AN EROTICISM WITHOUT US

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a radical reevaluation of desire, love, and the libidinal economy through the lens of 'an eroticism without the human' or a 'generic beloved.' It challenges the entrenched notion that desire is rooted in the unique and exceptional, arguing instead for its foundation in the impersonal, anonymous realm of genericity. This perspective shifts the focus from a traditional discourse that glorifies the individuality of the object of desire to one where qualities are seen as interchangeable and not exclusively human. In critiquing the current anthropocentric libido, which is exploited for economic gain to the detriment of the planet, I advocate for a broader, more inclusive understanding of desire. This necessity becomes clear in an era dominated by digital platforms, where human attributes are fragmented and commodified. This paper suggests that exploring non-human modes of desire could lead to a reconceptualization of the libido, offering an escape from the limiting anthropocentric paradigm.

KEYWORDS

peak libido, eros, extimacy, genericity, anthropocene, impersonal desire, algorithms, fungi, mysticism

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Suppose that the conditions of desire do not lie in one's exceptional qualities but in genericity. All desire is innately impersonal yet intimate. It doesn't care who or what you are, and wants with indifference. Such desire is anonymous, indiscriminate, impersonal, and external. It holds the promise of an innermost alterity—the allure of the other who exists outside oneself and reciprocates desire.

Desire reveals the paradox at the limit of being, where an encounter prompts the recognition of the external as an unfolding of one's innermost interiority. This is a transition from intimacy to 'extimacy.' First coined by Lacan, 'extimacy' can be understood as the "intimate that is radically Other" (Miller 1997, 77), inverting the distinction between exteriority and intimacy, suggesting their mutual transformation and interpenetration. Extimacy reorients desire, asserting "the most intimate is not a point of transparency but rather a point of opacity" (Miller 1997, 76), wherein the Other is found within as though a "foreign body, a parasite" (Miller 1997, 76. When we perceive intimacy as something external, it transforms into a sort of 'extimacy' that penetrates and infuses the categories of intimacy—implying interiority or self—and exteriority, the elusive other.

Indeed, there is no specific object of desire. Instead, there exists only the potentiality to desire. In other words, desire is an external determinant that unexpectedly stumbles upon us. Amidst sensuous disorientation, we erroneously perceive desire as originating from within, as our own possession. The external nature of desire allows it to occur at any moment and in any place. Desire is potentiality itself.

And yet, isn't it that we long for the special other's attention beyond all else? The desire to possess the beloved and the quest for completion through them are profound aspects of our romantic aspirations. The object of desire, unique among all others, captivates with qualities that endow her with a distinct, fixed identity that transfixes the amorous subject. Love is often directed towards the individual who unveils their hidden self, revealing their essence to us, implying uniqueness. But such love simultaneously transforms the object of desire's specificity into the common beloved, highlighting the paradox of genericity. Anyone in love has also fallen out of love, only to find themselves impassioned once more by a new 'objet petit a.' Different, but the same.

However, unlike the fetishistic, singular, and specific object of desire, let us propose a beloved who is not fixed but fluid, generous, and transformative. Their qualities are interchangeable and communal. Their love is a surplus ever-suspended because it belongs at once to no one and is experienced by everyone. In the absence of a singular object, an anonymous beloved emerges—always already absent yet ever-present—engaging in a form of love from the outside, as Giorgio Agamben (1993) describes it, "the experience of being-within an outside" (75). This anonymous beloved without qualities represents an attempt to conceptualize the libido not as the anthropocentric and passionate drive for the singular and particular but for the generic.

The libido is often perceived as a species-specific phenomenon, an excess of instinct that sets humans apart from animals. Passion, drive, sexuality, and, of course, love are all encompassed within this anthropocentric understanding of libido, which is both limiting and questionable. This perspective confines love to the realm of anthropos, where human desires are commodified in the libidinal economy, leading to disastrous planetary consequences. To conceive of the generic beloved is to profoundly shift the scale of the libido to a planetary, if not cosmic, level. This perspective speculates that the libido is inherently unhuman, functioning as a cosmic vector pulsating throughout the natural world. Envisioning the libido as innately passive, impersonally intimate, and seductively generic.

Reorienting the Beloved

But what does it mean to speak of a generic beloved? Proposing the embrace of genericity as a condition of desire—loving the other without qualities—does not imply sameness and never converges in meaning. Being generic does not suggest that the subject loses its distinct characteristics in relation to the other. This project is not an attempt to collapse the gap between forms or dissolve into an amorphous cosmic goo where one is indistinguishable from the other or continuous without absence. Quite the opposite—the libido thrives on discontinuity.

Consider Rilke's idea that love necessitates that “two solitudes protect and border and salute each other” (2004, 45). For Rilke (2004), the testament of love is to leave the beloved intact. Rather than attempt to break down the boundaries between self and other, love thrives when individuals remain separate, incomplete, and mysterious to each other. It is the libido that connects us. Desire presupposes attachment. Discreteness allows us to stumble upon one another in acts of love—the brush of

the hand against the skin, a kiss, coitus. What would the love act look like were we truly "water in water?" (Bataille 1992, 19). Protecting the beloved's solitude becomes paramount, as the true desire is not complete knowledge but an enduring embrace of the unknown. Genericity is a requirement to love and be loved.

The central question is how to love and desire the other while fully acknowledging our inherent discontinuity. It involves reconciling our discreteness and incommensurability, recognizing them as the source of eros—the cosmic, ecological charge propelling the libido. The precipice of subjectivity. Genericity does not aim to flatten humanity; such an approach would counteract the freneticism of the libido and the necessary frisson of eros.

Certainly, the flattening of the lover's discourse into a safe and standardized 'love plot' for consumption is precisely what the generic beloved aims to subvert (Berlant 2012). The generic is the recognition of the other in their incommensurability; it is the unknown determinant of the beloved, the indescribable and incomprehensible. The generic beloved is always atopic: "unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality" (Barthes 2010, 34). Embracing a generic beloved means reconciling with the idea that the gap between the self and the other is not a cruel estrangement but rather an erotic, seductive space charged with energy.

Through this irreconcilable gulf, the subject and the beloved are paradoxically intimately entangled, though such a connection can only be grasped obliquely. To move towards a libidinal ecology of genericity (and generosity), the lover must initiate a process of stripping away the self. The future of eros doesn't hinge on becoming but on undoing—not on the possessive love plot but on the cosmic generosity of indiscriminate love in excess.

Georges Bataille (1992) proposes such a perspective in his interpretation of Marcel Mauss's 'gift' within a general economy. Bataille suggests transitioning from exchange calculations to a cosmic potlatch—a notion he would term 'expenditure.' This planetary, sacrificial gift-giving, abundant and linked to the principle of the gift, becomes fundamental to general nonproductive activity and finds embodiment in the sexual act as the giving of "exuberant energy" (Bataille 1992, 41). Here, sexuality, desire, and love in excess are turned into sacrificial 'gifts'—the renunciation of self for the other.

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In an age so lacking in eroticism yet so exhaustively replete with sexuality and avenues of sublimating one's desires via consumerism and acquisition of capital, the question of a 'sustainable' libidinal ecology holds a particular charge. Dominic Pettman (2020) captures this dissonance with the term 'peak libido,' suggesting that we are at risk of losing a precious human resource—the ability to connect, commune, rejoice, and recreate vital and evolving human institutions.

Pettman (2020) urges us to examine this age, the Anthropocene, in which human desire has left a lasting and rapid geological impact on the planet and all life. He encourages viewing this epoch through a libidinal lens, recognizing the profound interplay between desire, human connection, and the broader ecological context. Let us propose that it is timely and essential to reassess the societal narrative surrounding desire.

Often, desire is conflated with the possessive nature of the human libidinal economy, where individuals find themselves elevated to a spectacle and commodified as objects of desire where they are evaluated based on their qualities as if they were a lucrative investment. As Anna Longo (2019) suggests in *Love in the Age of Algorithms*, we have left behind a society of control in favor of a risk society. She likens this shift to games of chance, "where the goal is to decide how much to invest in oneself today in order to sell oneself at the best price tomorrow" (Longo 2019, n.p.).

Indeed, love is a game of chance, and desire operates on the principles of capital. The economy plays a role in shaping our libidos, rendering us vulnerable to being labeled as poor investments or inadequate lovers. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the digital age, where our reliance on technology and algorithmic decision-making is uncomfortably intimate. The dependence on technology not only requires extensive categorization of identity but also encourages individuals to distinguish themselves and be exceptional, with self-expression being rewarded by algorithms.

This, in turn, raises the stakes of the gamble to extend beyond the digital and into the physical world. As R.S. Benedict (2021) acknowledges in the article *Everyone is Beautiful and No One is Horny*, like most aspects of contemporary life, our bodies are now simply investments for future—equally lucrative—lovers and profitable business exchanges. For Benedict (2021), "a body is no longer a holistic system," (n.p.) nor is it the means by which we experience the sensorial physical pleasures of embodied life. Rather, the body exists to increase our value as increasingly abstracted digital assets. As Benedict notes, the optimized body "is a collection of features: six pack, thigh gap, cum gutters" (2021, n.p.).

Benedict critically examines the drive towards optimizing the physical form to enhance certain hierarchical attributes, raising questions about the aim of bodily optimization: "Some vague sense of better living?" (Benedict 2021, n.p.). However, a notable oversight in Benedict's otherwise brilliant analysis of the beautiful but asexual body is the consideration of how the human form increasingly exists in a fragmented, virtual state. The algorithm's tendency to distribute abstract human qualities across various categories further disrupts our connection to our physical bodies. Consequently, our bodies are transformed into attributes to refine, perfect, and make exceptional for the sake of virality.

The contemporary landscape is marked by a pursuit of investment in personal growth: more followers, more likes, more love matches, more sex, more sponsorships, more money. In a risk society, where individuals are extensively exposed, the object of desire becomes too knowable. Exploited by algorithms and reinforced data, individuals who display their qualities are vulnerable to oversaturation. In this context, the being without qualities—the anonymous and generic—presents radical potentialities for a cosmic and sustainable libidinal ecology that is as seductive as it is generous.

If anyone is wondering why swiping right on the latest dating app isn't yielding results, it's this: completely transparent selfhood is not sexy. Erotic allure diminishes when the self is transparent because the cosmic libido thrives on the mystery and unknowability of an external, an Other that can never be fully grasped. An empty profile is more seductive than someone revealing every detail about themselves before the first date. We're no longer trying to seduce one another, but we *are* seducing the algorithm and doing an amazing job of it.

With the global proliferation of the internet and mass data in our daily lives, algorithms might continue to make love to us, whispering sweet nothings in the form of virality, push notifications, and dopamine-spiking 'likes.' But as far as human relations go, the lover's discourse has been stripped of sex appeal, deprived of seduction. Our libidinal pulse grows faint. While we eagerly connect with the virtual cloud, disseminating our most successful qualities through electrical impulses, we have forgotten the sensuality of the flesh, the passion of the creature, and the eroticism inherent in the planet.

Paradoxically, digitally scattering ourselves doesn't result in a loss of self but rather leads to increased self-awareness. This digital dispersal generates an excess of selfhood that doesn't inherently require a physical embodiment. In contrast to the self-abnegation involved in embracing the generic, digital scattering operates on the premise that one's essence resides in specific features without necessarily acknowledging the self as contingent on the other. Being digitally scattered engenders a sense of self rooted in categorizable, manageable, and dispersible qualities. In this context, the human, always partially existing somewhere in the digital realm, avoids encountering the other and cannot acknowledge themselves as the other. Existing online, attuned to algorithms that love us, we manifest not as individuals or a collective but as fragmented classifications. This phenomenon is the echo chamber of the digital self. This flattening transpires when the beloved is reduced solely to their qualities—amorous statistics—and matched with their reflection.

This distinction highlights broader issues at play. Having become accustomed to existing within narcissistic feedback loops focused on the self, we may have forgotten how to desire generously and, consequently, how to care from an external, generic standpoint. Exploring the role that attention to unhuman, ecological, and planetary modes of desire becomes crucial in re-conceptualizing the libido. This, in turn, extends to reimagining the love plot beyond the anthropocentric lens and toward the anonymous and impersonal—the realm of the generic beloved.

In this framework, the beloved is not singular but represents all that exists—self-emptying, unfolding, entangled, pointing to no one in particular. Can we cultivate anonymous love? Can we redirect our human libidos toward the cosmic and be seduced by the generic? How might this transformation reshape our understandings of desire and position the human not as a host for the libido but entangled in a greater, planetary sensuality—an 'eroticism without us?'

Desiring as Radical Passivity

The conceptualization of an eroticism without us can be comprehended through two distinct movements. First, there is the acknowledgment that desire has always existed beyond the human realm. This accentuates the constraints of the anthropocentric libido and suggests a process of estrangement from self—interiority, identity, and uniqueness. The prefix 'un' underscores the removal of the human from desire. This is a passive process; by unsaying the self and its qualities, one unveils interiority as an inherently hollow, open anonymity through which libido can encounter and flow.

Secondly, unhuman desire, freed from anthropocentrism, is linked to an eroticism that is inherently ecological and, therefore, present wherever, whenever, and in whatever form. This signals a shift toward an impersonal entanglement that exists independently of human involvement. Desire doesn't need us and will continue to form viscous attachments to life long after humanity ceases to exist. Thus, we have two movements: the cosmic and the planetary, both relational and dependent on the other—orbital.

The first movement necessitates the removal of the human from the central role in desire through renunciation. The underlying idea is that all desire is inherently unhuman—it involves discarding the self. To confront the unhuman within is to develop the ability to love anonymously, embracing radical passivity. As Thomas Carl Wall (1999) suggests, radical passivity is "passive in regard to itself," (1) indicating a withdrawal for the sake of the other that holds the potential for transformation and communication. Radical passivity embodies a passionate desire for that which is external.

The notion of radical passivity thus introduces complexity into the interplay between self and other and, consequently, between the human and unhuman. Adopting a passive stance regarding oneself implies experiencing oneself as already other and always potentially other. Radical passivity exemplifies a paradoxical generosity where the gift is withdrawal, unveiling the subject as a nonpresence—a floating signifier—and creating space for generative possibilities. Wall (1999) articulates this intricate and dynamic state of being-in-potentia: "Before I take on the particularity of a person, I am—and am not—an extreme possibility. To say it even better, I am a *potential* possibility, the null event of an inactuality" (2).

The Wound of Divine Love

Drawing a parallel with the mystical traditions of Divine Love, we observe a similar relinquishing of the self to the divine in the works of the medieval female Christian mystics. These texts portray mysticism (and mystical practice) as the being-in-potentia of the erotic. The devout subject in prayer, supine to the Divine, dedicates the self to the seclusion of an anchoress cell or the solitude of a desert hermitage, allowing the beloved divinity the requisite attention for the expenditure of love.

In the mystical itinerary *TheMirror of Simple Souls* (ca. 1250–1310), late thirteenth-century beguine Marguerite Porete (1999) outlines the seven states of the soul, which she equates to "states of being, after Love has come and taken hold" (Porete 1999, 142). Porete (1999) identifies how one gives oneself over to God not just to receive His love but to empty oneself (*kenosis*) so deeply of subjective human qualities that one may become a potential possibility for Divine Love's unfolding. For Porete (1999), the soul's journey toward divine union is envisioned as a solitary pilgrimage marked by self-sacrifice. She describes this path as "the steps by which on climbs from the valley to the summit of the mountain, which is so isolated that one sees nothing there but God" (Porete 1999, 142).

Divine Love thus requires the radical passivity of expenditure—the loss of self, or renunciation, as a form of "martyrdom" (Porete 1999, 143). The soul who seeks Divine Love "obliges herself to obey the will of another…so as to destroy her will" (143). This is characterized as a violent and difficult process: "[O]ne must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be, burdening oneself down with several states of being, so as to unburden oneself and to attain to one's being" (143).

In Porete's (1999) itinerary, the mystical subject systematically and willingly undergoes the stripping away ('aphaíresis') of selfhood to create an opening within (or hollowing out) that the Divine might come inside as the beloved, and the ecstasy of this violent tearing apart may take place. Porete characterizes this union as the freedom of the soul, which abandons this free will and returns to God now as an abyssal wound: "fallen from love into nothingness, without which nothingness she cannot be everything" (Porete 1999, 144).

This spiritual journey towards Divine Love highlights a radical passivity, rooted in an anonymous and impersonal form of desire. Through this process, the body willingly endures both physical and mental anguish, casting away every trace of identity and worldly attachment. This act of self-denial and disengagement from the material world, or journey into nothingness, prepares one to be a vessel capable of receiving love from the divine Other.

In other Medieval mystical experiences with Christ, the motif of the wound or stigmata serves as a mirror for conceiving the unknowable Divine. To bear the pain of stigmata is to be Christ-like. Mystics, including Porete (1999), recount visions of Christ displaying wounds, drinking his blood, and even entering Christ through these wounds. The connection between Christian mystics and Christ's wounds is underscored by an unmistakable erotic dimension, as scholar

Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes in *Dissimilar Similitudes* (2020). Bynum describes responses to Christ's wounds as explicitly erotic in a "polymorphous" sense, “distributed across the entire body” (2020, 199). She highlights Christ's role in opening “doors and windows” so that the soul “may enter and remain within the “tabernacle” of the body” (199). This perspective suggests a mutual indwelling inherent to impersonal desire: to welcome God, one must shed the self while simultaneously, through Christ's human-affiliated wounds, we can enter and inhabit Him.

Christ emerges as the quintessential generic beloved. His love is characterized as anonymous, polymorphously perverse, and cosmic. The desire for this love disperses the concept of ‘self,’ exposing the absence of essence within. In *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Porete (1999) conveys a similar idea in the sixth state of the soul’s journey. Despite deep humility and elevated goodness, the soul cannot see itself or God. Instead, “God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her” (145), enlightening the soul to perceive nothing else but God, even when face-to-face with one’s ‘self.’

The mystical subject paradoxically reveals that the interiority is already an exteriority. The self and other are collapsed. By getting rid of the self, one can experience the self as if from the outside in its generative potentiality—as desire. To be intimate with the Divine is not a desire mediated by the presence or absence of the object of desire but attention to the anonymous and impersonal gulf between the source of the frisson. Divine Love is ‘extimacy’ in its most cosmic sense. It suggests a prototype for unhuman desire that focuses not on the individual but on an inessential commonality. As such, ‘being’ signifies that the self exists in a state of whatever, whenever, and wherever.

Being Whatever for the Other

Giorgio Agamben (1993) introduces the concept of ‘whatever being’ in *The Coming Community*. According to Agamben, ‘whatever being’ signifies a potential community that is "mediated not by any condition of belonging…nor by the simple absence of conditions…but by belonging itself" (1993, 85). Within this

community, individual identity or specific qualities act as a revelation of the absence of essence. The self is perpetually a nonpresence, always and never the other, existing eternally outside itself, intimately estranged from essence. Identity, instead, serves as a conduit for unveiling the essential absence within.

In other words, the self is merely topographical, a face with many faces and simultaneously headless. Might we appropriate Agamben (1993) and transform the state of 'whatever being' into the acephalic, many-faced, plural non-subject: the 'whateverbeing?' In this context, the subject's desire for the other is assimilated as a potentiality; desire-in-itself precedes the desire for another. For Agamben (1993), this means that we do not love because we are unique and do not love because we are human. We love because desire encounters us regardless of one's identity or nature. Desire is exterior to being, or more specifically, independent of being—it is 'whatever.' In this context, embracing what we have defined as genericity is an expression of love. The concept of the generic or 'whateverbeing' puts us in a state of potentiality, and this potential is what holds us in the flow of movement—time.

Agamben explains that love is not focused on specific qualities of the loved one, nor does it dismiss these qualities for a generic love, "The lover wants the loved one with all of its predicates, its being such as it is" (1993, 2). This specificity, or what makes the loved one lovable, is not the comprehension of a particular thing or its qualities but rather the understanding of its intelligibility. He highlights the movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis, which "transports the object not toward another thing or another place but toward its own taking-place—toward the Idea" (1993, 2). The lover and the beloved are always 'in medias res.'

Love is fundamentally a state of duration and movement—an enduring suspension within the realm of desire that extends outward without a specific origin. Love entails recognizing that one's existence is orbital, relational, and entangled from a distance. The movement of desire is akin to transformation, metamorphosis, and permutation. To orient oneself through the lens of the cosmic libido means continuously evolving in time and space, transitioning from one form and subjectivity to another, always in motion, never stagnant, yet perpetually suspended in the midst.

As Alphonso Lingis (1998) notes, these movements are "without theme, climax, or denouement; they extend from the middle, they are durations" (60). If one envisions the libido as a cosmic vector, then the lover and beloved are knots at various points on that line of transmission and magnitude, which extends infinitely and

converges in all directions. As knots, lovers may seem physically bound to a particular time and space, whereas the libido remains unburdened by the spatio-temporal, free to traverse the cosmos.

Considering the orientation of lovers in this manner, as in-between or liminal, positions the subject as passive in relation to the libido. The libido, therefore, is nonlocal—it lacks a specific place or distance; it happens upon the lovers in anticipation of their entangled futures. Entanglement then describes the consequence of nonlocality—whereby particles in relation to one another become permanently correlated and dependent on the other's states and properties. The lovers, in turn, begin to love through this sensual determination from the outside.

In the libidinal vector, lovers are akin to points in space, perceiving themselves as separated by a vast cosmic gulf. However, in reality, they are indistinguishable, interchangeable, anonymous, and generic—a complex interplay reflected in the entangled nature of quantum particles. With the self removed, it is as though the body is open and porous, hollowed out for desire to surge through, connecting one discrete form to the next, collapsing the differences between self and other for the sake of an inessential commonality. Essencelessness. The senses take precedence over identity; the body reverts to the polymorphous perversity of the infant—an unelaborated attention to sensual aesthetics. This is the radical passivity of sacrifice, mystical experience, and the alterity of the innermost interiority of being, which is entirely impersonal and cosmic in scale. A tearing apart of individuated being.

Fungal Whateverbeings: Commingling Desire

Agamben's speculative ‘coming community’ envisions the libido beyond the anthropocentric lens, leaning toward a generic commonality or "a condition of belonging" (1993, 16). In essence, the libido is cosmic and inherently ecological. Similarly, eros—the surplus of desire—represents an entanglement of inessential commonalities and infinite potentialities that surpass individual subjects and species. This prompts the question: How might our anthropocentric libidos experience desire when it moves beyond a self-oriented perspective, independent of identity and human-centric views, emerging instead as inherently unhuman and devoid of essence?

If libido can be understood as an erotic, cosmic vector that "cuts across species, territories, categories, and scenarios," (Pettman 2020, 68) then to desire is to reach out and encounter the threshold of the outside. It is to desire a whateverbeing comprised of whatever while being oneself 'whatever.' Agamben articulates that "whatever is the thing with all its properties, none of which, however, constitutes difference" (1993, 19). To exemplify this concept, he refers to the human face, asserting that 'whatever' is neither the individuation of generic faces nor the universalization of singular traits (Agamben 1993).

With its emphasis on indifference, Agamben's 'whatever' expands the potential of desire beyond human conception, transcending human-to-human love (1993). It allows for contemplating alternative desiring modes involving other species and life forms that can both desire and be desired. By shedding our essence and embracing whateverbeing, we may open ourselves to new, overlooked, and displaced forms of care. This transition invites us to explore the ecological as a model for understanding the potential of desire to surpass the confines of the self. The planet transforms into an erotic and uncanny non-place where humans confront their artificiality and discontinuity, compelling a reorientation towards the external, the other. In this context, Earth becomes a geological erogenous zone, wherein the libido, in its myriad forms, pulses through, encountering and connecting discrete beings.

Consider the mycorrhiza, a specialized network operating subtly beneath the forest floor, fostering a symbiotic relationship between fungi and plant roots. In this intricate system, plants, particularly trees, rely on a complex network of fungi, encompassing both the fruiting bodies and mycelial threads that sprawl rhizomatically beneath the soil. These fungal networks entwine around plant roots, facilitating the absorption and processing of vital nutrients from the earth. The mycorrhiza, essentially a network of interconnected fibers, acts as a conduit, directing these essential resources to the trees, which cannot perform this function independently. In return, the trees provide the fungi with the sugars and carbon generated through photosynthesis.

The outcome of this reciprocal exchange exemplifies an intimate yet impersonal network of care. Contemplating the mycorrhiza network draws analogies to desiring the generic beloved amidst the complexities of the relationship between self and other. In *Entangled Life*, a comprehensive exploration of the mycological realm as a model for alternative intelligence and futures, Merlin Sheldrake (2020) articulates the intricate and mutable subject-object relationship of mycelium with elusive precision: "From the point of view of the network, mycelium is a single interconnected entity. From the point of view of a hyphal tip, mycelium is a multitude" (47).

Sheldrake (2020) further clarifies: "Mycelium is a body without a body plan" (49). It constitutes an entity that is simultaneously singular (comprising hyphae and fruiting body) and plural (encompassing interstitial connective tissue, interwoven frenetic fibers), perpetually existing beyond its boundaries, navigating past its subject limits to engage with lovers across different species. In this analogy, mycelium networks mirror the libido as an erotic vector, with the fruiting bodies of fungi, along with the plants and other species encountered, representing the so-called 'knots:' the lovers and beloveds.

"Mycelium is how fungi feed" (Sheldrake 2020, 47); in other words, how they desire. The libido, seen as a form of metaphysical hunger, transcends simple nourishment—it embodies expenditure. Per Bernard Stiegler: "If consummation is that which destroys its object, libido is to the contrary that which, as desire and not as drive, that, as the sublimation intrinsic to desire, *takes care* of its object" (2012, 114 emphasis original). For fungi, this libidinal process is transformative rather than destructive. Through the acts of expenditure—decomposition, metabolic chemical transformations, and the dispersal of spores—fungi not only consume but also protect and transform their environment. They absorb and are absorbed by their surroundings, deciding post-encounter whether to integrate or bypass. This results in the emergence of mycelial networks as sites of lavish expenditure, where fungal hyphae extend and intertwine, producing not just mycelium and fruiting bodies but also generating enticing aromas, providing sustenance for other organisms, and even creating substances like ink for artistic use when allowed to decay. In this way, fungi operate as ecological desiring machines—an eroticism that is technological, transformative, and generic in its desire.

Unlike human animals and many other species that actively navigate the world in pursuit of food to consume, fungi adopt a different approach: they "put their bodies in the food" (Sheldrake 2020, 51). That is to say, the world comes into contact with fungi, which then "weave themselves through the gaps" of the desired object, settling within plant species until "they are as much a part of planthood as leaves or roots" (Sheldrake, 2020, 6). In this way, fungal desire is impersonal and anonymous, capable of protecting the solitude of the plant (such as defending the plant against disease) while forever altering its composition physically and ontologically. Additionally, fungal desire is sacrificial—by feeding and reaching out to their object of desire, they, too, are fundamentally and irrevocably altered.

Indeed, fungi are whateverbeings—the discontinuous fruiting body and entangled streams of embodiment. Their individuation is not a fixed point but a continual generation process characterized by continuous growth, recession, appropriation, and impropriation along a substantial line. The image of the line is not arbitrary; it signifies a gradation in every direction. With long and branched hyphae that penetrate the roots of plants, the more of the world the hyphae can reach out toward, the more it can consume, and the more life spreads.

The hyphae of the mycelial network are the most invasive of lovers; they decant themselves into their environment and shape themselves to fit within their beloved, regardless of species. The movements and feeding behaviors of the mycelial network and the fungal fruiting body stand in for an indiscriminate potential love plot. Eros is engendered when dissimilar species encounter each other, establish connections, intertwine, and generously care for one another.

According to Lingis (1998), our intimate connections with animals are often overlooked, leading us to falsely believe that our affections are limited to the human sphere. Lingis points to various instances, from caressing a hen to riding a horse, as profoundly intimate interactions. By stating that when making love with humans, "we also make love with the horse and the calf, the kitten and the cockatoo, the powdery moths, and the lustful crickets," Lingis (1998, 63) highlights the expansive nature of genuine intimacy, challenging our tendency to narrowly define it within human boundaries.

Lingis (1998) focuses primarily on connections with fellow creaturely beings, a concept more easily grasped than an erotic relationship with fungi. However, I argue that such an erotic connection can be expanded to both organic life and the inorganic, embracing various movements and durations—fungal, botanical, climatological, geological, or technological. Perhaps, as we navigate the Anthropocene, this shift in understanding becomes imperative.

For Lingis, "orgasm proceeds by decomposition of the competent body," suggesting an inherent eroticism in rot (1998, 63). The mycological process of rot and decay by fungi exemplifies such potent eroticism. If an ecological phenomenon such as mycorrhiza can serve as a paradigm for a libidinal ecology characterized by perpetual entanglement—always beyond the human, where the beloved is inherently generic, and intimacy is inherently impersonal—what unfolds when we extend this sensuous and planetary understanding to human experiences? Can we imagine ourselves not as an exceptional species separate from the nonhuman world but as having never been human, always durations of a planetary movement?

Erotic Decay

Agamben (1993, 10) would note that "[T]his life is purely linguistic life. Only life in the word is undefinable and unforgettable" and, as such, reliant on the empty space of the example. Let us develop the exemplary language necessary to conceptualize a desire that does not require the distinctions of self and other, which loves prior to the formulation of either, but wherein our discontinuity remains intact. As 'linguistic beings,' we can unarticulate that self (Agamben 1993). This entails a linguistics of decay, an eroticism of rot, akin to the material language used by medieval Christian female mystics in expressing their encounters with Divine Love, and which shares a profound fascination with highlighting the beauty inherent in death.

For instance, the curious intimacy of fungal decay and the mystical language of an apophatic un-saying can be found throughout Jenny Hval's novel *Paradise Rot* (2018), wherein Jo, a young Norwegian exchange student, moves into a former brewery in Australia. Due to its former status, the apartment continues to ferment—humid and replete with insects, mildew, ripened fruit, and compost. The brewery's rot imbues and mutates everything it touches; "raw and porous" (Hval 2018, 33). Here, Jo shares the space with another woman named Carral, who seems peculiarly fungal. In their initial encounter, Jo recounts hearing Carral urinate in the bathroom while their conversation persists, with the "paper-thin walls" accentuating the sound of "crumpled tissue rubbing against skin" (Hval 2018, 28). Indeed, Carral is without well defined boundaries, social and bodily. She is often sick and somnambulistic, excreting bodily fluids and lethargically meandering around the apartment, sleeping upright around the mezzanine as if she were in the process of zymosis.

The more time the two women spend together in the brewery's fermentation, the more entangled they become and the more mycological they behave. During one summer, the apartment becomes a host to other-than-human life, with "yellow moss patches," "white spiders," and "crawling maggots" living alongside the two women, who offer no resistance to their presence (Hval 2018, 102). At the same time, Jo begins to wake to Carral next to her in bed, "moist and milky" (Hval 2018, 103). She notes, "Sometimes I was sure I could feel little sprouts appear under the skin where she'd breathed" (Hval 2018, 103).

The brewery manifests as the erotic being-in-potentia where subjectivity can collapse, much like the anchoress cell or the forest floor—it represents a liminality between the so-called libidinal economy and a libidinal ecology. Here, the senses are foregrounded; the world becomes that which one encounters sensually and which, in turn, acts upon the body. With such astute attention to the sensuous, every encounter becomes an erotic, intimate act, even without being explicitly sexual. Even existing in a room together holds the potential for cultivating desire if one is paying attention—as Jo always is.

Reserved by nature, Jo, as a narrator, often assumes the position of the detached other, even within herself, an outside observer. Indeed, a biologist major, Jo exudes curiosity and objectivity—Carral is like the fungus Jo studies in her university's lab:

> She was wearing that thin pale-yellow wool sweater again. The yellow was so close to her skin tone and hair that she seemed naked, a sexless, matted nakedness. I cut the yolk from my fried egg and put it in my mouth. The yolk burst under my tongue, and I imagined it was her skin I was tasting, but she didn't move, just continued to twirl a finger in her ponytail, looking down at the novel opened in front of her. I licked the sticky yellow from my teeth (Hval 2018, 48–49).

Jo's frequent observations of her roommate carry a discernible erotic undertone, suggesting that naming the sensual and tactile aspects of Carral leads to a reciprocal feeling within Jo—an inherent aspect of desire. The crucial element here, however, is the impersonal intimacy and generic nature of the exchange. Jo's desire for Carral is mediated by the senses, beginning with color, then extending into touch, taste, smell, sight, and taste—an intricate synesthesia of the libido. This connection doesn't necessitate physical contact or deep knowledge of each other as individuals; rather, it involves an intimate entanglement through synthesizing the senses, bridging the gap between forms.

Eventually, Carral begins sleeping in Jo's bed at night, and the two lovers' forms commingle: hip bones stick to thighs, and damp beads of sweat, blood, and urine soak their sheets. Hval doesn't assign a negative value to this codependent decay; instead, she allows it to fester, reach out, feed, and transform. Compare this with an example from the female Christian mystic Angela of Foligno (ca. 1248–1309), who recounts drinking Christ's blood from his wound in her itinerary, *The Memorial.*

> Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side. It seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by this blood he would cleanse me. And at this I began to experience a great joy, although when I thought about the passion I was still filled with sadness (Foligno 1993, 127).

Through the exchange of fluids, Angela assumes a greater intimacy with Christ, allowing Him entrance to her ("he would cleanse me"). Jo experiences these intimacies upon waking to Carral's urine, sweat, and blood. What was inside Carral now extends to Jo, who, in reciprocation, allows herself to be punctured ("cleansed") by the other's excretion of their interiority (127).

Carral is the fungus, and it is Jo who rots and is cleansed: "So I lay there for a while as the pee soaked into my mattress…I continued to stroke Carral's body, first her cheek, puffy and wet, and then her hand. Then I was braver, stroking her naked back, letting my fingers walk her ribs like rungs on a ladder up to her throat" (Hval 2018, 97). Consider also the processes of fungal decay, wherein hyphae penetrate the decomposing body or the nutrient-lacking plant and deposit their fluid. Decay is the poetics of whateverbeing.

When Jo wakes to find Carral's urine soaking her clothes and dampening her skin, she appears indifferent, untroubled by what others might find unsettling or grotesque. Instead, this occurrence seems to draw Jo closer to Carral, as if her roommate's bedwetting is an extension of her own bodily fluids. For Hval (2018), decomposition holds the promise of potential being; it assimilates subjectivity to sustain a libidinal charge and generate more desire. Much like fungal hyphae, the lovers transcend the limits of their bodies, becoming anonymous and impersonal, dispersed between one another and throughout the brewery. Jo describes this entanglement: "Then there's a rush through me, her stalks and fingers and veins spread through my entire body like a new soft skeleton" (Hval 2018, 134).

These themes culminate in a dream Jo has near the end of the novel, just before she and Carral have sex for the first time. She dreams of two women whose bodies have morphed together, necks twisted around each other, faces obscured, and

identities inscrutable. The only thing that separates them is the cracks remaining from when they were singular, which are "covered in white mould fur, as if they shared a skin woven around them" (Hval 2018, 135).

Despite their mutations, the women are two and one. They exist separately and together—are both/and. As per Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), they embody 'being singular plural.' For Nancy (2000) this means that "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one another, circulating *in the with* and *as the with* of this singularly plural coexistence (3). The gap, the cracks stitched together in white mold, binds them in this eternal unfolding as self and other, so eternal that it becomes irrelevant to distinguish between what form one takes in whatever moment. The women could be anyone—they are generic, and their identities mean little to warrant their libidinal commingling. But the mold, the threadbare mycelial networks, the desire, is the irrevocable constant. One woman then says to the other:

> I'll tell you the fairy tale of the apple. Eve ate the apple, and then Adam came and did so too. Afterwards the apple was forgotten, and it was assumed that it rolled away in the grass while Adam and Eve were chased out of the garden. But that's not true, because secretly the apple rolled in between Eve's legs, scratched open her flesh and burrowed into her crotch. It stayed there with the white bite marks facing out, and after a while the fruit-flesh started to shrivel, and mould threads grew from the edges of the peel. The mould threads became pubic hair and the bite mark became the slit between the labia. Soon all of Eden followed the apple's example and started to decompose and rot, and since then this has happened in all gardens and everything in nature, and honey mushrooms came into existence, and rot and parasites and beetles arose. But the apple was first, and it never stops rotting, it just gets blacker. The apple has no end, just like this fairy tale (Hval 2018, 136).

In Hval's fairy tale, the eternally rotting apple of Eden is desire—the means by which a libidinal ecology unfurls (2018). This decay embodies an impersonal form of eroticism that, rather than destroying, transmutes the object of desire through continuous expenditure. Eve eats the apple and as such becomes entangled with its mold threads and decaying flesh—she puts her body in the food, her body becomes the food. Hval places desire as fundamentally unhuman and the beloved as generic—a body to imbue with life, a self to decompose; "a black, dead and rotten fruit" (Hval 2018, 140).

The Anonymous Network of the Beloved

Ultimately, a libidinal ecology is profoundly uninterested in qualities; instead, it desires sensuous beings. It wants to *feel*. It is a little hedonistic. In this context, the beloved is whatever, existing wherever and whenever. They are generic—universal, belonging to everyone and no one. Acephalic, they wear myriad prosthetic faces devoid of a fixed identity. They embody both mystic and mycelium, the Divine and the fruiting body. Rather than scattered in qualities across the globe, they are dispersed in form, an infinite potentiality of presence. The acknowledgment of their unknowability, their incommensurability, establishes a connection to the lover. They are entangled through the gulf between them, bound by the libido that manifests. The generic entices, holding the potential of the libidinal ecology in a digital world increasingly filled with commodified digital selves, estranged from their own libidos, perpetually gazing at their mirror image.

It appears evident that reverting to a pre-digitized self is unlikely. We will most likely never return to nature as a veritable garden of Eden (nor should we want to!) The Internet is here to stay; we will persist in dispersing ourselves across the wired globe and syncing to the cloud. But perhaps there is a being-in-potentia not yet explored in this digital landscape. One more attuned to a symbiosis with the natural world rather than an estrangement. Perhaps we might look toward nonhuman ways of connecting while scattered in all directions, throughout time, non-localized lovers, whateverbeings.

Sheldrake explains that "a mycelial network has no head and no brain" (2020, 86). Fungi are decentralized, and control is dispersed. Because mycelial coordination takes place "everywhere at once and nowhere in particular," mycelium fragments can break off and generate novel networks. This means that in fungal erotics, the beloved is constantly reassembling itself and is "potentially immortal." (Sheldrake 2020, 86).

The mycelial network has often been metaphorically likened to the Internet, humorously called the "Wood Wide Web." However, this comparison is frequently confined to the conceptual realm and lacks tangible substance. While the digital is commonly perceived as existing in the ethereal "cyberspace," the Internet has a

physical infrastructure. It comprises interconnected submarine fiber optic cables spanning the globe, satellites in low-earth orbit, and various hardware components such as routers and modems.

In short, the Internet forms a physical and virtual structure upon the planet, and the digital realm is only one aspect of a very physical, tangible entity intimately connected to the natural world. Only our libido has for so long been co-opted by the seductive virtuality of an alternate world of risk and exceptionalism that rewards our narcissism. As such, we have forgotten how cosmically entangled the digital is with the planet. Indeed, that technology is an extension of an already-present planetary sensuality that communicates with us, senses us, feels us, and *desires* us—no matter who or what we are. We need only pay attention to the planet's libidinal pulse, reorient our senses to its unhuman desire, and submit to the seduction of the generic beloved.

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