



## **On abortion; or what's love got to do with it**

**Jeremy Fernando & Nicole Ong**

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,  
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from  
where.*

*I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or  
pride;*

*So I love you because I know no other way*

*than this: where I does not exist, nor you,*

(Pablo Neruda: excerpts from Love Sonnet XVII)

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Whenever we are faced with the notion of abortions, the first question that arises is that of whether it is right or wrong—in other words, we are asked to provide a moral injunction. The problem with this is that it presupposes that one can be passed on a situation, any situation; for, each time there is an abortion, it happens in a particular context, with its own set of considerations. Hence, each abortion is a singular situation: perhaps one might be able to judge whether it is right or wrong based on that particular context, but even so, only retrospectively. And the

decision may continue to change, alter—perhaps even continually contradict itself—over time.

Here, we must try not to forget that in order to consider the notion of abortions, we have to open the register that this is an act that is completely one-way. It is a decision, made by a subject (or a consensus by a few subjects) on another; and more importantly, an other that has no capacity to neither involve itself in, nor alter the course of, that said decision. This is a situation of an act where the other remains, and always potentially remains, an absolute other. Hence, this is an ethical situation; where one is called to make a decision whilst remaining blind to the other.

And this means that what we are called to face, and to potentially continually face, is the face of death—in order to think of abortions, we have to be willing to stand up to a position where in a particular situation, a murder is an ethical act.

In order to do so, we might have to first consider the relationality between the potential parent-to-be and the child. This is a peculiar relationality as it is a faceless one. Even though one can posit the fact that the woman has a phenomenological relationship with the foetus, this does not mean that she can have any cognitive understanding of the child-to-be. One might even venture that there is non-verbal communication between them (by way of movement, illness, and so forth) but all of this is interpreted through her, without any possibility of verification with the other. This is not to say that one can ever know, with any level of

certainty, what another is saying: however, with an other that is present, there is a greater sense of this possibility (no matter how illusory it may be). To compound matters, not only is this other absent, it is absent whilst being part of oneself. In other words, we are dealing with a relationality between the self and the other that is part of the self.

Thus, what we are faced with here, is the very structure of love itself.

If we consider the fact that any relationality involves—and is in some way the result of—negotiation, then there must be a space between them for this very negotiation to occur. Otherwise, all that is happening is one person subsuming the other within her own sphere of understanding. This would be understanding at its most perverse; that of bringing the other under one's stance. If that were the case, there would no longer be any relationship: all negotiation is gone and the other person is effectively effaced. Whenever one hears the phrase "I understand my partner," one should be wary; clearly that person's version of a relationship is a masturbatory one.

In this sense, any relationality always already carries with it the unknown, and always unknowable. The other person remains enigmatic, is an enigma. And this is the only way the proclamation "I love you" remains singular, remains a love that is about the person as a singular person—and not merely about the qualities of the other. For, if the other comes under your own schema, then the love for another is also completely transparent, one that you can know thoroughly, calculate; the other becomes nothing more than a check-list. And if it is the qualities you

love, by extension, if those qualities go away, so does the love. Only when the love for the other person is an enigmatic one—one that cannot be understood—can that love potentially be an event. This is especially true when the other is an absent other that is present within. For, any attempt to love a quality will rapidly disappear when the phenomenon that is the other appears. It is only when the other within remains an absolute other is there any chance that its appearance can be welcomed.

If love is an event, it cannot be known before it happens: at best, it can be glimpsed as it is happening; perhaps only retrospectively. Hence, at the point in which it happens, it is a love that comes from elsewhere; this strange phenomenon is best captured in the colloquial phrase, "I was struck by love"; even more so by "I was blinded by love." This is a blinding in the very precise sense of, *I have no idea why or when it happened; before I knew it, I was in love*. Cupid is blind for this reason: not just because love is random (and can happen to anyone, at any time) but more importantly, even after it happens, both the reason and the object of one's love remain veiled from one.

Thus, all one can ever say is that one loves someone, some other—a love that does not have the possibility of knowing its source, nor its intended object. When one loves another, all one knows at that moment is that one loves ... *"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where ..."*

It is the absolute singularity, madness, and impossibility, of love that Toni Morrison attempts to explore in *BeLoved*. Here, it is tempting to hide behind morality—in particular the maxim "thou shall not kill"—

and categorise Sethe's act of killing her daughter as being fundamentally wrong. For, this prevents us from having to consider the particularity of the situation, a situation so peculiar that the murder of a child and ethnicity are not incongruous.

Sethe's killing of her child becomes a sacrifice for the right to love without any inhibition. To be able to love is human; and it is not the inhumanity of her actions that is disturbing, but the absolute humanness of her love. Perhaps what is most terrifying is not just the fact that we are confronted with the question of the ethical implications of Sethe's murder, but whether we are capable of performing this extent of humanness ourselves.

*Which situation is worthier of empathy?*—this is the question, spectre, which haunts *Beloved*. Paul D accuses her of acting like an animal—“You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194)—when he discovers that she has killed her child, highlighting his disgust with her lack of reason and responsibility as a mother. To him, a mother's role is to ensure the protection of her child's life at all costs; and Sethe's choosing of Beloved's freedom over the latter's life is an incomprehensible thought. This is compounded by the fact that Sethe is unable to explain her actions beyond saying repeatedly, “I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.” (193) When Paul D tries to squeeze an explanation out of Sethe, his attempt is futile: “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple ... Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognised

schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonno. Nonono. Simple. She just flew.” (192)<sup>1</sup> This is as though the inability to articulate, to account for her action, is the reason for its ethical inadmissibility; as if the ability to justify is a pre-condition. This is of course the collapse of accountability into ethics that Jacques Derrida warns us against time and time again, most pronounceably in *The Gift of Death*. As he teaches us: “Such is the aporia of responsibility: one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of forming it. For responsibility demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering for oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence and secrecy.” (60) In *Beloved* the situation is so far beyond our reach that there is no language to represent the trauma of her predicament. In fact, even as she attempts to speak, the only thing that is clear to us is that her act cannot be captured in language: her speaking only foregrounds the unspeakability of her murder. It remains a secret.

And it is this secret—this absolute blindness—that continues to haunt us. For, it is impossible for us to determine—with any certainty—whether Sethe's

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<sup>1</sup> Here, we should open our receptors to the intrusion of the third person into Sethe's perspective of the moment. In particular, one should pay attention to the impossibility of articulating her memory of that moment—she says nothing whilst saying a lot. And here, we might attempt to hear the jarring silence of the dash—where nothing is said; but in that conjoining break, a relationality is potentially opened to the unsayable.

murder of Beloved is indeed an ethical act or not. Even though Sethe chooses to murder Beloved to protect her freedom, as a life without freedom would not be worth living at all, this is still a choice that is made on her part—with a notion of what life is, a valuation of what is worthy and unworthy—which may or may not have anything to do with Beloved. In this way, even though Sethe may have had the best of intentions—and there is no reason to doubt her sincerity—this may have ultimately still been a selfish act, an act that privileges the self over the will of the other.

So, even as we posit ethics as the ability to respond to another, at the very moment of response, we have a situation that is potentially an effacement of the other. For, in choosing, one has to put to death all other possibilities for that perspective that one chooses to be chosen. Hence, ethics has to rest upon the very premise that it attempts to avoid.

In this sense, regardless of her reasons for choosing one course of action over all others, any choice by Sethe would involve a purely blind moment, one that would be beyond all capacity for comprehension—it would always be in want of understanding. In this manner, Sethe's choice of freedom over life would always already be a choice beyond her, an un-human choice—a true act of love; "*where I does not exist, nor you ...*"

And this might be the very reason why abortion has long elicited such a visceral response. Not just because it involves the death of a foetus, but more so that it foregrounds the very fact that love itself involves death. More than that, any attempt to love

potentially involves the effacement of the other—not because of a lack, but precisely due to too much love.

Here, we might want to slow down a little, and allow the echo of secrets and rituals to resound in us. If we are positing that love is an event, unknowable until the point in which it happens, then the only manner in which we can potentially access it is through a ritual. However, this access is never direct: for even if one knows the procedure of the ritual, one can never know its result (if any) until it happens. And even if something does occur after the ritual, there is no necessity that that it corresponds with the very intention of the ritual itself—any correlative claim would require prior knowledge. Thus, a ritual is by definition a test. This is a test in the sense offered by Avital Ronell in *The Test Drive* when she speaks of Nietzsche's gay scientist; where a true test "offers a model for cognition that cannot simply account for itself or maintain its results within the assumed certitudes of a controlled system of knowledge." (156) Ronell was meditating on the manner in which Nietzsche's scientificity was both a basis of and the breaking point of science itself—a continual test which both tested for and within itself; all that is ensured is that science is a continual test. In this sense, all that remains is a question. As she continues: "at some level, the correlated acts of discovery and invention exceed the limits of what is knowable or even, as Jacques Derrida has argued, strictly recognizable." (156) And what is tested is perhaps precisely one's very faith in the test itself. Which then brings us back once again to the structure of love. For, if one is always already blind to both the source and the object of love, then the very naming of it as love (even as an attempt to describe the phenomenon that affects us, has an effect on us) is a leap of faith—this is "love" as

a catachrestic metaphor in the strictest sense of an illegitimate naming; naming nothing except for the fact that it is naming.

And this leaves us with the question of what love and murder have to do with each other.

If love is a pure name, this suggests that it is an imposition. The utterance “I love you” is not just a blind statement, it is also a naming of that very relationality itself—a naming that not only does not take into account the will of the “you” but more importantly potentially erases that very “you” as it is naming it. Hence, love also potentially effaces that very relationality that it depends on. In other words, love is not a contractual relationality—a masochistic contract—but a sadistic erasure.

And what situation foregrounds this very erasure more than an abortion. Which is not to say that every abortion is an act of love—far from it. There are numerous reasons for doing so: some are arguably better than others. But no matter what the reason, at the point in which one chooses to have an abortion, there is no way to verify, or justify, the choice: it is one that is made by one on an other, a choice that “exceed the limits of what is knowable or even ... strictly recognizable.” It is in the strictest sense, a gift of death.

Just because it is a gift does not mean that it is necessarily good for the other. For, whenever we give something to another, we are doing so regardless of whether the other needs, or even wants, this very thing. Even when the gift is given with the best of intentions, one is at best guessing the wants, and needs, of the recipient: hence, this is a projection of

one on the other. It is only after the gift is given that we can judge, usually by how it is received, whether the gift has been good or not. Even if this gift has been given numerous times, there is no necessary correlation between the previous reception and the one that is to come. In this sense, every gift is also haunted by blindness: the giver has no possibility of knowing what the recipient wants, needs; the receiver has no access to the intent, source, of the gift. All that is known, at the point where the gift is given is that there is a giving. More than that, each giving is always already a test—both of the effects of the gift, and also of the very relationality between the giver and recipient.

Here, we can hear an echo of Rainer Marie Rilke, who on May 14, 1904 wrote: “it is good to love, for love is hard. Tenderness from one person to another is perhaps the most difficult task assigned to us—the most extreme, the final test and examination, the work, for which all other work is only a preparation.” (*Brief I*) If we allow Rilke to remix with Avital Ronell here, and her teaching that “testing inhabits the aporetic logic of never accomplishing itself as the principal means of its becoming, (224) we can tune in to the register that the difficulty of love lies in it being a continual test. Not only is love a test of the relationality between the subjects involved, it is also a test of itself—for, one must never forget that love is the name that we give to the unknown that affects us, seizes us, and quite often ceases us. Hence, as the relationality is tested, what is continually becoming is precisely what this ‘love’ is: even if we posit that love is singular, and happens in a particular situation, this does not mean that it is not constantly becoming, allowing itself perhaps to be glimpsed only as it is becoming, retrospectively, momentarily.

Thus, each time we attempt to catch a glimpse of love, each time we attempt to express love—even if it is through the ritual of uttering “I love you,” taking into account all the instabilities of the three words being uttered—there is a momentary death involved. For it to be a sincere utterance, there has to be a correspondence between the “I” and the “you”—in love, through love—no matter how fleeting: and it is in that relationality that there is a freezing—when the becoming becomes being—and this is the moment that is haunted by choice, by death. What one is doing is naming the other in a relationality of love with the self, at a particular moment in time. In other words, the utterance is a reification of time itself.

This is love as an authoring of a relationality between the self and the other in a moment in time, bringing with it all the registers of illegitimacy that resound in authority. For, an authoring of the self suggests an inscription in which it is impossible to distinguish whether the self is a narrator or a character in the narration. Hence, the relationality is always already haunted by an imaginative gesture, fictionality. And what is being authored is not only the relationality, and the other—the “you” that is being addressed in the utterance, a “you” that is always already veiled from the self—but more pertinently the self, the “I.” For, even though the self is doing the authoring, the ability to differentiate the character from the narrator remains beyond the self: as “I” am uttering “I,” there is no way that “I” can separate the electioneer from the “I” that is called forth, named, in the utterance. In other words—and here what choice have we got but to use the words of the other, words of otherness—what we have is a foregrounding of the “I” as potentially other to the self.

Which brings us back to where we began. Since each and every choice that is made, that we make, is one that occurs in and through the self, it is an act by the self, which then affects another. But if we take into account the fact that each choice also requires a notion of an “I”—and that each gesture of the “I” is always already haunted by the indistinguishability of the other from the self—we have a situation where all choosing is potentially a death of the self. And this is precisely why abortions affect us so much. One must not forget that to abort is to give up; to choose, pick, bring death to (a) possibility. It is the foregrounding of a killing of otherness in the self—and what truly scares us is the fact that we cannot differentiate between the self and the other within. This is the very same indifferentiability that Pablo Neruda hints at that lies in love, the point “*where I does not exist, nor you ...*” And thus, ultimately we are never quite able to distinguish not just the reasons for the abortion—no one can have access to these, perhaps not even the self—but more pertinently, we are not able to separate love from death itself.

When “I love you” and killing you might be one and the same thing. Where what is killed might just be me.

On abortion, love; or the killing of the self.

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