

# Unacknowledged Desire(s): Fractures. Impressions. Holes.

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As part of Unacknowledged Loss II

A project on mourning and loss by Barbara Raes & HAU Hebbel am Ufer

In June, as post-lockdown Berlin was starting to discover the potential of a newly restricted social landscape, I had the opportunity to engage in an experience with nine artists: Ania Nowak, Colin Self, Dragana Bulut, Enis Turan, Falk Rößler, Joana Tischkau, Mmakgosi Kgabi, Nuray Demir and Olympia Bukkakis, who were participating in the Unacknowledged Loss residency, invited by Barbara Raes / Beyond the Spoken and hosted by HAU. As the theaters were closed to audiences, I was invited to create a five-minute experimental video of each artist, a portrait with the intention of glimpsing into their process. During this month-long residency, I met the artists and got to know their practice and how they were relating to this experience of being socially isolated for several months, and together, we discussed what we considered to be the acknowledged losses in our lives.

In Berlin, during the lockdown period, we were lucky enough to be allowed to go out on walks with one other person. I went for a walk every week with Andre, our conversations unfolding like an exquisite corpse, always picking up where we left off. We met in the Platz between our homes. Andre brought me homemade peanut butter. I brought them hash cookies. We would talk about relationships to loss, to an unknown, and to our intergenerational experience. We would talk about age, love and how we recognize queer kin. How we are kin. How there is too much language and yet not enough. How queer histories will continue to resonate during a period where it seems unavoidable to mourn a future we are not supposed to know.

Here, we share some impressions. Discursive. Experimental. Emotional. Incomplete and always in motion. Inspired by the artists I had the privilege to spend time with in June. Inspired by their work and their beautiful urgent insights. Inspired by questions that state the obvious. Inspired by the potential between people who take the time to make each other feel seen. Inspired by our walks. Our coping mechanisms. Inspired by our care. How to intervene the automatic turn to notions of death when processing notions of loss.

## Cutting our Loss(es)

A slight brush against a stranger's arm. The moment one pulls out of a hole. The hollow impression of a hole that is left full. An active mourning that has not yet manifested. The dominant decides the submissive has had enough. The submissive consents. T-shirt weather in the middle of December. Longing as an entity

occupying the space between bodies. When the story stops. Feeling seen. Performing constantly. When the term "greenhouse effect" was first used in 1901. When an animal comes out of another animal. When the plenum disperses. When community is only about feeling important and not actually about community. When familiar love becomes a stranger. When a moment of rocking turns into a moment of shaking. In 1896, the first quantitative prediction of global warming due to a hypothetical doubling of atmospheric carbon dioxide was made. Cleaning your house. Playing the piano in front of the sunset. Boundaries opening up portals rather than close down potential. A constant shifting state of an unknown. Rooted simultaneously in the individual and the collective. Opaque histories. Bodies. Politics and desires that continue to be under attack, deeply exhausted from explaining, at war, fucked, loved, invisible, privately adored, shamefully desired, overworked from ticking boxes and tirelessly resisting. When unconditional love means showing up. The vibrator as a tool to cure female hysteria. Sharing a meal with no end and no beginning. When reparations are systemically racist and assist as a political crutch to help countries refuse their deep colonialist histories. Only you can know your own broken heart. Saying what you feel. Riding your bike across the city. The wind on the back of your hand as you are being driven into dusk. A sharp axe in the hand of a passionate artist. Hacking your own narrative. The effort it takes to stay effortlessly still. Everything that is ambiguous and atonal. Collapsing. When you are doing well at work. An empty darkroom with all the lights on. When the heat of summer suddenly transitions into the coolness of autumn. When experiencing cold feels like the first time. A hiss inward. Sinking teeth and nails and bones into longing. Chasms and craters and folds and deserts. When vowels and nouns and adjectives become abstract. When panting turns into silence. When the air is unusually quiet and shy. The language and memories of worlds some claim never have been realized or thought about before right now. The realities of people who have always lived in these worlds. The majority that can't bear the transparency. A majority who never had to consider edging a state of apocalypse. Industrialization. The invention of the dildo. A new tattoo. When the things we have been discussing hypothetically are right in front of us. When relevance is irrelevant. When one stops referring to a "we" and an "us".

## Mourning a Future

I've had my palm read two times, about ten years apart. Each time, the reader told me different things, and I realized it is because the lines in our hands change with age. They shift with experience. The lines redirect and get older, more used, more known. They slowly burn into our palms like perfect embers that will only go out when you put them out yourself.

"The beginning of a new era", "a threshold humanity must cross", a loss, a hole, an apocalypse.

This year is marked by the big change-energy of the edging of a Saturn, Jupiter and Pluto threesome. Despite the neoliberal attempts to trivialize and individuate astrological information through sun-sign-based life-predictions, love-compatibilities and smartphone horoscope apps, astrology positions us within a collective organism, drawing a map of losses, of energies, potentials and existing tensions, exposing strategies favorable to turning desired fictions into realities.

The year 2020 has been long talked and written about among astrologers as a warning about the personal, political and societal foundations that the planets would come to shake up, shifts that will continue to unfold over the next thirty years. Most planets this year have been transiting through Capricorn, often known as the Patriarch, who holds systems of governance and of economy that demand structure, like its ruling planet Saturn. On January 12th this year, a day after the first registered Covid-19-related death in China, as the world awoke to hear about an outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, Saturn and Pluto were conjunct in Capricorn. This hadn't happened since 1518, the year the Portuguese authorized the first direct slave trade from Africa to the Americas. Saturn-Pluto conjunctions happen roughly every thirty years in a different sign, and they underline moments of incredible significance: the start of World War I and World War II, the cultural revolution of the 60s (when they joined in Libra, the sign of relationships), or the previous instance in the 80s during the economic recession.

This year's astrology unlocks energies that have not inhabited the skies in centuries, that excavate, expose and attempt to dismantle the deep roots of an unfair system of rules, social divisions and justice. If the Pluto in Scorpio generation has come to highlight and destabilize deep-rooted views of hetero-patriarchal sexuality and binary gender-coding; if the Pluto in the Sagittarius era has come to explode the travel industry and ways to communicate, connect and learn internationally; then, Pluto in Capricorn (until 2024) comes directly against the stiff, dated, violent systems of governance themselves. Pluto, in Capricorn, has spent the year in conjunction with Jupiter (the last peak coming in November 12th). In the past, this conjunction was active during the Plague of Athens around 400 BC, the Black Death in the 14th century, the Russian Plague of 1771 and the 1918 flu pandemic; it was also peaking in Libra during the HIV outbreak in 1981.

Olympia said, "I think I am mourning a future." Enis was concerned with the temporality of grieving. Joana posed questions around disconnection to death. Colin and I sat in Görlitzer Park

discussing caretaking and political burnout. Mmakgosi invited me in for tea and we engaged about maintaining the balance between showing up for yourself and the people in your life. Nuray and I agreed that the loss of language continues to be woven through the fabric of our lives. Ania reflected on the notion of granting oneself permission in order to experience loss. "How can we make lost histories visible? What is a historical loss?" Falk asked. Dragana left me thinking about the privilege and luxury of time and space to consider what unacknowledged losses are, and in the most beautiful way, how grief is simply not a remarkable experience.

Grief is what is felt in the immediate moment of loss. A reaction to loss. Mourning is what comes after grief. A state of mourning could last seconds or decades. It could last lifetimes. Mourning is often referred to as a collective experience, whereas grief is articulated as an individual state.

Loss could be like a prescribed burn. An intentional fire set to regenerate a forest. Ash to nourish future growth. Indentation as foundation. A pillar. A new seed. A re-building of community. Future fires. A transparent layer facilitating an acknowledgment of what is not yet lost, what can still be seen, and feel seen. Controlled burning can stimulate germination and reveal the minerals in layers of soil. Some pinecones only open up and spread seeds when exposed to fire. Artists don't just ignite prescribed burns; artists are controlled fires. Artists navigate an ambiguous state of hyper-relevancy and irrelevancy. Extreme visibility and invisibility. Artists labor under an unacknowledged system of class created by a system of hierarchies. The audience. The technicians. The administration. The office. The curator. The programmer. The assistant director. The director. The board of trustees. The donors. When the museum must become a hospice, and the artist serves as a doula, who will take care of whom? Who will clear the empty stage? How will the walls get painted? Who will prepare the house? And why are these questions only futures presented in the form of questions, rather than prompts towards a slow, sustainable, prescribed burn?

Planets are beyond human, beyond linear predictions. The fall toward techno-dystopia is as close as the one toward humanitarian revolution. The next three months are horny for strengthening collective structures and actions, a shedding of past individual dreams and ambitions as irrelevant, a profound use of the transformative energies the skies are bringing, to conjure into plausible reality the political fictions hypothetically dreamed of for decades. As cycles shift in the skies, terrestrial cycles must also shift from a managerial annihilation of bodies toward another kind of somatic fiction; before the same fictions triumph again and imprint their destruction into this new cycle of lived reality, before the dream of a metamorphic revolution becomes simply formless, failing, again, to fully take shape.

Astrology as a guide, a tool, a soothsayer, but not an answer. Wondering when to choose the right moment. When we act too

slowly. When we intervene too quickly. The haste to fix. The urgency to fight. The need to be heard. To write. The pressure to make. To be seen. To be heard. To be useful. When usefulness becomes problematic. When caring unintentionally becomes a rock in the wheel. When loving is so painful, it stops motion. How to responsibly take up space. Edging the burn out. Not wasting time. The appropriate time to call. But then, missing that appropriate time because you waited too long. Too long to express your love. Too long to exercise your outrage. Too long to measure safety and risk. Will there ever be a right moment?

## KADDISH/ FADO MENOR

*Dreaming back thru life, Your time – and mine accelerating toward Apocalypse, the final moment – the flower burning in the Day – and what comes after. – ‘Kaddish’ by Allen Ginsberg*

Apocalypse is one of the main concepts our language has destroyed. Apocalypse as a shift, a major change, a chapter torn over; apocalypse not innately as destruction, as ending, as finale.

“I think every generation feels they are on the brink of some kind of apocalypse,” my father said to me. But what I think he never expected to experience in his lifetime was his own loss of faith in democracy. No doubt, this is a highly privileged position to have for three quarters of one’s life. However, for my dad, a now retired lawyer who balanced his professional life between polar opposites – such as anti-death penalty politics, prison reform and running a legal organization for the underserved in New York City while also representing oil companies (for example) – the idea that democracy could be a mirage is a kind of apocalypse.

Typically I speak to my father and stepmother once a month. A simple check-in, which almost always leads to me stoking the fire regarding politics, queer stuff or whatever it is I am reading that moment. Like me, my Dad can’t walk away from a good argument. As I said to a previous partner the first time I introduced him to my family, “Don’t be alarmed. We are Jews. It sounds like we are screaming, but we are just talking.”

After 13 years of living in Berlin, I finally felt the epigenetic roots of my German-Jewish history creep in. I emphasize finally here, because I always wondered when this would happen. I spent a good part of the last decade arguing with my father about my decision to move to Berlin. “You can’t be serious about making a life for yourself in Germany,” my Dad often said. During the early lockdown period, I lay in my bedroom and stared at the painting of my Great Oma, Fanny. The portrait of her that hangs over my bed was one of the only objects sewn into the lining of the vehicle that my family used to flee Berlin, and my Oma, who made me sit in front of this portrait of her mother at Shabbat dinner every Friday night, left it to me when she died. Ap-

parently, I look exactly like her, and as I spent many afternoons gazing into the eyes of my Great Grandmother, for the first time in my life I wondered if she found the unknown as unbearable as I did. For Fanny, I can only imagine, the unknown manifested in questions regarding where the family would end up, if they would make it out of Germany safely, and eventually, whether they would find a way to be together again. For me, the unknown has become an open ended portal. A portal in the form of a car wash, relentlessly sprayed and scrubbed with my family’s past, present and future. Ancestral feelings coupled with a notion of privilege, however false this notion may be, that I feel safer in the country that exterminated my ancestors, a country my father tried to stop me from moving to, while my parents, my sister and my friends back in my home country of the United States continue to face an unprecedented political unknown.

To compare my Oma’s history to mine right now is of course impossible. Comparing histories is a dangerous game. I’m obviously in a more secure place than she was in 1933. I am not on the run. I can openly be Jewish. Be a queer. Be a genderless body to the community I stand with. And unlike so many in the global reality of this moment, upon first sight, for now, I can still pass. I am White. I can be read as cis-gendered female. And I know that I can use these positions toward access if I want to. Many European friends have asked me how the United States could be exploding into riots during such an intense pandemic: “Aren’t people under strict lockdown?” they asked. I explained there is no choice. They die one way or the other, so they die fighting.

I came to Berlin to give myself a second mourning after the death of my mother. To mourn in the city that her mother left and spent her life mourning over, but would never talk about. It was the only way I could feel close to her after she died. And it was the only way I could be in control of my own mourning. I often say that I came to Berlin in search of a Jewish diaspora I never had, but rather found a queer diaspora. But now I ask myself how my queer diaspora and my Jewish diaspora are of the same, and how can this be useful?

In Kaddish, Allen Ginsberg writes a mourning ritual about his mother Naomi in the form of a poem. Inspired by the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer recited while in a state of mourning, Ginsberg makes sense of his relationship with his mother, a Holocaust survivor, as well as his queerness and her decline towards death. My mother was also named Naomi. Over the lockdown period, I began to write my own Kaddish, a ritual for myself, my mother, and the queerness she refused to acknowledge in me:

*Strange now to think of you, 14 years gone, 14 years later,  
gone without your version of corsets and eyes. Girdles and  
Mitsouko.*

*Once a day, while I walk on  
the cool March pavements of Berlin, I make daily voice  
recordings of love letters between famous artists to send to  
my friends, embarrassed by my broken heart, incensed by an*

*impending unknown.*

*I've been up all night discussing this foreign feeling  
tethered to concepts of 'home country'.*

*I have only gone back to blood family ties. To the ones who  
are left.*

*Your husband. My Father. A lawyer who wanted to be a rabbi.  
He refuses to say 'Next year in Jerusalem' at the end of every  
Seder, as though a collective hope by a family of Jews will  
end decades of violence.*

*Your Daughter. My Sister. She gardens each day with soul and  
grace. She waits for doctors. She waits for answers.*

*I felt relief when you died. Loss echoes as I recall your laugh,  
and sings the ends of my ego. My broken German with an ac-  
cent of Yiddish. Naomi, speaking your mother tongue, like a  
song. German was a language of violence. A book of secrets  
you locked away from your children. A lexicon of symbols and  
codes that you only spoke with your parents, the only Ger-  
mans I knew for half my life.*

My mother always refers to the moment I left home at 15 as the moment she lost me. When I was a child, my mother visited an astrologer and tarot reader and was told she had to accept that I needed to be far away in order to go into the depths of myself, that there were things she wouldn't be able to teach me, that I would find them through other kin I'd make across life. She speaks of that as knowing my loss, and speaks of my loss with joy and with pride and a tinge of melancholy. The same mix of emotions that characterizes fado (meaning "destiny" or "faith" in Latin), known as a Portuguese traditional music genre, but whose roots are thought to come from Indigenous populations in Brazil and West Africa – rhythms, melodies and chants practiced by Muslim communities now stolen and erased of history through Christian-colonial invasion.

Over the past nine or so years, since disclosing my queerness (or, if I have to call it that, "coming out"), conversations with my Dad have fractured the threshold of male-socialized familiarity into a vulnerability we hadn't shared before. He called me a few months after I had moved to London to apologize for his silence and prolonged processing, telling me he had been angry, he struggled to understand why – after all he worked to give me and my brother more chances, after us having been born much lighter than he was, almost passing – I had to choose hardship for myself.

I cannot begin to imagine the loss, and the apocalypses, that someone born in 1959 Mozambique, under Portuguese dictatorship as colonial rule, has experienced. Someone who between five and 15 years of age lived in a military dispute over land, the same land he was taught as nation, same nation he was presented as his. Someone who was forced to renounce their nationality and assets to escape conflict and decimation, someone who upon arriving in Europe has had his dream shattered by sedimented impressions of race that reboot the same apocalyptic cycle our systems have been nurturing for cen-

turies, the same he tried to escape from. Seeing Portugal descend, from afar and over the past eight years, into mass-tourification and rampant neo-fascism under the international disguise of a "socialist" government, I can only begin to imagine from afar, fifty years later, the floods in Mozambique destroying the homes of our family there, hear of the Jihadi invasions close to his hometown, all whilst the pandemic kept spreading.

It feels impossible to begin to understand my dad's and my history of displacement and migration as part of the same timeline of events, events that surpass both our human existences. Impossible to derive from the privilege that having been born in Europe, even if Southern, lays on my every move. At the same time, in different shades and different eras of the same linear temporality, we're two Brown bodies navigating a system that violently enforces itself as White. I moved away from Portugal in 2012, when the financial crisis peaked and Northern Europe managed to avoid a big part of its recession by tearing down the Southern and Mediterranean economies of its Union, I had "no future". Dad and I are two genealogically connected bodies who saw a future at loss, and in loss. We have a whole different framework for our existence, our own sets of privileges and oppressions, but we have much in common: We both moved based on false promises, we both worked 70 hours a week or more under illegal contracts, we both were harassed and attacked in the street, we both resorted to sex work at times, we both went days with no food, we both deal with the undermining of our abilities and responsibility and skills, and we both exist in code-switching and retracted anger, forever chasing a failed sense of safety.

I speak to my parents nearly every week, sometimes twice in a week. We have a very close, open and honest relationship. I was born into a long line of police officers: both parents, two grandparents, uncles, aunts and some cousins. I, however, see the police as the state's way of weaponizing people's need for a stable income, pitting poor people against each other to distract from the real underpinnings of violence.

When I spoke with my mother over the past few months, as I made peanut butter and my mother tried to pass the time in isolation for 20-something days battling coronavirus, we spoke about the Black Lives Matter movement, about abolition, about defunding the police and the restructuring of security and policing budgets, both military and civil forces, nationally and EU-wide. We spoke of the rapid rise of fascist populism, united under political parties heavily supported by these state authorities. As protests have unfolded and racist voices grow stronger and stronger in the force and the country at large, I watched my mother's core foundation get crushed, the image of her work fractured as she slid into a major depression over her 36 years of naive complacency. I don't think my White mother deserves pity. Her awakening is nothing short of late. But what I know is that my mother should've been a social worker, a trauma counsellor, a caretaker; the fact she had to put on a blue uniform to somewhat do that work is profound economic mismanagement.



Fado menor is the subgenre of fado reserved for songs about longing, mourning, death, solitude and resignation. It's the only fado I ever really enjoyed, that I would go to see live in small bars across Lisbon when I felt the waves of grief, that I sometimes listen to now when I lay in the melancholy of complicated family histories, of acquired losses, of privileged geographies and the inescapable hole of distance.

They tell me they're happy I'm in Berlin, that I'd probably get much better care here were I to become sick, should my asthma or my bronchitis make me one of the more severe cases. It's a bittersweet safety, when hospitals back home cannot afford to function properly due to cuts brought up ten years ago to pay a debt, and extreme interest, in a big part to restore German economy.

*“Mas não sabes fazer preces  
não tens saudade nem pranto  
por que é que tu me aborreces  
por que é que eu te quero tanto*

*És para meu desespero  
como as nuvens que andam altas  
todos os dias te espero  
todos os dias me faltas”*

Fado Menor, Amalia Rodrigues

In 2017, when I gathered 40 members of my queer community and brought them over for a collective wedding ceremony in my parent's home in rural Portugal, my mother sobbed that she got to know another family of mine and thanked them for filling up the holes in me that her own experience didn't stretch enough to cover. Is the act of living just an accumulation of experiences and sensations toward filling all the holes we're born into, or born with? The feeling of loss as a reminder that some holes aren't meant to be filled, or that all holes have always been full, but full of a complicated matter we don't recognize as whole?

## **No End. No Middle. No Beginning.**

The excitement of not knowing where somebody is gonna touch you next. The anxiety of not knowing when somebody is gonna touch you next – if somebody is gonna touch you next. The post-coital exhale, a cumshot in vapor form. In 1944, Harvard Mark I, the first success in automated computation research, is built with investment from the U.S military force. Breathy whispering in someone's ears. Knowing desire before knowing displacement. Biting. Natural landscapes pre-Windows XP default wallpaper. Body hair interlaced between skins that aren't in contact. Hook-ups who never sent a location pin. Not being fictionalized. Not existing in reality. Two rings of anal muscle squeezing spit out of my tongue. Being washed-out, wiped-out, whited-out. Thirtythree degrees and not needing to book for the pool. It's 2020 and White people do reading lists against racism as a form of activism. Shared nail-polish. Consent as a shifting practice of interpersonal care and not as a stiff, threatening, state mandate. Dipping my licked spoon in my friend's ramen broth. Having my butt-cheeks spread open by hands that aren't mine. Knowing pleasure before knowing worry. Being a tombstone made of flesh and bones and fat and cum but managing. Wanting to fuck and actually fucking. When parks had more grass and trees than broken bottles and condom wrappers. When the reliable cruising spots still existed. Not mourning a whole ecosystem. Not knowing one's history. The indentations in memory accelerating doubts over whether you have ever been touched at all. Drifting into loving. Can a human tongue stretch long enough to reach the inner ring of a sphincter? Reaching it anyway. Protests that feel like protesting. Sending letters in envelopes closed with saliva. Knowing orgasm before knowing doom. Seeing my grandma not over Zoom. In 1989, the World Wide Web was invented. Seeing a star shine before it goes extinct. Eating tomatoes that grew on an apartment balcony. Lying in loneliness as something extraordinary. Smiling to the cashier in the supermarket. Learning to smile with my eyes. The disquiet of many voices speaking at the same time but not knowing what they're saying. The fact that language became even more essential and inescapable. The depressing reliance of “The world's biggest bookshop”. Being dominated before being desolated. Not knowing what to do with oneself and others, what to do with oneself amongst others. Fugitivity from cyclicity. Renewed language for the same hatred. Wanting to be patient with good intentions. Cleaning your hands in your sheets like a teenager after jerking off. The same narrative for a different time of the same political intentions. Doing your laundry. Hoping is not a good tactic. Saying “we need to stick together”. Hypocritical desire lies at the root of queerness. A feeling. Not an idea. Not a philosophy. Not a theory. It is not concrete, or easily defined. There is not a clear definition or obvious conclusion. And like emotional time and space, it is not quantifiable.