

Revolutionary possibilities of love in a time of disaster, decolonisation, and diffraction

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Abstract

Representations of love appear across many disciplines and discursive fields that are and should be in conversation with geography. It is imperative that geographers engage in formidable but worthy tasks to distil diverse renderings of love into the regenerative interventions we urgently need. Those interventions require geographically minded interpretations of love to drive radical research, pedagogies, policies, and practices in ways that have direct and indirect effects across the life course and life worlds. Such labours are mediated by state and law, by intersectional relations, or by neuroscience, and involve asking how love underwrites critical infrastructures—of place (making), care and entanglements, colonialism, and human-nature relations in the Anthropocene and posthuman—that lead to the flourishing futures we seek. Rich geographical studies oriented to those tasks still face charges of flattening difference. This commentary picks up one aspect of this agenda: a blind spot in geographical research relating to the ethical imperative to love based on benevolence. Instead, I champion the revolutionary possibilities for geography to inform policies, pedagogies, and practices by using a love based on alterity aligned with social weight, reasserting accessible science as an effective driver of social and system transformative changes. Specifically, I argue for a regenerative socio-political analytic of love in a time of disaster, decolonisation, and diffraction.

KEYWORDS

alterity, decolonisation, diffraction, disaster, ethics, love

1 | INTRODUCTION

Here, at the edge of extinction, is the place to begin, when the worlds that one loves—including angiosperms and flying foxes—are being trashed.

(Rose, 2017, p. 52)

I really think that the aftermath of this pandemic isn't going to be long COVID, and it isn't going to be you know respiratory cripples [sic]. It's going to be deeply wounded people with grief that they have nowhere to grow into

(P024 Clinician). (Collier et al., 2023, p. 5)

This commentary began in solidarity with those who despair as we witness 'the worlds that we love... being trashed' (Rose, 2017, p. 52). Even as we grieve, we yearn hopefully for the worlds we love and we toil to reorient to still-possible worlds (Bulkeley et al., 2018; Osborne, 2019; Roelvink et al., 2015). Nevertheless, we are "deeply-wounded" and "disenfranchised" from our grief by "bad deaths" (Collier et al., 2023) and cascading and disparate losses that now characterise multiple slow emergencies (Grove et al., 2022). Such systemic structural violence arises as we are "untethered" by "elemental forces" amplified by climate change. Our taken-for-granted air, water, and earth come to life in "apocalyptic" and "uncanny and improbable events" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 2; O'Malley, 2022) in ways that test our

relationships and resolve, and our very existence. So, this commentary begins at the fraught edges of extinction, where entangled wicked problems need collective and systemic responses (Hartmann, 2012; Rittel & Webber, 1973). These are responses that require social relevance and regenerative capacities for (more-than)-human flourishing. Geographers must trailblaze such responsibilities to science, society, and eight billion of our closest friends and neighbours.

Fortunately, we are seeing more exceptional, even viral, “science communication collaboration in the era of COVID-19 and the social media” that galvanise global priority actions—that “flatten the curve” (Wiles et al., 2023)—in ways that save lives and societal systems. Too often, however, public narratives sensationalise events (Hanusch, 2013) in personal rather than systemic terms; pathologise (narratives of) conflict, death, distress, and loss (Lucas, 2022); and reinforce a constant return to normal. Remedy and repair narratives calibrated to insurance, electioneering, and provocation lovelessly boost individual and local responsibilities for resilience and recovery (Eriksen & de Vet, 2021; Lucas, 2022). Moreover, research “fatigue in COVID-19 pandemic and post-disaster research can exacerbate the enduring harms including ‘bad deaths’ and the displacing and disadvantaging of communities and people with ‘grief that ... [has] nowhere to grow into’” (Collier et al., 2023, p. 5). In their “misguided search for the political” (in theory and practice), media, policy, and scholarly responses become increasingly fractured, disconnected from “real” politics, and socially weightless from relying on “troubling abstractions ... [that] throw into question [any] ... supposed emancipatory potential” (McNay, 2014, n.p.).

Geographers must continue to shape agendas that better communicate and give effect to the systemic changes made thinkable when COVID-19 gave us a powerful opportunity to pause, reflect, and pivot. We must be active agents and allies in the progressive “movements ... currently proposing changes that support more equitable ways of living, being, schooling, and working—some of which may ultimately save the planet, and all of which have a bearing on education,” government interventions, and our social and societal practices (Brown, 2021, p. 1). So here, I want gently to take up the gauntlet to fine-tune geographical efforts into meaningful pedagogy, policy, and practices by drawing on the revolutionary possibilities of love. Indeed, I hope this work is read as a clarion call for a more transformational reckoning of love for all in the time of disaster, decolonisation, and diffraction.

2 | WITNESSING LOVE PLAIN AND SIMPLE IN AND BEYOND THE MEDIA

The first revolutionary possibility is plain and simple, literally. Love is what love does (after hooks, 2000).

I follow Morrison et al. (2013a, p. 508) who, rather “than defining love ... think it is more productive to ask, ‘What does the language of love do and how does power circulate in the name of love?’.” Acknowledging that geographers love what they do invites us, first, to extend our reckoning of love to how we design and communicate our efforts for more effective science and societal changes and, second, to be open to capturing and leading multi-media communication about love at the heart of our discipline and communities. In witnessing every day and extraordinary moments, geographers need to translate our disciplinary power, undertaken with love, to be understandable to a reasonable person, especially when we want them (and ourselves) to know, engage, or act differently individually or collectively. So, we must be alert to the challenging weight of love—from recognisable experience and multiple registers of expressing love—in our scientific discourse and methodological approaches, explored below.

Equally, geographers must attune to vernacular and varied languages of love that might easily be missed or overwhelmed in the cacophony of public media. Indeed, the trigger for this commentary’s focus on witnessing love was hearing a media moment centred on love. It was epitomised as a hug and a toothbrush for a shell-shocked evacuee in Flaxmere in the devastating wake of the 2023 Cyclone Gabrielle across New Zealand.

They arrived with nothing and nowhere to go, and [the] Morgans said they found open arms. All I wanted to do was brush my teeth. I know it sounds silly. Well, the next thing, this lovely person leans over me, gives me a big hug and hands me a toothbrush.

(Brunton & Crimp, 2023)

Anchored on the heartbreaking social weightiness of the power and language of love, this narrative drew on a four-minute report about the devastation and a time when “thousands [were] displaced and whanau [family were] ... struggling to connect with loved ones as power, internet, and cell phone service [were] still patchy for many” (Brunton & Crimp, 2023). The encounter over a toothbrush, then, celebrates simplicity, meaning, and light-heartedness and invites people to publicly deliberate about love for regenerative ends, thereby giving registers of love their due social weight. That such weight was rendered in plain English is, I think, telling.

Guidance on and techniques for plain language and reduced complexity in public communication are expected—even legally required (see Australian Government Office of Parliamentary Counsel *Plain Language*, 2023, and the New Zealand Public Service

Commission *Plain Language Act 2022 Guidance for Agencies*, 2022). Meanwhile, a meta-study on plain languages (Dreher, 2020) shows how (often-insider) complexity characterises technical communication, inhibits comprehension between scholars and practitioners, and points to how plain language is socially just and ethical even within the mean discourses of capitalism (see also Dreher, 2017, 2020; Ettliger, 2009).

From such foundations, we may meaningfully engage in post-capitalist agendas, such as those modelled in the *Manifesto for the Anthropocene* (Gibson et al., 2015). We could consider generative AI implications enlightened by Haraway's (1991) cyborg manifesto. Assuredly, the capacities and ethical considerations for generative AI and accessibility give us another lens to revisit the worlds we love at the edge of extinction. Yet, technological salvation is blinding us to love as comprising phenomena, an orientation, and a responsibility for our needed regenerative enlightenment; where we could contemplate multispecies kinning (Houston et al., 2018). Indeed, we may, perhaps, epitomise love as:

shimmering [an indigenous Australian concept that incorporates] a sensorial richness, as beauty and grandeur, as constantly in flux, moving between past, future and back again ... In order to disrupt anthropocentrism and present a moral wake-up call that glows from dull to brilliance in these precarious times, we bring to environmental education the potential of holding the shimmering past tracings of theory along with us on our journeys.

(Malone et al., 2020, p. 129)

In plain English, then, we need to bring diverse audiences on a challenging transformative journey and support moves from that passive status of audience-member to co-creator to remember the broken and forgotten kin connections between us. Seeking progress towards a regenerative agenda tempts more direct moves to action.

One way forward is via humble expertise—in classrooms, courtrooms, parliamentary cabinet rooms, or research workshops—that allows for testimonies of grief through which healing and reparative pathways become known and navigable. Simply, embracing love and humility means that our geographic research should meet the “reasonable person” test in three ways. First, we should convey the public value of independent philosophical and pragmatic inquiry into love to the community: in terms of “taxpayers’ money” (Cosic, 2013) and the wider public interest (Foryth, 2018). Second, we should demonstrate how we “take seriously the views of ‘real people’—in all their wondrous diversity,” knowing that a “growing amount of humanities and social science research is

grounded in deep engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, worker organisations, lobby groups, industries and educational bodies” (Foryth, 2018, n.p.). Third, we should involve multimedia translations of ethical integrity into radical pedagogy, policy, and practices (following Freire, 1996) from our emerging geographic legacies and momentums (see Banfield et al., 2022; Harrison, 2022; Stratford, 2023). Furthermore, the revolutionary possibilities that adhere to love and humility mean rethinking the public interest (Grant, 2005) in ways that move the “reasonable person” test out of the “pub” (Foryth, 2018) into socio-ecological communities in place and need.

3 | LOVE IN AND BEYOND THE CUTTING EDGE OF GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Another revolutionary possibility of love is methodological. We must mobilise geography to champion ways of growing into and beyond our grief as we witness, share, and explore love in smaller and larger moments; moments that offer us regenerative possibilities to heal from traumatic and enduring harms and move towards (more-than-)human states of flourishing. Such pursuits require geographers of all stripes to map, measure, facilitate, and collaborate on the radical pedagogies, policies, and practices that ethically reorient love in regenerative ways of being/becoming, (un)settling, and reconciling our places.

Geography shares with allied disciplines such as planning the responsibility of our work being an “always unfinished social project whose task is managing our coexistence in the shared spaces of cities and neighborhoods in such a way as to enrich [non-human and] human life and to work for social, cultural, and environmental justice” (Sandercock, 2004, p. 134) and from “Seeking the value of loving attachment in planning research” (Porter et al., 2012, pp. 594–598). So, geographers, already skilled in transdisciplinarity and co-learning, must now avoid misguided (socially weightless) searches for the political (McNay, 2014) as we mine and deconstruct representations of love in diverse disciplines and discursive fields.

From a prolific geographical scholarship on love, I offer two contemporary acupuncture points focusing on love as a critical lens in contemporary geography. In doing so, I acknowledge the influence of Yi-fu Tuan (1974) and Hong-key Yoon (1991), whose works on love relate to environment and place in material and profane worlds (as distinguished, for example, in Knight, 2009). The first acupuncture point I note relates to heightened exchanges on geographical love during the early 1990s “when Hay (1991, 1992), Bell (1992, 1994) and Robinson (1994) engaged in a heated discussion about

heteronormativity” (Morrison et al., 2013a, p. 508). I point the reader to a 2013 geographical scholarly review by Morrison et al. (2013a) that maps love’s diverse ambitious, partial, or contradictory traces and guises before broadening critical geographies about love. Both that and other examples of their work respond to a “lack of public discussion” with a “conceptualization of love as something that is spatial, relational and political” because it “is timely ... for love to be taken seriously as a valid and crucial subject, especially by feminist, cultural and social geographers who are invested in understanding discourses of the Other” (Morrison et al., 2013b, p. 506). When Inwood (2013) problematises their flattening of the “Other,” Morrison et al. (2013b, p. 724) riposte that critiquing “oppositional categories such as Self/Other (also love/hate, universal/particular) may do more to prompt critical understandings of love as spatial, relational and political rather than simply throwing out the term ‘Other.’” I have held onto this kernel as I have looked more widely than geographical research (and return to flattening in the third revolutionary possibility of love below).

The second acupuncture point relates to efforts to drill into the methodological implications of critical approaches to language and power “in the name of love” afforded by Morrison et al. (2013a, p. 508, b). Here, we might take up the timely intersection of love with storytelling offered in recent *Geographical Research* scholarship that questions the “narratives of doom, hope, and crisis” (McManus, 2023, p. 5) and with moves towards more “desire-based research frameworks that foreground the intelligence, aspiration, and personalities of participants, a more complete spectrum of people and their lives” (Sou, 2023, p. 10). Where McManus’s (2023, p. 5) commentary invites us “to engage with those stories ... we tell and live by ... as part of the process of learning to live with climate,” Sou’s (2023, p. 10) Wiley Lecture uses comics to “construct embodied, situated, and desire-centred narratives that spotlight the voices, identities, and hidden everyday personal experiences of research participants.” Equally instructive is Lucas’s (2022, p. 371) work “recognising and representing [how] the messiness and plurality of attitudes to climate change could generate more useful forms of friction, shifting from antagonistic to agonistic and productive discourse.” Here love is regenerative by troubling our “loving attachments” and our tamed ethics of love (Kondo in Porter et al., 2012, pp. 603–605).

Another methodological example troubling notions of taming love and broader emotions uses Barad’s diffractive methodologies as modelled by Aslanian (2018, p. 173): their research integrates how new “neuroscientific research reveals the pivotal role love and touch play in children’s development,” which may stir corresponding interest among geographers in early childhood education. Specifically, Aslanian (2018, pp. 173–174):

engages a diffractive analysis and transforms educators’ solicited narratives of love in pedagogic practice into love poems. The poems attend to the overflowing quality of love as an uncertain, ephemeral phenomenon, invoking moments of pleasure and the desire to connect with children as personal matters, rather than solely professional concerns.

Geographers can learn from this methodological and professional reckoning in “research that explores these complexities while avoiding the hysteria” invoked by moral panics about early childhood learning and teaching that manifest as misguided, harmful, or fear-based policies (Aslanian, 2018, p. 173).

So, I extend my case for exploring the revolutionary possibilities of love into our time of great upheaval while grappling with already-violent histories and confronting legacies. In a Kantian sense, any regenerative enlightenment based on love offers an exit from our self-imposed immaturity and a way to love in a multi-species world needing justice, kindness, and repair. This way leads us to the heaviest revolutionary possibility of love where we reach beyond geography to draw back in—like a hug and a toothbrush amid trauma and troubled times—to forge our reparative and reconciliatory pathways forward.

4 | LOVE AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN BENEVOLENCE

Today, I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its imperfections, its perversions.

(Fanon, 1968, p. 42)

Colonial feminism’s historical relationship to the violence of such bewildering benevolence sends up red flares for the contemporary theorist considering a resuscitation of love in the framework of a feminist politics—such brilliant flares. They must illuminate.

(Davis, 2002, p. 148)

The third revolutionary possibility of love for geography emphasises how rethinking the metaphysics and ethical obligations of love offers emancipatory potential towards decolonisation and posthumanism via radical pedagogies, policies, and practices. Pursuing this opportunity reveals that geography has a blind spot with respect to love. The weakness appears at a critical nexus of work drawn from the many disciplines and discursive fields that are and should be in conversation with the already-broad church of Geography: spanning media, poetry, posthumanities, early

childhood education, anthropology, political, feminist, and Indigenous philosophies, English, and political ecology, to name but a few. Faced with such scholarship, it is appealing to think that love defies single theoretical, pragmatic, and personal definitions and, thereby, exposes an essential wildness: “Love grows wild—it becomes in relations on its own irreducible terms. Like a dandelion, despite our best intentions to shape and mould the landscape, it grows up ‘between the cracks’” (Aslanian, 2018, p. 182).

However, here I offer a third acupuncture point—differentiated from earlier concerns about flattening the other—a perversion of love found in the vestigial violences of benevolence implicit within metaphysical ethics and legacies of love.

5 | WHERE NEXT?

Purposely, I am triangulating three intersecting reference studies from philosophy that fundamentally trouble love: Native American (Pack, 2021), feminist (Davis, 2002, p. 148), and political (Arendt, 1958; Roodt, 2001).

First, Pack (2021, p. 277) has made a compelling case for reading Native American philosophy alongside Arendt to enrich our understanding of historical Western alienation—to grow into our grief—by realising what is lost and forgotten, and by finding ways to remember, heal, and co-exist.

Second, Davis (2002, p.148) has shown how “historical associations between knowledge and discourses of love ... were conditioned by imperialist brands of humanism and benevolence under colonialism,” wherein love is based on *benevolence*. Love failed when the “civilizing-Christianizing mission of colonization, drawing on the ethical epistemological schemas of the Enlightenment, asserted a benevolent function, and Christian ideologies of love formed a supportive partnership with knowledge procedures imposed upon the colonized” (Davis, 2002, p. 147). I am cautiously avoiding joining feminists who “have tended to seize love, in the form of passionate care and responsibility, and hold it aloft as emblematic of the revolutionary cause” (Davis, 2002, pp. 147–148). However, I am suggesting that recognition and reparative work are needed to grow through grief, and concur with Davis (2002, p. 146):

that love aligned with benevolence cannot be saved from reason and histories of domination ... the revolutionary possibility of love requires identifying and deconstructing historical alliances between love and reason and between benevolence and imperialism; otherwise, we collaborate with a violent legacy.

An alternative, Davis has argued, is deconstructing love relative to knowledge in order to break the foundational connection with benevolence in favour of an ethics of *alterity*:

a ‘poststructuralist concept of difference’ [that] contradicts universality, challenging the fundamental democratic principle presumed by humanist ethics. ... a useful concept for transnational feminist practices that must take women’s radically different global locations and subject positions—including complex relations to power—into account. (p.148)

This framing of alterity as a situated and relational ethics deepens the social weight of concerns about flattening the other and extends to reckoning posthumanities decolonisation in ways that can mutually enrich the critical geographies of love.

On that basis, I consider the diffractive dislocation that undermines core geographic spatial imaginaries, following Arendt, Nietzsche, and Roodt (2001, p. 319) in “rethinking history and praxis beyond the confines of subjectivity or teleology for the love of the world that lies between us” and possibilities of love getting us past grief into still-possible flourishing futures.

This third revolutionary possibility brings forth three pragmatic considerations relevant to mapping geographical research with radical pedagogies of love.

The first consideration relates to undoing the “colonisation of the mind” in our place-making (Warne, 2020, p. 74). Here, for example, we can learn from “Revealing story and healing rifts: the potential of post-colonial placemaking in the Kulin nations lands of Australia” (Novacevski, 2023, p. 1), findings in which “illustrate how practice grounded in reciprocity, revealing story and fostering connectedness open portals to placemaking as a post-colonial practice of care and emergent possibility.”

The second consideration is about how Indigenous researchers and policy-centred examples help build up (knowledge of) social organisation and collaborations in hope of socio-ecological transformations we need (see, for example, Barkin & Sánchez, 2019). Tipa et al. (2009, p. 98) illuminate and extend the earlier imperative of ‘responsibility’ advocated by McClean et al. (1997) in asserting that:

a focus on responsibility is needed—a responsibility that embraces attention to appropriate spaces and rituals, and negotiations and ‘border crossings’ regarding knowledge production, cultures and research output. They close by advocating a form of aroha [love]: ‘an untranslatable notion that entwines ideas of love, care,

responsibility and preparedness to be accountable in a form of unity that does not force sameness.’

Likewise, Tipa et al. (2009, p. 98) have lamented the paucity of examples; they advocate for responsible geographies that “provide comprehensive accounts of [research collaboration] epistemologies and political navigations” and showcase, inter alia, how aroha plays a critical role.

The third consideration concerns a “learn, do, learn” praxis (Walker, 2019) at the scholarship-policy interface. Here I offer the centring of aroha (love in te reo Māori) in the principles and values of award-winning place-making project by Eke Panuku in redeveloping Auckland’s Wynard Quarter (see the powerful graphic in this link). This regenerative ethic of love exemplifies the pragmatic and healing possibilities on which I will end—with an invitation that others take up these recalibrations and to provide the everyday stories, the reflective practices, and the learning, doing, and learning of love we need to draw us back from the edge of extinction.

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