

The Break-Up: Hardt and Negri's Politics of Love

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Love, like weaponized anthrax spores, has a habit of getting into everything.
(Pettman, 2006, p. xii)

On Valentine's Day 2011 a series of seemingly improvised events began to unfold in the corporate hubs of Australia's largest cities. At a business lunch in Sydney's waterfront restaurant strip, tuxedoed waiters delivered a cake to a group of Commonwealth Bank executives in the midst of a long lunch. A serenade accompanying the gift explained that they were being "dumped" by an arch rival, National Australia Bank. The profit-seeking pact that had existed between the nation's four major financial institutions was officially over. From now on, NAB was going it alone, citing that "no one should feel trapped in an unhappy relationship" (NAB, 2011).

Stunts were repeated in various permutations throughout the week as it became clear that this was a viral marketing campaign like no other. Actors hired to play feuding couples in city cafes and commuter trains broke up over hidden bank fees. Pianists performed break-up songs from trailers that were driven past rival banks. Outside the branches of NAB competitors passers-by were handed tissues in case they were upset by the split. Break-up posters were unfurled from rooftops to hang outside bank managers' boardrooms, while helicopters carried branded NAB banners across city skylines. On Sydney Harbour, the ultimate playground of the mega-rich, a yacht sailed past a "strategy meeting" of ANZ Bank executives anchored near the Opera House. The spinnaker read: "Dear ANZ, Sorry, but this ship has sailed. We're breaking up with you."¹

In the weeks that followed, NAB's experiment playing with the conventions of love was hailed as one of the most successful marketing strategies in recent history (Drummond, 2011; Thompson, 2011). A month after the campaign launch, the bank reported a 20 per cent growth in transaction accounts, a 35 per cent increase in mortgage inquiries, and credit card inquiries had doubled (*The Age*, 2011). The break-up promotion was credited for reversing the popularity of the bank from last to first in an annual survey of Australian consumers (*Herald Sun* 2011). For NAB, the language of love translated directly to profit.

What does autonomism offer a media climate that gives rise to the NAB campaign, complete with its guerrilla tactics, stand-in stunt actors, and integrated on/offline antics? How can love retain its political potential, when its registers and genres are so regularly "corrupted" at the hands of the state, the corporation, and the family (Hardt & Negri, 2009)? Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth* urges readers to return to some old concepts – among them love – in order to realise the "power and productivity of the common" (2009, pp. xi-xii). In its most optimistic sense: "Love is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with what exists and the creation of the new. Being is constituted by love" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 181).

For Hardt and Negri (2009, pp. 182-3), love's "corruption" takes two primary forms: "identitarian love" (love of the same, which culminates in the extremes of patriotism and fascism), and "love as unification" (when two become one, as in so many prevailing marriage metaphors). These conventions work against more radical experiments in love, which would break free from the insularism of the couple and family form (2009, p. xii). Love, like a musical score, is most powerful when it harnesses singularities "as a network of social relations":

Bringing together these two faces of love—the constitution of the common and the composition of singularities—is a central challenge for understanding love as a material, political act. (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 184)

Hardt and Negri's turn to love involves caution. They worry that the term "makes many readers uncomfortable" with feelings of embarrassment or cynicism, that love "has been so charged with sentimentality that it seems hardly fit for philosophical and much less political discourse (2009, p. 102). Yet the preface to *Commonwealth* shows that love has been a foundational question for philosophy at least as far back as *The Symposium*. This opening discussion notes a small sample of the many feminist philosophers with an interest in love from a range of geographical locations. Hardt and Negri mention Irigaray (1987) and Cavarero's (1990) readings of Diotima (2009, p. xii; ff 387), though they don't go on to speculate why a leading collective of Italian feminists writing, often critically, alongside autonomism took the name "Diotima" for their collaborative publishing project (Dominijanni, 2005; Scarparo, 2005). In this vein, we might also recall that "The Woman in Love" is an entire chapter of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953). If love has been a constitutive question for feminist philosophy, then – and this is not to say that it has *only* been explored by feminist philosophers (see Armstrong, 2003) – anxieties about "sentimentality" say less about the concept than the gendered distinctions still permeating apparently radical philosophy.²

Critical thinking about love and its politics is of course ongoing and extensive (Seccomb, 2007).³ The limitations of the couple and nuclear family are evident in a growing number of popular representations (Ryan & Jetha, 2010; Figes, 2010; Ladd & Langtree, 2008), including some of the highest grossing Hollywood films in the past few years (O'Connell, 2011). The incredible emphasis now placed on marriage as the ultimate model for love is the culmination of wider shifts in discourses of intimacy under capitalism (Kipnis, 2003; Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2007). In this history, romance triumphs with the emergence of the individual: "Romantic love accompanied the dawning of individualization among the bourgeoisie, and it became a dominant discourse only when individualization was widespread" (Shumway, 2003, p. 19).⁴ Alongside the infatuation, intensity and disequilibrium that characterises the individual experience of "falling" in love, scholars also identify the significance of "mature love" (Armstrong, 2003, pp. 1-7). This is love understood as the bonding capacity necessary for social solidarity (Shumway, 2003, p. 12) and it is the traditional meaning of love to which Hardt and Negri also seem most attracted.

Hardt and Negri's turn to love is part of a wider movement to disassociate love from the conventions of middle class propriety, where property and intimacy are linked together in a

mutually beneficial pact. This has been the lesson of queer theory over the course of several decades. The normative processes that make heterosexuality hegemonic involve “material practices that, though not explicitly sexual, are implicated in the hierarchies of property and propriety” that secure heteronormative privilege (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). The intensity of the gay marriage debate is evidence of love’s signifying and suturing work: it provides a platform for a variety of safe, reliable and useful citizenly identities. In their very terminology, identity movements premised on “equal love” and same-sex *entitlement* ask to access the benefits of normativity accrued through love without necessarily challenging the historical, ideological or economic bases for its attachment to particular living arrangements and rewards.⁵ To talk about love’s politics, then, in the field of media and communications especially, is to recognise the ideological function of love genres and platforms (Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984; Wexman, 1993; Pettman 2006). These scripts and plots literally produce love as having certain formal properties. “There is now a metaconventionality to love”, Lauren Berlant argues (2001, p. 439), in the sense that one narrative has come to dominate:

The paradigmatic love plot starts specifically and ends generically. A story about love’s engendering in individual persons ends with marriage or something promising it, and with the presumption of reproductive acts to come, spawning future generations or sequels. (2001, p. 438)

Berlant’s love “plot” has a double meaning, capturing both generic and conspiratorial dimensions. If love’s *purpose* is “to be formally brilliant” (Berlant, 2001, p. 433), there are few social rewards for experimenting beyond the couple. Love plots “bear the burden of organizing personhood for others, all too frequently marking out the ground and the limit of praxis” (Berlant, 2001, p. 437). And it is this limited imagination for love – our reluctance to explore its “wild syncretism” (Berlant, 2001, p. 448) – that Hardt and Negri appear to lament. Their critical reference to love as “repetition without difference” (2009, p. 184) echoes Berlant’s description of love as “a refrain”. Love is the only repetitive-compulsive behaviour that society openly celebrates.

Returning to the NAB advertisements, we can see how the tactics employed in the promotion clearly draw on generic conventions of love and romance to advance an agenda. Pitching the promotion around a break-up demonstrates love’s literal currency: love is seductive in its timeless exchange value. The ad’s various modes of demanding individual recognition and fulfilment – epitomised in the faux “Dear John” letter painted on the glass front of NAB headquarters⁶ – invest in contemporary notions of love as the primordial path to personal enrichment. As if to emphasise the point, one of the main benefits NAB offers new customers is the promise to cover the “exit costs” of changing partners.⁷ Directly challenging rivals in a daring attack, NAB casts itself as the hero standing up for the needs of the ordinary consumer. This in itself is a classic romantic gesture.

The most we can say about the campaign’s radicalism is its acknowledgment that monogamy and fidelity provide a firm basis for profit. The pact between the nation’s major banks in a period of significant global financial uncertainty is shown to have accumulated a shameful amount of wealth. In this example, we have reason to question

whether love is the only discourse still available to us that is capable of salvaging singularity in a late capitalist epoch, or whether it is rather a case that “love” has become (or perhaps always was) a decoy that lures us into a libidinal economy no less indifferent to individual suffering than the macroeconomy overseen by the IMF and the World Bank. (Pettman, 2006, p. x)

In the accommodating fiction of the break-up, the language of love deflects attention from material concerns, including the inequalities that continue to exist even in wealthy countries like Australia. The bank’s strategy inadvertently reveals that love’s normative modes also involve participation in a wider set of appropriate citizenly concerns: in this case, the tremendous cost of home ownership in Australia, the reality of mortgage pressure (Ryan, 2008), and the consequences of fluctuating interest rates.

In a nation where home ownership is a national “obsession” (Allon 2008), banks play a key role in defining the media agenda. Microscopic shifts in percentage points command newspaper headlines, form the basis of election campaigns, and seal the fate of political leaders.⁸ As ordinary consumers are increasingly required to find security through financial markets, and “links between responsible citizenship, personal freedom, and individual economic security [are] repeatedly tied to the ownership of housing” (Allon, 2010, p. 368), the domestic unit takes on a new kind of intensity. NAB’s simulated attempt to put an end to the monopoly on consumer finance is hardly possible in a context where “the right of property” is the basis for the nation itself (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 27).

It is this scenario that leads Hardt and Negri to find revolutionary hope in the multitude of the poor who stand as “an objective menace to the republic of property” (2009, p. 45). Hardt and Negri’s twinned emphasis on love *and* poverty in *Commonwealth* is a powerful combination for naming the forms of exclusion that now define participation in neoliberal economies. The break-up campaign was after all an urban drama enacted by creative professionals for the discernment of a CBD audience. The city-centrism of its stunts reflects the distance between the forms of agency and fulfilment available to a globally mobile, digitally literate elite and those consumers far from the hubs of financial power whose lack of *cultural* capital renders them *economic* victims (Wynhausen, 2011). NAB’s sloganeering has done little to satisfy the grievances of suburban residents whose lifetime assets have been lost in the global property market meltdown, or rural residents for whom a local bank branch is nothing more than a memory.

Recent political claims pivoting on love’s entitlements have often left such matters of geography and class inequality to one side. Drawing attention to the inventiveness that underpins the condition of both poverty and love, Hardt and Negri provide a means to bring these concerns back together. To wrest love’s imagery from an easy association with profit involves identifying the role of intimacy in maintaining “the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 553). To avoid love’s foreclosure in the circuits of capital means insisting that it avoid any “necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (*ibid*). These privatised processes are directly challenged by

autonomism's focus on the common, although Hardt and Negri warn that "love needs force" to dismantle the corrupt institutions of today's ruling powers (2009, p. xii). On reflection, this does sound like a political project that is particularly sentimental. But it is also just the kind of project to which I would enthusiastically pledge commitment.

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Notes

The title for this paper is clearly indebted to the Vince Vaughn/Jennifer Aniston vehicle of the same name (Reed, 2006). As the IMDB synopsis observes, it is real estate, rather than love, that truly binds the film's warring parties: "In a bid to keep their luxurious condo from their significant other, a couple's break-up proceeds to get uglier and nastier by the moment." <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0452594/>

¹ The campaign actually commenced on the Friday prior to Valentine's Day. A tweet from an official NAB Twitter account anticipated a "difficult conversation" in the days ahead. The full set of official YouTube clips affiliated with the campaign can be found at <http://breakup.nab.com.au/>

² If the following paragraph implies that Hardt and Negri actually have romance in mind when they worry about sentimentality, this is not to discount that sentimentality is also an established area of cultural and genre analysis (e.g. Berlant, 2009; 1997; 1991).

³ Linnell Secomb's work on love has influenced this paper in several ways, not least because I inherited her undergraduate course, *Intimacy Love and Friendship*, when I joined the Department of Gender & Cultural Studies at Sydney University three years ago.

⁴ For centuries, Shumway explains, marriage functioned to affirm participation and membership in a wider society. Only recently – and with the decline of a range of other social institutions – has marriage emerged as the dominant social relationship through which citizens strive to attain personal satisfaction. It is also the vehicle by which individuals feel most compelled to demonstrate ethical will, especially in the absence of any alternatives (Shumway, 2003, p. 229).

⁵ The literature on this is by now vast, although Butler's (2002) take on same-sex marriage remains compelling. I discuss these issues in greater detail and in relation to home-making claims for indigenous populations in Gregg (2007).

⁶ <http://breakup.nab.com.au/2011/02/a-big-message-to-the-other-big-banks/#content>

⁷ Kipnis describes relationship exit costs in her extraordinary polemic, *Against Love*:
Divide your current unhappiness by how well you'd come out in the property settlement, multiply by some private floating variable—guilt, fear of the unknown, how to explain it to the kids if there are kids (to relatives and friends, if not)—and what you arrive at is a misery quotient: a precise calibration of how much emotional rigor mortis you can tolerate in exchange for a sense of stability (2003, p. 137)

⁸ International readers can understand part of this complex dynamic in noting that the Australian Liberal Party's key slogan for the 2004 election: "Who do you trust to keep interest rates low?"