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## The Queer Lover, the Most Lonesome Fragment: Understanding “Love” Through Loss in A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments

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The Queer Lover, the Most Lonesome Fragment:  
Understanding “Love” Through Loss in *A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments*

NICOLE A. COSENTINO

Toward the end of Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) life, the once-devout structuralist, Marxist, and semiologist started to conceive of language and the discourse derived from language in a new way. For nearly the entirety of his writing career, Barthes focused on the technicalities of language, considering its usage and its receipt; he critiqued the circumstances under which discourse emerged while also considering audience-response and what the general writer might consider accessible, relatable, or readable. Barthes’s work was well-received in its time, and scholars and critics alike considered the way Barthes read authors like Balzac, Mallarmè, and Proust to be both insightful and important to the study of how language is formed, the manner in which it emerges, and the circumstances that dictate the degree to which language participates in a collective thought process/ belief system *or* exists as a unique text that is decipherable only to the author of the work.

What is missing from nearly all of Barthes early writing, though, is a personal connection to himself through language. For Barthes, writing about the self—the “I”—was an anxiety-inducing activity that, like being photographed, created a sizable discomfort in him. Barthes thus reserved himself to the position of observer for much of his writing career, knowing there was a safety in not revealing himself to his reader. From *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) to his infamous essay, “The Death of the Author” (1967), there was little divergence in Barthes’s writing style. For Barthes, remaining outside of discourse was to be in control and to remain undetectable. Once his personal life imploded with the news of his mother’s illness, though, Barthes engaged in the translation of language to discourse as a way to cope with the loss of the only person to whom he ever fully dedicated himself: his mother, Henriette Binger Barthes (1893-1977), whom he lovingly called *maman*.<sup>1</sup> He achieved this through what he termed The Neutral.

Barthes’s lectured series titled *The Neutral* that was given at The College de France from 1977-1978. These lectures sought to bring attention to the desire, or *pathos*, for Neutral (emotional connection to the need), which “overtly spring[s] from a personal fantasy,” which is an offset of postulation (or, hallucination)” (Krauss and Hollier 12). In the lecture dated February 18, 1977, Barthes proposes the following conditions as desire for Neutral: a suspension of orders, laws, and the will-to-posses (among other things) as well as the suspension of narcissism and the voluntary practice of “dissolv[ing] one’s own image” (Krauss and Hollier 12-13). It is also noted that while there is violence associated with the Neutral, such violence is inexpressible because it is no longer seeking to possess. Barthes contends that recognizing the will-to-possess as a desire that is “discontinuous, erratic” and never about wisdom is critical to engaging successfully with

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<sup>1</sup> My reading of the term *maman*, as it is used by Barthes—and as it is translated from French to English—is a derivative of the way a child calls to his mother during the developmental stages of oral communication. Thus, the way this term operates and should be read within the context of this analysis takes two forms. The first: Barthes’s childlike dependency on his mother’s presence, affection, and attention. The second: a way for Barthes to assign a level of possession to Henriette, since among *maman*’s translations resides the term, “mommy.” Mommy, or *maman*, then becomes a signifier for a possessed being, or a loved subject for Barthes.

the Neutral, which is what allows him to write so vulnerably about *maman* (Krauss and Hollier 12-13).

Barthes's beloved *maman* died on October 25, 1977. The day after her death, Barthes began to write notes—many of which were fragmentary—on random slips of paper in an effort to document his feelings and the emotions that ran parallel to his grief—a series of mementos to which he would return at intervals to remember *maman* and cry; the excess of emotivity accrued from his emotional response to remembering *maman* in this “elsewhere” space allowed him to disengage from himself and continue forward with his writing. Though Barthes wrote these notes for himself, he did intend to organize and publish them later on, since Barthes felt it was his mission to ensure that Henriette's memory enjoyed posterity and timelessness. Shortly after Barthes's bizarre death, his long-time associate and translator Richard Howard gathered the fragmentary slips that Barthes wrote over the course of the two years following his mother's death and preceding his own, translated them, and published them under their intended title: *Mourning Diary* (1977).<sup>2</sup>

It is from the pages of *Mourning Diary* (*MD*) that we see a suffering Barthes, one who speaks from a place of loss and misery, beginning on the day following his mother's death (October 26, 1977), and this style of writing marks an important departure from the typical structuralist methods employed in Barthes's earlier work. It is often the case that “When structuralist methods are employed, little attention is given to the narrators as holistic personas: their personality, biography, and narrating style,” but *MD* refutes this structuralist method and instead gives full attention to Barthes's personality in response to *maman*'s death (Tohar et al. 59). While *MD* inarguably acts as a personal account of Barthes's emotional register and is, perhaps, one of the few times a reading audience is given literary proximity to the life of this extremely private man, this diary is **not** the *most* personal account in Barthes's later repertoire. What we need to note here is the development of *Camera Lucida* (*CL*; 1980) within *MD* so that we can read these two, along with *A Lover's Discourse, Fragments* (1977) as a collection of work, each of which relies upon and informs the others. It is in *MD* that Barthes retrieves the illusive *Winter Garden Photograph* (*WGP*) and in *CL* that he exhausts himself first trying to find and then to attempting to explain the essence of this extremely puncturing photo. In *MD* there is a tension between suffering and mourning, in *CL* there is a tension between studium/ punctum and operator/ subject. Between the two, though is *ALDF*, and it is here where these tensions are allowed to unraveled a bit. We can thus argue that Barthes is successful in “switching systems” in *ALDF*, since he is no longer strictly “critiquing” language, but instead translating the language of loss to a discourse of love and mourning.

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<sup>2</sup> In an entry dated October 31, 1977, Barthes writes, “I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it—or without being sure of not doing so—although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths” (*MD* 23). To speak one's truth as the subject of one's own study, then, is to risk creating literature—a kind of public spectacle that does not possess the singularity of the Neutral. So, the act of speaking subjectively in writing is to commit to becoming the “I,” thus creating literature through the act of truth-telling and remembering. Barthes is willing to take this risk for the sake of making sure that Henriette's memory remains forever inscribed in a literary repertoire. Not long after this entry, Barthes contends that “true mourning is not susceptible to any narrative dialectic,” so we can see that there was a struggle for him in the process of sharing pieces of his personal life (*MD* 50). We see a further evolution of Barthes's willingness to enter the personal mode of writing (confession) in an entry from March 23, 1978: “My haste . . . to regain the freedom . . . of getting to work on the book about Photography [*Camera Lucida*], in other words, to integrate my suffering with my writing” (*MD* 105).

I therefore argue that in order to access the most personal, genuine version of Roland Barthes as the lonely queer subject, we must first understand the deep connection he shared with his mother, Henriette Binger Barthes, and we do this by translating the fragments of *ALDF*, which takes on a personal narrative style. Since personal narratives “reveal the connection between the individuals and their society,” it is a matter of *how* we read *ALDF* that determines whether it is a text that utilizes the translation of love as a way to undertake personal matters through a lens of distanced subjectivity (Tohar et al. 58). In suggesting that *ALDF* is, in fact, Barthes’s first personal narrative project, I would like to extend my analysis to include that the subject of *ALDF* is not as anonymous as the text projects it to be. In fact, I take the position that we should read the subject of this text as the lonely queer lover, Barthes, whose singular desire is to understand, document, and memorialize the complex love he felt for Henriette. To do this, one must read a collection of Barthes’s later works both in succession of each other and alongside each other, since no single text can fully translate Barthes’s discomfort, lonesomeness, weariness, anxiety, suffering, and mourning with relation to his connection to Henriette. It is only once we read *A Lover’s Discourse*, *Fragments*, *Mourning Diary*, and *Camera Lucida* as a collective body of work that we access Barthes’s most genuine self, and therefore understand the process of Barthes’s translation of language to discourse, discourse to speech, and speech to loneliness.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a renewed interest in Barthes’s later work that has encouraged scholars and critics in the academy to translate the structure of Barthes’s work in ways that are not purely structuralist or post-structuralist, thus opening new avenues for interpretation of key texts that were produced toward the end of Barthes’s life. About this, Sunil Manghani notes,

Barthes’s late work marks an important refusal of oppositional frames in which contemporary issues are posed, and which, for Barthes, can only lead to forms of arrogance, violence, and narcissism. Thus, Barthes draws attention to the Neutral as a means not only to disrupt dominant frames, but also to refuse entry into them. Barthes’s ‘incidental’ accounts of the Neutral are an attempt to give form to a desire that offers *release* to the subject, rather than builds it. We come, then, to understand the Neutral less as a form of critique, more as an alternative means of living. (20)

Frank Whitehead’s work on Barthes’s narratology explains that Barthes was concerned with the “level of *functions*, the level of *actions*, and the level of *narration* (or discourse)” as a way to distinguish analytical narrative hierarchies. Within *ALDF*, there is a tenable rollercoaster of emotional turmoil evidenced in the various fragments or “scenes” that work to form the core of the lover’s language, which demonstrates Barthes’s interest in the action over the function, thus departing from his strictly structuralist and/ or post structuralist style. Barthes’s lectures at the College de France that focused on The Neutral focused on the way in which “the subject matter goes against any kind of hierarchy or ordering,” and why Barthes preferred the “incident” of knowledge over the “event” that defines it, since that is what the Neutral requires to “be in continuous flux” (Manghari 8).

To translate meaning from language is to rely upon and accept difference. In *ALDF*, we find that the lover is working through the way we interpret the meaning of the gestures and phrases associated with the lover’s discourse so that some relief may be achieved in moments of

abandonment, disappointment, isolation, and confusion. Neil Badmington argues that posthumous readings of Barthes afford his writing “new lives, other, plural lives” in which his feelings of entrapment in language are somewhat loosened in living neutrally (65). The desire for the neutral is to be understood as a desire for the “suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse,” whereby Barthes reimagines Saussure’s position that “meaning rests on conflict” to, instead, think of “meaning as an effect of conflict” (Badmington 68). Thus, we must look at *ALDF* as a strong example of the Neutral since the lover—or subject of writing—is presented as a fictional entity and whose attempts to connect with the self and the amorous subject are anchored in anxiety, grief, disappointment, longing, feelings of abandonment, and betrayal, only to culminate in the lover’s declaration of the non-will-to-posses (NWP).

In *ALDF*, Barthes examines love from what seems to be a protective shield, using an anonymous narrator (the “lover”) and the theories and positions of other notable, historical, philosophical, literary, and religious figures as a way to untangle the emotions, scenes, and events that are identified as “love.” This “love,” of course, is often read as romantic, but it is deeply filial for Barthes. Existing scholarship does attend to the importance of the maternal presence that governs the pages of *ALDF*. As Lawrence Kritzman puts it, “In the lover’s discourse, the maternal imago not only becomes the center of the subject’s identity, but remains an internalized principle of sensuality and corporeal experience whose absence constitutes a symbolic castration” (859). The desire for the return of the mother in *ALDF* results in a type of staging of a “catastrophic theatrical event characterized by the nostalgia for a lost maternal plentitude that is manifested in the projection of nothingness” (Kritzman 860). Such nostalgia leaves the lover torn “divided between the potential loss of what can never be recovered and the memory of what can never be forgotten” (Kritzman 860). As Pierre Saint-Armand notes in “The Secretive Body: Roland Barthes’s Gay Erotics,” Barthes was horrified by “the cultural localization of a particular seat in the body destined for sexual functions,” and he preferred a more aleatory and flexible understanding of the body and sexuality (159). Thus, in “unsettling the *meaning* of erotic gestures” in *ALDF*, Barthes explores a reinvention of the manner in which we discuss, engage in, and suffer from love.

In the preamble to *A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments* (1977), Roland Barthes writes, “the lover’s discourse is today of *an extreme solitude*,” a discourse spoken by many and warranted by no one (1). Such a discourse drives itself into the realm of the “unreal” by its own momentum, and in doing so becomes a site of “*affirmation*” (Barthes 1). And it is only once the discourse of love affirms itself that we learn that **all discourse** in love is derived from the one who loves, the lover. We are to understand, then, that this is a work focused entirely on the way the loneliness of love—offset by waiting—results in the need for love to declare itself *elsewhere*, outside of reductive language systems. *ALDF* thus relies upon the neutral as a way to work through the complications of love, a typically universal and shared experience—or, a concept that is easily translatable through popular, common language. What Barthes wants us to understand is that, while each lexia might have resonance, it is the reader who ascribes meaning to any given fragment of study in the text. Everything that happens from the point of engulfment to the point of accepting that the lover can never fully possess the loved subject is a series of suffering in loneliness that occurs in different forms and in different places for the queer subject. Thus, we will read the excerpted fragments from *ALDF* as examples of how Barthes not only works through the Neutral, but also as an examination of the hopelessness of his position as the lonely queer lover whose experience of love and the mourning that occurs when Henriette passes cannot

be shared because the “violence” of his feelings are inexpressible and, therefore, non-marketable and non-transferrable to a larger audience.

According to Barthes, the lover’s discourse begins with the lover becoming engulfed with the loved subject and ends with the lover’s will-to-possess. It is the lover who says, “I am engulfed, I succumb” (*ALDF* 10). In love, the lover’s psyche is always a site of trauma, since the lover is bound to become the victim of his own desire, thereby becoming “engulfed” by the amorous subject. Here, we come upon the term “suffering,” which is crucial to the understanding of the project in *ALDF*. The lover suffers because the lover cannot escape the pacing, cyclical thoughts of the psyche, since the lover has essentially been poisoned by the influence of the loved subject. The engulfment of the lover’s discourse is a kind of welcomed suicide—not of the corporeal self, but of the essence of the self. And so, the lover can commit suicide in the spaces of love whenever the need to “dissolve . . . fall . . . flow . . . [and] melt” become so overwhelming that the lover finds himself trapped in a kind of hypnosis or hysteria. And it is only in this state of hypnosis that the lover declares himself solitary because he realizes that even in physical death, there is not guarantee that he can attain the loved subject again; for Barthes, this is his realization that he cannot attain Henriette again (*ALDF* 10-11). Kathleen Woodward is attentive to this feature in Barthes’s writing and notes that such anxiety is demonstrative of the space that exists between mourning and melancholia (Freud). Ultimately, Woodward concludes that Barthes does not wish to be rid of the pain and suffering that the loss of Henriette caused him. Instead, Woodward asserts that by remembering his mother in a state in which he never knew her (*The Winter Garden* photograph referenced in *Camera Lucida*), he allows himself to transfer grief to a kind of imaginary space where the passage of time does not negate the longing for the departed loved one. Instead, it reifies and deepens the love language assigned to that loved person; he lives in his suffering, so therefore he is happy (100).

“Suicide,” in the lover’s discourse, occurs in the mind. It is not a physical endeavor. It is a disconnect that works to save the lover because suicidal thoughts are words that can be spoken and are understood as words that have meaning *all the time* (my emphasis), unlike “I-love-you,” which only has meaning at the moment of utterance (*ALDF* 218). To speak the desire for suicide in the lover’s discourse serves two functions: it taints the loved subject’s life in the form of blackmail or it creates a vivid fantasy whereby language transfers to action and the lover and the amorous subject are unified eternally in death (*ALDF* 219). We see the evolution of this fragment in an undated fragment in *Mourning Diary*, under the heading “Suicide.” The undated fragments read: “How would I know I don’t suffer any more, if I’m dead?”; “In the imagination I might have of my death (which everyone has), I added to the anguish of disappearing soon the equal anguish of the *unendurable* pain I would cause her”; and, “On the infrequency—the insignificance of our verbalization, of our speech: yes, but never a platitude, a stupidity—a blunder . . .” (*MD* 247). The “her” to whom Barthes refers in the second undated fragment is Henriette. We see that the site of affirmation of suicide in the lover’s discourse carries over as a site of suffering in mourning. Here again, we see the anguish of the lonesome queer lover, who, even in tangential and fragmented suicidal ideations, is looking to return to the mother.

The fragment “Fade-out” says, “the other is not a text, the other is an image, single and coalescent; if the voice is lost, it is the entire image which vanishes (love is monologic, maniacal; the text is heterologic, perverse). The other’s fade-out, when it occurs, makes me anxious because it seems without cause and without conclusion. Like a kind of melancholy mirage, the

other withdraws into infinity and I wear myself out trying to get there” (*ALDF* 112). Here, we have a very clear view of Barthes’s structuralist approach to decoding what he terms the fade-out of the loved subject. He begins by attending to text, noting that when narrative voices shift and fade, it is a “good thing.” It is the text that speaks, not a subject or a “who,” but rather a “what,” an essence. Removal of a direct subject in this case supports the structuralist position that, within the text, there should be no “I,” or “you,” but simply subjects who might have some relation to each other by consequence or by circumstance. Language in the case of fade out is all that remains, since the image is no longer tenable. Where the voice in narrative text is beneficial and, arguably, drives forth the story of the writing, the loss of the voice in the lover’s discourse takes with it everything—the image, the voice, and the language (*ALDF* 112). To deem love monologic only further isolates the lover from the amorous subject. In this parenthetical aside, love affirms itself as a performance of language meant for an audience, similar to the wrestler and the function he serves for his audience. Taken another way, we might conceive the “love-as-monologic” theory to extend to the concept that the lover, in their maniacal conquest of the amorous subject, exhausts language to the point that the amorous subject withdraws. In either scenario, though, the lover causes the fade-out, the catalyst of which is birthed with the overuse/over exhaustion of language and ends with the removal of voice from the amorous subject, resulting in the amorous subject’s physical and emotional withdrawal and eventual dissolution (112). We see an extension of “Fade-out” in *Mourning Diary*, in a fragment dated April 21, 1978. Barthes writes, “Thinking of *maman*’s death: sudden and fugitive vacillations, brief fade-outs, poignant though somehow empty embraces, their essence the certainty of the Definitive” (*MD* 116). Thus, we can sense that Barthes’s physical memory of Henriette is inconsistent, because his life proceeds as hers is ended.

This brings us to the end of the lover’s discourse, the will-to-possess. “The Will-to-possess” is defined as the lover’s realization that ceaselessly attempting to “appropriate the loved being in one way or another” is useless and self-defeating, so the lover abandons the will-to-possess the other for the sake of self-preservation. Barthes also discusses the Non-Will-to-Possess (NWP), which essentially means “not to kill oneself (for love) means: to take this decision, not to possess the other” (*ALDF* 232). About NWP, Barthes also writes, “For the notion of N.W.P. to be able to break with the system of the Image-repertoire, I must manage (by the determination of what obscure exhaustion?) to let myself drop somewhere outside of language, into the inert . . .” (*ALDF* 233). To drop outside of language and become inert is to remain motionless; such stoicism speaks back to feelings of suicide and abandonment—yet another affirmation turned to suffering where Barthes loses his mother once again, since he can no longer possess her and comes to a point where he realizes the attempts to do so are futile.

So then, we must ask: Why must the queer lover always be lonesome in Barthes’s literary repertoire? In looking to *A Lover’s Discourse*, *Fragments* and *Mourning Diary*, we find our answer—because he can never fully possess what he has constructed to be the most perfect of all the feminine forms, his mother. Though the desire is not sexual, it is deeply personal; it is an affliction that lives within the soul of the queer subject. Despite its construction, *ALDF* is *not* another of Barthes’s definitively structuralist works. It is, instead, a literary demonstration of Barthes’s willingness to expose himself as an emotional being by documenting his feelings following her death (*MD*), his breakdown of the way love functioned between them (*ALDF*), and the way his mother dies anew each time he glances at her photograph, particularly the *Winter Garden Photograph* (*CL*).

## The Queer Lover, the Most Lonesome Fragment

As readers, it is up to us to decide—to translate—the “meaning” of the literature we seek. Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” reminds us of this readerly privilege in the essay’s final line: “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth [the anti-hero]: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (6). We revisit this line to remind ourselves that while *ALDF* can certainly be read as a text that examines the lover’s discourse through a romantic lens, it must also be read as Barthes’s personal narrative of the agony and anxiety he feels in a world without *maman*. While it seems Barthes is never capable of finding peace after the death of his true love, *maman*, what he provides to us in *ALDF* demonstrates that, although love is a universal emotion available to all, the experience of love is singular and deeply personal, and thus can only be expressed through the neutral, from the perspective of the lonely, queer subject.

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