



## What we talk about when we talk about intimacy



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### ABSTRACT

This essay develops a theory of interpersonal intimacy. It argues that intimacy is made up of four interrelated feeling-states: curiosity, vulnerability, empathy, and a recognition of irreducibility—that is, a recognition that one cannot ever fully know the Other, that one cannot ever completely ‘become one with the object adored’ (Woolf, 1992b, p.69). These four feeling-states operate as a carefully calibrated series of affective checks and balances; curiosity without empathy can become aggression, vulnerability without curiosity can become selfishness, empathy without uninhabitability can become self-congratulation. However, when these affects coexist, they allow for a generous orientation towards the Other, and for the Other’s openness in return—in other words, they lay the groundwork for interpersonal proximity.

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### 1. Introduction

We say that we ‘crave intimacy,’ or perhaps that we’re ‘afraid of intimacy.’ We host ‘intimate gatherings’ and reveal to our confidants our ‘most intimate secrets.’ We read (supposedly) ‘intimate biographies’ of public figures; we wear so-called ‘intimate apparel’ next to our skin. But what is this thing we call intimacy, a thing so rhetorically powerful but so conceptually slippery? What is this curious affect, or cluster of affects, or affective orientation, that is both intensely personal and necessarily relational? Intimacy is not quite synonymous with love, nor with sex, nor with friendship—it is rather a litmus test of the potential proximity of Self to Other. This proximity is, for many of us, the thing we desire most from our relationships; as E.M. Forster’s (1910) famous maxim, ‘Only connect,’ suggests, we want to transcend our own boundaries, to be not just contiguous but continuous with other people. However, we are often made painfully aware that this continuity is surprisingly hard to achieve. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf (1992b, p.79) stages this difficulty, writing,

What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers [of the Other]? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object adored? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart?

This essay wrestles with some of Woolf’s questions in an effort to clarify (*pace* Raymond Carver) what we talk about when we talk about intimacy.

While various theorists have already grappled with the concept of intimacy—most notably in Lauren Berlant’s edited *Intimacy* and *Compassion* collections—their analysis tends towards the geopolitical dimensions of (real or fantasized) proximity. Berlant (2000, p.3), for instance, discusses collective intimacy, or what she calls ‘abstract intimacy’: the troubling aspects of group belonging that lend themselves to blind patriotism. Similarly, Sara Ahmed’s writing, particularly *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004b), illuminates the ways in which the bodies of Others are marginalized by way of hate, shame, disgust, and fear in order to generate the intimate publics of nationalism. More recently, the journal *Area*’s ‘special section’ (2014) on ‘intimacy-geopolitics and violence,’ along with a 2014 issue of *Emotion, Space, and Society* on intimacy and embodiment, have taken up these concerns. For example, Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli’s introduction to the former (2014, p.344) asserts that ‘all forms of violent oppression work through intimate emotional and psychological registers as a means of exerting control,’ and Kye Askins’ short piece in the same issue (2014, p.353) argues for a ‘quiet politics of encounter’ between a native-born and a migrant woman in the north of England as a form of transformative

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geopolitical activism.<sup>1</sup> This breadth of work informs my analysis here—indeed, this essay assumes that all interpersonal proximities are politically charged. However, I aim to complement these arguments, some of which take the term ‘intimacy’ as a given, by lending the concept some affective specificity. Going forward, we might therefore be able to analyze important geopolitical events on an even more granular emotional level.

I have chosen eight texts that theorize about intimacy—texts ranging from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* to Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*—to guide this essay’s inquiry.<sup>2</sup> These texts suggest that intimacy is so complex, and so difficult to achieve, because it is not a unified feeling-state; it is rather a number of discrete affects that coexist precariously. Intimacy, I argue, involves curiosity, vulnerability, empathy, and, perhaps most importantly, a recognition of irreducibility—a recognition that one cannot ever completely ‘become one with the object adored’ (Woolf, 1992b, p.69). The first three of these feeling-states are all forms of openness: for generous orientations towards the Other, and for the Other’s openness in return. Without each of these modes of openness—after all, curiosity without vulnerability can be proprietary; vulnerability without curiosity can be selfish—and without an acceptance of the ‘core of darkness,’ ‘invisible to others,’ that is central to ‘being oneself,’ intimacy is, I think, impossible (Woolf, 1992b, p.69). With them, however, intimacy can be revelatory of both Self and Other, at least to some degree; as Woolf’s Lily Briscoe puts it (1992b, p.79), ‘it was not ... inscriptions on tablets [that she desired], nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge.’

## 2. Irreducibility

Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other* argues, in discussing translation, that ‘one shall never inhabit the language of the other’ (1998, p.57). There is ‘no possible habitat,’ he explains, ‘without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia’ (1998, p.58). I would suggest, by extension, that the Other is fundamentally inaccessible, whether we share a language or not. There is no way to fully know another’s thoughts nor to penetrate another’s heart. There is no way to be coextensive with another person—we can touch each other, but we can never be of one mind. For this reason, even our closest relations must remain in part ‘distant, heterogeneous, uninhabitable’ (Derrida, 1998, p.58). Woolf (1992b, p.69) describes this irreducibility in terms of shallows and depths, explaining that ‘[b]eneath [the surface] it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by.’ All of the texts I read for this project struggle with these inaccessible depths, but ultimately

indicate that intimacy rests on accepting rather than resisting our mutual ‘uninhabitability.’

Chinese-British author Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the story of a young Chinese girl named Zhuang (‘Z’) who moves to London to learn English and begins a relationship with a Western man, hinges on precisely this predicament. Z resents her lover’s desire for independence, and suggests that their problems stem from Western versus Eastern approaches to family:

Maybe people here have problems being intimate with each other. People keep distance because they want independence, so lovers don’t live with together, instead they only see each other at weekend or sleep together twice a week. A family doesn’t live with together therefore the intimate inside of a family disappeared.

‘How,’ Z goes on to ask, ‘can intimate live with privacy?’ (Guo, 2007, p.87). While cultural and linguistic differences are certainly at stake in Z’s relationship, she is also confronting a fundamentally interpersonal problem: she wants to live inside her lover’s head, but finds she cannot. In this desire, too, she ‘lose[s her]self,’ loses the ability to ‘see [her]self,’ and eventually she reluctantly leaves her partner and returns to China (Guo, 2007, p.272). Intimacy *must*, she realizes, ‘live with privacy,’ both her lover’s and her own. Even her poetic non-standard English, which she learns largely to better connect with her lover, cannot bridge the gap of that ‘privacy.’ This revelation of proximity’s limits echoes Clarissa’s sentiments in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1992a, p.156): ‘[T]here is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect ... for one would not part with it oneself.’ Indeed, at one point in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary*, Z says,

Maybe this notebook which I use for putting new English vocabularies is a “Nushu” [a Chinese word for a secret female-only language used to describe one’s innermost feelings]. Then I have my own *privacy*. You know my body, my everyday’s life, but you not know my “Nushu”. (Guo, 2007, p.97)

This statement indicates that there is some core of herself with which Z will not, and perhaps cannot, part. The book therefore suggests that in order to achieve intimacy, one must accept the ‘Nushu’ in both Self and Other.

I do not wish to minimize the complex geopolitics of Z’s relationship: as a migrant body, she is marked as Other in London, and the dynamics of vulnerability in her relationship are troublingly uneven from the start (she can be deported at any time; her lover cannot). However, as though responding to Sara Ahmed’s critique (2004a, p.32) of writers who conceal economies of appropriation or objectification and who universalize the Western subject in discussions of ‘fellow-feeling,’ the novel takes Z’s perspective and reflects on her affections and her attachments in her voice. This is far from a story of a migrant learning to ‘be British’ in order to mitigate her vulnerability; it is rather a story of Z’s reckoning with her own desires for intimacy, desires that refuse to be dominated by those of the Western lover. Tellingly, the lover remains nameless throughout, and we are given very little information about his motivations or aspirations for the relationship. Instead, we see from Z’s point of view, a political gesture that stems precisely from her recognition of her ‘Nushu’. She cannot live inside her lover’s mind, nor can we; the novel’s story is hers alone.

Z’s evolving understanding of her emotional landscape is also an evolving understanding of space. While she initially thinks of ‘emotional geographies’ (Bondi et al., 2016, p.3) as the contours of shared place—a family ‘living with together’—she gradually learns

<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner’s collection *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in our Time* (2012) also argues persuasively for the geopolitical as always already intimate (and vice versa).

<sup>2</sup> I selected this study’s primary texts by surveying approximately forty literature students and professors, soliciting titles that turned on questions of interpersonal intimacy and including the texts that became the touchstones of these conversations. These texts are historically and culturally variable; they span three continents and over eighty years. This comparative breadth is common in studies of affect: seminal texts like Eve Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* and Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*, for example, are similarly wide-ranging. However, I do not intend my attention to my texts’ shared features to imply that intimacy is ahistorical or that it should be understood in universal terms. Intimacy is certainly, at least in part, culturally constructed and historically situated—as, I would argue, are all affects. That said, I am also interested in my texts’ commonalities, and in considering what these commonalities might contribute to our understanding of intimacy. Nevertheless, more detailed cross-cultural studies of intimacy would certainly be welcome additions to the critical conversation.

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