

Love is what people say it is: Performativity and Narrativity in Critical Love Studies

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Abstract: This article outlines the objectives of Critical Love Studies, their grounding in a wide range of critical theory, a multi-disciplinary methodology linking narrative approaches from literary studies, linguistics, social sciences and psychology, and gives an example of practical application in literary scholarship and participatory community research into experiences of love in the human lifespan.

It introduces the concept of “love acts” which are likened to performative speech acts in the ways in which they create social reality. The relationship between an occurrence of love (a set of interrelated love acts) and its social context may be affirmative or constitute some form of deviation from the norm. In some cases, love acts which deviate from the norm achieve “critical mass” and have a transformative effect on their social world.

Finally, this article discusses the love *dispositif*. A *dispositif* or apparatus is constituted by the dynamic and productive interplay of discourses, practices, and the material conditions for their existence. The love *dispositif* hence encompasses love norms, love institutions, love theory, all speech acts and practices generated by and in the name of love, as well as the material conditions, such as the gendered division of reproductive labour, and even oxytocin levels in people who experience love. None of these in isolation suffice to understand or explain “love”. Together they produce and reproduce everything we experience or represent as love.

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In this article I will outline the objectives of Critical Love Studies, their grounding in a wide range of critical theory, a multi-disciplinary methodology, and finally gives an example of practical application in literary scholarship and participatory community research into experiences of love in the human lifespan. In so doing, I will make three fundamental claims about love. Firstly, that we cannot grasp its full potentiality (it is always yet to come); secondly, that it is performative (it needs to come into being in individual occurrences of love); and thirdly, that changes to the ways in which people experience and represent love happen through countless iterations of what I will call “love acts”. Love acts, like speech acts, do not have any mysterious powers. They simply take place within a normative framework which makes certain acts – such as saying “I love you” – intelligible. These three claims are rooted in the basic understanding that love is relational in two ways. On the one hand, love needs to relate to an object, as fleeting as that may be. Types of love objects are habitually used to differentiate between phenomenological categories such as parental love, neighbourly love, romantic love (i.e. “sexualized intimate love”, Milligan 2011, 45), and so forth. On the other hand, love relates to a set of rules which define the validity of love in a given socio-historic context (cf. Pearce 2007). The relationship between an occurrence of love (a set of interrelated love acts) and its social context may be affirmative or constitute some form of deviation from the norm. In some cases, love acts which deviate from the norm achieve “critical mass” and have a transformative effect on their social world.

A telling example of social transformation processes can be found in debates surrounding marriage. By the 1990s, love theorists such as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) or Anthony Giddens (1993) were convinced that marriage as a model for the organization of intimate relationships had been discredited. A perception of high divorce rates (measured against a 1950s white middle-class standard) and the spread of new relationship models such as communes, serial monogamy, couples who live apart, one-parent families, and blended families with more than two parents, as well as the increased visibility of gay and lesbian people in society, meant that Giddens declared the new millennium a brave new world of intimate democracy based on non-hierarchical couples in “confluent love” (1993, 61). De-traditionalization seemed to be an irreversible process. Fast forward a couple of decades, and we find ourselves in a world which has undergone massive changes in terms of fast, global, multi-nodal communication, while traditional values, often fuelled by conservative and fundamentalist religious belief, have made a comeback. Regarding marriage, discourses have shifted from the 1990s set-up, in which progressives who disregarded marriage were pitted against conservatives who clung to it, to a new layering of discourses, in which many progressives and conservatives alike agree that marriage is the best way to organize intimate relationships between non-related adults. We usually do not ask any more why anyone should get married: we ask why anyone should be excluded from marriage. One could argue that traditionalists have won. The 1950s model of two well-adjusted parents with two adorable kids has spread to same-gender couples, and soon fertility technology will allow same-sex parents to have genetic offspring with each other (Ringler 2015). Still, there is a catch for traditionalists. Their model has won, but the price to pay has been to open it up to people of whom they are deeply suspicious. Equal

marriage is both marriage as we used to know it and it is not. It is concurrently the continuation and the annihilation of tradition. In other words, we are witnessing a case of *Aufhebung* in a Hegelian sense via Jacques Derrida (2001, 196-7). Gay and lesbian people saying “I do” first in private ritual, then in tolerant religious congregations, and finally in front of officers of the state marks a drift in what family, marriage, and love mean, powered by performative (speech) acts of love. New aspects of the potentiality of love have come into being. This is not a smooth process, as reports on violence against LGBTQ people show (Dehghani 2015); neither is it complete, as the increasing numbers of straight couples demonstrate who seek civil partnership instead of marriage (Allen 2009; Bowcott 2016).

In the first section of this article, I will make an attempt at defining some key concepts of Critical Love Studies in relation to narrative research in a wide sense of the term, spanning from literary scholarship via linguistics to social sciences. We will start with the obvious question: what is the love Critical Love Studies claim to be studying? My inevitable failure to give a definitive answer will allow us to explain what is critical about Critical Love Studies: namely, a self-critical stance which aims to avoid becoming judgmental or prescriptive about love. Narrative methodologies are characterized by their emphasis on paying close attention to the narration as well as the narrated and, through that, to the narrator/language user/interviewee. Paying attention to the ways in which people talk about their experiences of love is to be understood as an ethical stance which avoids as much as possible projecting normative love theories onto occurrences of love acts. Normative love theories are those which claim to possess the key to understanding love in general or a specific type of love. These may include theories based on an orthodox reading of Marx, Freud, Rougemont, Barthes, or Luhmann. The aim of Critical Love Studies, as I understand them, is to do justice to experiences and representations of love in their normativity as well as in their individuality. The interplay between pattern and deviation, or the general and the particular, is important to Critical Love Studies, as this opposition marks out the theatre of social relations and therefore experiences and representations of love.

A normative Marxist love theory, for example, which dismisses the perceived commercialization of romantic love in the age of consumer capitalism is more likely to judge love acts which seem to follow patterns of consumer behaviour. If I get a Valentine’s Day card for my wife, take her out to dinner, and even buy some hideously overpriced red roses, I appear to be following profit-driven, made-up social norms. What a staunchly anti-capitalist love theory cannot grasp though is that within the “false consciousness” (Projekt Ideologie-Theorie 1979), a lot of complex relationship work may be taking place. Imagine that my wife and I missed last year’s Valentine’s Day because of a bereavement in the family which started off a difficult year filled with grief and depression. Our going out for Valentine’s Day may very well be a turning point. It may be an experience of shared self-care and love. As a love researcher, you will not know about this unless you ask us open-ended questions. To ask open-ended questions is similar to “Narrative Inquiry”, which also is critical of (neo-) Marxist critique. Narrative Inquiry, however, reifies the “experience”, and levels differences between types of inquiries, which ultimately means that research is “just another conversation” sitting alongside the practical wisdom of people without the potential for overview (recognition of patterns) or induction (refinement of hypotheses) (cf. Pinnegar & Daynes 2007).

To give another example, the internet in general and dating apps such as *Grindr* and *Tinder* in particular have been vilified in the media (and by some love researchers, such as

Illouz 2013, 231; Badiou 2012, 5-8; Dunbar 2013, 222). Allegedly, they have killed off courtship and romance. Only Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2012) appears fascinated with the erotic potential of blended dating. A non-normative approach to blended online/offline match making and dating will instead keep an open mind towards the possibility of moments of great tenderness and deep connection experienced by users of these apps. Consequently, in the second part of this article, an offer is made of a non-normative love theory which takes a positive stance towards everyday performances of love as well as the elusive potentiality of love in general. The third and final part outlines an integrated research project which combines various types of narrative research with community engagement in the form of participatory co-design. Love is what people say it is, and not what experts say it should be.

What are Critical Love Studies?

Each occurrence of love should be judged against the backdrop of the socio-historic circumstances in which a set of love acts is performed. This does not mean that love has no universal traits. Looking at love from the viewpoint of narrative research, we must acknowledge that already on the most basic linguistic level, the lexis of English, there is a word called “love” which denotes a something which in order to exist must be distinguishable from many other things which are not love. What exactly this love is, we find much harder to grasp. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists no fewer than seven different uses of the noun, not counting scoring conventions in games such as tennis, and four categories for the verb. The linguistic valency of *to love* expresses attachment, desire, preference, and taking pleasure in something, as well as physical acts. We seem to mean rather different things when we state that we “love these shoes” or “love my partner”. This drift of meaning indicates that, although we may want to entertain the notion that there is a universal concept of love, we cannot actually tell what it is – at least not based on linguistic evidence. Things become even more complex when we look at other languages. A cursory glance at two other major languages of European origin confirms that there is subtle variation regarding the meaning of “to love”. In French, the addition of the adverb *bien* (well) downgrades *aimer* from loving to mere liking. Spanish offers three gradations to express affection for another person (*Me gustas. Te quiero. Te amo.*) whose appropriate usage (the correct socio-historic context) worries the amorous student of Spanish. These simple and well known examples appear to indicate that language plays a role in expressing love before we have even looked at questions of culture. It may very well be the case that the language we use to express our love for someone or something influences the ways in which we experience this love. Furthermore, the Hispanophone and Francophone spheres are vast, and English is not “owned” by British, Irish, American, Australian (etc.) speakers either. It has transformed into variants of global English which are informed by a huge number of environments. When a person in India speaks in English about love, they do not necessarily mean the same things as a person in the UK (cf. Twamley 2014).

The attention to detail which we have just given to the word love (and a good dose of scepticism regarding our ability fully to understand the object of our studies) should inform the attitude Critical Love Studies adopt in dealing with any occurrence of love. This is where we need close readings of love. Close reading is widely employed as a technique in literary

scholarship far beyond its ideological home in New Criticism (Brooks 1979; Wellek 1978). Close reading (also called practical criticism) activates potentiality in any given text by concentrating on the words on the paper (screen), and by downplaying for the duration of the exercise any information which is external to the text, such as literary traditions, paratext, or, in the classroom sometimes, even author name and title. Attention is directed to detail in the text as well as to individual responses of the reader. By noting down which parts of the text spoke to us, and those which did not speak to us, we aim critically to reflect on our preconceptions. Anything which triggers a reaction in the reader, be it surprise, pleasure, agreement, rejection, even boredom, throws a light on the interplay of pattern and deviation. In paying attention to the text and individual reader response, close reading also entails appreciation for the craftsmanship which was needed to write the text, and its ethical stance (Federico 2016). Good close reading accepts the limitations of the individual and should even embrace failure to understand. The dialogue between a text and the critical reader should consequently always be extended into a conversation between readers.

This is where we can take inspiration as love researchers. Critical Love Studies obviously do not operate outside socio-historical contexts, but they can make a systematic effort to read occurrences of love first as valid expressions of love. In this sense, practical criticism of love is the first exercise of Critical Love Studies. Where practical criticism of literature focuses on short forms such as poetry and hand-picked passages from longer narrative prose, narratology aims to understand narrative texts in their entirety. This is where we can safely widen our disciplinary scope: narratology (*The Living Handbook of Narratology* n.d.), discourse analysis (Schiffrin 2003), and narrative research (Narrative Research 2013) are driven by a dual interest in patterns and deviations from them. Patterns tell love researchers what the commonly held beliefs and widely accepted practices surrounding love are. Deviations, on the other hand, hint at the further potentiality of love. Borrowing the binary of *langue* and *parole* from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics (Jäger 2010), I hypothesize that the term "love" stands for an inexhaustible potentiality of love (the *langue* of love), which in its fullness is inaccessible to lovers and to researchers alike. This *langue* of love has to be realized in individual love acts (*parole* of love) to come into being. As lovers and researchers, we do not have full understanding of the potentiality of love. We are in a position, however, to judge whether the love acts we are experiencing or studying are intelligible in the context of their occurrence ("utterance"). There may be occurrences of love we do not yet understand as such (they go unnoticed or are rejected). There may be occurrences of love which jar with our understanding of what constitutes a well-formed love act (they usually get a lot of attention). And finally, there are occurrences of love which are covered by convention and hence form part of a dominant pattern of accepted love behaviour (they are often taken as given but warrant our critical efforts).

With regard to dominant patterns of love, there have been in the West (which admittedly is another problematic concept) two large-scale and culturally hegemonic attempts to consolidate the full potentiality of love into a single principle (May 164-170). In Biblical times, God was identified as the sole source and guarantor of love. In the Romantic period, the individual (as modelled on the white bourgeois male) replaced God as the source and guarantor of love. Romanticism elevates the assumed uniqueness of an individual experience of love to a unique, unrepeatable epiphany. The Romantics replaced religion as love with love as a religion. Love hence became an end in itself. As students of romance we may enjoy this emphasis, but we should bear in mind that it is rather problematic in its self-

centeredness. If love is guaranteed in the individual and not in the beloved, it loses a great deal of its relationality. The main critique levelled against Sentimental and Romantic love is that the lover, usually a man, is more in love with his idea of love than with the beloved. Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* is a famous case in point. Read by thousands as a manifesto of Sentimentality, the author despaired at his reader's insistence to identify with "poor Werther" and anecdotally to copy the protagonist's suicide. Goethe understood his novel in letters as a warning against the excesses of a self-centred youth (Gratzke 2012).

Since the Romantic period, romantic lovers have been expending a lot of energy worrying whether the beloved is an appropriate or even authentic expression of the unique love they feel for them (May 2011, 164). This is, according to Eva Illouz, where the psychology industries have gained their foothold. The modern Western(ized) individual constantly thinks and speaks about itself. It may be looking for someone to love but the main criterion is whether that person is the right one for us. Instead of losing ourselves in the beloved, we find ourselves. Simon May interprets this obsession with love as a defence mechanism in a de-traditionalized world:

Indeed, every increase in individualism fuels the prestige of love. The more independent our identity is of political, religious, national or community loyalties, so the more we turn to love as the ultimate source and sign of belonging — a sign that people display today as eagerly as in previous eras they displayed their fidelity to church or state. And the more individualistic we become the more we expect love to be a secular journey for the soul, a final source of meaning and freedom, a supreme standard of value, a key to the problem of identity, a solace in the café of rootlessness, a desire for the worldly and simultaneously a desire to transcend it, a redemption from suffering, and, a promise of eternity. Or all of these at once. In short: love is being overloaded. (May 2011, 239)

To conclude this part, our attention turns to the notion of critique as implied by the moniker *Critical Love Studies*. So far I have stated that there is an object to study which we call love. There appears to be some semantic coherence of love, but there does not seem to be a universally accepted universal theory of love, unless one believes that Freud, Rougemont, Luhmann, Barthes, or anyone else has explained love in its fullness. In contrast to this, practical criticism of occurrences of love teaches us that love is diverse and complex. *Critical Love Studies* are – therefore – first and foremost critical of themselves. This kind of critical approach owes a lot to deconstructionist and poststructuralist thought in that it reflects continuously on its own epistemological limitations. Michel Foucault argues in his works that sexuality is not something innate in people which was subsequently subjugated by authorities such as the state, experts, or religious institutions. He rejects the assumption of sexual repression and questions discourses of liberation. Sexuality, in his thinking, is the result of cultural and political production. Power and knowledge circulate widely, bringing forth sexuality, sexual bodies, and sexual practices (Foucault 1998, 15-7). If we turn this way of thinking towards the study of love, we see that a critical approach to *Love Studies* must ensure that it takes into account its place in the production of love. This is where an inductive method acts as a safeguard. By first paying close attention to the texts, images, and objects which and the people whom we study, *Critical Love Studies* self-consciously limit their

investment in any normative approach to love. The ethical goal implied here is not to drown out individual variations in the discourses of love which are produced by the love *dispositif* of which Critical Love Studies form a part (cf. Bussolini 2010). In very practical terms, this means that we have to be aware that people who are interviewed by researchers will always to some extent tell them what they assume the researcher expects to hear. This is a research bias known as “interview bias”, which may creep into qualitative research on top of “interviewer bias” which equally needs to be evaluated throughout the research process (Finlay 2002).

Finally, Critical Love Studies in this vein is by no means the only way to conduct Critical Love Studies. A lot of excellent love research is first and foremost critical of love itself, most notably some of the feminist research into the ways in which ideologies and practices of romantic love continue to subjugate women by burdening them with the bulk of relationship work, often leading to (heterosexual) living arrangements in which women also undertake most of the reproductive work (Gunnarson 2013). A recent collection of essays on Feminist Love Studies calls for “a return to and deepening of the strand of materialist feminism which both includes and goes beyond the study of discourses. The aim is to focus on the material practices and embodied experiences of love, power, and domination in order to move towards liberation” (Ferguson & Jónasdóttir 2014, 1). This type of Feminist Love Studies employs a notion of critique more in the tradition of the Frankfurt School’s *Kritische Theorie* than in any poststructuralist way (cf. Horkheimer 1992). Compared with the clear political stance taken by Feminist Love Studies, the kind of Critical Love Studies discussed in this contribution is apologetic of love. “Deconstructionist” Critical Love Studies pay close attention to their object of study; this attention may be understood as a form of care or even professional love (cf. Page 2011). We may have to deal with challenging and even abhorrent occurrences of love (representations and behaviour we would prefer not to be explained as loving). Nevertheless, Critical Love Studies understand love as a fundamentally human experience. The analytical philosopher Tony Milligan describes a tendency to extend “scepticism about being loved” into a “pessimism about the nature of love” and posits, “[o]penness to the possibility that we may be loved is an important human virtue which is incompatible with such serial scepticism” (Milligan 2011, 4). This concept of “being human” has been challenged for good reasons (Ferguson & Jónasdóttir 2014, 5). It is still something I value as a beacon. Moving back to continental philosophy: quite possibly “being human” is always still to come, like love is always still to come. Feminist love researchers Ferguson and Jónasdóttir agree with Milligan to a certain degree. Their Feminist Love Studies do not actually reject love, they are critical of “male power” at its heart:

We emphasize that love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy, that – on its own and/or fused with other essential human capacities, such as the capacity to work – allows humans to act intentionally together to form and change their life and living conditions. It is male power in the ongoing production and exchange of love as a material energy in love and caring *practices*, not simply ideological *beliefs or discourses* on love, gender or sexuality, habits or physical coercion that must be analysed to understand the persistence of, and resistance to, male domination when it arises. (Ferguson & Jónasdóttir 2014, 6)

In the following, I will attempt to build a bridge between a deconstructionist and a materialist-feminist approach to Critical Love Studies. Both sides agree that “love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy”. I will argue that there is no actual difference between “practices” and “discourses or beliefs” of love, as love only comes into being as an act of love. A speech act (of love) is not fundamentally different from a repetitive set of love acts which constitute a practice of love.

The performativity of love

In his book *How to do Things with Words* (1962), J.L Austin describes speech acts as “illocutionary acts”. Characteristically, the performance of an illocutionary speech act changes something in the social world. A pertinent example would be the registrar declaring a couple husband and wife. This is not the same as describing two people as husband and wife (Austin 1962, 5). John R. Searle differentiates a number of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. To pronounce two people husband and wife or to baptize someone constitute declarative speech acts. Things become a little more complicated when we consider indirect speech acts. In many cases, utterances which do not signpost their performative character are still understood as having such implications.

When you return home from work, and you tell your partner that you fancy steak for dinner, what is it you are actually saying? Is it an assertive (you want them to know that you like beef), or a directive (you tell them to prepare dinner now), or a commissive (you are promising to prepare dinner soon)? It is apparent that understanding this performance involves a great deal of socio-historic context for the hypothetical couple and for the researcher. Relationship history, individual skill sets, the gender of the two people, the availability of meat (or a kitchen for this matter) – there is a plethora of social, psychological and material considerations which would need to be taken into account in order fully to understand what just happened when you came home and spoke about steak for dinner. These kinds of considerations have, on a more abstract level, generated a lot of controversy, as Searle’s explanations have been found lacking precision regarding the processes taking place when indirect speech acts occur. The position outlined by Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish in 1992 is particularly helpful here because it stresses the importance of “institutions” (socio-historic contexts). The starting point of their argument is that performative speech acts do not have any special powers compared to any other speech acts. What we learn from the analysis of indirect (performative) speech acts is that in order to be successful, any performative speech act must be understood. Communication must take place rather than mere utterance. What makes declarative speech acts stand out is the direct effect the utterance has in the social world. Bach and Harnish explain:

Declaratives have the distinctive feature of producing changes in the world. There is nothing magical or supernatural about how they manage to do this, and they change the world not by what Seale calls ‘physical causation’ but by convention. They succeed by meeting certain conventional conditions that

constitute an utterance as effecting, generally within an extra-linguistic institution a certain change or creating a certain fact. (1992, 105)

According to this interpretation, the performativity of a speech act lies in its successful communication, which in turn is dependent on a complex (often not conscious) series of assessments an addressee or audience makes when hearing a speech act. They cover questions about the truthfulness of the statement, the intentions of the speaker, their sincerity etc. (1992, 99, 101). If my assessment is that the speaker has declared their love for me to instigate sex, I may be inclined not to trust the intentions of the speaker, their sincerity, or even the truthfulness of the utterance. What Bach and Hamish (1992) call extra-linguistic institutions, which offer the benchmark against which a (performative) speech act is measured, can be understood as formations within a love *dispositif*, or at least a love discourse. Returning to the dichotomy of practices and discourses, cited by Ferguson and Jónasdóttir (2014), one could argue that discourses are based on practices in the sense of speech acts, many of which are performative, some of them even declarative. No speech act (and by extension no discourse) is performed outside of at least one *dispositif*. I understand a *dispositif*/dispositive/apparatus in a wide sense as the dynamic and productive interplay of discourses, practices, and the material conditions for their existence. The love *dispositif* hence encompasses love norms, love institutions, love theory, all speech acts and practices generated by and in the name of love, as well as the material conditions, such as the gendered division of reproductive labour, and even oxytocin levels in people who experience love. None of these in isolation suffice to understand or explain “love”. Together they produce and reproduce everything we experience or represent as love.

This interplay of discourses, institutions, and their material basis will now be explored further using the opposition of performance and performativity. Performance theory has been widely used outside linguistics, prominently in social sciences, gender studies, and cultural studies. In Erving Goffman’s (1959) micro-sociological approach, the analysis of social performances (face-to-face interactions) operates in a similar way to the practical criticism of love as outlined above. Goffman reads closely how people act in various settings and observes recurring patterns such as the difference between “front-of-house” and “backstage” areas of interaction (restaurants are an obvious example), the use of “costume” (appropriate clothing) and “props”. From this, he draws conclusions regarding “stigma management” (impression management) as the driver of social performances. The aim of our social performances is to offer a coherent and favourable image of ourselves. Social performances are judged by their audiences (addressees) in a similar way to linguistic performances against benchmarks (the conventions of extra-linguistic institutions). In order to perform successfully in face-to-face interaction, I will need to convince my audience that there is little difference between the face and the mask; that, in fact, virtual and actual social identity coincide. Stigma management is effective where the existence of the initial stigma is covered. Goffman’s take on “stigma” sits very well with an understanding of the lover as “wretched” as famously proposed by Roland Barthes.

In more general terms of impression management, we recognize the same mechanism in action. Online dating and blended dating throw up a whole range of issues surrounding virtual and actual social identity: in particular, the friction which is caused by exaggerated virtual identities when they are put to a face-to-face test. In any case, the micro-sociological basis of Goffman’s performance model may be applied to any observation of practices of love

in face-to-face interaction. A first date is easily projected onto “front-of-house” (a bar maybe), “backstage” (the mess I left in the bedroom getting changed several times), appropriate clothing (the carefully chosen outfit on which I settled finally – smart casual possibly), the use of props (flowers again or the seemingly unthinking way in which I place the keys to my expensive car on the table). At this point it would be illuminating to fill in the blanks regarding gender in this description of a date. If it were a heterosexual encounter with a male first-person narrator who thinks he is subtly displaying his wealth and thereby socio-economic attractiveness, we would have a story which conforms with “hegemonic masculinity”. Fill the same pattern with iconic characters such as Harry Potter and Sherlock Holmes and you have exotic fan fiction. Make the characters female and you are close to a trendy HBO lesbian-themed TV series.

The term “hegemonic masculinity” was coined by R.W. (Raewyn) Connell in her ground-breaking book on *Masculinities* (1995, revised 2005). The use of the plural in her title is crucial: once we start to do research into masculinity (through a close reading of gender display and gendered behaviour), we are bound to come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a unified gender identity of all or even most men. Still, there is hegemonic masculinity which denotes a benchmark of male performance against which all occurrences of masculinity are measured. The reason there is a dominant pattern of masculinity in most societies (and that men are often dominant) is not that most men actually meet these standards. One reason is that, implicitly or explicitly, men and woman keep making reference to dominant, hegemonic masculinity. Men are constantly involved in stigma management (usually their actual social identity does not conform with hegemonic masculinity), but in many cases they succeed in creating the impression (a virtual social identity). Women are complicit in this as audiences and speakers, as are men who define their performed self against the norm. Camp masculinity does not make sense in itself. It can be seen as a reaction to hegemonic masculinity in that it creates a niche which remains intelligible in hegemonic terms: camp men are described as effeminate, which leaves the gender binary intact. Very few gender performances are actually disruptive of gender norms. Neither is disruption in itself a positive thing: intersex and trans people may “require a clear name and gender” in their “struggle for recognition” (Ahmed/Butler 2016). Still, not unlike non-normative love acts, non-identical repetition and dissemination of non-normative gender performances may develop traction in terms of transformative change.

The gender *dispositif* and the love *dispositif* evidently relate to each other. In both cases they refer to hegemonic masculinity, which informs hegemonic forms of love and intimacy. In the next step, we will look at gender performance once more to gain a clearer understanding how the immaterial (practice and discourse) relates to the material (the economy, the physical). Judith Butler, in her initial model (1990), likened all gender performance to practices of drag, parody, and copying (“melancholic interjection”), which seemed to imply a relatively high degree of choice and agency for the person performing gender. We should, however, not underestimate the accumulated power of iteration as explained by Butler. The gender binary is enforced by constant, wide-ranging, and microscopic processes of repetition of gendered practices, benchmarking of gender performances against heteronormative conditions, and gendering speech acts. This is, at its core, what gender performativity means. Gender is not completely fixed. This applies to individuals as much as it applies to society. Gender needs to reproduce itself constantly. Its norms need enforcing and its borders need policing. In order to come into being, gender

needs to be performed. This carries the opportunity for non-identical repetition, drift of meaning, and practice. There are obstacles and limits to these change processes, and these are material. In her second monograph, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler makes clearer how gender performances are informed by and inform discourses and practices of class and race as well. The gender performance of someone like Venus Xtravaganza should not merely be judged against the carnivalesque or spectacular. As a working-class Latina trans woman, she was subject to intersecting complex conditions: marginalization in economic terms, stigmatization in racial terms, and a gender which did not seem to follow from the “proper” material base in the flesh (which was not fully intelligible in the socio-historic circumstances). With the odds stacked against her, it is sadly no surprise that her life was cut short. Any possible success of non-normative gender performance relates to the degree in which the socio-historic conditions of the *dispositif* allow for a relative departure from race, class, and gender norms in a particular individual or group of people. Caitlyn Jenner’s very public coming-out in 2015 as a trans woman and her subsequent success in managing her media image (the virtual social self) have probably been made possible by her wealth and whiteness (cf. Blay 2015).

This part has put into question the assumed dichotomy of practices and discourses. Speech act theory, Goffman’s micro-sociology, and Butler’s take on gender performativity all suggest that it does not exist. Practices, discourses, and material conditions jointly constitute a love *dispositif*. The material conditions of love include socio-economic factors: as Eva Illouz observes, social endogamy is still prevalent. She refers to Pierre Bourdieu when she states that we can only desire what is socially suitable to us (Illouz 1997, 210). Furthermore, the materiality of the human body plays into this. Heightened levels of oxytocin may be a little non-specific and therefore not sufficient to predict love; psychologists can, however, show that we have preferences for certain types of faces, how these preferences change (for example, under the material influence of the menstrual cycle), and that they may have an effect on our choices of love objects (Dunbar 2013, 129-131). We will keep all of this in mind as we now turn our attention back to the potentiality of love. Love is performative with all its conditions and limitations: the need for stigma management, the power of hegemonic love discourses, the force of capillary iterations of love norms, and the influence of the material and the physical.

By now turning to the deconstructionist philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, I intend to re-activate the beacon of Critical Love Studies, which is the conviction that “love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy” (Ferguson and Jónasdóttir 2014). In his *Carte Postale*, Derrida offers the sketch of a model of love which is performative and relational:

3 June 1977

and when I call you my love, my love, is it you I am calling or my love? You, my love, is it you I thereby name, is it to you that I address myself? I don’t know whether the question is well put, it frightens me. But I am sure that the answer, if it gets to me one day, will have come to me from you. You alone, my love, you alone will have known it. (Derrida 1987, 8)

The lover names the beloved my love (*mon amour*), which is a declarative in the sense of Searle's classification of performative speech acts. S/he worries, however, whether this declaration has the desired effect in the social world. As a sentimental lover s/he suspects s/he is addressing their love ideal rather than the beloved person. S/he also implies that there is a unique quality of this love (the answer to the question of the self can only come from the beloved "you"). This is where Derrida's voice of a lover comes very close to Roland Barthes' notion of the lover writing from a position of dependency, hurt, and self-doubt. Furthermore, Derrida's lover is fundamentally unsure whether their utterance translates into communication. Can I "address myself" to another person and be understood?

Would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly, without *courrier*, only to you but I do not arrive, and that is the worst of it. A tragedy, my love, of destination. Everything becomes a postcard once more, legible for the other, even if he understands nothing about it. And if he understands nothing, certain for the moment of the contrary, it might always arrive for you, for you too, to understand nothing, and therefore for me, and therefore not to arrive, I mean at its destination. I would like to arrive to you, to arrive right up to you, my unique destiny, and I run I run I fall all the time, from one stride to the next [...]. (Derrida 1987, 23)

Derrida does not actually develop this performative model of love in *La Carte Postale*. He also misses several opportunities to link his reflections on the alien origins of Western philosophy in Greek antiquity (the interchangeability of the "lovers" Plato and Socrates on the postcard from the Bodleian library) to Plato's seminal *Symposion* (Gratzke 2015). Instead, Derrida traces non-progress (*pas* as step and negation) in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. An engagement by Derrida with the *Symposion* would have been hugely interesting because Plato's text can be read as a performative and relational working-through of love theories available to the guests at the feast. This collection of speeches in praise of love is often understood as a linear progression towards the most insightful (Socrates' contribution) with a comic coda (Alcibiades' taunting of Socrates). However, read as a non-hierarchical, circular, and participatory discourse, we open ourselves up to a fuller potentiality of love as explored by all the speakers in the *Symposion* together. No single contribution to the debate can exhaustively explain "love"; collectively, they throw lights on the unified yet shattered fullness of love. The term "shattered love" comes from the translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's article "L'amour en éclats" into *English* (2002). *Eclat* is a polyvalent word which in various contexts means *fragment, bruit, scandale, luminosité, or splendeur*.

According to Nancy, a singularity of love only exists in harbouring the potentiality of love. In other words, the *langue* of love is there to enable the *parole* of love. This way of thinking avoids a hierarchy of love acts (occurrences of love). There is no "master figure" of love. *Agapé* does not rule over *philia* or *eros*. *Philia* or *eros* do not (need to) strive for transcendence. They in themselves do not stand for anything but themselves. (Nancy denies the validity of the five ascending steps of love as attributed to Diotima in *The Symposion*.) To Nancy, the core of love is the opening up of the immanent self, which in the terminology used above can be understood as the fundamental relationality of love. Deviating from Derrida's scepticism about and Barthes' solipsism of romantic love, Nancy posits that love is always

anchored outside the self. Love can be general and particular, necessary and impossible at the same time; still, at all times it implies an ideal unity of humanity which cannot be defined or evidenced. This imaginary unity is hinted at in the shattered semantic field of the word “love” and in the diverse love *dispositif* of the present. My argument has thus returned via continental philosophy to Tony Milligan’s analytical assertion that “[o]penness to the possibility that we may be loved is an important human virtue”. Love comes from the outside and enables the relationality of the self, which makes the self human.

Performing narrative research.

In continuation of the passage on naming my love my love, Derrida writes:

[...] when I call you my love, is it that I am calling you, yourself, or is it that I am telling you my love? and when I tell you my love is it that I am declaring my love to you or that I am telling *you*, yourself, my love, and that you are my love. I want so much to tell you. (Derrida 1987, 8)

In a flirtatious manner Derrida addresses here the interplay between declaration and narration. Narration plays a part in the iterative and microscopic reproduction of relationships and through them social and cultural norms. In this sense, narration has a performative dimension, in which dynamics of norm and deviation apply directly to the social world. Narrative research, as a set of methodological approaches employed in social sciences and qualitative psychology, explores a wide range of narratives, such as “small” individual narratives, which occur naturally in everyday conversation, and “big” narratives, which help to create and to maintain bonds of larger communities. Types of narratives can also be differentiated according to their topical focus, be it “event-centred” (the account of something which has happened) or “experience-centred” (a more sustained reflection). Social scientists in their work may be mindful of the language used in the narratives they observe (or elicit) and record, or the temporal structure of the texts produced (Tamboukou, Andrews & Squire 2013). This is where this approach benefits from knowledge of discourse analysis or narratology. A core skill anyone who works with narrative research methodology ought to develop is, however, “learning to listen”:

Most qualitative researchers who conduct in-depth interviews are interested in how people make sense of their experiences and so their questions aim to elicit people’s experiences and perspectives. However, when a researcher uses narrative principles to guide her interviewing practices, she develops interview questions that focus on specific, concrete life stories. In my view, the principles of narrative analysis ground the best interviewing practice rather than being one viable option among others. In this sense, close attention to narrative principles could improve immensely the data qualitative researchers gather. (Chase 2003, 84)

Close listening, like close reading, aims to create a relatively open approach to the research data in which the hypotheses (or predictions made on the basis of quantitative data) do not cover up the unique aspects to be found in qualitative material. This attitude can to some extent prevail in research, which then moves up in scale towards general patterns such as stock characters and commonly used storylines: success, redemption, loss etc. (Phoenix 2013). Particularly pertinent here is our tendency to create “personal myths”, which are part and parcel of love relations both in their maintenance through iterative shared performance, and in their public presentation (McAdams 1997, 11-2). Discourse analysis is admittedly more concerned with general patterns than with individual flavour, but it nevertheless offers good insight into the role language and language use play in the creation and performance of identity and of social reality (Paltridge 2012). Teun van Dijk’s work (2009) regarding the relationship between socio-historical contexts and individual language use marks a promising departure from some earlier, rather more “mechanical” concepts. He posits that contexts are not given but created in each occurrence of discourse. Individual users of language constantly negotiate their relationship with various contexts:

The new theory of context further explored in this book emphasizes that the relation between society and discourse is indirect, and mediated by the socially based but subjective definitions of the communicative situation as they are construed and dynamically updated by the participants. These definitions are made explicit in sociocognitive terms, namely as context models stored in the episodic (“autobiographical”) memory of the participants, just like any other social experience. The mediating interface constituted by these context models – construing and ongoingly monitoring the relevant properties of communicative situations – accounts for a vast number of properties of discourse. (van Dijk 2009, 7-8)

This implies a dynamic understanding of the relationship between norm and deviation, pattern and occurrence. The research process which follows from this understanding does not seek to detect the footprints of socio-historic institutions in the analysed text or talk, but to explore the ways in which the writer, speaker, or interviewee negotiates the tension between the individual and the general. Examples for complex constructions of context may include over-affirmation (an insistence that there is nothing special in their narrative when there is evidently a deviation from the norm) or self-aggrandisement (a claim to be free from any precedence when there is only a standard storyline detectable).

Bearing these points in mind, we now move to recent conceptualizations of narratology, which are based on notions of emplotment, sequentiality, eventfulness, tellability, and the intricate relationship fictionality has with notions of reality, auto-fiction, and imagination (Abbot n.d.). Myth-making is an integral part of these processes. It covers “personal myths”, which may be individual or shared between (romantic) partners, as well as the narratives produced in communicative and cultural memory (Assmann 2008). This approach anchors literary narratology in a wider trans-genre and trans-media field of narratological research and memory studies, which chimes with my assertion that narrative research, discourse analysis, and narratology basically aim to achieve the same things.

To introduce a well-known example, Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995) tells its story from the perspective of a man, Rob Fleming, who has been "rejected". It starts out by Rob as the first-person narrator making a list of top five break-ups with the aim of proving (in his head) to his most recent departed girlfriend Laura that she is not the one who has hurt him most (1). This pattern of rejection is his personal myth to which some of Hornby's readers may be able to relate, as it seems to carry emotional pertinence: often it feels like we are the one to whom stuff always happens (which quite possibly is a perception bias). Later on in the book Rob tries to deviate from this pattern to break up the stranglehold of his personal myth:

When I saw Laura outside the shop I knew absolutely, without any question at all, that I wanted her again. But that is probably because she's the one doing the rejecting. If I can get her to concede that there is a chance we'll patch things up, that makes things easier for me: if I don't have to go around feeling hurt, and powerless, and miserable, I can cope without her (1995, 86).

The first sentence contains a simple declaration, which is that Rob feels he would prefer to be back together with Laura. This statement, however, is broken up by a double, progressing emphasis that he knows this "absolutely" and "without any question at all". Why say this twice? These assurances that Rob "knows" for sure already seem to defend a momentary feeling of emotional authenticity against the next part, in which he turns the emotional event into a tellable experience on which he can reflect. This reflection starts with "but" in a new sentence, which marks the cognitive labour needed in an effort to normalise the experience. It now needs to fit Rob's personal myth that he always gets rejected, it needs to fit his plot. His emplotment sounds philosophically speculative: he wishes her to "concede" that there was a "chance" of reconciliation. This idea moves seamlessly (a comma, not a full stop separates the next thought) into a reflection on his stigma, his actual social self, which is that he has to "go around" in public (we may assume) "feeling hurt, and powerless, and miserable". The importance of all three emotions is stressed by linking them with "and" twice. This list seems to put Rob into the category of the "wretched" lover (Barthes). His perceived lack of "power" is ideologically significant. Rob is, in large parts of the book, concerned with being seen as less masculine than other men (1995, 13-4, 51, 86 etc.). He struggles with his investment in hegemonic masculinity. In fact, Laura's professional success and greater economic power are major factors in this (70). The passage ends with a surprise, a miniature plot twist. Rob turns his initial event-centred objective (the feeling that he unconditionally wants to be back together with Laura) on its head. If there were an indication that Laura relinquished some of her power to reject him, Rob feels he would be sufficiently restored in his personhood to "cope without her".

A lot of our assessment of this passage (and indeed the book) rests on the implied author whose presence and guidance we read in/into the text. If we think of the first-person narrator and the implied author as allies, we will be more likely to accept the context model offered by Rob himself (women reject him, he would be better off if he regained a sense of self-determination). If we make the assumption (based possibly on our knowledge of other books by the same author) that we are to understand the limitations of Rob's perspective, we may want to think of Rob's warped logic as an expression of hegemonic masculinity fighting back against the emotional, economic and social ascent of women. Or, thirdly, we

could interpret this passage as Rob's attempt to understand an event (his emotions having seen Laura walk past his business) without making them fit his personal myth completely. There is a small difference between feeling rejected (beginning of the book) and desiring a glimmer of hope in order *not* to feel dependent anymore (the passage quoted above). The narrative entirety of the book does not offer a final assessment. There is no space here to lay out the full plot or its eventfulness and sequentiality, but Rob and Laura do get back together after a series of emotionally significant events (such as the death of her father, where Rob can offer support through familiarity and physical intimacy). In return, if we want to think of this in economic terms, Laura helps to restore some of Rob's virtual self by organising a club night where he can reconnect with his youthful glory days as a DJ. His sudden proposal of marriage, however, is triggered by a sense of helplessness – he cannot help flirting with other women: “that stupid girl” who has approached him as the cool DJ (238). Rob tells Laura:

See, I have always been afraid of marriage because of, you know, ball and chain, I want my freedom, all that. But when I was thinking about that stupid girl I suddenly saw it was the opposite: that if you got married to someone you know you love, and sort yourself out, it frees you up for other things. I know you don't know how you feel about me, but I do know how I feel about you. I know I want to stay with you and I keep pretending otherwise, to myself and you, and we just limp on and on. It's like we sign a new contract every few weeks or so, and I don't want that any more. And I know that if we got married I would take it seriously, and I wouldn't want to mess about. (1995, 241-2)

Laura is understandably sceptical regarding Rob's intentions, but at the end of the novel the reader is treated to some hope. The club night is a success, and Rob plans a mix tape for Laura which is based on music she knows and would like to hear, and not music Rob thinks she should know and appreciate. He is at least momentarily dropping his very late teenage focus on being able to tell cool from uncool pop culture (245). Rob is making baby steps towards accepting the relationality of love as something in which he gives loving attention to Laura rather than obsessing either over his perceived lack of male physical and economic prowess or Laura's suitability for his pop cultural sensibilities.

This interpretation comes dangerously close to treating Rob Fleming as if he were a real person and not a character in a book. What I have been trying to show, though, is how a close reading interacts with an understanding of context, here expressed in reflections on the implied author and our take on the works of the paratextual real-world author. An equivalent of this dynamic is to be found in the negotiations in which Critical Love Studies engage with the love *dispositif* at large and interview bias in particular. Interviewee and interviewer will make assumptions over the type of considerations which are socially acceptable to be expressed in the given situation. Neither side will want to reveal too large a gap between virtual and actual social self. This joint bias may be mitigated by creating an environment where acceptance is the basis of communication. If love is what people say it is and not what researchers say it should be or what participants believe they are supposed to say, we will collectively further our understanding.

We can take Plato's *Symposion* as a model if we read it as a participatory, non-hierarchical, and, in its circularity, open-ended event which gives space to a number of speakers to reflect on shared and competing love myths. No individual contribution to the

Symposion exhausts the potentiality of love or the richness of experiences of love. In their polyphony and potentially cacophony they illustrate the *fragment, bruit, scandale, luminosité*, and *splendeur* of Nancy's shattered love (*l'amour en éclat*). Obviously the *Symposion* reflects an extremely privileged socio-historic environment which has been part of a male-centred academic canon for centuries. What I want to carry into modern day participatory research is the celebratory atmosphere. The speakers of the *Symposion* disagree over many – indeed most – things, but they are united in the belief that love is of crucial value to people's being in the world and being in time (mythical, historical, and biographical time). Alcibiades' taunting of Socrates makes a good example of a performative exploration of love which has its place in a multi-methodological approach for community-based participatory research or CBPR (Israel, Jason 2012).

The research context of my study of occurrences, communications, performances, and representations of love is the work of Hull Critical Love Studies, a research group which brings together the expertise of medical sociology, clinical psychology, and cultural studies. In terms of CBPR, we are planning to run a series of focus groups, writing workshops, and a book club during 2017-18. The outcomes of these will be complemented by in-depth interviews with a range of participants. The over-arching theme for Hull Critical Love Studies is "Love in a Lifespan", given the research interests in youth work, family displays, old age, and end of life present in the group. Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995) and Stephen Frear's film adaptation will feature in my work with people who have gone through break-ups or divorce. This links with the theme of loss important in work with the spouses of people with dementia. Following from our starting point that "love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy" (Ferguson & Jónasdóttir 2014), we will listen closely to nuance in the narratives produced, performed and discussed during the project with the aim of furthering our understanding of loss as an integral part of love which may very well be traumatic but probably is far less complete than we commonly believe. Meg-John Barker, in their book *Rewriting the Rules*, asks some pertinent questions about ending a relationship (2013, 130-46). Do we have to see every end of a relationship as a failure? Do we have to cast either side as good? Do we have to stop talking to, stop having some kind of relationship with our ex? The last point is easily dismissed when we look at the many people who, after a potentially difficult time, manage to share responsibility for children. What if we looked at the end of relationships as a common and integral part of relationships? What if the values we upheld while in a relationship were extended to the time and the people involved beyond the end of the intimate relationship? Performative non-identical repetition, we have seen in earlier examples, is productive and can be made to bring forth positive change, provided the critical mass of love acts is reached over a period of time. The potentiality of love may very well extend to former partners and spouses.

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