The Language of Love and Desire: Convention, Affect, and Intimacy in the Contemporary Romance

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 19 August 2021

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Introduction

Romance is one of the most popular literary genres. Yet, it has been dismissed variously as light reading or "chick lit". Certainly, not all romances are great works of literature, but to relegate an entire genre to such derogatory and implicitly sexist categories is to ignore romance's potential to offer perceptive critical perspectives on narratives of intimate relationships which, simultaneously, invoke and call into question relations of desire and the normative strictures which govern romantic relations. In her book, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994), Catherine Belsey analyses the Western tradition of romance in terms of desire. She considers a "politics of sexuality" (Belsey 4), influenced by the work of Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1981), and various psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theorists. One of the questions Belsey poses is, "What if there is no human sexual relation outside culture, outside the regime of the signifier?" (5). Sex is typically associated with the physical and love with the metaphysical, but such a dualistic vision is short-sighted. Love stories are typically imbricated with normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, notions of what "normal" love or desire might look like. However, the novels which I examine here acknowledge and play with these normative expectations, pushing back against conventions which silently control romantic behaviour and imaginings.

Belsey's book attempts to "redress the balance" of private versus public in desire, to highlight the political side of the love story, a story which is conventionally read as separate from the world around it (6). This is my aim as well, not to invert the hierarchy of personal/public, which, as Belsey argues, is "to leave the terms of opposition in place" (6), but rather to propose a kind of double-vision.

The scope of my inquiry is much smaller than Belsey's. I focus on contemporary romances (ranging from 1984 up to 2019), which subvert romantic expectations and present an alternative language of love and desire that reveals the simultaneously personal and political aspects of romance. As Belsey writes, "What makes romances so *easy* to read, and consequently so easy to despise, is precisely their familiarity" (31). The reader's knowledge of the romance plot is intertextual, with the popular romance of today following a precedent set in the nineteenth-century novel, with its repeated dedication to distinguishing "true love" from falsity (Belsey 31). The traditional romantic plot is a blueprint, firmly cemented in the Western imagination, and, through colonialism and globalisation, the imagination of many postcolonial subjects as well.

Belsey considers the various binaries that have been used to think through love and desire, in psychoanalysis, sexology, and literature. There are binaries of body and mind, and love and desire (Belsey 33). The alternative which she poses is that "love, desire, the body are all meanings" which are simultaneously a product of personal experience and of culture and history (Belsey 34). Romance is influenced both by lived experience and by socio-political notions of love and desire. Desire is ambivalent, signifying both a sense of lack, something one yearns for, and a material reality in the body (Belsey 34). As Belsey argues, desire transcends the duality of mind/body, and this excess creates the impossibility of a "*perfect* happy [ending]" (34). In this dissertation, I take up Belsey's consideration of love stories producing the meaning of love and desire and moving beyond the blueprint of the impossibly perfect romance with the conventional happy (or else tragic) ending.

Queering the Romance Plot

Love and desire are conventionally spoken of in the language of destiny and completion, domesticity, gender and sexuality, madness, sickness, irrationality. Love and desire are also, more recently, spoken of in terms of "norms" or health. There is a preoccupation with "healthy" sexuality and "normal" behaviour, which Michael Warner tackles in relation to queer identity and activism in his book, *The Trouble with Normal* (2000). Romance is conventionally heteronormative and prescriptive about the kind of relationships it represents. I do not mean to exacerbate this through my choice of novels, which do not focus overtly on same-sex or other non-normative sexual orientations. Nevertheless, as Nikki Sullivan argues, heterosexual narratives can also queer, or query, the prevailing "norms" of a society (4). There is space, even within narratives of heterosexuality, to observe the ways in which these relationships subvert expectations and defamiliarise what one may take for granted.

In "Queerying examples of contemporary South African short fiction", Sally Ann Murray uses a queer methodology to consider the "relationality between queer as sexuality and queer as a more broadly disruptive optic" (77). She attempts to "orientate" herself in a different position (Murray 78). This idea of orientation is borrowed from Sara Ahmed (Murray 78). Ahmed uses "queer" not only in her consideration of non-normative sexualities, but also to refer to forms and practices which are "'oblique' (slant, diagonal, out of line)" (qtd in Murray 79). This obliqueness creates a kind of disorientation. I too would like to orientate myself in a new direction, or perhaps *disorientate* myself.

Disorientating Romance

The purpose of this research is to disorientate the reader of contemporary romance in order to reposition, or re-map the contemporary romance narrative, pushing back against stereotypical expectations of gender, sexuality, and desire. I analyse the typical romantic blueprint in conversation with the playful ways in which it is dislocated, subverted, or reinvented in four contemporary romance novels. In this dissertation, I consider the ways in which the language and tropes of love and desire influence perceptions of love.

I also consider questions of the association between love and proximity or togetherness, and love leading to *happily ever after* or tragedy. Moreover, I consider the role of dualism in romances and how limiting views of gender and sexuality become an obstacle to love and desire. The alternative romantic narratives presented in my chosen novels push against and unsettle social norms, subverting the reader's expectations and offering a more nuanced, multifaceted consideration of love and desire.

Destabilising the View

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that "queer" is not "a stable referential content and pragmatic force" and insist upon the importance of a multiplicity of discourses (qtd in Murray 79). The novels that I have chosen are from Czechoslovakia (though Kundera considers himself a French writer since his emigration), England, Ireland, and South Africa, respectively. Each makes playful use of form and content to dislocate the traditional romantic plot, questioning implicit assumptions with regards to notions of fate, gender, completion, independence, intimacy, and endings.

I approach these novels through a queer, feminist lens, drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2002) on happiness, Michael Warner (2000) on the concept of "queer" versus "normal", and Elizabeth Grosz's (1994, 1996) considerations of duality, corporeality, and the "freak". I also make use of various postcolonial theories, particularly the work of Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2007), Anne Putter (2012), Kerry Bystrom (2013), and Claire Chambers and Graham Huggan's (2015) on the postcolonial city, and Timothy Wright's (2018) consideration of the "mutant" in narratives of post-apartheid Johannesburg. My approach is also necessarily indebted to Michel Foucault (1981), to the notion of existing within discourse. If romance can be treated as a discourse of its own, what is implicit in that discourse? What does the language of love and desire teach readers about intimacy and

happiness? And how do contemporary romantic narratives challenge traditional romantic assumptions?

I am attempting to contribute to the existing scholarly literature in terms of the ways in which contemporary romances can generate queer understandings of love which go beyond the idea of sexual orientation, considering the generative possibilities of ideas of corporeality, hybridity, and ambivalence. Queer Theory proposes notions of doubleness, the refusal to stay within demarcated categories.

In Chapter One, I analyse Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). This novel is constructed around Nietzsche's notion of *eternal return*, the idea of reincarnation. Yet, Kundera's novel constantly critiques the fundamental notion of powerlessness and the impersonal implied by *eternal return*. The novel focuses on the power of choices that people make and how it is one's choice that upholds love, rather than the clichéd romantic notion of destiny. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* also challenges the notion of nostalgia, revealing the ways in which nostalgia blinds one to the horrors of history.

Following this, I consider A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Byatt highlights the mythological precedent of the notion of unbridled femininity through the novel's repeated allusions to the fairy Melusine and water, interweaving this motif with two powerful female protagonists. The juxtaposition between the story of two late-twentieth-century lovers and two nineteenth-century lovers exposes the new possibilities for expressions of love and desire offered in the modern era, while demonstrating the difficulty of romance in any time.

In Chapter Three, I examine Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). This is a novel which also plays with the idea of linearity by skipping ahead in time, seemingly arbitrarily, between chapters. Rooney presents a contemporary couple struggling to come to terms with their love and how it operates according to, or despite, a new set of normative assumptions. Her novel also highlights the concurrent separateness and interdependence of individuals.

Lastly, Nthikeng Mohlele's *Illumination* (2019) indicates the ways in which love is not a transcendent, metaphysical concept, but is influenced by context. Johannesburg becomes a kind of character, and its transitional state appears to be a mutation, half-formed and inconsistent, which is reflected in the protagonist and his relationship with his wife. Ultimately, Mohlele's novel forces one to question what love might look like in such a fractured, postcolonial environment. The language of love and desire is clearly imbricated

within the fabric of a complex, hybrid socio-political context, serving as one text within a broader palimpsest.

Though these novels span different countries and periods, they are all in dialogue with a much longer history and with a history of romantic ideas which still predominate today. These novels manipulate the staple romantic formula to suggest an alternative possibility for romance in the contemporary era, one which is messy and at times uncomfortable, but which is ultimately more open and grounded in reality.

Chapter One

"Es könnte auch anders sein" :

The Choice to Love in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Kundera, 1984) problematises a dualistic view of existence by showing life's inherent contradictions, especially as they pertain to romantic love. The novel uses binary oppositions, such as light/weight, soul/body, and love/desire, to probe the difference between authentic love and its various social idealisations. These dichotomies implicitly extend to masculine/feminine, and fate/chance. Moreover, Kundera's invocation of the animal and nostalgia highlights and critiques another flawed Romantic trope.[1] In this chapter, I examine the notion of love and desire in terms of chance and choice.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a philosophical, self-reflexive novel which tells the story of two couples and their relationships. The first couple consists of a renowned surgeon and womaniser, Tomas, and a village waitress and photographer, Tereza. The second couple consists of an artist, Sabina, and married professor, Franz. Set during and after the Prague Spring, Kundera's novel also critiques the politics of Soviet Czechoslovakia. Ultimately, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* meditates on ontology, on the incapacity of commonplace binaries to contain the complexities of lived experience, and on the messiness of romance in a world of miscommunication, misperception, and deceit.

Fate

Tomas perceives much of life in terms of the notion, "*Ess muss sein!",* which means *it must be so.* "*Es muss sein!",* a reference to Beethoven's String Quartet No. 16 in F, Op. 135, is a motif throughout the novel. This refrain implies that certain things are fated to happen. The narrator also refers to "*Ess muss sein!"* as "the difficult resolution" (Kundera 31), indicating that destiny is trying in its inevitability. Yet, the cliché of preordained love is subverted when the narrator pronounces that "Love lies beyond *Es muss sein!*" (Kundera 231). If love is out of reach of "*Es muss sein!*", or fate, this means that love is not a matter of destiny, but of chance or choice.

[1] I use romantic with a lower-case r to signify love stories and the popular contemporary genre of romance, and Romantic with a capital R to signify the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. The latter has, of course, influenced the former. However, the two are not synonymous.

It is Tomas's wife, Tereza, who introduces him to Beethoven. While living in Switzerland with Tomas, Tereza tires of his infidelity and decides to return to Prague without him. However, Tomas is propelled to follow her back to the turmoil of Prague by a feeling of "*Es muss sein!",* a sense that their love is meant to be. Thus, the allusion to this motif is "Tomas's first step back to Tereza" (Kundera 31). However, Tomas's idea that following Tereza is something which *must be so* is not a result of fate but of his own decision. Tomas begins to doubt his convictions with regards to fate, "Did it really have to be?" (Kundera 32). He is determined to return to Tereza because his life feels unbearable without her. Tomas's penchant for a line from Beethoven's String Quartet does not prove that his and Tereza's love is predestined. Rather, it reiterates Tomas's commitment to Tereza.

Although most of Tomas's life follows his mantra "*Es muss sein!"*, it is significant that his love for Tereza does not. The number six is important to Tomas because it corresponds to a series of fortuities that bring him and Tereza together. The repeated use of the word "*happened"* (Kundera 33, 34) in Tomas's reflections highlights the circumstantial nature of the spouses' meeting.

> [A] complex neurological case *happened* to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza's town. They called in the chief surgeon of Tomas's hospital in Prague for consultation, but the chief surgeon of Tomas's hospital *happened* to be suffering from sciatica… Tomas *happened* to be given a room in the [hotel] where Tereza was employed. He *happened* to have had enough free time… to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza *happened* to be on duty, and *happened* to be serving Tomas's table. It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go to her on his own. (Kundera 33, 34)

Six chance occurrences lead to Tomas and Tereza meeting. It may seem improbable that so many coincidences occurred. Yet the last line of the above passage indicates that even if these occurrences were out of Tomas's control, it is only "as if" he had no predisposition to approach Tereza. Though their meeting is predicated on chance, Tomas immediately knows that he desires Tereza and it is his choice to act on this desire that propels their love story. Tomas does not love Tereza because it must be so; he *chooses* to be with Tereza.

Tereza initially looks for evidence of fate in her relationship with Tomas, but it is chance that unites them. The signs of fate Tereza sees are arbitrary to anyone but Tereza. These signs include a "book, Beethoven, the number six, [a] yellow park bench" (Kundera 48), everyday

things. However, Tereza's belief that these signs are significant changes the trajectory of her future and gives her the "courage to leave home and change her fate" (Kundera 48). At the beginning of their relationship, Tereza chooses to leave her hometown and pursue Tomas in Prague. It is this choice that changes the course of the narrative and the course of her love. What Tereza perceives as fate is chance, but it is, ironically, her belief in fate that prompts her to make a life-altering choice.

In his book, *Milan Kundera & Feminism: Dangerous Intersections* (1995), John O'Brien argues that fate versus free will is central to many of Kundera's novels.

> In Kundera's works, fate is generally shown from a constructivist perspective and identified as an individual coping mechanism, a delusion, or a personal force. Yet, for all its mythic or constructed qualities, fate plays an important role in the daily lives of its characters. And, in novel after novel, a different role still if that character is a woman. (O'Brien 52)

There is a constant battle between the idea of a predestined life and a life of choice. O'Brien argues that the representation of women as "weaker than their male counterparts" suggests Kundera's women "would necessarily be more comfortable relaxing into fatalism than asserting their free will" (53). However, this is not the case with Tereza, who deconstructs her own notion of love as predestined.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being suggests that coincidences abound which prompt one to make choices. Tomas and Tereza's relationship follows the notion contrary to "*Es muss sein*!", that is "'*Es könnte auch anders sein'* (it could just as well be otherwise)" (Kundera 33). Tomas has this realisation – that their love is arbitrary – while watching Tereza dance with another man. He finds that if Tereza "hadn't met Tomas, she would have been ready to respond to the call of any other man she might have met instead" (Kundera 16). Thus, their love is not inevitable or even particularly special.

Moreover, Kundera's novel challenges the notion of predestined love by contrasting Tereza with Tomas's apparent "soul-mate". Tomas has a dream of an unknown woman whom he believes to be the woman who knows him best. This fictive woman is the "'*Es muss sein!*' of [Tomas's] love," (Kundera 232) or, in Platonic terms, his missing half. However, Tomas knows that were he to meet his "soul-mate" and find domestic bliss with her, he would "abandon his paradise and the woman from his dream and betray the '*Es muss sein!'* of his

love to go off with Tereza" (Kundera 233). The myth of the perfect partner pales in comparison with the real woman he loves.

Eternal Return

Tomas knows he will choose to be with Tereza, repeatedly. Their love is like Nietzsche's (1881) idea of *eternal return*, except for one key element: choice. *Eternal return* invokes reincarnation, the idea that after death, one's soul will be reborn in another body ("Reincarnation"). Reincarnation suggests consequences for one's actions and the possibility of re-doing life. As the narrator says, *eternal return* is "to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum" (Kundera 3). History repeats itself. *Eternal return* implies a lack of free will as one is doomed to repeat the same life, a notion that runs contrary to the idea of individual choice, which appears to be key to relationships in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

One of the criticisms of Nietzsche's philosophy which Arnold Zuboff identifies, is that it "renders the world basically aimless and impersonal" (343). *Eternal return* is a kind of nightmarish vision of a world in which "existence… [is] without meaning or aim, yet [recurs] inevitably without any finale of nothingness" (Nietzsche qtd in Zuboff 344). This image of reincarnation is *the unbearable lightness of being*, the unbearable knowledge of one's life being uncontrollable and meaningless. However, love illustrates a new possibility for meaning as it is shown repeatedly in the novel not to be an inevitability, but a choice. Love is like *eternal return* not because it is beyond one's control but because it is based on *repeated* choices.

In a world of reincarnation, time is perceived as cyclical rather than linear. This vision is apparent in the form of the novel, as events do not occur in chronological order. The reader is introduced to philosophical ideas before being introduced to narrative or characters. Tomas is associated with *eternal return,* as the narrator introduces him straight after a consideration of this idea. However, his first action is to look across his courtyard, "not knowing what to do" (Kundera 5). This image is followed by an explanation that Tomas had met Tereza for the first time three weeks previously. There is something contradictory about the simultaneous association of Tomas with the lack of free will of *eternal return* and the requirement that he make a choice about Tereza. From the very outset, Tomas's relationship with Tereza is predicated on a series of returns that are not inexorable but chosen.

Either/Or

Tomas wishes he could separate the "heaviness" of love from the "lightness" of erotic attraction. The idea that desire and love may be neatly separated is akin to conventional notions of gendered experiences of ontology. Traditionally, women are conceived of as more corporeal and emotional, and men as more mental and rational. Elizabeth Grosz argues that much of "philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body" (4). The descriptions of Tomas in relation to philosophical thoughts and Tereza in relation to her body appear to follow this trajectory. While Tomas is born of the saying "*Einmal ist keinmal'*," Tereza is "born of the rumblings of the stomach" (37). "'*Einmal ist keinmal'"* translates to *what happened but once, may as well not have happened*. Hence, Tomas's life is predicated on the question of *eternal return* versus the mundanity of a transient, mortal life. His existence is based upon an abstract idea, while Tereza's is concrete and corporeal.

Nonetheless, gendered dualism is questioned through the events of the plot and the characters' emotional growth over time. Tomas constantly follows sexual, bodily urges despite his supposed high-mindedness, while Tereza invests her time in reading and photography. Tereza's constant battles between soul and body show that she is not unquestionably somatic. Her sense of her body illustrates the idea that "[b]eing a body is something we must come to accommodate psychically, something that we must live" (Grosz xiii). Embodiment or the experience of being in one's body (or *being a body*) is experienced differently for different sexes. There are certain normative expectations of how one might use one's body according to one's sex. This entails following traditional gender roles, which, for Tereza, means "[behaving] as other female bodies behave with male bodies" (Kundera 135). The body is associated with a general, de-individuated experience, and common societal expectations.

Contrastingly, the soul is associated with the individual, with one's personal identity. Tereza's sense of estrangement from her body, her sense that it is "alien and yet assigned to her and no one else" (Kundera 135), is a result of her awareness of Tomas's infidelity. Tereza blames her body for Tomas's unfaithfulness, for "[lacking] the power to become the only body in Tomas's life" (Kundera 135). Tereza finds it easier to fault her own body than

Tomas's actions. Dualism serves the purposes of a fictitious story in which Tomas is a slave to his bodily desires and Tereza's body is at fault for not being enough.

Increasingly, Tereza begins to see her desire for monogamy as antiquated. Thus, her body becomes, in her view, an "anachronistic shell" (Kundera 138). Tereza attempts to lead a life in which embodiment feels light, "to grasp the lightness and amusing insignificance of physical love" (Kundera 138). To this end, she has sex with an engineer. Yet, Tereza's sexual encounter with the engineer is not liberating. She disassociates from her body, which she feels has "betrayed her" by going "out into the world" (Kundera 149) to behave as other bodies do. In this moment, Tereza realises that her body is as important to who she is as her soul is. Thus, Tereza is portrayed as both philosophical and embodied despite her introduction.

Furthermore, gendered dualism is implicitly questioned by the insinuation that the characters in the novel are *just characters*. Kundera calls it "senseless for the author to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived" (37). His characters are not expected to be read as living people "born of a mother's womb" (Kundera 37) but rather as extrapolations of "a stimulating phrase or two or… a basic situation" (Kundera 37). The characters in the novel are a kind of thought experiment, an extension of, on the one hand, the idea of embodiment and, on the other, the philosophy "*Einmal ist keinmal*" (Kundera 37). The characters' overt artificiality suggests that to reduce real people to similarly one-dimensional stereotypes of masculine high-mindedness or feminine corporeality is ludicrous.

However, for the purposes of exploring the various dichotomies that his narrator outlines at the opening of the novel, it is useful to create characters like Tomas and Tereza. As Fred Misurella writes in *Understanding Milan Kundera* (1993), Kundera's narrative "urges [the reader] to escape, not *from* the world, but *into* it through an imagined one" (108). This imagined world "functions as a model" which Kundera uses to prompt questions about "the meaning of human life" (Misurella 108) through overtly constructed characters. The characters' construction allows an escape into the philosophical realm.

Both/And

The use of binary oppositions in Kundera's work has come under criticism for the way in which it leads to ambiguity and contradiction (O'Brien 66). As O'Brien notes, Roger Kimball denounces Kundera's ambivalent writing as "wanting it both ways" (qtd in O'Brien 66). However, having it *both ways,* or *both/and* as opposed to *either/or*, provides the possibility of

plurality. Though Kundera centres much of his novel around the question of fate versus free will, he provides the space for a pluralistic understanding of individuality. While deconstructionism has been accused by some feminists, such as Susan Bordo, of evading "human locatedness" (qtd in O'Brien 67), there is space within the multiplicity of voices evoked in deconstructionism which supports Donna Wilshire's feminist take on an epistemology which "[dismantles]… dualism in favour of a "both/and" pattern" (qtd in O'Brien 68). The power of *both/and* lies in its expansion of possibilities of ontology. *Both/and* suggests that there is room for the individual within the multitude, and for choice within the seeming ubiquity of fate.

The primary dichotomy that Kundera probes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is that of light and weight. In Part One, entitled "Lightness and Weight", the narrator introduces *eternal return* and dubs it "the heaviest of burdens (*das schwerste Gerwicht*)" (Kundera 4). If this inescapable repetition of life's events is so burdensome, then daily life appears, by contrast, to be "splendid" in its "lightness" (Kundera 4). However, despite the philosopher Parmenides's clear designation of "lightness [as] positive, weight negative" (Kunder, 5), Kundera demonstrates that lightness is not necessarily positive, and weight is not necessarily negative.

Similarly, romance is neither light nor heavy: it is both. Although weight is typically associated with responsibility and difficulty, it is also associated with romantic love: as the novel insists, "in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body" (Kundera 5). This quote makes certain heteronormative assumptions. However, the idea that an image of heaviness, of bearing the burden of another body, can evoke both the notion of onus and of sexual satisfaction is pertinent. The narrator argues that, "The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfilment" (Kundera 5). The sexual act depicted is simultaneously weighty and light, negative and positive.

Vulnerability and Compassion

Love is conventionally described in the language of possession. However, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the aggression of Tomas's sexual escapades is challenged by his genuine love for Tereza. Tomas's understanding of intimacy changes when he shifts his focus from possession to compassion. According to Joseph Mai, Tomas's life before he meets Tereza is a light attempt to "take possession of the world" (Kundera qtd in Mai 107) through his

womanising. When Tomas meets Tereza, he finds himself drawn towards her "in a different, heavier way" (Mai 107). The reason that Tomas perceives Tereza as different from his other lovers is because of her vulnerability. He thrives off "opening the surface of things and looking at what lies hidden inside" (Kundera qtd in Mai 107) as both a surgeon and a lover. Yet, Tereza is an open book, "she had come to him uncovered" (Kundera qtd in Mai 107). Tereza is immediately legible to Tomas in a way that no one else is. And in this way, there are no secrets for Tomas to attempt to possess.

Instead, it is Tereza who takes possession of Tomas. This is evidenced in Tereza's despotic occupation of Tomas's "poetic memory", which "[exterminates] all trace of other women" (Kundera 202). *Poetic memory* is a space in one's memory reserved for "everything that charms or touches [one], that makes [one's life] beautiful" (Kundera 202). Though Tereza may not be the only woman with whom Tomas is sexually intimate, she is the only woman recorded in his memory as making his life beautiful.

Tomas becomes vulnerable in his love for Tereza. However, he worries that this vulnerability undermines his masculinity. In *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality,* Victor J. Seidler (1989) analyses the ways in which men in Western culture have been raised to view themselves as rational, independent, and dominant (4). Tomas perceives the feeling of being unable to "survive [Tereza's] death" (Kundera 7) as a challenge to his manhood. His dependence on Tereza challenges the assumption that masculine strength manifests as independence.

The conventional notion of the role that a man "ought" to play is one of decisiveness and action. Consequently, Tomas becomes "distressed" when he finds himself "in a situation where a real man would instantly have known how to act" (Kundera 7). Tomas's sense of his manhood is undermined by his hesitancy and indecision with regards to Tereza. He sees this vacillation as "depriving the most beautiful moments he had ever experienced…of their meaning" (Kundera 7). Tomas's notion of what it means to be "a real man" detracts from the emotional experience of being in Tereza's presence.

Kundera suggests that the true meaning of love is compassion or "co-feeling" (19), which cannot truly be felt if one views the world through gendered dualist hierarchies. Co-feeling, the narrator argues, "signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination", which means that "[i]n the hierarchy of sentiments… [compassion] is supreme" (Kundera 19). However, compassion necessitates a degree of sacrifice. Tomas cannot answer the question of whether

it is "better to be with Tereza or to remain alone" because one cannot base one's choices off the multitude of other possibilities (Kundera 7). However, Tomas must sacrifice his sense of masculinity as surety and total autonomy to pursue the life he desires. Tomas's love for Tereza entails a dependency on her and a sense of shared susceptibility.

While Tomas and Tereza's relationship emanates compassion, Franz and Sabina's relationship emanates miscommunication and misapprehension. Franz views Sabina in terms of his own egocentric projection of his masculine value. In like manner, Sabina views Franz in terms of a limited perception of masculine strength. Sabina is lover to both Tomas and Franz. Sabina's two lovers differ, in her view, in terms of their apparent masculineness.

What attracts Sabina to Tomas is her perception of him as strong because of his dominant behaviour in bed. For Sabina, "[p]hysical love is unthinkable without violence" (Kundera 108). However, Franz perceives strength differently, as something which a man can harness to protect the woman he loves. As Franz says, "I can protect you no matter what" (Kundera 108). This is reminiscent of Tomas's mythical view of Tereza as the woman from the "bulrush basket" (Kundera 233), an allusion to Moses or Oedipus. This allusion suggests that Tomas sees himself as responsible for nurturing her as one would an abandoned child. The image of Tereza as an abandoned child resonates with her open vulnerability, but it does not resonate with Sabina's mantra of betrayal.

Sabina's view of love fits into her broader sense of the "kitsch-ness"[2] or falsity of life in Communist Czechoslovakia. The visual art term, "kitsch" is used by Kundera to explore inauthenticity not just in art, but in life and love. In the novel, kitsch becomes the opposite of truth. According to Kundera,

> kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. (242)

[2] Gillo Dorfles, author and compiler of *Kitsch: an anthology of bad taste* (1986), writes that kitsch is "artistic rubbish" (10). This idea is predicated on the notion of art as something of value which provides a faithful representation of reality, eliciting a genuine emotional or philosophical response. In its initial conception, kitsch is art for those with bad taste (Dorfles, 31). It is something that looks like art on the outside but, upon closer inspection is in fact "a falsification of art" (Dorfles, 12). As such, kitsch imitates the appearance and effect of art without being "true art" itself. Ethically speaking, kitsch has been denounced because of its infidelity to the truth.

Kitsch is, in a sense, the denial of the animal side of humanity, the side which responds to basic carnal needs and impulses. Though the elitism of using the label, kitsch, as a description of "bad" art has been critiqued in recent years,[3] it is worth noting briefly as Kundera uses the term to critique the misleading façade of both Communism and societal expectations. Sabina feels compelled to revolt against normative expectations of commitment, marriage, and children because she sees these as kitsch, painting a pretty screen over the ugliness of desire and pain.

While Franz may be good to Sabina in many respects, his egocentrism obstructs their relationship. In making love to Sabina, he pictures her as emptiness waiting to be filled by his love. Franz feels

> like a rider galloping off into a magnificent void, a void of no wife, no daughter, no household, the magnificent void swept clear by Hercules' broom, a magnificent void he would fill with his love. (Kundera 113)

The "void" in the above quotation connotes both female genitalia and the Freudian notion of femininity as lack. Sabina allows Franz this void, because she is void of, in literal terms, a phallus, but in more figurative terms, the kind of responsibilities and expectations associated with masculinity. Franz's apparent reading of the feminine as lack of masculinity is limiting and reminiscent of Lacan's idea of women as "*pas-toute*" (7). Franz views Sabina as incomplete, waiting to be made whole by the sexual act. This resonates with Grosz's contention that women's bodies are commonly conceptualised or inscribed "as a lack relative to men's fullness, a mode of incapacity in terms of men's skills and abilities, a mode of women's naturalness and immanence compared with men's transcendence" (xiii). Egotistically, Franz sees Sabina as a vehicle for his own fulfilment. Thus, Franz and Sabina's relationship is riddled with misperception and misapprehension. Kundera's illustration of the ways in which this misapprehension of Sabina leads to the dissolution of their relationship suggests the severe limitations and destructiveness of such a view of femininity.

[3] See for instance: Ortlieb, Stefan A., and Claus-Christian Carbon. "Kitsch and Perception: Towards a New 'Aesthetic from Below.'" *Art and Perception*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–26., doi:10.1163/22134913-00001091.

Nostalgia and the Animal

Part of the novel's grappling with the body is its consideration of *the animal*. Love appears in its "purest", most instinctual, and innocent form in the character of Karenin, Tomas and Tereza's dog. Karenin's vulnerability becomes most apparent when he grows sick in the latter part of the novel, when Tomas and Tereza move to the countryside. It is in this section that the idea of the love of animals comes to the fore. The love between Karenin and Tereza is described as a "better" (Kundera 289) kind of love than the love between Tomas and Tereza. It is implied that this is because Karenin is completely vulnerable within the relationship and is in his most natural, animal state.

Modern nostalgia is, in Svetlana Boym's words, "a romance with the past" (38). However, this vision of the past is neither objective nor historical, but an idealisation. Nostalgia is associated with a return to nature. In their new village home, Tereza becomes friends with a heifer and gives it the name "Marketa" (Kundera 281). Tereza's friendship with Marketa is reminiscent of a passage from Nietzsche's "Uses and Abuses of History" (1873) in which he describes a philosopher confronting happy cows. When asked why he is happy, the cow wishes to say that it is because he always forgets what he wants to say, but he does not say anything because he has already forgotten this thought (Nietzsche qtd in Boym 58, 59). There is an innocence associated with the cow and its forgetful nature, which suggests a similar idea to that implied in Genesis: that it is knowledge that eliminates animal innocence. Nietzsche's forgetful cow becomes the epitome of a prelapsarian vision of humanity.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is critical of nostalgia from the outset. Early in the novel one reads, "In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine" (Kundera 4). Looking back on a "lost" part of one's history, one is tempted to look through tinted glasses, even at atrocities. The guillotine has become part of the Romantic myth of the French Revolution. This telling of history highlights the might of average citizens who were able to topple an unjust regime. Yet, this romanticising of the Revolution glorifies immense violence. Romantic tropes such as nostalgia pave the way for misleading representations of the past or agrarian life in contrast to modern urbanity. This is an ethical problem, and example of what Kundera identifies as kitsch, the beautifying of histories and realities that are themselves destructive and violent.

Moving to the countryside does not necessarily mean one will discover prelapsarian bliss. Tomas and Tereza discover this in their new pastoral home. Thanks to the Communist regime

which has overtaken Czechoslovakia, "village life no longer [fits] the age-old pattern" (Kundera 274). The church is off-limits, the tavern has been turned into offices, and there is nowhere for people to socialise. After a day of work, the countryfolk "shut themselves up within their four walls and… stare at the refulgent television screen" (Kundera 274). People keep to themselves. Domestic intimacy is replaced by the beaming glow of the television showing that country life is not a harmonious relic of pre-industrial life. Human nature does not revert to some "purer" animal state in a rural setting. Moreover, this image exposes the ways in which Communism fails to create the sense of community it promises.

The idea of animal love as somehow "better" than human love manifests in Tereza's total acceptance of Karenin. Unlike her relationship with Tomas, "Tereza [accepts] Karenin for what he [i]s" (Kundera 289). Tereza finds Tomas's affairs upsetting and they make her question his love. Whereas, with Karenin, she "[does] not envy his secret intrigues", nor does she try to "transform" him through training "as a husband tries to reform his wife and a wife her husband" (Kundera 289). Rather, Tereza merely attempts "to provide [Karenin] with the elementary language that [enables] them to communicate and live together" (Kundera 289). The danger with perceiving this kind of love as "better" than the love between Tereza and Tomas lies in the implication that it is better to love someone blindly, accepting who they are and not expecting them to change any aspect of their behaviour. It is also a troubling vision of love in that it is predicated on a complete imbalance of power.

Happily Ever After?

Conventional romance narratives end either in tragedy or *happily ever after.* True to form, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* offers both endings. On the one hand, the reader knows that Tomas and Tereza die in a car-crash shortly after a night of dancing and drinking as this revelation comes sometime prior to the final chapter. On the other hand, the novel ends with them still alive, in a moment of love and harmony.

The novel ends at a moment that is both happy and sad simultaneously. Tomas admits that he has been genuinely happy away from Prague and his work as a surgeon. Confused by his admission, Tereza says, "Surgery was your mission," but Tomas responds, "Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission. No one has" (Kundera 305). Tomas's initial idea that everyone has a "mission" in life or an "*Es muss sein!"*, whether that be love or one's career, restricts his life to a normative vision that represses his individuality. Once Tomas considers the possibility of "*Es könnte auch anders sein"*, his prospects are limitless.

In the final moments of the novel, Tereza is happy that she and Tomas are together but realises that they "are at the last station" (Kundera 305). She senses impending death. However, Kundera presents a *both/and* scenario; happiness and sadness coexist. As the narrator says, "The sadness was form, the happiness content. Happiness filled the space of sadness" (Kundera 305). In this image of sorrow as form and joy as content, these emotions are compared to a piece of literature. The sadness is likened to the layout of words on a page, while the happiness is the words' meaning. The two affective experiences complement each other.

Moreover, the narrator subverts the "happily ever after" plot by displacing linear time in favour of an ostensibly "happier" time. According to the narrator, the sadness of the end of the novel lies in "man's plight", which is that "[h]uman time does not turn in a circle; it runs in a straight line" (Kundera 290). Even though the narrative has been written cyclically, the general, human, understanding of time is chronological. There is a clear beginning and end to life, and to traditional romances. This linearity is "man's plight" because it prevents the happiness of a cycle. As the narrator says, "happiness is the longing for repetition" (Kundera 290). Happiness is thus the desire for *eternal return*, for a cycle of life that continues in perpetuity.

Double Exposure

The Unbearable Lightness of Being uses a kind of literary "double exposure" as O'Brien writes (122) to critique the misrepresentation of women, and I would add men as well, in terms of rigid dichotomies. The term "double exposure" is taken from photography, meaning "the act or process of recording two superimposed images on a photographic medium, usually done intentionally to produce a special effect" ("double exposure"). Double exposure is a technique which Sabina uses regularly in her artworks. In the scene in which Sabina and Tereza photograph one another, "the camera [serves] Tereza as both a mechanical eye through which to observe Tomas's mistress and a veil by which to conceal her face from her" (Kundera 62). This is, as Misurella writes, another kind of double exposure (115). In this instance, Tereza usurps Tomas's usual position, in both her gaze and the way in which she commands Sabina, "Strip!" (Kundera 62). The command which Tomas repeatedly uses in sexual encounters with both women binds them together as if by magic. However, this command feels more compelling to Sabina than a command from Tomas because it is "not

from a man but from a woman" (Kundera 62). There is something intoxicating about Tereza assuming the role that is traditionally her husband's and demanding that her desire be met.

When it is Tereza's turn to be photographed in the nude, she does not feel she has relinquished this new power, but "[wishes] that the moments she stood naked opposite Sabina would never end" (Kundera 63). She finds herself "literally *disarmed"* (Kundera 62), as though the camera, and her gaze, are both her weapon and shield. Yet, in the process of disarming herself, Tereza feels "intoxicated" (Kundera 63). There is an equality of power between the two nude women and an ambiguity. Both feel enchanted by the erotic atmosphere. However, the spell is broken by Sabina's laughter, an expression of her fear of "the enchantment" (Kundera 63). Sabina is afraid of this latent eroticism, of their shared nakedness in the literal sense, and of their shared vulnerability in their love for Tomas.

Sabina and Tereza experiment with the power of the gaze in a way that makes them both vulnerable. Their shared nakedness allows them to briefly "lose their individuality" (Misurella 115), and to forget about Tomas. However, their embarrassed laughter suggests that this harmony and their depleted sense of individuality cannot last forever (Misurella 115). And, significantly, this scene is proceeded by the invasion of Prague by Russian tanks, emphasising the similarities between private and personal senses of shame and vulnerability, while "loss of identity, publica and private [becomes] the paramount theme" (Misurella 116). Double exposure superimposes the private onto the public, the intimacy and vulnerability of two women and the violence of the Russian invasion. Once more, Kundera's narrative focuses on duality, not as irreconcilable but as overlapping.

Unscripted Love

The Unbearable Lightness of Being presents a novelistic version of double-exposure, veering between notions of the body and soul, light and weight, love and desire. It uses romantic tropes, such as destiny, *happily ever after*, duality, and nostalgia in a playful, contemplative manner that incites readers to reconsider romantic conventions. Moreover, Kundera's depiction of the importance of individual choices contrasts with the emphasis on the collective in Soviet Czechoslovakia, prompting the reader to question whether there is still value and agency within the individual.

Kundera presents a vision of love that is influenced by chance – *"Es könnte auch anders sein"* or *it could just as well be otherwise* – coupled with choice. Additionally, Kundera's depiction of Tereza and Sabina as nuanced women who follow their own desires paves the

way for further consideration of the various archetypes of feminine sexuality in the romance tradition.

In the next chapter, I analyse the archetype of the wild, sexually empowered woman in more detail through the lens of A.S. Byatt's 1990 novel, *Possession: A Romance*. *Possession* considers the romantic lives of two couples in which frequent intertextual references are made to the mythical fairy woman, Melusine. Melusine exemplifies the hybridity of feminine experience which cannot be captured by any dichotomy. The invocation of her presence in *Possession* suggests an alternative focus in romance, one which positions feminine desire as central. Moreover, feminine desire is not depicted as a longing for the happiness that is conventionally expected to correlate with marriage, but in autonomy and freedom within an intimate relationship.

Chapter Two

The Modern Melusine:

Hybridity, Happiness, and Proximity in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*

The term "possession" has connotations of both ownership and bewitchment. According to the Chambers Compact Dictionary (2005), possess means "to own", "to have something as a feature or quality", or "of an emotion, evil spirit, erotic: to occupy and dominate the mind of someone" ("Possess", 612). In A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), romantic love is portrayed, on the one hand, in relation to the idea of possession as ownership and preoccupation. This is framed within the world of academia in which the pursuit of knowledge is also a pursuit of possession. On the other hand, possession is portrayed in terms of its supernatural connotations, as can be seen in the way in which the narrative appears to be *possessed* by the myth of Melusine.[4] Byatt repurposes the ancient myth of the hybrid fairy-woman, snake-woman, dragon-woman, Melusine, illustrating how feminine desire can be transformative.

In the previous chapter I argued that *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* demonstrates the possibilities of a radical break from the conventional expectation of finding one's "soul-mate" or predestined love. Similarly, *Possession* demonstrates the possibilities of a fundamental break from the trope of uninhibited feminine desire as dangerous and destructive. Byatt offers a vision of desire as transformative, illustrating the ways in which a queering of the romance narrative proffers a different ending from *happily ever after* or tragedy. *Possession* creates a dialogue between the late-twentieth and nineteenth centuries by paralleling the romantic narratives of couples from each period. There is also a persistent link to the medieval era and its place in romance history through the presence of Melusine. Byatt uses Melusine to bring to the fore the wild, fearsome elements of the unbridled feminine, centring feminine desire and offering more empowering alternatives to the traditional romance plot.

In *Possession*, two literary studies academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, embark on the traditional romantic quest. However, what they pursue is more commonplace in the Campus Novel than the Romance. They seek the truth about a pair of Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, whose relationship has been kept secret for years. Maud and

[4] Byatt names her "Melusina" but she is traditionally called "Melusine|. I will use the two names interchangeably.

Roland's quest begins with Roland's discovery of letters that Randolph Henry Ash wrote to a mysterious woman, whom he later discovers to be Christabel LaMotte. However, while the romance between the poets fills many pages of correspondence, Roland and Maud are far more restrained when it comes to their own desire. There are repeated allusions to the myth of Melusine in *Possession.* She is the subject of one of Christabel's most famous poems and is rumoured to be her ancestor. These constant references work alongside a motif of water which implicitly links both Christabel and her descendant, Maud, to the metamorphic qualities of Melusine.

The Hybrid Body

As Melusine is a character with whom both Christabel and Maud identify, it is worth considering the myth of Melusine in more detail. In *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth* (Urban et al., 2017), various literary scholars trace the legacy of the medieval character, Melusine. Historically, goddesses and other magnanimous or wicked beings frequently take the form of hybrid women, assuming a "part-serpent, part-bird, or part-piscine form" (Urban et. al 1). Melusine joins the ranks of other "extraordinary females" depicted as seeking out noble human marriages to integrate into human society (Urban et. al 1). However, what is remarkable about Melusine is her ambivalence. Melusine is regarded not only as a monstrous creature attempting to assimilate but also as "an impressive medieval chatelaine, matriarch and foundress of the Lusignan line" (Urban et. al 2). She is thus simultaneously a representation of acceptable feminine power, the noblewoman, and unacceptable feminine power, the monster.

Moreover, Melusine is the centre of her own story. Jean d'Aras's *Roman de Mélusine* (c. 1450) and Coudrette's poem, *Roman du Parthenay* (c. 1401), both foreground the legendary woman as the originator of a prevailing medieval dynasty. Contrary to the dominant focus of romances of the era, d'Aras's and Coudrette's romances centre Melusine rather than a masculine hero like Arthur or Charlemagne (Urban et. al 2). It is significant that the original stories of Melusine position her as the protagonist because Byatt's appropriation of her into her contemporary romance sets the tone of a woman-centred narrative.

Melusine's story is one of tragedy in which the disloyalty of the men in her life causes her great suffering and painful change. Her father breaks a promise to her mother not to watch her giving birth, which leads Melusine to exact revenge and consequently be cursed (Urban et. al 5). Following this, Melusine must rely on her husband, Raymond, to remain faithful to his promise

never to see her on a Saturday, the day on which her body transforms (Urban et. al 5). However, both men deny their wives the privacy asked of them and Melusine suffers the consequences through her bodily changes and eventual ostracization.

While Christabel is associated with Melusine, her lover, Randolph, is different from the men in Melusine's life because he respects Christabel's privacy. After Randolph and Christabel have sex for the first time, he realises that Christabel had been a virgin, which surprises him as she has "[s]uch delicate skills, such informed desire" (Byatt 285). This arouses a sense of curiosity in Randolph as to where or how Christabel acquired this sexual knowledge, yet he decides that it is better not "to exhibit indiscreet curiosity" (Byatt 285). Randolph compares himself to "the unfortunate Raimondin"[5] (Byatt 285) who spies on his wife and finds himself repulsed by her otherness. However, unlike Raymond, Randolph respects his lover's desire for secrecy. He understands that there are some things which Christabel is entitled to keep to herself. This suggests an alternative possibility for the queer or unconventional woman. I will reflect on the ways in which the novel participates in the queering of conventional notions of femininity in more detail below.

In "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit", Elizabeth Grosz (1996) adopts the term "freak" in a similar way to which Queer Studies have reappropriated "queer", taking a pejorative word and repurposing it as a means of self-definition. Grosz considers the somatic limits of subjectivity, contemplating human bodies historically labelled "freaks", "curiosities", "prodigies" or "monstrosities" (55). For Grosz, the importance of the subject classified a "freak" is "a certain social isolation" (56). "Freaks" are not intolerable because they are "unusually gifted [or] unusually disadvantaged" (Grosz 56). What makes them both intriguing and horrifying is their ambiguity, their capacity for being *Both/And* rather than *Either/Or.* Melusine is a perfect example of this ambiguous physicality. Her hybrid body "imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life", the "very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, and sexes" (Grosz 57). Thus, the discovery of Melusine's transfiguration changes her position in society. It is only her secrecy and her husband's agreement not to see her once a week that affords the possibility of her comfortable double existence.

Moreover, Melusine's physical hybridity raises questions about the body in intimate relations. Grosz poses the question of "the degree to which [social, political, and historical factors]

[5] Another spelling of Raymond. The spellings of his name change frequently as the myth has been translated so many times.

tolerate anomalies, ambiguities, and borderline cases" and how this tolerance or intolerance "[marks] the threshold… of acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity" (55). Melusine, as a corporeal amalgamation, finds herself in the position of "monstrosity". Her humanness is tolerated, but not her transmutation. However, Raymond's act of spying on her illustrates Grosz's contention that the "freak" is treated with "simultaneous horror and fascination" (55). Melusine is intriguing, but ultimately intolerable in normative society. As Angela Jane Weisl notes in "Half Lady, Half Serpent: Melusine's Monstrous Body and the Discourse of Romance" (2017), Melusine's body is divided between a female human at the top and an implicitly phallic tail at the bottom (229). Thus, Melusine is a troubling figure because she embodies both the feminine and the masculine, along with the power that is associated with masculinity (Weisl 229). Furthermore, the body is central to Melusine's story not just because of her capacity for physical metamorphosis, but because her monstrosity denies her a soul, and thus a chance of redemption in the afterlife. Melusine's "freakish" form leads her to be unhappy because her desire turns into destruction and her difference is read as dangerous.

Perceptions

Like the narrator of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* Byatt highlights gendered Cartesian dualism in her consideration of corporeal and irrational women versus cerebral and rational men. In traditional depictions, Melusine is one of the "[b]right monsters of the sea and of the sky/Who answer longing and who threaten not/But vanish in the light of rational day" (Byatt 293, lines 98, 99). The men in these tales are positioned in the "light of rational day", while these supposedly monstrous women are said to vanish in the rational realm. This implies that there is no space for these magical women in normative, apparently rational society.

However, Christabel subverts expectations in her version of Melusine. When Raimondin encounters Melusine for the first time, he finds her to be "strong", not "curious, nor kindly, nor aloof", but "self-contained" (Byatt 296, 297). Melusine gazes at Raimondin. She observes him, while he becomes "consumed" by desire (Byatt 297). Raimondin finds himself possessed by the beautiful fairy's gaze. He is not rational in this encounter, but gives way entirely to desire, drinking from the cup Melusine hands him. Raimondin finds himself "dazed with glamour… in her gaze" (Byatt 298). "Now," the speaker declares, "was he hers, if she should ask of him/Body or soul, he would have offered all" (Byatt 298). In this instance, Melusine holds the power. She is active; it is her gaze that entrances Raimondin. And it is he who forgets rational

thought in the presence of her self-sufficient, strong beauty. Melusine transforms into a different picture of femininity, one that is powerful, magical, and independent.

In Laura Mulvey's filmic analysis, she discusses the notion of "the gaze", particularly the "male gaze" and the ways in which it implicitly operates through the camera in many films. Contrasting the notion of this dominant gaze, Mulvey offers the "woman's eye" or the gaze of the feminist critic, which is "not a single, stable way of seeing but one that must find ways of mutating" (5). Like Kundera's notion of "double exposure", as discussed at the end of my previous chapter, Mulvey's feminist gaze encourages a critical response to the verisimilitude of cinema. Mulvey argues that the cinematic gaze could be read as masculine in the Freudian sense because it entails "the pleasure of looking, voyeurism" and is "metaphorically active", while women are presented as spectacles to behold (7). Though *Possession* is not a film, it makes explicit use of the gaze of its characters, subverting the notion of the act of looking as masculine. One of the ways in which the male gaze is challenged in *Possession* is in Christabel's act of looking. For instance, Christabel watches Randolph undress, unabashedly, "When he looked up, he caught her eye. She might have lain with her face turned away but did not" (Byatt 283). Christabel does not hide her desire. It is Christabel who watches Randolph undress, and this feminine gaze surprises him. Similarly, Melusine's gaze in Christabel's poem works as a kind of spell upon Raymond. In both cases, it is the feminine gaze which is overt, active, and powerful.

Feminine Desire

The idea that there exists a unifying sense of "woman" or "women" has been contested by feminist theorists who have pointed to its contextual and social contingency. Denise Riley argues that the subject "women" is "historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change" (241). Riley contends that the collective "women" is troublesome because it groups together a heterogeneous set of people according to standards which are inconstant across different cultural and historical contexts (244). While "women" has been historically used as a limiting, generalising term, there are still ways in which it can be useful.[6] In the words of Stuart Hall, the "Other" is someone "who [is] in any

[6] As Liz Stanley writes, Riley's implicit argument is that "*women* is categorised while *men* is not because it is never apparently sexualised in the way that *women* has been", yet the historical and discursive construction of the subject "women" necessitates a construction of the subject "men" in order to uphold the paradigm of assumed heterosexuality within which these subjects operate (275). What Riley fails to observe is that the category of "women" is constructed not just in relation to society or nature but in juxtaposition with "men" as part of the larger metanarrative of what Judith Butler terms "compulsory heterosexuality" (283).

way significantly different from the majority" (229), one who is designated as one of "them", rather than one of "us". The Other is therefore a subject who does not fit into normative conceptions of personhood. If men are assumed to be "the norm", the representative of all of humanity, then women are necessarily Other.

Melusine, rather than fixing the notion of a single kind of "woman", promotes the notion of womanhood as unstable and changeable. Her physical hybridity correlates to a symbolic hybridity in which Melusine is at once a powerful noblewoman and a monster. Melusine's character comes to assume many nuances of femininity and the social world more broadly. She becomes an embodiment of liminality, "a warning of the ever-permeable boundaries between the perceived world and the world unseen" (Urban et. al 7). The seen world incorporates a superficial understanding of life, a normative view of society.

In *Possession*, Maud's colleague and fellow feminist academic, Leonora Stern, considers the Breton myth of the City of Is. Leonora writes that the City of Is shows the ways in which the socially unacceptable hides beneath the surface of everyday life. In the patriarchal society of the Bretons, expressions of feminine desire are suppressed. Leonora's preface for *The Drowned City* presents the City of Is as a feminine inversion of the patriarchal world of the Bretons, which wreaks havoc when it rises to the surface.

> *The women's world of the underwater city is the obverse of the male-dominated technological industrial world of Paris or Par-is, as the Bretons have it. They say that Is will come to the surface when Paris is drowned for its sins.* (Byatt 134)

The feminine world lies below the surface of daily life, restricted by the masculine order of the city above. When it is finally unleashed, it has the power to "[drown] [the masculine world] for its sins" (Byatt 134). In a less literal and violent version of this, when feminine sexuality, heavily repressed by conventions of respectability in the nineteenth century, is given the space to show itself, it threatens to overwhelm the social order. Thus, the feminine world is associated with water and its destructive capabilities, tacitly invoking the image of the mythical water-woman, Melusine.

Likewise, Christabel's niece, Sabine de Kercoz, considers the mythological representations of powerful, desirous women. She rewrites the Breton myth of Dahud, another legendary water-woman, transforming a "sorceress whom the Ocean loves and whose excesses cause the City of Is to be engulfed (by that same Ocean) and drowned" into "an *embodiment*… of [women's] desire for freedom, for autonomy, for [their] own proper passion" (Byatt 349). Dahud most

clearly embodies the connection between feminine sexuality and the ocean, representing "the terror of the passion of the senses, let loose in women" (Byatt 349). According to one of the editors of Sabine's father's mythological recensions, "Paganism, woman and the Ocean" are the "three desires and… three great fears of man" (Byatt 349). Sabine does not understand why sexual desire and the senses are considered terrifying in a woman, nor why these three things are considered the sublime desires and fears of all humanity – here labelled "man". She declares that the editor turns passionate women who are in touch with the sensual and sensory world into "witches, outcasts, *sourcières*, monsters" (Byatt 349). The "freak" appears frightening when free.

Expectation and reality

Before the first time Randolph and Christabel have sex, Randolph contemplates his desire and the expectations that he has of this erotic encounter. In his attempt to articulate his feelings, Randolph turns to books. He remembers reading *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (Tobias Smollett, 1748) as a young boy and discovering that the book has a happy ending (Byatt 282). The book ends with the hero outside the bedroom door, "and then let in, as a kind of *post scriptum*" by "some characterless embodiment of physical and spiritual perfection, or more accurately of the male imagination" (Byatt 282). The gratification of the hero's sexual desire, and of the reader's desire, is an after-the-fact occurrence, solidified in a masculine fantasy of perfect womanhood. This moment is, for Randolph as a young boy, a "touchstone" (Byatt 282). Hence, his own sense of masculine heterosexuality is linked both to literature and the imagination, and to a sense of the fantastical mystery of womanhood.

> That was the first of those long strange nights. She met him with passion, fierce as his own, and knowing too, for she exacted her pleasure from him, opened herself to it, clutched for it, with short animal cries. She stroked his hair and kissed his blind eyes, but made no more specific move to pleasure him, the male – nor did she come to that, all those nights. It was like holding Proteus, he thought at one point, as though she was liquid moving through his grasping fingers, as though she was waves of the sea rising all round him. How many many men have had that thought, he told himself, in how many many places, how many climates, how many rooms and cabins and caves, all supposing themselves swimmers in salt seas, with the waves rising, all supposing themselves – no, knowing themselves – unique. Here, here, here, his head beat, his life had been leading him, it was all tending to this act, in this place, to this woman… "No

> more speech", [he said] and held her down and caressed her till she cried out. Then he did speak again. "You see, I know you," and she answered breathless, "Yes, I concede. You know." (Byatt 283, 284)

Here, feminine sexuality is repeatedly linked to water, to "salt seas" and "waves rising" or "liquid moving through… grasping fingers" (Byatt 283). This suggests that there is something about the feminine which is fluid and unfixable; men struggle to grasp it yet feel themselves inundated. There is irony in Randolph's consideration of just how "many many men", reinforced by this repetition in "how many many places… climates… rooms and cabins and caves" find themselves engulfed in overpowering waves of feminine (heterosexual) desire (Byatt 283). Contrary to what Randolph gleans from literature, feminine sexuality is not always passive or demure, but can be overpowering and transformative.

Furthermore, Randolph labels his sexual activities with Christabel as "strange nights" (Byatt 283) in part because they are not centred on his own desire. Christabel surprises him because she is so aware of her own desire and pleasure, and she will fight for it, rather than focus on pleasuring him. In a time in which men predominate in public life, Randolph assumes that Christabel will try to please him, "the male" (Byatt 283), and is surprised to find that this is not so.

Similarly, when Maud and Roland first have sex, Roland is conscious of his position as a man and all the conventional language of possession and conquest with which masculinity has historically been associated. Roland acknowledges that to call sex "[taking] possession" is passé and inappropriate (Byatt 507). Like Randolph, Roland is aware of the importance of his lover's privacy and autonomy. He acknowledges that Maud is "a beautiful woman such as he [has] no claim to possess" (Byatt 424). She is in a better social position than he is, much like the noblewoman, Melusine, and she is autonomous. However, Roland concedes that real life is not the same as romance, and "Romance must give way to social realism" (Byatt 424). Maud's desire is clear and jubilant. She cries out in a way that is reminiscent of Melusine's legendary cry, but it is in "pleasure and triumph" (Byatt 507), not in anguish. Maud's cry suggests that there is an alternative ending to the story of the uninhibited, sexual woman, the contemporary Melusine.

In like manner, Christabel's awareness of what she desires is alluring and awesome. It is "like holding Proteus… as though she was liquid moving through his grasping fingers, as though she was waves of the sea rising all round him" (Byatt 283). Randolph considers Proteus, a sea god

from the fourth book of *The Odyssey*, whom the hero, Menelaos, must hold onto to find out what he wishes to know (Fineberg 66). As a defensive strategy, Proteus transforms himself into various wild beasts, a tall tree, and water (Fineberg 66). However, ultimately, Menelaos manages to hold on and learn all he needs to know from Proteus. Thus, Randolph imagines himself trying to hold onto his lover, as though in pursuit of some deeper knowledge or great truth. Nevertheless, Christabel only relents in that she admits that Randolph knows her, he knows what she desires and what pleases her. Randolph knows Christabel in the Biblical sense of having knowledge, carnal knowledge, but other elements of her character remain a mystery.

Intimate but not Proximate

Simone Pfleger considers the challenge which the story of Melusine poses to conventional notions of happiness in von Ringoltingen's 1456 rendition of *Melusine*. Working with the theoretical framework of Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Pfleger contemplates how Melusine's story transgresses the conventional notion of happiness as "personal and genealogical" and centred on "proximity" (Pfleger 209). Ahmed's critical, feminist perspective on happiness exposes the ways in which the idea of happiness can be used to normalise or prescribe certain heteronormative and stereotypical behaviours. As such, it is a useful lens through which to consider the alternative romantic possibilities offered in *Possession*.

Queer theory interrogates the tensions and inconsistencies of heteronormativity and queerness which abound in contemporary discourse. As Michael Warner says in *The Trouble with Normal* (2000), the term "queer" draws one's attention to the taboo aspects of everyday living that disrupt so-called "normalcy". A queer reading necessitates a destabilisation and questioning of the social positions and practices that one may take for granted as "normal" and fixed, making space for those who do not neatly fit socially acceptable categories (Pfleger 216). Melusine can be read as a "queer" character, a character who does not fit with conventional expectations of femininity. Not only is she a shapeshifter but her hybridity means that she must live forever on the margins of society. This resonates once more with Grosz's notion of the "freak".

> Melusine's corporeal hybridity, its secret, and the necessity of Reymund's absence on Saturdays prevent conventional nearness. Rather, the marriage oath functions as a disruptive force that does not exclusively extend a promise of normatively conceived happiness and joy and, in so doing, points to what is at stake when over-valorizing such

> norms: that is, the possibility of nontraditional happiness or unhappiness as an alternative way of being in the world. (Pfleger 209)

The possibility of "nontraditional happiness or unhappiness", which Pfleger suggests in her reading of Melusine, is an alternative vision to the conventional notion of happiness as that which gives life meaning (209). As Ahmed writes in "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness" (2010), "happiness is what [one wishes] for", yet this does not mean that one necessarily knows what happiness is (572). In her reconsideration of happiness, Ahmed turns to the figure of the "wretch", the "stranger, exile, or banished person" offering a new perspective on the idea of happiness from the perspective of those who are traditionally considered to exist without it (573). Melusine is clearly a "wretched" figure, fleeing the safety of her marriage, and becoming a solitary figure, eventually vanishing altogether.

Christabel is a similar character, contained within a prison of her own making. She compares her solitary life to an egg, "a perfect O, a living Stone, doorless and windowless, whose life may slumber on till she be Waked – or find she has Wings to spread" (Byatt 137). She is protected from the outside world, though her shield is fragile. Her life does not expose her to much of the external world as it is "doorless and windowless" (Byatt 137). Christabel implies that this life is safe but dormant. However, self-liberation is not an option in her society, "not so here" (Byatt 137). Hence, Christabel finds it safer to live apart from society. Nevertheless, Christabel is not "wretched". She calls her solitude "the best thing [she has]", her "gold cage", inside which she does not cry, but "[sings]" (Byatt 137). Though it is a cage, it is not a miserable one.

Similarly, Maud's flat is the place into which she retreats, preserving her sense of self. The flat is sterile and white with an "unambiguous bright cleanliness" accentuated by closed curtains and many lights (Byatt 136). For Maud, her flat is a "bright safe box", the only place where she truly feels at ease (Byatt 137). Like Melusine in her bathtub, Maud feels safe when she is solitary. Both Maud and Christabel are "freaks" in the sense that they do not fit the normative notion of women desiring husbands or children.

Moreover, Christabel's living arrangements with her friend, Blanche Glover, suggest the possibility of a same-sex romantic relationship. When Blanche meets with Ellen Ash, Randolph's wife, she tells him of Randolph and Christabel's affair. Blanche states, "We were so happy, Mrs Ash, we were all in all to each other, we were innocent" (Byatt 454). The proximity of Blanche to Christabel makes them both happy, and Blanche feels that they are

"all in all to each other", that no one else counts outside their home. However, Christabel's intimacy with Randolph ruins this; it removes the sense of "innocence" in their life together. It is unclear whether this innocence implies a lack of sexual knowledge of each other or whether Blanche is referring to an innocence of the world of men, but her relationship with Christabel is changed irrevocably by Christabel's affair with Randolph. Maud and Roland's discovery of a heterosexual relationship in Christabel's life leads them to undermine the current academic assumption that she was lesbian. However, neither one considers that she could be bisexual or have multiple partners, Both/And rather than Either/Or.

Furthermore, the possibility of non-normative sexuality is also exhibited in Ellen Ash. Ellen tells Blanche that she "can do nothing about [Blanche's] happiness" (Byatt 454), but believes that she can be happy despite knowing about her husband's infidelity. For Blanche, her happiness is correlated with a monopoly over Christabel's love, while for Ellen, domestic bliss is a façade, concealing her own non-normative sexuality. It is not clear what Ellen's sexual orientation is, but she rejects Randolph's sexual advances many times and when they do have sex, she does not enjoy it. Thus, instead of sexual intimacy, Ellen and Randolph settle for friendship. Randolph "*[accepts] her love*" (Byatt 459), the kind of love that is separated from sex. Because Ellen feels bad about her lack of sexual interest, and because she is grateful that Randolph accepts this lack of interest, she accepts his adultery. However, she cannot accept abandonment. Ellen does not wish to lose the respectability and comfortable life she leads because of her "*charade*" (Byatt 457) of being a happy, conventional wife. But Ellen feels that Christabel is "in one sense [Randolph's] true wife" because she was sexually intimate with him and bore him a child (Byatt 460). Thus, the living arrangements of Christabel and Randolph suggest a further complexity in love and desire, intimacy and proximity.

Despite possessing none of the "happy objects" her society deems necessary for happiness, such as marriage or children,[7] Christabel is content. "Happy objects", according to Ahmed, are "those objects that affect [one] in the best way" (574). However, this definition relies upon the labelling of certain things as good or bad, meaning that happiness becomes "an orientation toward the objects [one comes] into contact with" (Ahmed 575). Therefore, Pfleger cites Melusine's unhappiness as arising from a lack of proximity to Raymond. Intimacy is expected to result in happiness and happiness is predicated on a certain orientation towards the "happy object". When Melusine, as the "happy object" is in the supposedly "wrong" orientation,

[7] Christabel does not raise her own child.

separate from her husband, the whole formula disintegrates. As Ahmed says, "Happiness is often described as what we aim for, as an end-point or even an end in itself" (575). Thus, in the conventional romance plot, happiness goes hand in glove with marriage and functions as a resolution to the difficulties experienced in the relationship between the two lovers over the course of the narrative.

However, in *Possession*, as with the tale of Melusine, marriage does not equal happiness, nor does proximity. Ellen's marriage to Randolph is based upon lies and "unspoken truths" (Byatt 458), while Christabel's life with Blanche is disrupted by her affair with Randolph. Moreover, Christabel and Randolph do not live happily ever after. Maud and Roland embark on a romantic relationship towards the end of the novel, but it is a complicated one in which Maud attempts to maintain her independence but also express her sexual desire. Maud relates to Christabel's desire for "self-possession, her autonomy", saying that she feels she must "keep [her] defences up because [she] must go on *doing [her] work*" and remaining an "unbroken egg" (Byatt 506). Roland accepts this, saying that he too has "[his] own solitude" and that he would never wish to "[s]uperimpose" his life onto Maud's (Byatt 506). Maud self-reflexively acknowledges her preoccupation with liminality, her focus in research on "Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses" (Byatt 506). Sexual intercourse is commonly described in military terms, "Invasion. Irruption", evoking the idea of breaking down boundaries, breaking down the outlines of one's subjectivity (Byatt 506). Roland and Maud are hyper-aware of this, steeped in cultural studies as they are. However, they decide to find a way to make their love work, just as Tomas and Tereza do in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.*

Maud and Roland choose to find a way to make their relationship work, even if they live apart. As Roland says, "We could think of a way – a modern way" to love each other without centring Roland's desires or diminishing the autonomy of either one of them (Byatt 507). Maud and Roland have an option that Christabel and Randolph do not. They have a "modern way" of maintaining a balance between autonomy and intimacy, travelling between countries as the two lovers pursue their own, separate careers.

Happily Ever After?

Possession does not end with *happily ever after* but rather with a reminder of Randolph and Christabel's separation and the tragedy of words left unsaid. Christabel's final letter to Randolph is never delivered and the Postscript in which Randolph meets their daughter, Maia, is something which Christabel never discovers. When Randolph parts ways with Maia, he tells

her to convey the message of their meeting to her "aunt" (Christabel), but "she [forgets] the message, which [is] never delivered" (Byatt 511). However, the birth of their daughter leads eventually to the birth of Maud, their descendant. As Lynn K. Wells writes, "Since Roland and Maud are established throughout as figures of contemporary culture, their final positions in the novel represent a fresh start imagined by Byatt for that culture and expressed in the fantasy terms of her text" (671). The future brings with it the possibilities of a new love story, one in which the *queer* or *freak* woman, the powerful Melusine, can have a satisfying romantic relationship while maintaining privacy and independence.

Thus, Byatt reveals the duplicity of the gendered, heteronormative *happily ever after* plot. Through her appropriation of Melusine and her transformational powers, Byatt recentres feminine desire and proposes a more fluid, hybrid understanding of femininity and desire. Byatt's novel suggests that desire can manifest in a simultaneous wish for autonomy and intimacy in which happiness exists in moments of "hap" (Ahmed 592), those chance moments of bliss that may arise in mutually fulfilling intimate relations.

While Kundera illustrates the importance of choice in love, and Byatt foregrounds the transgressive potential of feminine desire and the importance of individual autonomy in intimate relationships, Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) illustrates the ways in which contemporary romance is still understood within the prism of the normative. The question of what is "normal" in love is one which the characters in *Normal People* fixate upon. This prompts the question of why one would wish to appear "normal" and what might be a more productive, or potentially freeing, alternative, especially when it comes to love and desire.

Chapter Three

"two little plants sharing the same plot of soil":

Convention, Intimacy, and Change in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) confronts many of the typical romantic conventions, both in terms of the literary genre and societal expectations of romance. The very title of the novel indicates Rooney's interest in what is perceived to be "normal". "Normal People" is an ironic title in that, on the one hand, the novel refuses to adhere to the conventions of so-called normalcy, while on the other, it claims a new set of norms. In this chapter, I consider Rooney's exploration of constrictive ideas of normalcy and the way in which she queers normative romantic expectations through a subversion of various conventions around intimacy.

In the form of Rooney's novel, her irreverence towards norms is clear. For instance, she does not adhere to the literary convention of quotation marks, a seemingly "normal" indicator of who is speaking. This occasionally creates some ambiguity or confusion but also has the effect of making the dialogue feel more immediate. There is also no chronological structuring of time or structuring of the book into chapters. Rooney's novel follows the lives of its two protagonists, Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, from the nascence of their romance when they are both in high school in the small Irish town of Carricklea and through their years spent at university at Trinity College.

Social Hierarchies

Marianne comes from a wealthy family and Connell is the son of her family's domestic worker. In a more traditional romance, this might be the cause of the sense of forbidden love between the two. However, Rooney treats this convention as absurd, sprinkling her narrative with many snide comments about class-relations and the wrongs of capitalism. For instance, Connell tells Marianne she "should try reading *The Communist Manifesto*" because he thinks "she [will] like it" (Rooney 13). The reference to Marx and Engels results from Marianne's explicit aversion to social hierarchies. Marianne is aware that she is "from a good family and Connell is from a bad one" because of her wealth and his lack of wealth, as well as the Waldrons' various criminal relatives (Rooney 32). However, Marianne does not know much more about the social hierarchies within Carricklea.

> it's impossible for her to know which families in town are considered good families and which aren't. It's the kind of thing she would like to know, just to be able to reject it the more completely. (Rooney 32)

Marianne considers assessments of one's "goodness" predicated on class to be repulsive. However, it becomes apparent that class is not an accurate predictor of popularity at school. Connell's class does not exclude him from the realm of desirability even within the so-called "good families" as "Connell is considered quite a catch" (Rooney 33). What makes Connell a "catch" is his studiousness, athleticism, good looks, and disinclination for fighting people. According to the narrator, "Everybody likes him. He's quiet" (Rooney 33). Connell is an agreeable character because he keeps his head down, works hard, and does not disrupt everyday life. More than class divides, what determines one's desirability as a partner in Carricklea is one's ability to assimilate within the system. However, it is this characteristic of following conventions that proves to be an obstacle in Connell's love life as it limits Connell's sense of his own desires.

On the other hand, Marianne's status as a social outcast leads to a sense of alienation. Marianne is sceptical of the authority of the social ladder, at times feeling her social stigmatisation more acutely and at others reflecting that she has no desire to fit the normative mode, to be popular.

> Marianne sometimes sees herself at the very bottom of the ladder, but at other times she pictures herself off the ladder completely, not affected by its mechanics, since she does not actually desire popularity or do anything to make it belong to her. (Rooney 29)

Marianne does not have the same intense desire to belong to the social order in high school that Connell has. In part, this is because her abusive home environment leads her to feel undeserving of belonging.

Marianne's refusal to cave into the societal pressure to behave in a "normal" way is shown to be her unique strength. She does not seek validation from her peers and this self-sufficiency is often misinterpreted as coldness. Her mother, Denise, who is unloving and abusive, "believes Marianne lacks 'warmth', by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her" (Rooney 65). Marianne does not stoop to the level of begging for love or acceptance from those who mistreat her and this goes against her mother's expectations.

> Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she

> simply detaches, as if it isn't of any interest to her, which in a way it isn't. Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter's frigid and unlovable personality. (Rooney 65)

Marianne's proclivity for detachment is a result of a childhood in which detachment served as a means of protecting herself from adult cruelty and aggression. However, her ability to detach herself from situations furthers her sense of alienation as she grows up. Moreover, this detachment which protected her at home, estranges her from her peers and leads her to accept Connell's desire for secrecy about their relationship as her due.

However, social status is revealed to be transitory. Marianne learns that others' perceptions of her differ from her own self-perception. For instance, Connell "[seems] to think Marianne [has] access to a range of different identities, between which she [slips] effortlessly" (Rooney 14). This idea surprises Marianne, because she feels as though she is "confined inside one single personality, which [is] always the same regardless of what she [does] or [says]" (Rooney 14). Marianne thinks that no matter how hard she tries to change, she will always be the "weird" one. However, Marianne's place on the social hierarchy is not fixed, but rather socially and geographically contingent. She may be the odd one out at school in Carricklea, but at Trinity College in Dublin, she rises to the top of the social ladder, while Connell becomes the outsider.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl and Change

Similar to the figure of Melusine, Marianne is an unconventional woman who is ostracised because of her perceived otherness. For this reason, it is useful to consider her as a kind of *queer* character, even though she does not exhibit same-sex desire. According to Nikki Sullivan's *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003), Queer Theory relies on an acknowledgment that the various categories used to describe sexuality are historically and socially contingent. Same-sex desire and heterosexual desire are "discursively constructed" (Sullivan 4). Thus, the discourses that surround one may inform the kind of choices one makes in terms of love and desire. There are romantic and sexual scripts already in circulation.

In more recent romantic stories, especially romantic comedies, Marianne might appear to fit the role of the girl who is "not like other girls", the quirky, "Manic Pixie Dream Girl". As Claire Solomon writes in "Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (1929-2016)", The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a term coined by Rabin to describe Kirsten Dunst's character in the 2005 film, *Elizabethtown* (2). It is used to describe female characters, typically in popular movies, who are quirky and promote emotional growth in the male

protagonist. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is "the latest version of the eternal feminine" (Solomon 2). It is a contemporary mythical vision of eccentric femininity.

However, the trope is critiqued for using nonconformity as an aesthetic oddity rather than a commentary on conventional femininity as a whole. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl "scavenges culture for gestures of resistance such that errant, questionable, radical, decentered and otherwise nonconforming femininity is arrogated to its purview" (Solomon 2). In its construction, these eccentricities are rendered harmless and fun, something to attract the male protagonist and prompt his character development, but which leave the female character superficially eccentric. By contrast, although Marianne is idiosyncratic and prompts emotional growth in Connell, she does not fit the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Her peculiarities are not ungrounded, and she is a fully fleshed character who changes over time. Furthermore, the relationship between Marianne and Connell prompts development in both characters.

For Marianne, her relationship with Connell is not just about their love or desire for each other. It becomes the first chapter of a new phase of her life. This experience changes Marianne from being someone who "never believed herself fit to be loved by any person" (Rooney 44) into someone who knows her intrinsic worth and lovability. When Connell tells Marianne that he loves her, she realises that "now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment" (Rooney 44). The dynamic between these two young adults starts Marianne's new life as a woman who knows that love need not be accompanied by abuse and that she is as deserving of love as anyone else. Thus, although superficially Marianne appears to be like the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, her character development makes her a more three-dimensional character whose arc is important separately from Connell's.

Moreover, Marianne's quirks are not of the socially acceptable variety of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl's. She is still an object of disgust rather than an object of intrigue. Marianne is not described as beautiful, but unique. She does not possess the qualities associated with beauty. Instead of defined cheekbones, "[h]er face lacks definition around the cheeks and jaw" (Rooney 9). Marianne's face is not likened to a wonder of nature but to "a piece of technology" (Rooney 9). Her eyes are described in correspondingly robotic terms, as "cursors blinking" (Rooney 9), as opposed to a more traditional description of eyes as similar to sapphires or other precious gems. The narrator describes Marianne's face as "reminiscent of the moon reflected in something, wobbly and oblique. It expresses everything all at once, which is the same as expressing nothing" (Rooney 9). Marianne's face appears to reflect the world around her. It

reflects the increasing pervasiveness of technology, but also the natural world and its lunar cycles. Her face "lacks definition", while simultaneously mirroring the world in a "wobbly and oblique manner" (Rooney 9). It is an uncertain face, a face that both "expresses everything all at once" and "expresses nothing" (Rooney 9). Marianne is not depicted as beautiful or expressive, but as an uncertain, ambivalent figure.

By contrast, the description of Connell is of an attractive young man with "very good posture" (Rooney 11). Connell is described as beautiful: "His figure was like a long elegant line drawn with a brush" (Rooney 11). Marianne's gaze upon Connell is often sexual. However, it is at times a dissociated gaze, which reinforces her sense of alienation. While watching Connell playing a football match, Marianne thinks,

> Connell was so beautiful. It occurred to Marianne how much she wanted to see him having sex with someone; it didn't have to be her, it could be anybody. It would be beautiful just to watch him. She knew these were the kind of thoughts that made her different from other people in school, and weirder. (Rooney 12)

At the beginning of the narrative, Marianne feels more comfortable as a spectator than as the protagonist of her story. She finds Connell attractive but cannot conceive of herself acting on this attraction. She thinks that these thoughts must be uncommon, what "[make] her different… and weirder" (Rooney 12). Marianne is aware of herself as a kind of trope, an incarnation of weirdness. She is an outlier, someone who is uncomfortable with the prerequisites of school, which her "classmates all seem to like… so much and find… normal" (Rooney 12). The uniformity, compliance, and scrutiny of school is "normal to them" whereas, for Marianne "school [is] an oppressive environment" (Rooney 12). Marianne's disdain for uniformity and obedience to arbitrary rules makes school feel stifling. It also makes her classmates, who seem not to take issue with school rules, seem vastly different from her, more "normal". Yet, one of the ways in which Marianne and Connell find resonance with each other is that they both find school difficult: "Connell seemed to understand how she felt about school" (Rooney 13). Though Connell tries his best to conform to expectations at school, he understands how they feel stifling to Marianne. They feel stifling to him too. However, to Connell, these rules seem necessary.

Contrary to what Connell believes, Marianne's status as an outsider does not mean that she does not care what anyone else thinks of her. She habitually feels a sense of alienation, of not belonging to the world of her peers. And she cares greatly about what Connell thinks of her.

She wants so much to please him that "[s]he would have lain on the ground and let him walk over her body if he wanted" (Rooney 34). This desire to be totally subservient to Connell's whims reflects Marianne's attempts to find a sense of belonging that she was never able to acquire in her abusive home. Marianne's expectation of love is of violence and domination. However, Connell's expression of love opens a new possibility to her.

> I would never hurt you, okay? he says. Never. She nods and says nothing. You make me really happy, he says. His hand moves over her hair and he adds: I love you. I'm not just saying that, I really do. (Rooney 44)

When Connell finally acknowledges that he loves Marianne, he does so in a way that is markedly different from Marianne's parents' expressions of love. For Connell, love is not about dominating or hurting someone else; it is about happy coexistence. Marianne reflects on the rarity of this experience of companionship: "Most people go through their whole lives, Marianne thought, without ever really feeling that close with anyone" (Rooney 37). Marianne has never felt as close to anybody as she has to Connell, and it is this closeness which gives her the confidence to become more involved in socialising with other people. It allows her to feel like less of an interloper, even if their relationship remains secret.

The Trouble with Normal

In his book, *The Trouble with Normal,* Michael Warner addresses the ways in which the LGBT movement undermines itself by attempting to integrate into the mainstream conception of what is "normal". The problem with "normal", as stated by Warner, is that it is incredibly restrictive. According to Warner, the way in the Lesbian and Gay movement of the 1950s attempted to distance itself from sex, hypocritically reinforced the stigma of heteronormative society that they were meant to be fighting (45-52). For as long as sex, in this case, same-sex desire, is kept in the shadows for the sake of respectability, there is a form of repression occurring. Warner suggests that framing the fight for LGBT rights as a fight for the right to marriage is short-sighted and merely another way of being co-opted into restrictive social norms of respectability.

To want to be normal is tantamount to the fear of being abnormal and both notions are aligned with how one is perceived by society and its "normal" constituents. Warner worries that the LGBT community is reneging on the suggestion of its reclaimed definition of "queer" by attempting to be perceived as the very antithesis of queer – normal (59). Outside its sexual connotations, the word queer denotes strangeness, and this, Warner argues is a strength. To be

"queer" is to resist the constraints of the "normal" and to embrace one's own desires without fearing one's perceived abnormality. What Marianne does in Rooney's novel is similar in that she embraces her own uniqueness instead of trying to conform to expectations.

Marianne, despite her wealth and intellect, is a social pariah at school and Connell fears losing his good reputation via this association. Marianne is described as "an object of disgust" because she "wears ugly thick-soled flat shoes and doesn't put make-up on her face" (Rooney 3). It is also rumoured by schoolmates that "she doesn't shave her legs or anything" (Rooney 3). These descriptions indicate the ways in which Marianne functions as a queer character. According to Sullivan, heterosexuality has not commonly been the subject of critical consideration as it is typically relegated to the realm of the "norm". However, there are ways in which heterosexuality can be denaturalised, or made "queer" (Sullivan 121). In the work of many Second Wave feminists, heterosexuality has been positioned as diametrically opposed to lesbianism (Sullivan 126). For instance, Kitzinger and Wilkinson see heterosexuality as "[reaffirming] phallocentric logic" (Sullivan 126). However, just as there are many different experiences of womanhood, so too are there many different "heterosexualities" as Segal calls them (Sullivan 127). Normative notions of heterosexuality are predicated on stringent gender binaries, but this does not mean that every heterosexual relationship necessarily adheres to these. Marianne functions as a queer character in the sense that she, like Melusine or Christabel in *Possession*, is a woman who does not follow societal expectations.

Normal People confronts new kinds of sexual shame that arise alongside a normalisation of casual, premarital, or extramarital sex among young adults. For Connell, sex becomes shameful because it is no longer private. There is a lack of confidentiality between sexual partners and he fears what his sexual partners will tell their friends. In the past, Connell has "had to hear his actions repeated back to him later in the locker room: his errors, and, so much worse, his excruciating attempts at tenderness" (Rooney 21). Sex with Marianne is different because "everything [is] between them only" (Rooney 21). Marianne does not share intimate details with the rest of the school or use their intimacy as gossip. She respects that "awkward or difficult things" should stay between them and not become a "gigantic pantomime" with which to humiliate Connell (Rooney 21). Knowledge of sexual encounters is recurrently associated with shame in *Normal People*. The idea of others knowing about Connell and Marianne having sex is depicted as a kind of invasion, thus, secrecy maintains their intimacy. Even when they are alone together, the expression of sexual pleasure is framed within ideas of secrecy.

> When he touched her that night she was so wet, and she rolled her eyes back into her head and said: God, yes. And she was allowed to say it, no one would know. (Rooney 21)

Marianne feels she is "allowed" to express her pleasure only because no one else will find out about it. Her desire is now confined by the bounds of Connell's own sense of shame. Paradoxically, Marianne's desire is also liberated by this secrecy. Connell finds Marianne's ability to keep their relationship a secret to be admirable and a sign of "what a secretive, independent-minded person Marianne [is]" (Rooney 21). He thinks that her ability to keep mum about their relationship is a sign that she "just [lets] things happen, like nothing [means] anything to her" (Rooney 21). However, this is a complete misconception of Marianne's feelings. She keeps quiet because she wants to still be able to see Connell and because their relationship means a lot to her. Feelings of shame about not being "normal" lead to frequent misunderstandings between the two.

One instance in which the idea of the norm is questioned in the novel is when Connell's mother, Lorraine, asks if Marianne is Connell's girlfriend. For Lorraine, the fact that the two are having sex means that they are a couple. That Connell sees it otherwise confuses Lorraine, who says, "You're having sex with her but she's not your girlfriend?" (Rooney 50). Although Marianne and Connell's relationship is monogamous, there are repeated suggestions that because of the lack of a label, it could become something else. Marianne asks Connell whether he wants to see other girls. A new norm has been created in recent years – the polyamorous relationship – so Marianne wonders whether this might be the correct label if monogamy does not apply. However, their relationship is not polyamorous, it merely lacks an official title.

Connell's insecurity about himself manifests in his desire to "act normal". He sees his longing for Marianne, as an "inexplicable drive to act on perverse and secret desires" (Rooney 23). For Connell, there is something perverse about his desire for Marianne. Yet, simultaneously, he feels that they suit each other perfectly.

> He seemed to fit perfectly inside her. Physically it just felt right, and he understood why people did insane things for sexual reasons then... But why Marianne? It wasn't like she was so attractive. Some people thought she was the ugliest girl in school. What kind of person would want to do this with her? And yet he was there, whatever kind of person he was, doing it. (Rooney 24)

Connell thinks that there must be something aberrant about him because of his desire for Marianne and the sense that he "fits perfectly insides her" (Rooney 24). He finds his desire powerful but also concerning because it is non-normative. Once more, even though Connell's desire is heterosexual, he experiences it, in a sense, as queer because he desires someone who is considered undesirable according to the school's social hierarchy.

Nonetheless, Connell cannot deny that Marianne has a profound effect upon him. When she tells him that she likes him very much, "Connell [feels] a pleasurable sorrow come over him, which [brings] him close to tears" (Rooney 25). This moment is inexplicable in Connell's eyes, "meaningless or at least indecipherable" (Rooney 25). His sorrow is pleasurable because Connell shares Marianne's feelings, but his pleasure is sorrowful because he feels that he cannot or should not be in a relationship with a social outcast. In Connell's eyes, "Marianne [lives] a drastically free life", while Connell is "trapped by various considerations" (Rooney 25). According to Connell, Marianne's freedom is predicated on not caring what other people think of her. Connell, on the other hand, is limited by his concern about what other people think of him.

After Connell takes another girl to the Debs ball at their school, Marianne attempts to rationalise his mistreatment of her. She endeavours to place the blame on herself: "He had never tried to delude her into thinking she was socially acceptable; she'd deluded herself" (Rooney 63). Nonetheless, Marianne "feels sorry for [Connell] now, because he has to live with the fact that he had sex with her, of his own free choice, and he liked it" (Rooney 63). Connell, the ostensibly "ordinary and healthy person" must accept his seemingly deviant desire for the unattractive pariah (Rooney 63). Warner writes that often "normal" has been categorised as the opposite of "pathological", and yet "[h]ealth requires variation, not a pregiven norm" (58). The idea of Connell being perceived as *ordinary and healthy* requires an appearance of normative sexuality, of being attracted to an acceptable candidate. Marianne pities Connell because she knows that he must now live with the shame of having desired her, and he views this desire as a sign of pathology.

Furthermore, Connell's concern with normalcy leads him to doubt his own feelings when they do not align with societal expectations. Prior to his relationship with Marianne, Connell is sexually harassed by a teacher of his but, because men are expected to be sexually active and dominant, he questions his sense of humiliation and disgust. When Miss Neary flirts with him in front of the whole class, his peers' applause prompts Connell to wonder if his visceral nausea

in response to her approach is actually "a sexual thrill" (Rooney 5). He wonders too if he experiences desire properly as he "doesn't even really know what desire is supposed to feel like" (Rooney 5). The idea that there is a prescription of how desire ought to fearouses great anxiety in Connell and because he has negative sexual encounters with women, he wonders if he is "somehow developmentally impaired" (Rooney 5). Conforming to normative standards of masculinity in terms of always enjoying sex and actively pursuing it is associated with good health. Thus, Connell's discomfort with casual sex and the advances of his teacher leave him feeling pathological.

Marianne's self-esteem suffers after a second break up with Connell and she enters an abusive relationship while on exchange in Sweden. Her new partner, Lukas, repeatedly tells her "You're worthless" or "You're nothing" during sex, which propels Marianne into "a depression so deep it is tranquilising" (Rooney 190). Her relationship with Lukas is characterised by this kind of disregard and by physical violence, a sharp contrast from her relationship with Connell. When Marianne and Connell have sex again much later in the novel, Marianne asks Connell, "Will you hit me?" (Rooney 237). Though Marianne leaves Lukas and realises that his degrading treatment of her is not love, she still associates feelings of worthlessness and being dominated with being loved. When Connell refuses to hit her, she feels ashamed, as though he has "been slowly growing more adjusted to the world" since high school, while she "has been degenerating" (Rooney 239). Marianne now fears that Connell finds her repulsive and pathological, or even abnormal. Yet Connell loves her, and he does not wish to hurt her.

While Marianne worries about being thought abnormal, she discovers that her brother, Alan, considers Connell to be abnormal because he is on medication for depression. According to Alan, Connell is "fucked in the head" and she would tarnish the family's reputation by associating with him (Rooney 239). Both Connell and Marianne suffer from depression and both have a desire to be "normal people", to be acceptable and not have the uncomfortable feelings that they do. However, it soon becomes clear that everyone has uncomfortable feelings, and everyone struggles to fit within the "norm".

The tragic realisation which Connell makes after breaking up with Marianne in high school is that despite his attempts at secrecy, "everyone knows" that he and Marianne were a couple (Rooney 77). Worse still, "No one cared" (Rooney 77). Connell's obsession with appearing "normal" destroys his one truly meaningful intimate relationship, and his concerns were

baseless. Thus, in the end, trying to appear "normal" ruins both Connell's and Marianne's happiness.

Interpersonal Dynamics and Happiness

In an interview with Anna Leszkiewicz in the *New Statesmen,* Sally Rooney says that she is "in favour of the idea of being normal", of "[b]eing able to think, OK, my relationships are normal, my thoughts and feelings are normal" (43). This sentiment suggests an expansion of what is considered "normal". If Marianne and Connell are the "normal people" invoked by the title, then the implication is that normal, everyday relationships are filled with misunderstandings, miscommunication, and a mixture of pain and joy. Marianne's "desire for total communication" (Rooney 25) is common to many relationships and, yet is shown to be ultimately unachievable. As opposed to the typical heroes and heroines of romances, Marianne and Connell are flawed people whose relationship goes through many ups and downs, but this does not make them uniquely strange, but "normal", after all.

The notion of other people changing who one becomes is clear in *Normal People's* epigraph, which is a quote from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*:

> It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness. (qtd in Rooney).[8]

The influence of the beloved changes one, converts one into something and someone else. Love enables one to be more receptive to change. Despite its frequent rails against the "norm" or what is perceived to be "normal", *Normal People* offers a new set of norms. This new "normal", rather than embracing the notion of two halves making a whole in love, embraces the notion of individuals who are inextricably altered by their engagement with each other.

Without his relationship with Marianne, Connell "would be somewhere else entirely, living a different kind of life" (Rooney 265). Marianne reflects that he "would be different with women even, and his aspirations for love would be different" (Rooney 265). Moreover, Marianne would also "be another person completely" (Rooney 265). The dynamic between the two of them changes them both.

[8] No page number is given for this page.

> All these years they've been like two little plants sharing the same plot of soil, growing around one another, contorting to make room, taking certain unlikely positions. But in the end she has done something for him, she's made a new life possible, and she can always feel good about that. (Rooney 265)

Marianne and Connell are separate from each other, but their development has been shared. They have been nurtured by the same soil, their relationship with each other. Over time, their relationship requires them to shift and change, to make compromises for each other, "contorting to make room, taking certain unlikely positions" (Rooney 265). The transformations they undergo for each other alter their growth as individuals. And, even if they go their separate ways, Marianne realises "she has done something for [Connell], she's made a new life possible" (Rooney 265). Without her influence, Connell may have never applied to Trinity College or pursued literature.

Just as Connell teaches Marianne to love herself, Marianne teaches Connell to have faith in his abilities. Even if their relationship ends or changes dramatically, and "[w]hat they have now they can never have back again" (Rooney 266), their relationship will still have been valuable because of the ways in which they influenced each other's self-development. In Marianne's eyes, "the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel, of being unworthy" (Rooney 266). Though Marianne learnt to see herself as worthy because of Connell's love for her, this sense of worth is hers now, not his: "He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her" (Rooney 266). The same goes for the ways in which she altered how Connell sees the world and possibilities for himself in it. Marianne realises that her attempts to modify her personality have "never worked", and, as such, "If she [is] different with Connell, the difference [is] not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic" (Rooney 14). Irrespective of their evolving positions in social terms, their personal development is predicated on interpersonal interactions.

It is useful, here, to return to Sara Ahmed's "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness". Rooney's novel illustrates the ways in which happiness is not necessarily something which should be pursued, particularly as it relates to what Ahmed calls "happy objects" (574). If happiness is the end destination and the only other option in romance is tragedy, then the idea of happiness is also restrictive. If one were to take Ahmed's radical idea of happiness as being something that has an element of "hap" in it as its etymology suggests – an element of chance – then happiness does not have to be what one pursues and wretchedness

is not the only other option. Unlike in traditional romances, actual romantic relationships have no definitive moment of *happily ever after*. Even the structures which dominated Connell's life and sense of self come apart after high school ends:

> Their life in Carricklea, which they had imbued with such drama and significance, just ended like that, with no conclusion, and it would never be picked up again, never in the same way. (Rooney 77)

In this way, Rooney illustrates the transience of certain social norms. What is *normal* at one place and time is completely different from any other. Hence, any attempt to fit the mould is worthless as the mould is always changing. Part of the process of growing up is a realisation that the expectations of high school will not prevail forever, and it is more beneficial to be true to oneself than to try impress the crowd.

The ambiguous ending of *Normal People* challenges the dominant perception of happiness as something which must be pursued, or which will be the positive ending of a romantic narrative. Connell decides to pursue an MFA in New York and Marianne encourages him to go. Perhaps they will have a long-distance relationship as Connell admits that he loves Marianne and that he will "never… feel the same way for someone else" (Rooney 264). Marianne realises that Connell "probably won't come back" (Rooney 265), or that, if he does, "he will, differently" (Rooney 266). His time in New York will have changed who he is. As the context in which they find themselves will impact on their experiences and growth, this separation will inevitably change them. Yet, ultimately, it is ambiguous, and the reader is left unsure about whether the two remain a couple or whether they part ways. Their relationship continues to evade categorisation.

Thus, *Normal People* illustrates the ways in which romantic relationships prompt change, and how it is the dynamic between lovers which prompts personal and interpersonal growth, irrespective of whether the couple remain together or not. The novel insists that one rethink what might constitute a valid experience of love, and about the tyranny, and even vacuousness, of various normative notions of romance. Rooney uses the idea of "normal" to both critique restrictive social expectations of behaviour and propose a new kind of normal. *Normal People* queers the romance plot, disorientating it, and allowing for a critical engagement with conventional romantic expectations.

Chapter Four

The Intertwining of Love and the City in Nthikeng Mohlele's *Illumination*

Over the course of this dissertation, I have considered the ways in which contemporary romance narratives have played with, or subverted, various tropes and expectations to offer a more nuanced view of love and desire. However, I have not yet touched on one of the genre's most enduring tropes – that of love's "transcendence". It is my contention that the language of love and desire is embedded not only in the familiar blueprint of romance narratives but also in the environment in which intimate relationships occur. As various cultural theorists have argued, subjects are constituted to a great degree by their environment. With that conviction in mind, I consider what a love story set in a postcolonial city might illustrate about the way in which subjects, including the protagonists of romances, are shaped by their context.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on Nthikeng Mohlele's *Illumination: a Novel* (2019) in my exploration of the relationship between the contemporary, postcolonial city and romance. I consider the ways in which Johannesburg functions as a multi-layered text, a palimpsest, derived of the language of motion, primarily through driving (as opposed to de Certeau's well-known consideration of the *Wandersmänner* or *flâneur* who moves through the city on foot), fragmented networks of exchange, and the overlapping of the surface and underground, past and present.

Set in Johannesburg, *Illumination* paints the picture of renowned Jazz musician, Bantubonke's attempt to come to terms with a near-fatal event that leaves him permanently injured and unable to play the trumpet in the ways he once could. After the gas explosion which kills two of Bantubonke's friends, and maims him for life, Bantubonke reflects on life and death and on the place of his muse, Bird. Bird's relationship with Bantubonke is tenuous because she lives in France, while he remains in South Africa, and because Bantubonke is obsessive about his musical career.

Illumination follows Bantubonke's anguished descent from fame and glory into despair. The narrative is told from Bantubonke's perspective, structured in a stream-of-consciousness style which highlights the intertwining narratives of both Bantubonke's life and the life of his home city, Johannesburg. The novel highlights the way post-apartheid life continues to be shaped by apartheid geography, and the enduring effects of racial injustice, alienation, and

poverty. It also illustrates the ways in which personal relationships are intertwined with the socio-historical, geographic, and political environment.

Johannesburg is a palimpsest, a city of shiny surfaces, but with a dark underbelly. The underbelly entails both the crime and inequities of the present era and the legacy of the colonial and apartheid past. Beneath the veneer of diversity or cosmopolitanism, the promotional scripts of Johannesburg today, lie other, older, and more insidious scripts. The Johannesburg citizen is necessarily imbricated within this multi-layered narrative, aware of the various pre-texts of their life story or perhaps willfully ignorant.

Love in a Palimpsest

Contemporary romances are palimpsests: narratives written on top of already existing narratives. The contemporary romance inscribes itself over older scripts, which can never totally be erased from their modern variant. Likewise, the past cannot be completely overwritten by the present.

While *Illumination* would typically be classified as a post-transitional novel, written twenty-five years after the end of apartheid, the novel's depiction of a Johannesburg that is in a state of temporal and spatial liminality, suggests that transition is a slow process and to be post-transitional is not as straight-forward as the term suggests. Anne Putter argues that,

> transitional texts are… essentially about time, about history and how the nation's desire to overcome an unforgivable past should not necessarily be about forgetting or obliterating the memory of this important history. (60)

Rather, literature can be used to explore the possibilities of coming to terms with the past, present, and future in more fruitful ways. Putter considers the ways in which Johannesburg, and Hillbrow in particular, appears temporally plural, with many old street names and buildings, but also constant renovation and regeneration (61). Her view of Johannesburg as a palimpsest is twofold – predicated first on the cosmopolitanism of the city with its influx of migrants, and second on the layering of different temporalities (Putter 63). Johannesburg is manifold, composed of various historical and kinetic texts.

Just as conventional dualisms of the romance tradition are undermined in various ways in the novels previously analysed, so too do the dualisms of contemporary Johannesburg come under scrutiny in *Illumination*. As Meg Samuelson says, Johannesburg has, historically, been a city "marked by maps of mobility and schisms of segregation" (248). The previous racial

divisions of the city, which aligned urbanity with whiteness and permitted Blackness only in the form of migrant labour, have now been replaced by the separation of townships and "enclaves of luxury", which become, in effect, "fortress cities" (Samuelson 248). While the apartheid city was divided according to legalised racial segregation and discrimination, the post-apartheid city brings new divides, such as those of "class and xenophobia, along with gender and generation" (Samuelson 255). Moreover, the divides of the past are by no means eradicated by the end of the apartheid regime.

The Surface

On the surface, Johannesburg wears a skin of glamour and promise. It is, in many respects, beautiful, although, as Bantubonke says, its beauty "is not immediate. Neither is it only visual" (Mohlele 7). The beauty of Johannesburg lies in the sound and feel of the city, in its "magnetic buzz" and "evocation of memories", its "charged vigour of present-day living" (Mohlele 7). Johannesburg is an energetic city, alive with the "yearning for palpable prospects from its many migrants, residents and visitors" (Mohlele 7). It is a place of "abundant offers", which "has a beautiful arrogance about it, a refusal to succumb to comparisons, an insistence on setting standards, breaking life rules" (Mohlele 7). Johannesburg is, in Bantubonke's view, a place of great chance, which is incomparable, and unconventional.

It is clear from the outset of *Illumination* that what Mohlele is illuminating is not only a character's descent from fame into madness and despair, but the layers that constitute contemporary Johannesburg. The surface of Johannesburg is deemed unimportant, the visual aesthetics trivial. It also resists, as Bantubonke says, "being the beauty only of place, of the physical" (Mohlele 7). Johannesburg's beauty is thus a sensory, embodied experience above all else. To understand Johannesburg, according to Mohlele's description, is to be in tune with the kinetic energy of the city, with the lives lived and half-lived. It is to be in tune with the many journeys enacted in its streets and the "near-invisible traces of splendour and barbarism" (Mohlele 8), the faint lines of beauty and horror. The skin of Johannesburg appears thin, a shiny veneer that can barely contain the vitality of energy beneath it.

On a less abstract level, the surface of Johannesburg, or its exterior, is marked by high walls which separate the affluent from the impoverished. The city of Johannesburg was initially mapped along the lines of gold mines. Different areas within the city have been mapped and

remapped along colonial and apartheid lines, according to laws of racial segregation and the ensuing forced removals.

However, cities can be remapped not merely by a change in government but by the movement of people through space. According to Putter, "In much urban theory, there seems to be consensus that movement through city spaces enables one to 'remap', redeem as well as create 'new' space" (58). Various theorists have commented upon the transformation of the city and the ways in which cities are borne and shaped out of the movement and changing residents (for instance, Amin and Thrift 2002; de Certeau 2000; Soja 2000). Putter considers the use of Johannesburg as an "idea" within contemporary literature, by which she means a manner of "expressing societal concerns and other important changes taking place in the country as a whole" (58). She proposes reading literary texts as a kind of "cultural history or memory" (Putter 59), a means through which to consider the partial and discontinuous transformations of present-day South Africa. Putter's articulation of Johannesburg as an "idea" resonates with its portrayal in *Illumination,* where descriptions of the city are given such prominence as to make it function as a character. A character is an individual who plays a major role in driving the plot of a novel or drama ("Character"), which is effectively what the city of Johannesburg does in this case. Johannesburg is not merely the setting of *Illumination*, but an active participant in the narrative.

Furthermore, Johannesburg functions as a character with split personalities. Its personalities include: "revolutionary Johannesburg – Soweto, Sharpeville, Sophiatown", reminders of revolts against the apartheid regime; "the cultural Johannesburg of the Newtown Cultural Precinct", where artists gather; "the drug-den and charged Johannesburg of Hillbrow and Yeoville" which is known for its high crime rates; "the filthy-rich Johannesburg of the northern suburbs", which remain largely white in demography; and, lastly, "the black Johannesburg of the townships of Tembisa and Alexandra" (Mohlele 100). Fractured unevenly between wealth and poverty, criminality and highly securitised opulence, Johannesburg is a city of immense disparity.

Bantubonke retreats into a comfortable house in the middle of these various Johannesburgs, and then retreats further into his Listening Room. He "[exiles] himself to the Listening Room to listen to [his] own heart" and also to "decipher the pulse of this nation" (Mohlele 103). A private, internal reflection is thus coupled with a reflection of his environment, which is described as a heartbeat, something living and filled, once more, with kinetic energy. The

nation is, thus, anthropomorphised. Bantubonke must embrace a constant set of contradictions and feelings of uncertainty in his fractured, but vibrant city. Moreover, his wife, Bird's studies in France mean that she experiences their love in different ways as she lives in a wholly different environment.

Hospitality or Hostility

Bantubonke keeps the sordid elements of the outside world at bay by sealing himself behind thick, tall walls and an intercom system. In the article, "Johannesburg Interiors", Kerry Bystrom considers conceptions of home and hospitality in post-apartheid Johannesburg, noting the ways in which the extension of hospitality or Derridean "hos(ti)pitality" can "[welcome] diverse groups into a shared public space while at the same time foregrounding inequalities in need of redress" (333). According to Aleksandra Bida's chapter, "Derrida and 'Hostipitality'", Derrida's notion of "host(ti)pitality" considers the seemingly contradictory notion of hostility within hospitality (119). The combination of hospitality and hostility can be seen in Johannesburg's cosmopolitanism and simultaneous history of xenophobia.

Bantubonke tries to seal off unpleasant aspects of his marriage in the same way that he tries to seal off unpleasant aspects of the city with high walls. For example, when Bantubonke hears that there is physical evidence, in the form of a cassette tape, that Bird has had an affair, he exhibits an extreme level of wilful ignorance by burying the tape in the garden. Above the burial ground of his tape, Bantubonke installs a fountain in the shape of "a giant falcon" (Mohlele 222). This is reminiscent of Bird, both at the literal level of her name and in the way in which it commands attention. The fountain is described as "a granite marvel of a thing with night lighting, [which] shoots water from nostrils along its beak sometimes radiating momentary rainbows" (Mohlele 222). Though Bantubonke acknowledges Bird's failings to some degree, he cannot completely lose the idea of her as a muse and listening to the tape would ruin his image of her.

However, this attempt at denial cannot protect him from reality. Every day that Bantubonke leaves his house, he is confronted with the violence of the outside world, and at home, his new fountain may be a prettier sight than the cassette tape, but it does not make the tape or Bantubonke's knowledge of its existence go away. Repression only offers a temporary, and false, sense of safety.

Beneath the Surface

Moving beneath the glittering surface of Johannesburg and Bantubonke's life as an acclaimed musician, one discovers a more complex, multifaceted reality for both the city and its citizen. Historically, Johannesburg has been referred to as iGoli or "the Place of Gold" (Mohlele 9) because of the gold mines which gave birth to the city. However, in addition to this historical image, Johannesburg has also become a conglomeration of different people, and of "new Africans," urban Africans and white Africans "who laugh uproariously whenever they hear or read of some imbecile in Madrid or Mississippi or Toulouse thinking that Africa is one massive jungle" (Mohlele 9). These "new Africans" ridicule those from other countries who view Africa as colonists once did, as a jungle inhabited by animals and unruly "natives" (Mohlele 9). Yet, there remains a tension between the "new" and the "old". As much as Bantubonke marvels at the contemporary melting pot of Johannesburg, the legacy of apartheid and colonialism remains.

As part of modern understandings of identity are predicated on a feeling of national belonging, the fractured nation state, and within it, the broken city, can lead to a ruptured sense of identity for postcolonial subjects. As Claire Chambers and Graham Huggan argue, Johannesburg, as a postcolonial city, has the capacity to "make and unmake [itself] in an ongoing process of creative dissolution" (786). This is evident in *Illumination* in Bantubonke's consideration of his home.

> In Johannesburg, lives are crafted, formed and distorted, happenings there reverberating to the furthest rural provinces, to KwaZulu-Natal or Mpumalanga, where amused or grieving next-of-kins whistle: Yoh, that's Jozi for you! (Mohlele 7)

Johannesburg is a city of both opportunity and distortions. The more negative associations of Johannesburg with the world of vice proliferate in the "Jim Comes to Jo'burg" trope, a nostalgic trope of a simple countryman travelling to the big, bad city. Hilary Dannenberg describes this kind of narrative as a tale in which a young rural man moves to the city and is ruined by the vices of urban life and urban women (40).[9] However, Mohlele's version of Johannesburg does not follow this trope. Rather, Johannesburg works as a character, like

[9] The "Jim comes to Jo'burg" trope can be found in various representations of the city of Johannesburg, inspired by the film, *African Jim* (Swanson, 1949), also known as "Jim Comes to Jo'burg", starring Daniel Adnewmah, Dolly Rathebe, and Dan Twala. The film depicts the journey of its protagonist, Jim, from the countryside to Johannesburg in search of work and who struggles against various city vices to find success.

Anne Putter's notion of it as an "idea", mediating between the vastly different experiences of its inhabitants and visitors.

Discontinuous Seams: Mutations

One of the threads holding the text of Johannesburg together is its hybridity and uncategorisable form. In his article, "Mutant City: On Partial Transformations in Three Johannesburg Narratives", Timothy Wright considers three contemporary narratives of Johannesburg which make use of mutant figures. One of the examples he uses is Neill Blomkamp's film, *District 9* (2009). Wright considers *District 9* to be a film which binds together what Imraan Coovadia calls the "intolerable present" and "impossible future" through the character Wikus and his transformation into a mutant "prawn" (qtd in Wright 418). This radical transformation within the dilapidated, fringe areas of Johannesburg suggests that "forms of dynamism might lurk, unseen behind [Johannesburg's] façade of stagnation" (Wright 418). Wikus's mutation from a human to a prawn is violent, disordered, and unfinished, suggesting the possibility of a "breakthrough to the new" alongside a "lingering attachment to the former self" (Wright 418). This individual, partial transformation is emblematic of the partial transformations of post-apartheid Johannesburg, a city which is radically altered in some respects, but which has not been able to fully break free from its past.

According to Wright, the word "mutant" in everyday language tends to have negative and fearful, frequently racial, insinuations (419). However, in his usage of the term, which I am adopting here, mutation is

> an *event* effecting a radical and unforeseeable rearrangement of the human subject: an alteration that may either aid or diminish the organism's capacity to survive in a fundamentally hostile environment. (Wright 419)

Though his transformation is not as overt as Wikus's, Bantubonke's near-death experience signifies a kind of mutation, in Wright's sense of the word. The event which causes Bantubonke's debilitating physical change and resultant psychological change is returned to repeatedly, and as Wright argues about the mutation event, Bantubonke's transformation diminishes his capacity to survive in the harsh reality of his equally mutant city of Johannesburg. This is, in part, because it makes his self-medication via music far more difficult, and because this harsh reminder of his mortality makes it more difficult for Bantubonke to remain optimistic, about his marriage or his country. Bantubonke's mutation

is an event, a moment that alters him and diminishes his capacity to survive. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this is not just one event – the gas explosion – but a series of events, which trigger a gradual change in Bantubonke. His mutation itself is a palimpsest, a rewriting of trauma over trauma.

The notion of the "mutant" offers a productive means to consider the subversive, uncategorisable existence that is shaped by the postcolonial city, its juxtapositions between immense wealth and poverty, hybrids of past and present, globalism and nationalism, cosmopolitanism and xenophobia, and its liminal spaces. The postcolonial city is "mutant" because it does not fit neatly into a singular category. Johannesburg, specifically, is an intertwined space, in which, in the words of Mbembe and Nuttall, "the formal and informal, official and unofficial, cohabit and at times become entangled" (282). As considerations of romantic love include notions of belonging, it is worth considering what romantic love might look like in the context of a city in which one feels, simultaneously, at home and out of place.

The Language of Motion: Driving through the City

If Johannesburg can be thought of as a text, then the language of which it is comprised is motion. Walking through the city enables a kinetic conversation between subject and environment. In "Walking in the City", Michel de Certeau conceives of urban walking as a means of communicating with the text of the city. While standing atop a tall tower affords one the possibility of reading the city (de Certeau 92), *Wandersmänner*, walkers or *flâneurs,* become part of the urban text, their bodies serving as part of a cryptic city language (de Certeau 93). The walker engages with the city both in synecdoche and asyndeton. Lindsay Bremner argues that "Synecdoche, a part standing for the whole, permits the walker to engage with the city by focusing on details which stand in for the whole", while "asyndeton, the suppression of linking words in a sentence, allows pedestrians to select routes and fragment the city, skipping over links or leaving out pieces" (qtd in Putter 65). The ways in which one engages with the city space are, thus, like the ways in which one communicates a story – visiting certain spaces and not others, commenting on partial views and partial experiences.

In de Certeau's view, city-walkers create a network of moving language which is undecipherable. They speak with the city and yet this communication "cannot be seen" (de Certeau 93). However, this communication can be inferred from the ways in which they engage with the landscape and with those they encounter within it. What is most striking to

me about Johannesburg, as opposed to the cities which de Certeau invokes, is that it is not very friendly towards *flâneurs*. In Johannesburg, "Driving is ubiquitous" (Mbembe and Nuttall 281).[10] Thus, it is important to consider the different kind of language invoked by city centred around automobiles, as opposed to walking. There is a greater sense of physical disconnect between citizen and city when the city is traversed by automobile (Putter 66). Additionally, time is experienced differently at this speed. Automobile travel allows for a more fragmented, discontinuous experience of Johannesburg. However, it simultaneously allows a degree of protection from physical harm when travelling in areas which one may prefer to avoid on foot.

It is driving through the city which connects disparate events and characters in *Illumination*. Uncle Alfred, or Bra Alf, is a taxi driver who has driven Bantubonke around for many years. Bra Alf "knows this country: its various transformations through time, the extent of its charms and ugliness" (Mohlele 110). He has witnessed the changes and developments in Johannesburg through his windscreen. Bantubonke figures that "Bra Alfie and [he] must have covered the distance from earth to the moon in [their] planned and impromptu voyages in and around Johannesburg" (Mohlele 109). During this time, however, Bantubonke learns extraordinarily little about his taxi driver.

While Bra Alf may spend most of his time driving to make a living, this capacity for movement is something which was incredibly uncommon for Black people under apartheid. According to Xavier Livermon, "automobility, especially for Black people who were mostly immobilized during apartheid, changes one's access to and appropriation or use of city space" (qtd in Nuttall and Mbembe 274, and Putter 66). No longer restricted by a passbook, Bra Alf can drive through the city and remap it with new memories and experiences, and a new job. As Putter argues,

> Cars allow their drivers and passengers to revisit past spaces, thus enabling the erasure of past uses, although not completely, and encouraging the altered use of such past space to suit the needs of the present. (67)

There is potential for a new kind of engagement with the city through driving, the creation of a personal palimpsest, of reinscribing parts of the city with new memories and associations.

[10] There is a class distrinction to be made here in that middle-class citizens are far more likely to drive private automobiles, while working-class citizens are more likely to use public transport, but ultimately, motorvehicles predominate on the roads.

However, as Livermon argues, “the mobility rendered possible by the use of the car is paradoxical, if only because the car highlights the very segregated and divided nature of the urban metropolis” (qtd in Putter 67). In the car, it is abundantly clear to see the ways in which the city is divided along class and, often still closely correlated, racial lines. Thus, while Bra Alf may spend a good deal of his day driving through wealthy areas of the city, it is highly likely he will return home to a vastly different part of Johannesburg at the end of the day. As Putter notes, “Travelling by automobile also works to link or connect different parts of the city that are usually segregated, such as the inner city, the suburbs and the townships” (67). Thus, travel by car is paradoxical in that it both exemplifies existing divisions and creates connections between different spheres within the city.

One of the most memorable journeys in *Illumination* is undertaken, not by car, but by hearse. Putter argues that, “movement through the city in automobiles grants one a more authoritative stance with regard to the use of this space as this becomes a new means of mapping, and interacting with, city space” (66). Moving through the city, and out of it, via a hearse creates another kind of mapping, a mapping of the living and the dead. One day, Bantubonke agrees to accompany his friend, Marcus, to a funeral in the hearse. Suddenly another layer of his environment opens up before him, the layer of the dead, six feet under.

Confined within the walls of the hearse, Bantubonke is, in some senses, dislocated from the land of the living.

> Dead things cannot move – they are not known or expected to move, at least not by themselves. Equally, it is not a given that living things are alive simply because they are conscious and moving – the Republic is littered with the living dead inflicted by such strife and heartbreak that theirs cannot be seen as living. (Mohlele 66)

South Africa is filled with “the living dead” (Mohlele 66), as Bantubonke calls them, people whom the Republic has failed. This name could be interpreted as referring to the vast population of homeless and unemployed citizens who beg on the streets to survive. Behind the car window, the prosperous middle-class citizen is shielded from a direct engagement with beggars and other homeless people, insulated and isolated, cut off from parts of the city that the affluent would prefer to forget.

In the Flesh

If the historical, social, and geographical elements of Johannesburg constitute its many layers beneath the skin, then the flesh or heart of the matter is the people living within the city. Navigating love in post-apartheid Johannesburg means navigating the socio-political and historical reality of the city and the kind of subjects to whom it gives rise. In his analysis of subjectivity, Farooq Ahmad Sheikh argues that in cultural theory, "A Subject is not born but is transformed into one from a concrete being by his immersion into culture" (1). Subjectivity is the means by which subjects understand the world around them (Sheikh 1). Thus, one's surroundings directly impact upon one's understanding of the world. Subjectivity "reflects the social processes that constitute us as subjects" (Sheikh 2). As such, as Foucault claims, a subject is not universal, but cultural (qtd in Sheikh 2). Consequently, the subjects created in post-apartheid Johannesburg are constituted to some degree by the culture and society in which they find themselves. Moreover, the South African milieu is one in which one's sense of identity and belonging has been persistently correlated with race.

There are repeated references in *Illumination* to farm murders, a topic which has been racialised by many in public discourse. In one scene, Bantubonke makes idle conversation with his white, Afrikaans electricians while they work. The senior electrician, Hendrik, asks, "Who is killing farmers in this country? Who ends up getting arrested, with stolen goods, illegal weapons?" (Mohlele 73). He answers his own question with the racist assertion, "It's you people" (Mohlele 73). Bantubonke exposes Hendrik's racism by questioning what exactly is meant by this statement. The exclusionary use of "you people" forces Bantubonke to identify himself racially, as a Black man, in this moment and to have his identity criminalised.

Intimate Exposure

Within a society of such inequity and division, creating a bridge of understanding between citizens with vastly different life experiences can be particularly challenging. Referencing Njabulo Ndebele and other theorists' notions of sharing intimacy, Kerry Bystrom considers "acts of *intimate exposure*", the risky but requisite work of sharing private aspects of the self in public (334). According to Bystrom, these acts offer the possibility of forging compassionate relationships between disparate members of a divided society. It could be argued that the inclusion of a love story within the narrative of *Illumination* offers a more productive means of considering contemporary Johannesburg than a book entirely dedicated

to current socio-politics. The *intimate exposure* of Bantubonke's life and troubled relationships highlights the interconnectedness of the interior and exterior worlds.

Moreover, Bantubonke's relationship with Bird mirrors his relationship with Johannesburg in many ways. As an enigmatic presence at a social gathering, Bird is charming and beautiful. However, this is only a surface-level engagement. Just as the façade of Johannesburg gives way to a darker underbelly, the façade of their perfect relationship crumbles, once Bantubonke considers her as multi-layered and complex, in possession of her own desires and indiscretions. Thus, Bantubonke becomes cynical about the rosy picture typically attributed to marriage.

> The concept of marriage is a great illusion. It is more like a friendship, a big friendship that is bigger than other friendships, except that matrimonial beds and abodes permit certain pains and pleasures under the contract of wedded coexistence. (Mohlele 88)

Marriage loses its sense of romance here. According to Bantubonke, romantic and platonic love differ only in that more is permitted in one than the other. He also considers marriage in terms of its legality, the way in which "matrimonial beds and abodes permit certain pains and pleasures under the contract" which would not be permitted otherwise (Mohlele 88). It is also significant that he lists pains alongside pleasures as this illustrates that his marriage is not without its troubles, nor is it the usual picture of *happily ever after*.

Mohlele's novel opens intimate spaces. The reader is given access to Bantubonke's most private thoughts, which he has while sitting in The Listening Room, within the confines of his house. This is a beautiful Houghton property, "beautiful, if you are permitted beyond the three-metre walls, if you are invited in via the intercom when you press the visitor button and say your name" (Mohlele 100). The implication is that few people are invited in and that, like many other middle-class citizens of Johannesburg, Bantubonke is largely isolated from the rest of the city, protected, or imprisoned within walls of his own choosing. Thus, making it past this frontier, into Bantubonke's house and his interior world opens new possibilities. As Bystrom says,

> Sharing intimate spaces and stories – making them habitable in public – may be a way of breaking down distances between people in the imaginative realm that can and does cross over into the realm of physical space, potentially opening up new ways of thinking and feeling as well as moving, acting and relating to others. (334)

There is the potential within this breaching of barriers to reconsider the postcolonial, urban subject, not only from the exterior view of the city, but from an interior, personal view. The exterior and interior inform and intertwine with each other. However, it is in intimacy that true connections and empathy can be found. It is in Bantubonke's intimate spaces that one finds the romance of the novel, a romance which cannot be contained within the bounds of Bantubonke's secure house.

Illumination is not an obvious romantic novel in the sense that Bantubonke and Bird's relationship is not always its focus. Their relationship is continually interspersed with disparate events and ponderings, decentring the focus of the romance narrative. Bird is daughter of a career diplomat whom Bantubonke names "Mr Pompous" (Mohlele 123). Bantubonke's description of his first meeting with Bird follows somewhat incongruously and abruptly from discussions of farm violence. However, it becomes clear over the course of the narrative that this transition is not as incongruous as it may initially seem as Bird's wealth and status are as much a part of post-apartheid South Africa as the brutality discussed previously. Bird represents a new figure in post-transitional South Africa, a member of the wealthy Black elite. Rather than bridging the divide between rich and poor, the new elite perpetuates the divides of the past further along the lines of class and wealth.

Apolitical Romance?

Romance has been pejoratively called "chick-lit" because of its popularity among female readers. The implications of this nomenclature are that first and foremost, there is a difference between literature and literature written for women, and that "chick-lit" is a less intellectual and less serious genre. As Rebecca Fasselt writes,

> Chick lit as a postfeminist genre has been dismissed as fundamentally a-political in scholarship that understands postfeminism solely as a backlash against a more political feminism, emphasizing the complicity of chick lit in patriarchal structures and normative ideas of femininity. (377)

"Chick-lit" is considered "postfeminist" because it does not actively critique gendered relations of power but appears instead to be complicit in their perpetuation. However, Fasselt argues that there is room within the genre for an accommodation of diverse, international voices and voices that are critical of conventional, Western romantic relationships (378). Literature aimed specifically at a female readership is not so homogenous, even if it habitually relies on familiar narrative blueprints and archetypes.

In a similar vein, Ronit Frenkel offers a new perspective on "chick-lit" by proposing the genre of "Pleasure" as opposed to "chick-lit" or other genres categorised as popular fiction. As Frenkel argues, works in what she terms the "Pleasure" genre reveal much about the world in which they are written and read. Frenkel invents the Pleasure genre in response to the ubiquity of pleasure in popular women's fiction (171). Arguing that these popular literary forms are all constituted by an invocation of pleasure, she replaces other, pejorative literary categories, with this umbrella term.

As the foundation of her argument in favour of a Pleasure genre, Frenkel considers Mohlele's *Pleasure* (2016) as not merely a novel, but an "expansive theorisation of pleasure" that is simultaneously "inherently local" and "global" (171). Frenkel uses Mohlele's novel as a novelised theoretical work to frame her analysis of various works of romantic fiction, arguing that "Mohlele's expansive theorisation of pleasure is inherently local… yet… simultaneously macro and global" (171). She uses Mohlele's *Pleasure* along with the notion of a Pleasure genre to consider the ways in which certain fictional works, such as popular romances, "[offer] an opportunity to think through the circuits that connect popular fiction through the lens of African literature" (Frenkel 171). One reason why one may wish to use the term "Pleasure" as opposed to romance may be a result of the criticism which popular romance novels or "chick lit" have received. For instance, Stephanie Harzewski's calls "chick lit" the "most culturally visible form of postfeminism" (qtd in Fasselt 379). The idea of "chick lit" as a postfeminist, and therefore apolitical, genre is predicated on the notion that "chick lit" is complicit in patriarchal societal structures and normative ideas of femininity (Fasselt 379). Such views can be found in Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008); and Christina Scharff's *Repudiating Feminism* (2012), in which "chick lit" is critiqued for overshadowing dedicated discussion about structural disparities with "neoliberal self-making" (Fasselt 379). However, Mohlele's simultaneous focus on experience and imagination, and "political circuits of identity-based oppressions and structural inequalities" (Frenkel 171) stands in sharp contrast to the criticism of popular romance as an apolitical genre.

Moreover, the Pleasure genre can be considered as a kind of archive of feeling within society. Referencing Ann Cvetkovich's notion of the "ephemeral archive", Frenkel considers popular fiction as "a history of feeling in public cultures" (qtd in Frenkel 172). According to Cvetkovich's work in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), this archive constitutes:

> an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception. (qtd in Frenkel 172)

Similarly to how Putter considers the idea of a city to be a repository of various cultural texts, the romance genre, or Pleasure genre serves as a repository of feelings, and thoughts, which circulate in a particular time and place. Locating a romantic novel in space and time allows the reader to confront perceptions of feeling and ideas of normativity specific to that milieu. Thus, literature which invokes pleasure also prompts a consideration of the environment in which pleasure is found and in the experiences of its characters.

There is a longstanding association between music and love. Consider, for instance, Duke Orsino's famous opening lines in *Twelfth Night,* "If music be the food of love, play on!" (*Twelfth Night* 1.1.1) For Bantubonke, it is music which teaches him the "language of love" (Mohlele 5). While training as a musician, Bantubonke also "[becomes] quite an accomplished licker of navels" (Mohlele 5). Bantubonke, like the protagonist of *Pleasure*, is invested in the physicality of love and desire. In Bantubonke's view, sexual encounters are not only gratifying but also "meditative" (Mohlele 4). Love and desire are both a source of pleasure and repose.

However, Bantubonke's accident makes it more difficult for him to appreciate pleasure and tranquillity in love. The harsh reminder of his mortality "blankets [him] in mild and sometimes expansive gloom" (Mohlele 76). Romantic love no longer serves as an escape from the painful realities of every day. It no longer appears to stop time. Rather, "Time itself seems to be declaring war on [Bantubonke]… and renders an emptiness when [he is] without [his] music" (Mohlele 76). Without his capacity to create music, Bantubonke feels a keener sense of time passing, of decay within himself and his city. Yet, this suggests something about love which resonates with Nietzsche's notion of *eternal return,* that love is not immortal, but constantly dies and is reborn. As Bantubonke says, "maybe such is the nature of love: its habit of living and dying in endless reincarnations, in doubts and brutal fights, in beauty and despair" (Mohlele 86). In this image, love is both beautiful and tragic. Thus, Mohlele's novel challenges the idea of love as transcendent and as an escape from hardship by suggesting that love is firmly located within a world that confronts one with pain and tragedy.

The deeply personal telling of Bantubonke's story in *Illumination* serves as an example of Derridean hostipitality in the post-apartheid city. Mohlele's novel highlights the ways in which intimate life is entangled with one's socio-political environment and the complex geography of life in the new democratic Republic. Moreover, *Illumination* illustrates the ways in which a traditional, Western blueprint of romance cannot merely be overlayed onto a South African setting. The postcolonial and post-apartheid city is the living embodiment of a palimpsest. Johannesburg is a city associated with kinetic energy, with the movement of diverse people, especially in automobiles, with crime, corruption, wealth, poverty, securitisation, and immense disparity. Within such a fraught and fast-paced environment, love and desire are juggled between various other social, historical, geographic, and economic concerns. However, as Bystrom suggests, there is the opportunity to bridge gaps of understanding and empathy in acts of *intimate exposure* such as Mohlele's novel.

Conclusion

Contemporary romance narratives have the capacity to invoke new possibilities in the imagined picture of love and desire. My analysis of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Kundera, 1984), *Possession: A Romance* (Byatt, 1990), *Normal People* (Rooney, 2018), and *Illumination: a Novel* (Mohlele, 2019) considered the ways in which these narratives offer alternatives to the stereotypical romance plot and the binary, gendered norms it commonly relies upon and perpetuates. In my attempt to disorientate the reader, following Sara Ahmed's notion of "orientation" and Sally Ann Murray's consideration of a queer reading methodology, I unpacked aspects of this familiar blueprint.

In my analysis in Chapter One, the question of destiny functions as a pivotal idea. Kundera's juxtaposition of the refrain "*Ess muss sein!"* or *it must be so,* and its alternative, "*Es könnte auch anders sein"* or *it could just as well be otherwise,* highlights the tension between the appearance of fate and the randomness of coincidence. Through my exploration of Tomas and Tereza's love story, it becomes apparent that what may be perceived as fate may well be an operation of chance, or a result of repeated personal choices. Ideas of fate, such as Nietzsche's cyclic vision of *eternal return*, may give credence to transcendental ideals of romantic love and the notion of predestined lovers. However, the notion of choosing to love someone everyday offers a challenge to *eternal return*, and prompts one to reconsider the question of free will. The dichotomy between fate and choice, and fate and chance, is never completely dissolved in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. However, the playful ways in which it is destabilised suggest a more complex understanding of why lovers fall, and stay, in love: a mixture of coincidence at the start and dedicated choice moving forward.

Simultaneously, Kundera's repeated meditations on the human and the animal, and the influence of nostalgia, illustrate the ways in which a romanticisation of the past and the animal can be misleading, and even dangerous. Tereza's conception of animal love, especially the love of her dog, Karenin, as somehow better than human love is suggestive of a love without language, in which an animal's obedience is unquestioned. The novel would seem to warn of a detrimental power imbalance if replicated in human love relationships. Moreover, stereotypical readings of gender, such as those espoused by Franz and Sabina, lead to a misreading and misapprehension of one's partner, which can ultimately unravel a relationship.

Through his various thought experiments, Kundera highlights the pitfalls of these romantic tropes and offers, in their stead, a messier vision of romance. This vision encompasses dichotomies in a Both/And approach, rather than Either/Or. Binaries such as the soul/body, fate/chance, masculine/feminine, and human/animal, are presented in an intricate dance. The reader is thus given a sense of double-vision, a more complex view of love and desire which offers a multitude of possibilities beyond the confines of conventional romance.

In Chapter Two, I analysed the historical archetype of the monstrous woman and the ways in which ideas of powerful womanhood and sexually liberated womanhood have been considered over time. The hybrid symbol of the figure of Melusine, the magical, part-fairy, part-woman, part-fish (at times part-dragon) plays on notions of the mystery, danger, and also transformative power of women's sexuality. She manifests in A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* in various intertextual allusions and through the characters of the two female protagonists, Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey.

Both women struggle to overcome a repression of their romantic and sexual feelings, Christabel as a result of the rigid Victorian society in which she lives and Maud because of her own postmodern suspicion of desire. This implies that although society's view of feminine sexuality may have changed over time, an underlying fear of women's desire lingers, even if, for Maud, that fear may have more to do with a loss of her independence as an academic than a fear of living as an outcast. What the narrative of *Possession* suggests is that there is a possibility for both independence and romantic love, if not in the past then at least today. Desire remains a powerful and transformative force but it need not turn one into a monster or an exiled wretch. Chances for an alternative vision of happiness which is not predicated on outmoded notions of *happily ever after* abound.

Similarly, my examination of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* in Chapter Three implicitly questions the conventional happy ending and marriage plot through its open and unresolved ending. The question of the necessity of proximity in romance is left hanging in the air when Connell reveals to Marianne that he plans to study abroad. The narrator suggests that whatever may happen, what is most important is not the end but the symbiotic growth of the two protagonists over the course of their romance. In Rooney's vision, romantic love and desire are chaotic experiences which are complicated by the conventions of society and the expectations one has of supposed normality. The idea of the norm is constantly critiqued

within the novel and shown to be an impediment to a relationship which is mutually beneficial and transformative.

What both Byatt and Rooney's novels suggest is that there is a possibility for happiness in its etymological sense, a sense of "hap" (Ahmed 592), for those who do not conform to heteronormative expectations. One need not be wretched if one is outside the scope of the normative. Tragedy is not the only alternative to the *happily ever after* formulation.

Lastly, in Chapter Four, I considered the ways in which romance is situated not just within the intertextuality of historical romances, but within a specific location. The language of love and desire is one of many languages, a discourse interwoven with other discourses, histories, and social realities. In Nthikeng Mohlele's *Illumination*, any assumption that romance is apolitical is undercut by a contemporary figuring of lovers and love situated in a specific socio-political milieu in which crime is ubiquitous. In *Illumination*, the city of Johannesburg functions not as a background to the narrative but as a character within it. The ways in which Johannesburg is depicted as a historical and spatial palimpsest impact upon Bantubonke's relationship to nationhood, music, and pleasure. Ultimately, *Illumination* highlights the ways in which subjects are informed by their environments and how love is imbricated within a socio-political context.

The key contribution of this research is an assessment of the productive potential of contemporary love stories, a reclaiming of a genre of Pleasure, as Ronit Frenkel proposes, which acknowledges its imaginative and political potential. The discourse of romance has a long history which is reflective of the time and space in which such stories were conceived. Contemporary romance narratives speak back to this legacy, offering a space in which to consider intimacy as ambivalent, complicated, mutating, and interdependent. This prompts questions about literature's capacity to naturalise certain notions of love and desire, and to challenge deep-seated assumptions. By disorientating the reader in various ways, these four contemporary romances invite one to observe romantic conventions which have become so ubiquitous as to be taken for granted. These narratives suggest that romance has more to offer than merely reinforcing normative expectations and providing a sense of satisfaction to the reader.

Through my analysis, I have discovered the ways in which I can repurpose the romance genre to critique normative expectations of love and desire. Within the space of a love story, one confronts many social, political, and philosophical questions, and the non-traditional

approach to the ending in my chosen texts provokes more questions than satisfying resolutions. Ultimately, these narratives affirm a more complicated, at times uncomfortable, version of love and desire. The falsity and shortcomings of the traditional romantic blueprint are unveiled and replaced by a depiction of intimacy which is unsentimental, unresolved, and integrated within its environment, rather than transcendent. This vision of love breaks free of the blueprint, and is more open and more compassionate.

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