

Frances Stark

I Recently Helped Repair the Broken Horn of Pan//2003

I live in a basement in the house of an elderly gay man, my landlord. He has invited me into his library on several occasions, which is where I learned about his obsessive reading habits. He is currently reading 52 books about Alexander the Great that he is dutifully annotating in the distinctive cramped cursive of people born before 1940. He also orders Greek statues from mail order catalogues; recently I helped repair the broken horn of Pan.

The artist T.J. Wilcox told me that he was working on a film about the love story of Hadrian and Antinous, about whom I know nothing. To flesh things out for me, T.J. recently gave me a copy of Hadrian's memoirs, not written by the second century AD Roman emperor, but a French woman in the 1950s – Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1954). Ancient history is not a subject that captivates me, and so, like a lazy schoolgirl, I was looking forward to a fleshy narrative that would bring a dry history to life, like those short films they would show in English class where recognizable TV actors were featured in dramatizations of Stephen Crane or William Faulkner stories (which is not to say that Faulkner and Crane are dry). I can't say I was dying to read the book, but before I could get into it, my landlord called from the hospital. He could very well be dying, literally; he desperately wanted some reading material. I perused my library for something appropriate. I grabbed Will and Ariel Durant's *Caesar and Christ*, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (you never know), and I thought I'd better include *Memoirs of Hadrian*.

My landlord didn't even want the Durants' book in his hospital room because he resented them for assigning Alexander such a small plot of historical real estate, claiming that Alexander's contribution to history was his practice of shaving his beard so as not to provide the enemy with something to yank on during battle. Alexander and Antinous left beautiful corpses, I presume, while Hadrian, at least according to his memoirs, lived to experience swollen limbs and ruminate on the decay of his body – 'faithful companion and friend, truer and better known to me than my own soul'. Because it had been suggested that I address love and sex as a topic in this particular issue, I planned to enter the foreign territory of Hadrian to see what I could come up with, but as you can see, I had to sacrifice the book to someone who needed and wanted it more than I did. This left me in a panic. I am happy to wind up at love and sex eventually, but faced with the prospect of starting point-blank with them, I was suddenly confronted with my own frigidity.

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There's no getting around love and sex, but once they've been suggested, or worse yet, requested, getting right to them feels like an impossible and irritating demand. Sadly, those last remarks sound like the typical lament about lack of foreplay. I kept seeing, but never reading, articles about a young, first-time novelist, Lucinda Rosenfeld, who wrote a book, or memoir called *What She Saw ...* (Random House, 2000), about all the men in this thirtysomething-year-old's life. I thought why not go with the flow, and read the book that everyone's talking about, which is probably an extended version of Tracy Emin's tent or shack that everyone's talking about. I confess I couldn't go with the flow which, rather than a decided commitment to a contrarian stance, is starting to become a point of contention I have with myself. As far as I can tell, being contrarian does not promote either inner feelings of sexiness or outward feelings of horniness. But never mind sex, what about love? I decided to surf the Net, where sex is plentiful but love is a little out of place.

In any case, that's where I learned that bell hooks had recently written a book called *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow & Co., 1999). I figured I was destined to read this book that I didn't want to read when I saw it at a friend's house the following day. It's the kind of book that could very well be on Oprah Winfrey's reading list: it aims to heal. In the chapter called, 'Clarity: Give Love Words,' hooks criticizes popular self-help literature for not providing clear enough definitions of love, and for reinforcing sexist culture. The author admits to having bought many self-help books, which of course contributed very little in the way of actual change in her life. In the last several years, you have probably noticed that the self-help section of just about any bookstore has become gargantuan, and you may even have purchased one or two of the books stacked there. Whenever I spot those types of books in people's studios or homes, it's like seeing a porno magazine that has been inadvertently left in view. Most people know that it's a useless folly, or a guilty pleasure, to sit alone poring over their flawed characters while indulging fleeting hope in strategies for relief from same. (I wonder if they have an Idiots Guide to Curbing Masturbation). hooks notes that no vehicle exists in our culture for readers of self-help books to talk back to their authors, to let them know whether they have been useful, and goes on state, 'Using our consumer dollars to keep specific books on bestseller lists is no indication that these books actually help us.' I was totally surprised to see that in the very next paragraph she gets the definition of love she utilizes throughout her entire book from Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), one of the biggest-selling self-help titles. So I was hating, not loving, that I chose to read this book, and squeamishly plodded through each short yet broad, encouraging sentence.

By Chapter 5, hooks had referenced Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* (Harper & Row, 1956), which was the first book that popped to my head when searching for love – as subject matter – became a necessity. The tone and scope of Fromm's text, written almost fifty years ago, is surprisingly similar to hooks', except she is more explicitly feminist, whereas he has been criticized for letting his usual critique of gender roles go soft in this particular book. Fromm, who was a member of the Frankfurt school, wrote in extremely accessible language. As with hooks, though, that accessibility is not merely about finding the lowest common denominator. I started to feel like a jerk for my initial squeamishness, which really is cynicism, kind of intellectual chilliness. As I read through the last chapters of *All About Love*, I started to warm up. I started to open my mind to hooks' voice, which made it difficult to want to find fault. I remember right when I was starting to thaw, and to appreciate the goodwill of her authorship, a typo appeared in a sentence I didn't agree with. All at once I felt like a garden-variety neurotic, turned off during sex by the awareness of an insignificant blemish. Then I fully surrendered, and the rest is mostly private, even spiritual, and has to remain off the record.

When my landlord found out I would be travelling to Munich he asked if I could please visit the Glyptothek so I could take photographs of a very special sculpture of Alexander. When I arrived at the museum, I was completely shocked and disappointed to find out that they had mounted an exhibition about the history of the fig leaf, which meant that the genitalia in all the statues had been concealed. My documentation of Alexander would have to be incomplete.

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