From the Love Studio

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What does love study under conditions of its unrequitedness? How can it at once cease to be an object and resist inversion into an idealized subject as the only way to survive? Against the purities, scarcities, redemptions, settlements, and requitals that make it a conscript of anti-politics of various kinds, love somehow continues to profess and remain a partisan to politics and its possibility, producing the world and often disappearing from it. When so much of that love is waiting to be spoken to, or called back from disappearance, the we and the I must make room for a forgotten you to be spoken to, heard from, grieved with, and offered a world in common. Even speaking as or for oneself in these conditions requires speaking to oneself, as if one were, just for a moment, the beloved, and not the accu(r)sed. This musing's own form and tone is an invitation to that moment, to a political method that counters the shared premises of racism, misogyny, fascism, capital, and the colony, lest our theories and practices claim further casualties: not even the beloved is safe from the wrath of that which seeks the final solution or last apology, encloses in words without excess, and squares away in smug, swift action, which is its own special curse.

The Adamant Heartist

"She was a *dil phaink*. She was a heartist like that."[1]

When religious fundamentalists in Pakistan ran a "Say No to Valentine's Day" campaign in 2013, Sabeen Mahmud heartfully countered it with "*Pyaar Hone Dain*" ("Let Love Happen"). Two years later, she was killed in cold blood on her way home from one of her many attempts at alleviating intellectual poverty in Pakistan. (This particular forum was on the state repression of the Baloch people and the silence around their disappearance and murder.) Her killer confessed, and was involved also in massacres of Muslim minority sects and the murder of an American woman academic working in Karachi the same month, "We shot her for holding a Valentine's Day rally."

The battle in which Sabeen and her killers met had nothing to do with a silly corporate holiday, and it was not even the same battle for each. For Sabeen, as for other casualties of these wars, love itself was the point of contention, *their* love against terror's soldiering in the name of some love. Two months after her death, her organization PeaceNiche brought a number of Pakistani activists, musicians, artists,

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and writers together for an art installation titled *Dil Phaink* at the South Bank Centre in London. *Dil phaink*, an Urdu phrase, literally refers to the manner of throwing your heart out into the world, or wearing your heart on your sleeve. With both the state and its enemies ready to bring death to her door, Sabeen's actual death brought up testimonies to her fearlessness in the face of the threat. Quoted frequently were her words that fear was a line one chose to cross (or not) in one's own head. Not far from this line lies the murderous insanity of those borders and partitions that render a person "a no man" and where countries dis/appear overnight. Left to wonder if homes and lives must also dis/appear with those lines, someone always dies showing the world its unreason, and we then clear the dead from the land. Meanwhile, rather than fade away into irrelevance to honor the dead and what they died for, in, and with, those lines turn into concrete and barbed memorials, and become the stubborn disease that we then die of. As one eulogy reminds us, "Sabeen is being remembered for her fearlessness, but her friends say that what motivated her daily bravery was love." Indeed, she died for, in, and with love, killed by someone else's fear.

It is a good day when someone at least acknowledges what has happened to Pakistan in the years you have lived in the United States, and where the destruction of that society as a casualty of the war on terror has paralleled a slow and steady assault on the psyche and a brutal domestication of your feisty confidence as an academic worker in this country. It is a better day when someone does so without you having to tell this story, for they have looked at you and the world enough, whether or not they know how every telling of that story also feels like an acceptance of, if not an acquiescence to, the humiliation and the barbarism, and runs the risk of sounding ungrateful for the love from this and that land and many in between that has held your heart and mind. It is a really remarkable day when someone grieves with you, and does so beyond guilt, apology, corroboration, or exhibition, without you asking for it and, in a gesture toward a world in which we can be together, relieves you of being the exemplar, the exhibit, the exception, or the uninvited host. Then you find yourself writing about the love that makes a claim on you by mourning with you a scarce and austere world, not as an act of compensation, accommodation, or charity in the name of something out there, but one of freedom, mutuality, hospitality, even a kind of *dil phaink*ness—an unreluctant abundance, the unaccursed share, of a heart eager to fall in love—as if all our lives and the meaning of our deaths depended on it. And, as you write, you know this love is an occasion to envision, theorize, and compel politics, and not the other way around, as is usually presumed by those who think they know what writing about love, and hence love itself, means to *everyone*.

Love's Nine Lives; or, Working Conditions at this Love Studio

They say that for weeks after Sabeen's murder, her cat Jaadu (magic) "would sit expectantly by the door of her house for hours every evening, waiting for a familiar footfall on the steps outside" (Ali and Zaman 2015). A couple of months after that murder, nine black lives were taken during a bible-reading session by a single shooter

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at a church in Charleston. The first killer "shows little concern about his trial and punishment when asked about his future,... completely unfazed, laughing slowly," saying "We'll go to prison, but we'll break out of there. Then, we'll make plans" (Ali and Zaman 2015). The second killer just pleads not guilty.

Love is not an object of study for me, but a series of propositions and objections articulated on behalf of politics from spaces and times often deemed antithetical to, cleansed of, or a relief from, politics. Politics I take to comprise acts that produce meaning in common, acts that make real. The politics of those who are either scripted out of reality, made insensible within it, or have not always mattered, makes sensible and material what has been denied sense and been immaterialized. Here, I present nine conditions of possibility of such a study—a love studio if you will—in this time: conditions as circumstances, but also conditions as stipulations.

One, that the question of love is forced upon us not only in its absence or failure, but when being able to tell love from what is not love, to reject the bargains on offer, and to ask for any, more, or a different love, becomes a meaningful and liberating response to the austerities, scarcities, catastrophes, and crises of the time. This brings up the particular nature of love as objection in an age of austerity and the relations to time and space that are presumed in moralistic notions of love and that render it apolitical or anti-political, whether in convoking the post-industrial multitude or the nation. The verbal, discursive, and ideological shift from scarcity to austerity in neoliberal necropolitics winds its way through, and picks up its force in, a particular economy of affect and embodiment.

Two, that this economy, *this* time, cannot be challenged without disrupting time and temporality as objects of the unspoken consensus. Contemporary capitalism's rebound into colony-style fascism mediates the move from scarcity into austerity, producing new crises and urgencies that need resistant counter-urgencies of love to oppose them, impossible without reclaiming form and time.

Three, that in austere times such as these, when even friends are casualties to interiorized scarcity, love is not a luxury but a staple form of abundance, right next to history and memory. Sometimes, this involves acts of naming and producing love where it is needed most—historical-materialist scavenging in the era of austerity, an admittedly twisted but needful poetics of politics that Jacques Rancière finds even in the self-naming of the proletariat.

Four, that only out of a kind of love can we even register the defacements of politics and the political, in the face of radical and reactionary anti-politics that features loves and attachments that keep us from asking these questions: How did we suffer to love this way? How did we come to focus on our objects of love without interrogating our ways of loving and what they do to that object? How did we become so attached to ourselves as lovers that we did not pause to confirm if this is what we, or our beloveds, really wanted?

Five, that any turn to the body and affect as objects of study of an empirical or pre-political kind is guilty not only of a vulgar but a brute or cruel materialism that celebrates material history and the materialization of history but shies away from the

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history of matter and materiality, and hence from politics—especially critical in a time when certain bodies get pulverized instead of becoming palimpsests.

Six, that love seeks itself, springs not from a "lack" but from the presence of another. With Eric Santner, this is not the presence of *the* Other, a reactive focus of the ethical turn *away* from politics. This is the "neighbor" revisited, the creature with whom the possibility of relation is not premised on any sort of reified alterity, because it is not an epistemological mediation, but one that is experiential and connected to, fundamentally, the question of being—with James Baldwin, more specifically, *our* being. The "creature" (in Santner) or "the uncanny" (in Freud), can be joined with the presence of that which will not look back (in Benjamin) and in relating to whom a great deal of imagination must be invested. The poor, the oppressed, the disposable, the wretched—the unloved—that seem to haunt any political theory that I find worth caring about, seem to me always to thwart any overly earnest attempt at claiming them as the objects of one's work. Political theorizing, at its best an act of accounting for the possibility of politics and political subjects, is much more fundamentally beholden to the unloved beyond their being mere objects of analysis—a world, this world, and its impossibilities sewn into our very subjectivities that make this question, this word, this world, possible. To study and write *with* subjects and objects of love is to attend to what matters most: not the love or the suffering that affix and reproduce the subjects they need, but those who produce this world with their love and suffering *and*, along with that, the crucial potential to *not reproduce* it.

Seven, that the action of loving—seen as a distinct potency that is neither merely will or agency, nor an extension or distortion of other moral forces—is worth exploring for its politics. To this end, not only time but also space must be dis-oriented, so that our imaginations and understandings unlearn the conventional topography of politics. This opens us up to confrontations and propositions that happen in realms unfitting for a normalized (and normalizing) politics of survival and sovereignty, and produce variant political subjects. Not exemplary love, but love and lovers by example.

Eight, that when love is approached as a fully aesthetic and political question rather than a moral problem, it has implications for how we treat the violent and the sacrificial that populate contemporary necropolitics, since each claims to act in the name of some love, and shares something with the forms of violence that pervade us in covert, quieter ways. Not sublime love or terror, but the neighboring martyr and the terrorist by example.

Nine, that there are forms of love specific to those who are marginal to, or written out of, the loves that usually bind body, state, society, ideology, and that a relation of effluence, exclusion, even opposition, to these bindings keeps love's politics around, plural, demanding, and negotiable. This condition finds corroboration not only in the love that is demanded from the oppressed, but also in the politics of those lovers that is always counted on but goes fundamentally misunderstood, inappropriable, and unrequited. This is not the exception, but something beyond it, for it makes a claim to both the sustenance of any idea of "we" or any proposition of a shared world, since all the claims to relations ensue from the wretched and the

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oppressed. The politics of love has to be understood from the outside in, from the standpoint not of the unloved but of the *unrequited*.

Not One Love

"Do not ask of me, my beloved, that love as before," goes the titular refrain in a poem by South Asian poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz that juxtaposes courting the revolution with sustaining the beloved and speaks of what one love teaches us about the other love (Faiz 1971). For those of us raised in households where such tussles of love went absolutely unhindered and their dramas normalized in the name of yet other loves, our desires and attachments—relations—to what calls to be desired, attached to, and related to are certainly shaped by seeing these loves fail, and these failures loved, both as claims to life itself. It is relevant to our times, as it speaks of an exhaustion that is also endemic to love in austerity. The more "loveless" an era, the more someone somewhere is doing to keep the world going and any life possible against all prognoses—and *that* compulsion looks a lot like love to me.

Useless, suggests the neoliberal optimist, decrying the wasteful romance of the failed and defeated. Melodrama, declare those who, in seeking to defend politics from the blackmail of sovereignty (a goal I share), legislate affective pieties and economies for a preferred non-sovereign politics with just the right pathology of desire and clarity of subject to make them epistemically comfortable. Wealthy new-age realists of all cultures, faithful vanguards of the "concrete" against all "abstractions" (often a synonym for thought) are confident that no revolution is possible, and secure beyond measure the small measurable joys of property-ownership at the first sign of immeasurable loss (of love?), and would be quick to advise you to do the same. But Faiz's poem undercuts these simplicities, and the two-ness it speaks of is not a cleft of one love from the other, or the personal from the political, or the rationing of the love pie. If anything, the meaning of beauty, pleasure, what is sought in love, is expanded not shrunk. Love ceases to be a singular form across both romances; its many forms signify departures from abstract formalism, concrete economism, and their conservative normalizations of the subjects and objects of love. A shift in quantum follows a rethinking of form: the same concept of love shows itself to contain multiple relations of and to love itself, the many modes of attaching oneself and the myriad relations to adhesion, and manifests in the varied intimacies that are inviting or risky, all in different measure, to different subjects of love.

I bring up Faiz's juxtaposition not to gloss over the history of the common feminization of the object of revolutionary love. That trope, on my reading, exposes that both the feminine and the love (and not just the feminine or the love) historically become something through that relation, and that it would be lazy to disavow the feminine and/or the love just because the poem, metaphorically speaking, must live on instead of being deconstructed and rewritten. Certainly, dominant forms of love and commitment that arise, nurture, and are cultivated in a patriarchal, misogynist, purist, and statist space are often proposed and affirmed in aesthetic modes. But

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arguing for a poetics of politics, in which I follow Rancière, just as I follow Faiz and other poets of revolution, involves rethinkings and rereadings that run counter to the assumption that the *form* called love is irredeemably affected by its irredeemable object, and that the relation between love and its object is singular and immutable. Otherwise, how might we be able to account for the relations and the adhesions that constitute the many problematic loves to which we are usually beholden: loves for nation, state, ideology that all have *at least* a violent provenance? Without parsing the relation and the adhesion in order to, for a moment, separate out the form from the object of love, how could we go beyond the knowledge *that* we die and kill for these (and other) loves, to ask the more pertinent and human question of the condition of the possibility of those matters of fact: the *how* of loving that makes dying and killing possible? Alternate political locations in time and space get articulated and manifested in the utterances and assertions of love that constitute a given political subject.

Transformative love exists where its form and objects both are pried away from this provenance and the relations to space, time, self, and other that come with it. This is love that is a shifting form and compels other forms to shift, not a fixed form to be deployed to reassure a given order. It involves negotiating not only what is worth dying for but also what is worth living for; not only who will receive our love, but also what love we will accept and be presumed to be in need of; not only what love we will never be given but also what love we will reject. This moment's resistance to the presumed conscriptions of our loves might make way for the love that has always been an occasion for a politics of the unrequited.

Note

Colin Eubank read and thought with heart and mind to get me through this piece one summer. Margaret Toye, Ann Ferguson, and the reviewers made this possible with their generosity, understanding, and studious love.

1. Nosheen Ali, on her friend Sabeen Mahmud (Parshley 2015).

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