and emotion into one goad for a better sociality is not my project. I tend to multiply approaches, to loosen forms. But I am trying to stay in sync with Michael, and so I end with this thought. The problem of working in an emotional vernacular is that it brings with it narrative and affective promises: it is a genre of sorts. Love has the capacity to be such a magnet, if we could cluster around it a genuinely realistic and visionary set of transformations that do not overstate the consoling promises (such as Elaine Scarry's equation of justice with beauty) that sacrifice the human to an idealized vision.¹⁵

[love, politics, Hardt, affect, psychoanalysis]

NOTES

1. My generalizations about love in this essay derive from previous work on love and attachment that I'll list here: “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” Lauren Berlant, ed., *Critical Inquiry* 21(Winter[1998]):281–288; “Love, a Queer Feeling,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 432–451; “Starved,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106(3[2007]):433–444; “Remembering Love, Forgetting

- Everything Else: *Now, Voyager*,” in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 169–195; and “Neither Monstrous nor Pastoral, but Scary and Sweet: Some Thoughts on Sex and Emotional Performance in *Intimacies* and *What Do Gay Men Want?*” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19(2):261–273.
2. Keston Sutherland, “‘Akkumulationstrieb’: A Worlding/Writing Workshop,” Unpublished MS, Department of English, University of Sussex.
 3. See Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss, and the Senses,” *New Formations* 63(Winter [2007–08]):33–51.
 4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. xii–xiii.
 5. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 113–114. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Cambridge: Polity, 2003.
 6. I learned from Michael Hardt to think about the centrality of the debate between limitless and limited resources for the commons (whose emergence love would presumably make plausible), in “Two Faces of the Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen,” *Polygraph* 22(2010):265–274.
 7. I mean this to point to some propositions about how affect binds us to the social but also I mean it self-ironically. Brian Massumi calls an “affective fact” an affect that takes on empirical density through self-assertion. Given these page limits, I can’t argue all of my presuppositions. See “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact”; in *The Affect Theory Reader*; Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds.; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 52–70.
 8. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.
 9. This is Andrea Dworkin’s claim about the world-adhering normative function of sex in *Intercourse*, New York: Basic, 2006, pp. xxxiii, 60.
 10. “Light touch intimacy” is Nigel Thrift’s concept, in “But Malice Aforethought: Cities and the Natural History of Hatred,” in *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 217–218; for an elaboration of this general image of urban generosity not built on the bonds of love but degrees of genial proximity, see Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue*, New York: New York University Press, 1999.
 11. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; Frantz Fanon, *White Skin, Black Masks*, Richard Philcox, trans., New York: Grove, 2008.
 12. Lauren Berlant and Jane Gallop, “Loose Lips,” in *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*, New York: New York University Press, 2001, p. 253.
 13. Jacques Rancière; *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*; Kristin Ross, trans.; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
 14. Jennifer Jason Leigh is the only well-known actor to inhabit Aviva. She is played by Leigh; Shayna Levine (as “Bob” Aviva); Emani Sledge (“Dawn” Aviva); Valerie Shusterov (as “Judah” Aviva); Hannah Freiman (as “Henry” Aviva); Rachel Corr (as “Henrietta” Aviva); Sharon Wilkins (as “Mama Sunshine” Aviva); and Will Denton (as “Huckleberry” Aviva). These names are for cast-differentiation purposes and do not make it into the film.
 15. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.