Thank You [slide 1]

Thank you, everyone, for being here. We're all still learning to navigate what it means to work and live at a university during a pandemic, so I appreciate the risks and precautions you're taking today to attend this talk. My thanks, also, to those watching the recording of this presentation. I hope you feel free to participate as much – or as little – as you'd like. I have a publicly listed email address and welcome all comments and critical feedback that anybody may want to share – whether later this week, month, year, or whenever you can get to it. Thanks are, lastly, due to Dr. Darlene Farabee for inviting me to join the FA2021 colloquium series and to introduce you, this afternoon, to my next research project.

Before **[slide 2]** I begin, I encourage you to use your phone or tablet or laptop to go to the following website in order to download a useful handout, which includes some of the larger quotations I'll be looking at today as well as other goodies. [If you don't have a device that can access the internet easily, don't worry! All of the longer passages will appear on PowerPoint slides. I hope you can download the handout later.]

Today's lecture is *not* an excerpt from my next book or the draft of a chapter. I'm still too early in the research and writing process for that. So in lieu of a presentable or partial chapter draft, I offer, instead, a model of how I read, a sense of how I conceptualize my research topic, and an elaboration of the four problems I'm currently investigating.

After **[slide 3]** a dedication and an epigraph, I'll begin the main body of the talk, which will first address what I call the "conceptual function" that love plays in literature and literary studies, then demonstrate love's "slidey-ness" (as a good friend of mine might put it), and finally elaborate four "love problems" that recur across a number of fields in and adjacent to literary studies.

Dedication [slide 4]

I want to dedicate my presentation – and really all the time and energy that I put into my next book – to my dad, who died this past June after only eighteen days under home hospice care. I'm still reeling from and dealing with this loss, but I'm learning to say, "Thank you," to him, at least most days, for his kindness,

care, and pride in Kris and Apryl (my brother and sister) and me. We are lucky to have had been his children. We miss him, and I wish he could be here. If you're watching, "Hi, Mom. Love you."

Epigraph [slide 5]

These sentences from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1993 essay collection *Tendencies* have been an encouragement and a foundation for my research and teaching for a long time and so seem like an appropriate epigraph:

> I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects; in fact, it's almost hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it. (Sedgwick 3)

[slide 6] Part 1: Love's "Conceptual Function"

It's still hard to believe that my book on Woolf and Lawrence is over a year behind me—it's been almost two years, in fact, since I submitted the full manuscript to Clemson University Press. After three years of start-and-stop research and writing in Rhode Island (after I finished my Ph.D.) and four more years of intense research and writing in South Dakota (after joining the English faculty at USD), I feel the double awkwardness of leaving a major preoccupation behind me to begin a "next thing," something new yet not all that new, as I'll explain at the beginning of Part 2. A triple awkwardness, perhaps, since the focus of my next book may make some people blush, cringe, roll their eyes, sigh, tilt their head, tune out, or forget to breathe.

Unlike *The Sensuous Pedagogies of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence*, my current research is not dedicated to any single author or set of authors but to an emotion, relation, force, form, situation, or experience that we sometimes call LOVE

(though what we talk about when we talk about "love" often goes by other names: e.g., intimacy, ardor, passion, heartbreak, and kinship). More specifically, I'm interested in studying love's "conceptual function" in literature and in the field of literary studies: the kind of *thinking*, that is, that love helps along in novels and poems but also in works of criticism, philosophy, theory, and history. I use the clumsy, potentially unattractive phrase "conceptual function" in order to mark a difference between the kind of analysis I am pursuing and what we might otherwise call a study of "literary themes."

What do I mean by this difference between "literary theme" and "conceptual function"? Let's look at an example: Derek Walcott's 1976 poem, "Love after Love" **[slide 7]**:

Love after Love

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love-letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life. (Walcott 328)

If a theme is something like a lesson or observation about life, human beings, or society that drives a plot or gives purpose to a poem or song (something like "love conquers all," to borrow a cliché), then we could say that the theme of Walcott's poem, which connects its situation to some sort of general or relatable concern, boils down to something like self-care in the aftermath of a breakup or, getting even more general, the value of self-love – its capacity to counteract or comfort the suffering that comes with loss. There's certainly enough evidence to write a passable Introduction to Literature essay in support of a theme like this.

But there's also more to see, more to say, more to worry about, and more to ask here: what does the appeal to love in Walcott's widely anthologized poem accomplish? What does it do? These questions encourage a "close reading" of Walcott's poem that attends to the odds and ends – the component parts – immanent to the speaker's invocation of love. I won't fully develop this close reading, but I do want to suggest some of the things that Walcott uses love to think about – all the while thinking, too, about love.

First **[slide 8]**: love and time. The poem's temporality is strange. The speaker imagines a future that may, indeed, have arrived by the final **[slide 9]** line, a line which repeats what the speaker envisions the auditor's double ("your self . . . in your own mirror") "will . . . say." The "after" **[slide 10]** in the title also implies a "before" that may also be *the present* occasion of the speaker's vision. The references to "love-letters" **[slide 11]**, "photographs," and "notes" – synecdoches of "your life" [parts standing in for a whole] – may refer to other loves *before* the love about to be lost, the love about to be supplanted by the returning "love [of] the stranger who was" – and is? and will be? – "yourself."

Second **[slide 12]**, though the poem is short and seems to have a narrow relational focus, it hosts a number of relationships: the relationship between, for instance,

1. **[slide 13]** the speaker and the auditor ("you");
2. **[slide 14]** between "you" and "another";
3. **[slide 15]** between "you" and "yourself"/"your self" (the "stranger"; found in the "mirror");

4. **[slide 16]** between "you" and "your life"
5. **[slide 17]** between "you" and the items on the bookshelf (items recalling, perhaps, a web of other relations);
6. **[slide 18]** between "you" and "your heart" (which also seems to enter into relation with itself: heart-to-heart);

These relationships aren't necessarily distinct; some bleed into each other; they have blurred edges. It's possible to read the poem's use of "you" **[slide 19]**, after all, as an instance of self-address, as an "I" that is, in a way, a third "you" or, even, the future "your self" waiting to greet the "you" when they step through their "own door." There's also a question we might ask about our own involvement in – our place in the relational matrix of – the poem, how the invocation of love activates our own befores/afters, our own door and mirror, our own notes and letters and bookshelves, our own heart. Walcott's is a poem that may prompt us to wonder about the closeness of close reading – the possible form of love we can engage in when involved in reading poetry slowly.

Third (and last): what will "you" be eating **[slide 20]**? Is the "feast[ing]" the speaker imagines/invites a kind of surveying, a reflecting, a reading of the items on the bookshelf? Is feasting on life a metaphor for recollection? And, if so, what do we make of the oxymoronic blend of consumption and reminiscence? Destruction and nourishment? Self-love and self-digestion/-mastication? The invitation in the poem is incredibly gentle, and yet there's something a bit unsettling about it.

Though not the scenario Walcott had in mind, I imagine, Dad's death did occasion the kind of photographic feast **[slide 21]** with which the poem closes – hours spent looking through old albums and prints, the selection of photos for bulletin boards to be displayed at his funeral, the conversations and questions about Dad's life (and our family's life) with Mom, my sister, my brother, and others. The recollection of this recent experience tempts me to wind back thru the poem with a very different sense of love and loss in mind – a bleaker sense of before/after but also a renewed hope that the theme of self-care is true, that feasting on my life (or my dad's) might occasion self-healing if I just read "Love after Love" **[slide 22]** one more time.

I hope you can see a little bit of what I mean by love's "conceptual function," how it acts as an aid to Walcott's thinking. Love is, at once, *what* the poem is about *and* a capacious imaginative space for cutting across times, for holding out (ambivalent?) hope for comfort and nourishment, for arranging complex relational and recursive geometries, for holding together pleasure and pain, for positing a kind of *coherence* in the face of imminent or actual loss (even if that coherence constitutes a myth). I hope you also understand a bit of what I mean when I say that my book will not be in the business of thematics.

Part 2: Love's Slidey-ness [slide 23]

Twelve years ago I was reading D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) as part of my prep for an upcoming Ph.D. comprehensive exam when it occurred to me that I could – and that I really wanted to – write a chapter about love in my dissertation project. Most surprisingly, I wanted to write it on Lawrence's fiction. (I say "surprisingly" because I had found his writing really boring, unbearable really, when I was an undergraduate.) The excitement that accompanied this realization is comic in hindsight – since I had no idea what I would analyze or argue, hypothesize or conclude, no idea how hard it is to write about something as ubiquitous yet mysterious as "love" – but, nonetheless, the insight was, like the book I'm trying to write over a decade later, not interested in establishing an ontology or a definition of love (what love really *is*) but drawn, instead, to what Lawrence's novel does with love, to what its attention to and repeated invocation of this emotion and the relations it manages to corral across three generations accomplishs conceptually. I wanted to learn how love has helped along this writer's thinking.

One drawback to this approach to finding and studying love is the potential frustration that my interlocutors may feel should they be looking to me for conceptual clarity or for a normative position about how we *ought* to be loving or what love *at its best* is.

As a peer reviewer of my work recently wrote, love is "a daunting topic that presents numerous pitfalls to the critic" [email]. Though it is one of the most repeated, recognizable themes/tropes in the stories and other media we consume and produce, part of its persistent allure seems to be the way it can mark or

signal or indicate or relate value: what matters to us, preoccupies us, sustains us; what hurts us most when lost, separated, or inexorably alerted or changed. Perhaps more than any other emotion – if love *is* an emotion – when we try to frame or focus on love, we seem to get ourselves into the study of a paradox: something both transparent and mysterious, mundane and valuably rare.

We see this problem recur in different ways in the work of philosophers when they rhetorically situate their own interventions in the history of philosophies or theories of love. Irving Singer **[slide 24]**, for instance, sets up a distinction between *idealist* and *realist* conceptions of love while, more recently, Carrie Jenkins tries to square the circle of love as a social construct and a biological fact of human being or evolution. These distinctions – idealist/realist, social/biological – might not, at first blush, seem related to each other, but they do convey a disciplinary will-to-define or -determine that feels quite alien to me. I say "disciplinary" to mark a potential difference between a **[slide 25]** *literary* study of love and a *philosophical* one, a difference that could very well encompass different attitudes, methods, purposes, goals, and relationships to words, feelings, histories, and sociocultural contingencies.

Some studies of love approach love's habit (or I should say *our* habit) of sliding back and forth between the poles of the dualisms I've inventoried here as a problem in need of solution or a circle in need of squaring. Whether the motive to define love is epistemological, ontological, or even political (as we will see shortly), my habits of thought are – for better or worse – too bound up with "relativism" to take up such pursuits for myself. I don't try to avoid – don't *want* to avoid but to accept and affirm – what a friend of mind might call the "slidey-ness" **[slide 26]** of love. Whatever love is, it is nothing if not situationally variable and relative; instead of trying to decide whether we should be an *idealist* or a *realist* (or both) when it comes to love or think of it as a social construct or a biological fact (or both), it seems to me that the literary itself refuses to decide. More than that, one kind of conceptual work that appeals-to-love make possible is the bringing together *of* mutually exclusive categories. Claiming a structural similarity between love and metaphor, Anne Carson describes "a change or shift of distance" "in the mind" that "bring[s] two heterogeneous things close" in

order "to reveal their kinship"; ". . . to hold in equipoise two perspectives at once" (73).

Even Lawrence, who is often taken to be something of an exasperating idealist, a "priest of love" as biographer Harry T. Moore puts it, is drawn to love as if it were an access point to metaphysical speculation *and* to the concrete, and often comic, mechanics of human behavior. Let's look back to two passages from *The Rainbow* **[slide 27]**. For context, these passages are set the day after a wedding and situate us in the bedroom of the newly weds:

> Inside the room was a great steadiness, a core of living eternity. Only far outside, at the rim, went on the noise and the distraction. Here at the centre the great wheel was motionless, centred upon itself. Here was a poised, unflawed stillness that was beyond time, because it remained the same, inexhaustible, unchanging, unexhausted.
>
> **[slide 28]** As they lay close together, complete and beyond the touch of time or change, it was as if they were at the very centre of all the slow wheeling of space and the rapid agitation of life, deep, deep inside them all, at the centre where there is utter radiance, and eternal being, and the silence absorbed in praise: the steady core of all movements, the unawakened sleep of all wakefulness. They found themselves there, and they lay still, in each other's arms; for their moment they were at the heart of eternity, whilst time roared far off, forever far off, towards the rim. (135)

The passage clearly, and a bit annoyingly (though, to me, somewhat deliciously), indulges in a sort of amplified, universalistic, metaphysical sense of intimacy, marriage, and love. We may also imagine a savvy literary critic asking what kind of social norms or ideologies this description supports yet obscures, what kind of social construct it participates in naturalizing as a true or inevitable picture of love.

But then, just half a page later **[slide 29]**, the *real* and *biological* interrupt this idealistic amplification of the morning after:

. . . then, quite calmly, even a little surprised, she was in the present, and was saying: "I am dying with hunger."

"So am I," he said calmly, as if it were of not the slightest significance. And they relapsed into the warm, golden stillness. And the minutes flowed unheeded past the window outside.

Then suddenly she stirred against him.

"My dear, I am dying of hunger," she said.

It was a slight pain to him to be brought to.

"We'll get up," he said, unmoving.

And she sank her head on to him again, and they lay still, lapsing. Half consciously, he heard the clock chime the hour. She did not hear.

[slide 30] "Do get up," she murmured at length, "and give me something to eat."

"Yes," he said, and he put his arms round her, and she lay with her face on him. They were faintly astonished that they did not move. The minutes rustled louder at the window.

"Let me go then," he said.

She lifted her head from him, relinquishingly. With a little breaking away, he moved out of bed, and was taking his clothes. She stretched out her hand to him.

"You are so nice," she said, and he went back for a moment or two. (135–36)

In the interest of time, I won't develop a "close reading" of these passages to the same extent that I did with Walcott's poem. All I will say is that the literary – as a process or quality of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls "the singular and unverifiable" (393) – has a tendency to betray stable definitions of the *is* and normative claims about the *ought*. Thus, Lawrence's representations of love tend to slide between the ideal and real, the social and the corporeal.

[slide 31] Two last things before we move on to the final portion of this lecture: first, my relativism and my embrace of love's conceptual slidey-ness are also motivated by its relational, emotional, and ethical capaciousness that breaks

us out of the dualistic swings I've been describing. The love that literature and literary studies have been talking around/about for a long time touches, sustains, and disrupts a range of relations – not just romantic ones – that inflect, shape, pressure, and slide into and next to each another. The love between romantic partners is no more "loving," it seems to me, than the love between parents and children, readers and books, pets and pet-owners, siblings, cousins, strangers, friends, dreamers and dreams, etc. This relativistic sense of love's slidey-ness also acknowledges that this emotion (again, if it is an emotion) combines with and amplifies or softens a range of affects: from anger and joy to hatred, shame, interest, disgust, competitiveness, generosity, cruelty, and more. It can also motivate a range of ethical, ethically indifferent, and ethically compromised behaviors, causes, or beliefs. In short, then, love's slidey-ness is not just about an oscillation between the universal and the real or between the social and the biological but also a more multiplicitous roving among many relations that enters into combination with many other emotions and that entails varied ethical or unethical orientations.

Second, if you want definitions, you will find lots of them on the handout I noted at the beginning of the talk. (**[slide 32]** Here's the link again.) I encourage you to scroll and skim through those definitions to see resonances among some of them but also the stark incommensurability among others. If you see definitions you'd like to talk more about, I'm always game.

Part 3: Love Problems [slide 33]

My lecture thus far has really been an introduction to how I think about love and not really a description of *what* my next book will actually cover. In this final section, then, I'd like to turn to the specific love problems I'm studying.

My project follows a method that I like to call "reading cross-wise" or "promiscuously." Though I have my own habits of study and aesthetic and critical preferences, *Finding Love* tries to learn from a wide **[slide 34]** range of texts across traditional literary periods and across theoretical paradigms, drawing on modernist studies, Victorian studies, early modern studies, studies in contemporary literature, feminism, psychoanalysis, formalism, black studies, queer studies, philosophy of emotion, postcritique, metaphysics, political

philosophy, aesthetics, poetics, and Pauline theology. This method of study isn't quite what Tressie McMillan Cottom means when she posits that **[slide 35]** you have to "Sleep Around Before You Marry an Argument," but I appreciate her association of research with a *reading around*, an association we also find in Melissa Sanchez's **[slide 36]** recent study of "queer faith" in early modern literature and theology. In her coda to that study, she writes, "Having initially been so doubtful myself, it is odd to be in the position of trying to persuade readers from a range of fields—queer theorists, critical race scholars, early modern critics, and theologians—that my promiscuous readings across time and tradition might be productive or pleasurable" (251).

In its own "promiscuous readings across time and tradition," *Finding Love* will try to articulate four problems that repeat their difference across disciplinary and historical boundaries. These problems **[slide 37]** are:

1. love's greatness
2. love's prepositions
3. love's genres
4. love's politics

In focusing on these problems, I suggest that one way to understand love's "order of constancy" (to invoke a phrase of Hortense Spillers, taken from Gwendolyn Brooks) is not through the isolation or definition of its inherent characteristics but, rather, careful attention to the consistent difficulties and promises that keep coming up around love in different times and traditions (131).

[slide 38] *Problem #1: Love's Greatness*

1 Corinthians 13 famously concludes by listing three major aspects of Christian life and Pauline theology – faith, hope, and love – that will carry on after all else has passed away (". . . now abide . . . these three"). Moreover, it pronounces love the "greatest of these" aspects. The **[slide 39]** opening verses of the chapter give some indication of *why* Paul names love the greatest:

> 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
> 2 And if I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
> 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

These verses imagine three parallel, impossible human beings who, respectively, have mastered earthly and divine tongues, have the profoundest faith in God's power (accessing that which God only knows), and have crafted the most selfless of lives. Without love, though, the first one says nothing; the second becomes nothing; the third earns nothing. Meaninglessness; falseness; empty-handedness: the consequences of lovelessness.

Though the apostle has a specific kind of love in mind (the Greek word, as you may know, is *agape,* not *eros* or *philia*), his formulation **[slide 40]** of love as a kind of super-additive – as the greatest of these – characterizes a wide field of modern literary and cultural theory which leverages love to give consistency to thoughts, feelings, methods, and/or purposes, looking to it – whether rhetorically, pragmatically, or wishfully – to recalibrate lives, tie up loose ends, stabilize imbalanced or precarious conditions, soothe uncertainties, guarantee futures, focus straying attentions, catalyze compounds of theory and practice, or reassemble scattered fragments. "Against strange maladies a sovereign cure," as Shakespeare puts it in Sonnet 153 (line 8). With its "dateless lively heat," love promises to hold us (or something, anything) together (Shakespeare 6).

I'm interested, for instance, in the fact that **[slide 41]** Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who shook up a few fields in the humanities with their book *Empire* (2000) about twenty years, turn to love in their book *Commonwealth* (2009), published nine years later, claiming this emotion as the missing "element" that will bind together "the multitude of the poor" with "the exodus from capitalist command" and pull all that they had been proposing into "a coherent project," "animat[ing]" ten years of collaboration (179). For these two philosophers, love –

understood as "a process of the production of the common and the production of subjectivity" (*Commonwealth* 180) – builds a bridge between a theory (or prophecy) that envisions a world after capitalism and the on-the-ground politics of a "new social body" (the multitude) that will bring this revolution about (*Empire* 206).

We could also look to psychoanalytic theory **[slide 42]**, where love sits (often silently) at the heart of the Oedipal drama that drives it. Indeed, though love rarely makes it into the lexicon of psychoanalytic jargon that students pick up in their classes on literary theory, it is ever present (id–ego–superego, libidinal economy, repression and sublimation, the fetish, the phallic mother, the Symbolic order, manifest and latent content, etc.). And not just in the theory. Reading Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, or Melanie Klein on actual psychotherapy, we see that the "transference love" that occurs between therapist and analysand is meant to carry on the signifying chain of a demand for love that first emerges in the Oedipal scene. Indeed, as for Hardt and Negri and as for Paul, love is *structurally* fundamental, and the consequences of its absence would be devastating – both for theory *and* for practice. The cycle of the Oedipal drama would break down; none of us would ever enter into the Symbolic order (meaning we would never learn to speak), and the psychotherapy would never do the work of "disrupt[ing] [the] repetition of" the Oedipal "scene, making something new possible here that had previously been just a repetition of the same old story" (Fink 50).

For a literary example, I want to share a rough sketch I made during early lockdown in April 2020 – a concept map **[slide 43]** – of love in Marcel Proust's *Swann in Love* (1913), a novella tucked near the beginning of his very long novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27). Though Proust's treatment of love, in general, is often boiled down to a process of jealousy and suffering that finds its retroactive apotheosis in a work of art created long after the failure of many relationships, this map suggests a more interesting Proust – someone who offers a much more nuanced, massive anatomy of what love supports, transforms, but also threatens in any given life. Without love, much more than Swann's romance would collapse.

[slide 44] *Problem #2: Love's Prepositions*

So this is a nerdy one. When I say "prepositions," I literally mean the words that anchor phrases like "to the store," "behind this podium," "around or adjacent to literary studies." As odd as this focus may seem, during the very first graduate course I led here at USD (in the SP2016 semester), my class and I noticed that some writers tend to privilege specific prepositions when writing about love or intimacy. Each preposition or combination of prepositions suggests distinct connotations as well as different spatial arrangements according to which we live and conceptualize love relations.

The philosopher **[slide 45]** Robert Solomon insists, for instance, that we love "with" one another, the "with" connoting the formation of "shared identity" and an insistence on "equality" at the heart of romantic love (xxx–xxxi; cf. 14, 143).

For the feminist theorist **[slide 46]** Luce Irigaray, the proper preposition is "to" or "at" (she rewrites the declaration, "I love you" [je t'aime] as "I love *to* you" [*j'aime à toi*]). The difference here may seem slight, but a knowledge of English/French mechanics helps us observe the shift of the "you" from the position of direct object to that of indirect object. The preposition "to"/"at" marks this indirection, also inserting a visible distance between the "I" and the "you." As Irigaray puts it in her study *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History* (1996), the "at/to" that introduces indirection into the love declaration transforms this declaration into an ethical act of recognition that eschews mastery or possession of others: "I recognize you signifies that you are different from me, that I cannot identify myself (with) nor master your becoming. I will never be your master. And it's this negative that enables me to go towards you" (104).

In *The Lonely Letters* (2020), Ashon **[slide 47]** Crawley marvels at the way prepositions proliferate in black studies and among black people, specifically re: matters of love, joy, music, and worship. He (or his persona A) shares a dream of "teaching [a] song to a choir" and the experience of getting "lost in the voices . . . vibrating to and in and with the music" (194). In one letter, he explains that this dream "felt irreducibly social, like being back in the church *with others* . . . like a

love, a relationship, a friendship" (194, original emphasis). To/in/with; elsewhere, "on," "of," and "from" (7); "For," "with," and "in" (33); "with," "on," and "along" (45). Each combination poses a distinct "prepositional problem" that doubles as prepositional capaciousness (65): ". . . intimacy is such," he writes, "that it resists . . . easy analytics" (97).

Let's look at Lucille Clifton's 1993 poem "daughters" **[slide 48]**:

daughters

woman who shines at the head
of my grandmother's bed,
brilliant woman, i like to think
you whispered into her ear
instructions. i like to think
you are the oddness in us,
you are the arrow
that pierced our plain skin
and made us fancy women;
my wild witch gran, my magic mama,
and even these gaudy girls.
i like to think you gave us
extraordinary power and to
protect us, you became the name
we were cautioned to forget.
it is enough,
you must have murmered,
to remember that i was
and that you are. woman, i am
lucille, which stands for light,
daughter of thelma, daughter
of georgia, daughter of
dazzling you. (13)

In place of a close reading, I only ask what we learn of the love – the intergenerational relations, the creative work of kinship – imagined by this poem

when we pay attention to the careful arrangement of prepositions **[slide 49]**: "at the head"; "into her ear"; "in us"; "daughter of . . . daughter / of . . . daughter of."

[slide 50] *Problem #3: Love's Genres*

In his 2011 PMLA article, "Can We Read the Book of Love?," Richard Terdiman claims that the "ineffability [of love] is impermanent; its silence engenders narrative" (478). Martha Nussbaum **[slide 51]** elaborates Terdiman's claim twenty years earlier when, using Proust's enormous novel as her main example, she considers the kind of "text" that properly shows the link between "love and knowledge," a text that displays "a temporal sequence of events (that has a plot), that can represent the complexities of a concrete human relationship, that can show both denial and yielding; that gives no definitions and allows the mysterious to remain so" (281). In short, the genre proper to love's knowledge would be the novel (or narrative, more generally). Better yet, of course, would be a text that could mix the emotional and experiential affordances of stories with the "probing and questioning" of philosophy, which when "properly and patiently applied" can show "the most tender and protective care for . . . our experiences of love and our love stories" (283).

[slide 52] But does love need the structure of stories? Need it be a story? *Is* it the case that novels – or short stories – are more proper for the expression of love's complexity? Is it the case that some admixture of duration and patient philosophical reflection are best suited? What of poetry? What *about* love do poems express—what do they afford us readers—if not, as Nussbaum puts it, "knowledge"? How does the style or the craft of fictions and poems but also critical and theoretical/philosophical writing come to influence, inform, obstruct, or perform ideas of love, attachment, intimacy, fidelity, ardor, and suffering?

[slide 53] Though Clifton may not elaborate on the intergenerational love – or the history of intimacy and kinship – that is imagined in "daughters" to the extent, say, that Proust slowly anatomizes, down to the cellular grain, the emotional theatrics of jealousy, she has at her disposal plenty of tools that are usually unavailable to the novel-writer or novel-reader: breaks (at line or stanza),

enjambment, saturation, line integrity, manipulation of white space, a concentrated implication of obscurity and particularity that we might call singularity, and more. These were the tools that were also available to Walcott in "Love after Love," a poem also quite capable, as I hope I demonstrated several minutes ago, of the sort of knowledge that Nussbaum circumscribes *almost* wholly within the domain of narrative fiction.

Indeed, I take the recent provocations of **[slide 54]** James Kuzner in *The Form of Love: Poetry's Quarrel with Philosophy* (2021), published just a few weeks ago, as a crucial counterpoint to Nussbaum and Terdiman and a valuable resource for working through my questions about the affordances of distinct genres and styles and the sort of knowledges, aspects, or experiences of love we encounter in (our study of) literature.

[slide 55] *Problem #4: Love's Politics*

In *The Politics of Friendship* **[slide 56]**, Jacques Derrida spends a few pages worrying over a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* that posits "friendship" as "a love more loving than love" (64). More *loving*, as Derrida reasons, friendship does not want to possess and "denounces . . . the *right to property*" (65, 64). After his concluding summary of Nietzsche's argument, that the "*just name*" of love would be "*friendship*," Derrida wonders:

> **[slide 57]** Perhaps, one day, here or there, who knows, something may happen between two people in love, who would love each other lovingly (is this still the right word?) in such a way that friendship, *just once*, perhaps, for the first time (another *perhaps*), once and only once, therefore for the first and last time (perhaps, perhaps), will become the correct name, the right and just name for that which would then have taken place, the condition being that it take place between two . . . Even if the right name for this unique love were to be found, how would you convince everyone else of its appropriateness? (66)

Apologies for drawing Derrida in in the closing minutes of this lecture, but the performative hand-wringing we read (and potentially enjoy) in this passage

speaks to the final problem I investigate in *Finding Love*, namely that what we talk about when we talk about love is often deeply *unjust*, violent, possessive, and *un*friendly. (Raymond Carver's short story, which I've alluded to several times, also seems to be a study in this love knowledge. And whether Proust intends it or not, the long reflections on suffering that takes up much of *In Search of Lost Time* also confirms this insight.)

Though the fifty years since **[slide 58]** Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) has seen many, many efforts to forget her insights into the "political significance" of love (247) and "love in its destructive guise" (249), her provocations remain compelling. Indeed, her work works against Derrida's musings (tho he, of course, comes around to working against himself, as he is prone to do) about the "becoming-friendship" or becoming-just "of love" (66), writing that women who are self-emancipated from economic dependence on men usually come to find "out," Firestone claims, "that the honesty, generosity, and camaraderie of men [is] a lie: men [are] all too glad," she writes, "to use [friends, especially women?] and sell them out" (255). Indeed, in reading Firestone's analysis of modern love, it's initially difficult not to accept her conclusion, given the class inequities love entails, the futures it forecloses, and the idealizations it may require: **[slide 59]** "Who needs it?" (256). **[slide 60]**

If we take a look at Proust's mono-focalized account of Swann's love affair with Odette de Crécy **[slide 60]**, we can get a full (and, I think, even fuller) demonstration of Firestone's account of what "love" often "means . . . to men . . . it means ownership and control; it means jealousy, where he never exhibited it before . . . it means a growing lack of interest, coupled with a roving eye. Who needs it?" (256). Indeed, over the course of many, many pages Swann – who is prefiguring the Narrator's own affairs with Gilberte and Albertine – develops a whole repertoire of jealous strategies, pleasures, invented mysteries/suspicions and problems of truth. Swann links Odette – as a figure and fabrication – with various artifacts and works of art that come to symbolize their love. And there's more: routines, events become idealized memories, places become sacred spaces, and more. The whole mechanism – as my students were quick to pick up on last spring – is deeply toxic, even if there is, maybe, something to learn here –

something interesting, even – about amorous figures, routines, jealousies, and invented pleasures of our own.

One avenue for asking different, more affirmative questions about love and politics would be to return to Clifton's poem within the framework of black feminist theory and politics. I'll close with these reflections.

In **[slide 61]** *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019), Jennifer C. Nash rehearses the centrality of love in black feminist theory and politics, citing Alice Walker's definition of womanism, the "love for ourselves" written into the statement of the Combahee River Collective (115), Tiffany Lethobo King's "critical call for 'loving' engagement with intersectionality" (114–15), June Jordan's poetry (specifically, "Poem about My Rights") [118–19], and Christina Sharpe's study of "wake work," which "builds," as Nash summarizes, "on the long black feminist engagement with survival as a radical form of politics, a tradition that emphasizes black creativity, black thriving, and black life in the midst of overwhelming violence" (121). Within this rich framework, which I'm barely scratching the surface of here, Nash posits a love-politics predicated on "vulnerability" and "witnessing"; she describes it this way **[slide 62]**:

> If vulnerability is a recognition that we are undone by each other, and an invitation to embrace rather than retreat from that fact, it is also a testament to how we are witnesses to moments when we are subjected to violence, particularly by social structures that have been constructed to discipline and surveil. . . [B]lack feminism has positioned and imagined black women as 'outsiders-within' who have a particular vantage point on how structures of domination operate to marginalize, constrain, and injure certain bodies. Black women are, then, witnesses who can see and even name forms of violence that other subjects cannot see, or simply refuse to see. (119)

What's love got to do with this?

Clifton's poem "daughters," which I'll have you read one more time to close this lecture, can help us see what makes this kind of politics a love-politics because Clifton shows us a structure of vulnerability and witnessing not just in

the present but across generations of black women. The poem speaks a deep awareness of vulnerability, a link between that vulnerability and "powers" that may, in fact, be powers directed toward "witnessing" even as they are also directed toward the protection (and the love) of kin. With all due respect to Derrida, it seems to me that love's *just name* would not be friendship but, at least in the United States, *black feminist collective*. Think of Audre Lorde **[slide 63]**, for whom the "erotic" is an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (32).

So one more/one last time: Clifton's "daughters." **[slide 64]** Can you feel the love? Thank you.

daughters

woman who shines at the head
of my grandmother's bed,
brilliant woman, i like to think
you whispered into her ear
instructions. i like to think
you are the oddness in us,
you are the arrow
that pierced our plain skin
and made us fancy women;
my wild witch gran, my magic mama,
and even these gaudy girls.
i like to think you gave us
extraordinary power and to
protect us, you became the name
we were cautioned to forget.
it is enough,
you must have murmered,
to remember that i was
and that you are. woman, i am
lucille, which stands for light,

daughter of thelma, daughter
of georgia, daughter of
dazzling you. (13)

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[slide 66] Last Slide