

**13. Nov – 14. Nov 2023**

**University of Copenhagen,  
South Campus, Room: 4A.0.56**

# Phenomenological Workshop

# Love and Sexuality

**Keynote Speakers:**

**Ellie Anderson**

*In Defense of Sartre's 'Woman on a Date':  
Erotic Ambivalence and Bad Faith*

**Sara Heinämaa**

*Desire and drive: Two modes of pre-intentional consciousness*

**Organised by:**

*Tris Hedges (University of Copenhagen) &  
Ellie Anderson (Pomona College)*

**Full programme and registration:**



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## Programme

### Day 1: Monday 13<sup>th</sup> November (CET)

09:15 - 09:30	Opening remarks
09:30 - 10:45	<p><b>[Keynote] Ellie Anderson</b> - In Defense of Sartre's 'Woman on a Date': Erotic Ambivalence and Bad Faith</p> <p><i>Chair: Tris Hedges</i></p>
10:45 - 11:00	Break
11:00 - 12:45	<p><b>Luke Brunning</b> – Sexual Attraction</p> <p><b>Nikolaas Cassidy-Deketelaere</b> - Love and Nature: Questioning the Paradigm of Heterosexuality in Contemporary French Phenomenology</p> <p><b>Michael Nelson &amp; Robin Jeshion</b> - Loving: The Telos of Sexual Desire</p> <p><i>Chair:</i></p>
12:45 - 13:45	Lunch
13:45 - 15:30	<p><b>Gary Foster</b> - Desire and Identity in Sartre</p> <p><b>Yixuan Wu</b> - "Yellow Fever" and Vicarious Desire</p> <p><b>Clara Moreton</b> - Simulacra of Women: Trans Fetishism as 'Thin Recognition'</p> <p><i>Chair:</i></p>
15:30 - 15:45	Break
15:45 - 17:30	<p><b>Matthew Robson</b> - The experience and value of being infatuated</p> <p><b>Heidi Knechtel</b> - Obstruction of the 'Romantic Situation': A Phenomenological and Existential Analysis of the Neuroscience of Romantic Love</p> <p><b>Mark Burgess</b> - How transformative experiences of sexual pleasure alter self-understanding: from concealed and deficient to revealed and proficient.</p> <p><i>Chair: Ellie Anderson</i></p>



## Day 2: Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> November (CET)

9:15 10:30	-	<p><b>[Keynote] Sara Heinämaa</b> - Desire and Drive: Two Modes of (Pre-)intentional Consciousness</p> <p><i>Chair: Tris Hedges</i></p>
10:30 10:45	-	<p><b>Break</b></p>
10:45 12:30	-	<p><b>James Martell</b> - Gender and Pleasure Surfaces in Malabou's Phenomenology</p> <p><b>Shimeng Wang</b> - Face and Hands: A Phenomenological Reading of Representation in Amateur Lesbian Porn</p> <p><b>Brad Harmon</b> - "No pic, no chat": On the Phenomenology of Cruising and the Ethical Negotiations of Grindr</p> <p><i>Chair: Ellie Anderson</i></p>
12:30 12:45	-	<p><b>Closing Remarks</b></p>



## Keynotes

### Ellie Anderson

*Pomona College, California*

[Research profile](#)

#### **In Defense of Sartre's 'Woman on a Date': Erotic Ambivalence and Bad Faith**

Within both philosophy and public discourse, sexual ethics has recently come to highlight something that queer theory and psychoanalysis have long suggested: namely, that sexual encounters often involve quite a lot of mixed feelings, even when consensual and mutually desired. Moreover, individuals may have mixed feelings about whether they desire to enter into a sexual encounter in the first place, and understanding these feelings in the presence of another person can be challenging. This is especially the case in situations where potential partners do not know each other well and are differently positioned by virtue of social privileges and power. With these insights in mind, I offer a feminist reading of one of the examples of bad faith that Jean-Paul Sartre develops in *Being and Nothingness*: a woman goes out with a man for the first time and refuses to recognize his sexual overtures as such. This example has long been vilified by feminists, with Michèle Le Dœuff arguing that Sartre's example evinces "the classic authoritarianism of a man." I argue, against Le Dœuff, that this example offers a rich phenomenological account of erotic ambivalence, particularly its temporal and self-relational structure.

### Sara Heinämaa

*University of Jyväskylä*

[Research profile](#)

#### **Desire and Drive: Two Modes of (Pre-)Intentional Consciousness**

The paper offers an original new analysis of the intentional and temporal structures of desire and compares these structures to those of love, on the one hand, and drives, on the other. I will explicate the object-directionality, temporality and dynamism of desire, and thereby draw attention to a crucial similarity between desire and disgust. Finally, I will, on this basis, illuminate a possible variant of desire that Simone de Beauvoir calls "feminine". Phenomenological results are illuminated and concretized by historical-philosophical insights, drawn from Descartes and Plato.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### Luke Brunning

*University of Leeds*

#### **Sexual Attraction**

Sexual attraction, that illusive sense of being drawn to someone as a sexual possibility, is often thought of as a prerequisite for good sex. But this ideal can be complicated along two distinct dimensions. First, sexual attraction is absent for some people. Asexual people, do not experience sexual attraction or experience it often, but may experience sexual desire and have sex. Demisexual people do experience sexual attraction, but in a reactive way or as a consequence of prior emotional intimacy. Sex workers may not be sexually attracted to their clients. Experience of attraction also alter over the lifecycle as people change. These experiences of absent or diminished attraction are not always accompanied by feelings of loss. That said, feminist critics are wary of the idea that sex without attraction is acceptable for everyone. The idea that women, especially, might acquiesce to sex without feeling attracted to their partner also underpins much intimate dissatisfaction. The second dimension of complexity concerns the content of attraction and our orientation to that content. Although sexual attraction is often seen as a necessary for good sex, some forms of attraction seem objectifying or manifest oppressive social attitudes. We can pose general questions about the predominance of visual articulations of sexual attraction and how that modality is structured around the male gaze. More specifically, we might worry when someone is sexually attracted to us in virtue of certain body parts, in virtue of contingent features (dress, bodily ornament), in virtue of our race, our body size, our presence or absence of a physical disability. These cases raise questions about whether and to what extent we can be held responsible for our sexual attractions, and whether some forms of attraction ought to be absent for good sex to occur. They also prompt us to consider the possibility of a stronger question; namely, could it be preferable in some contexts to desire sex on the basis of non-sexual attractions if sexual attraction is liable to be narrow or shaped by problematic social norms? That said, we also face the broader worry about the historical desire to encourage people to change the shape of their sexual attraction through conversion therapy. Noting these tensions has inherent value, but the real challenge is to develop an analysis of sexual attraction which tells us what it is, exactly, how it relates to other attractions, sexual desire and activity, and which helps us evaluate whether sexual attraction is a necessary feature of good sex. In this talk I shall work towards such an analysis, exploring the idea that we can develop an affordance analysis of sexual attraction. I will suggest that this provides us with a clearer sense of what sexual attraction is, how it relates to desire for sex, how sexual attraction is related to other forms of attraction, and when – if at all – sexual attraction plays the normative role of ensuring our sexual attention focuses on someone as an individual in the right way. This analysis also helps us understand what is at stake in cases where people experience little or no sexual attraction but nevertheless want to have sex.

### Nikolaas Cassidy-Deketelaere

*KU Leuven*

#### **Love and Nature: Questioning the Paradigm of Heterosexuality in Contemporary French Phenomenology**

From Emmanuel Levinas onwards, love has been a central topic for the current generation of French phenomenologists. However, the accounts they provide of this phenomenon are curiously heteronormative. To name but two examples: Emmanuel Falque's account of love presents this phenomenon entirely in terms of the organic coming together of differently sexed, male and female bodies; Jean-Luc Marion, meanwhile, offers an ostensibly phenomenological account of





love that nevertheless closely resembles the Catechism of the Catholic Church's understanding of the sacrament of marriage. Even more remarkably, in doing so, the latter explicitly refers to homosexuality as a 'perversion' of the very concept of love and directly compares it to bestiality. In general, moreover, when contemporary French phenomenologists present accounts of 'love', what turns out to be actually at issue in them is usually not love but sexuality—as if the sexual act would exhaustively define the phenomenon of love (to the exclusion of parental love, friendship, celibate love, etc.). This heteronormativity which takes the relationship between a man and a woman as the paradigm for the analysis of the experience of love, as well as artificially limiting this experience to that of sexuality, does not simply constitute a political problem, but also fundamentally compromises the field's methodological foundations: given the reality and authenticity of queer experiences of love—including, but not limited to, sexual love—an account that is unable to accommodate them by definition lacks the required phenomenological rigour. This is especially evidenced by the fact that, far from being 'reduced', the category of 'nature' mysteriously re-emerges in these contemporary authors as a pseudo-phenomenological parallel to the 'normal' that has been so thoroughly deconstructed elsewhere. What ought to characterise a sound phenomenological account, however, is that it reduces or 'brackets' both of these. This paper therefore diagnoses the problem posed by the heteronormativity of contemporary French phenomenology by engaging it from the perspective of critical theory, drawing in particular on Georges Canguilhem. It argues that the phenomenological method is instead an inherently queer one, precisely because it exists in the operation of the 'reduction', which must first of all mean disregarding any socially constructed 'normality' or divinely ordered 'nature'. Indeed, as Edmund Husserl occasionally indicates in certain cryptic remarks, the reduction ought to be understood as giving way to a field of consciousness that could perfectly well be described as itself eminently 'queer'.

## **Michael Nelson & Robin Jeshion**

*University of California & University of Southern California*

### **Loving: The Telos of Sexual Desire**

What is the relationship between sex and erotic love? Against many contemporary trends, we advance the thesis that there is a deep constitutive phenomenologically routed connection between the two. We develop this thesis by drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, and Buber, together with contemporary scientific research in cognitive science, social psychology, and philosophy of mind. The thesis has many consequences. In this paper, we explore how it impacts sexual ethics, in particular the commodification of sex. We argue that the link between sexual desire and love contributes to showing that there is a *prima facie* intrinsic moral wrong with sex commodification. In saying there is an intrinsic moral wrong, we mean that sex's commodification, for both seller and buyer, harms our relation with others and oneself. This thesis is strongly feminist, but it contrasts with the most influential contemporary feminist critiques of sexual commodification. Extrinsic critiques, like those of MacKinnon, rests on the claim that sex markets are oppressive and exploitative because of the vast gender inequalities of our society. These arguments do not turn essentially on the specific nature of sexual experience itself, on the structure of sexual desire, and its existential meaning, including how it connects us with others and ourselves. The wrong is entirely grounded in the contingent extrinsic social arrangements in which the sex market is embedded. Our thesis connecting sex and love suggests another, different, source of the wrong of the commodification of sex. Our analysis of sexual desire draws on several main theses from Merleau-Ponty. One is that the body is a "primordial" unity for the dualities of mental and physical, active and passive, and subject and object. Our body is also essentially sexual and our mode of existence is sexualized; what we are as human beings is



sexual beings. A second is that sexual desire is relational and anti-solipsistic, in that its object is another whole person and not gratification and pleasure. Sexual desire is how we confront other embodied persons as both subject and object, relating to their bodies as entities seen, touched, and felt while at the same time thinking, volitional and emotive beings. For him, as for us, sexual desires are not fulfilled by mere physical stimulation. Last, sexual desire essentially involves objectification of both another and of oneself. Our final thesis concerns the connection between sex and love. Drawing on Scheler and Buber and contemporary theorists on the nature of love, we argue that sexual desire's telos is a loving connection to another person. We tie all these points together to establish a thesis about an intrinsic moral harm in sexual commodification: Love, the "real" aim of sex, cannot be and ought not be bought and sold. When it is, it involves moral harms to self and others, including alienation. Thus, sexual expression that deviates from sexual desire's telos ought not be commodified. We close by briefly addressing obvious counterexamples, like the status of morally neutral masturbation and innocent casual sex, digisexuality (sex with robots), and the question of how consent impacts our argument.

## Gary Foster

*Wilfrid Laurier University*

### **Desire and Identity in Sartre**

The concept of desire permeates Sartre's major work *Being and Nothingness*. Desire in all its forms including love and sexual desire, are expressions of a more general desire which he calls the *desire to be*. Desire continues to be a theme in Sartre's later work, but the complexion of the desire changes.

One way of understanding the fundamental human desire in Sartre's work is to see it as a desire for, or an attempt to gain, an identity. Indeed, the key terms which characterize Sartre's account of human existence such as "original choice" and "fundamental project" point to the *personal* or *individual* dimension of a project which he characterizes as universal – the desire to be God.

Sartre's existential psychoanalysis, both as he presents it in proposal form near the end of *Being and Nothingness* and as he attempts to exemplify it in biographical works on Genet and Flaubert and the autobiographical work called *The Words*, aims to identify an individual's project or, as Sartre also calls it, their *fundamental attitude* towards existence. This project of being as Sartre elucidates it appears also to be a project of identity. To understand a person such as Flaubert, is to understand the choice or attitude which shapes or determines his identity as well as his character.

Love and sexual desire play a role in both shaping and discovering one's identity particularly through the concrete experiences of the *look* and the *caress*. It is through the look of the other that I begin to see myself as a self or as something/someone that can be *identified* in the world. I see myself as an object for others and that object is my *self* or my *consciousness* reified. Further, through the experience of the caress, I experience the bodily aspect of my identity. Through the touch of the other I experience myself as an embodied conscious for whom sexual desire is central to my being-for-others.

In this presentation I explore the ways that Sartre's notion of desire implies a desire to be a self or to have an identity. That identity, furthermore, is an embodied one, a point which is often overlooked in Sartre's work, since work on the body and embodiment in phenomenology is typically associated with the writings of Merleau-Ponty.





## Yixuan Wu

*University of Michigan*

### **“Yellow Fever” and Vicarious Desire**

In Merleau-Ponty's discussion of sexuality, he places an emphasis on the individual's ability to project before themselves a sexual world, and put themselves in an erotic situation (1962, 181). This paper applies this notion of sexual agency to the phenomenon of racial fetish, specifically, "yellow fever", to better understand the nature of this phenomenon. I use "yellow fever" to denote the sexual preference for Asian women. I suggest that "yellow fever" is a way of looking which can be theorised by Frye's notion of "arrogant perception" (1983), a way of perceiving others with a set of standards in reference to the seer's interests, which is done by manipulating the definitions of good and bad. This is in contrast to the "loving eye", which is a way of looking that presupposes the independence and complexity of the perceived person. This paper argues that the perceived person under the logic of racial fetish lacks sexual agency because the sexual world they project before themselves is vicarious. This is because when the perceived person operates under this skewed system of value, her desire does not extend through space, and she experiences desire according to the script written by the logic of racial fetish, where she is a subject constructed in a certain way. In the case of "yellow fever", the Asian woman is constructed as pliable, tamed and docile. In other words, the desire is projected from the white man, and the Asian woman returns his desire back toward him. Thus it is not that yellow fever turns the Asian woman into an "object" who does not experience desire, but that her desire is vicarious. This paper builds on Zheng's influential piece (2016) on why yellow fever is problematic by proposing that the wrongness also lies in that yellow fever is an ideological device which divests Asian women of sexual agency. To have sexual agency means that the desire towards others should emanate from the person herself, rather than being a return or reflection of others' desire.

## Clara Moreton

*University of Essex*

### **Simulacra of Women: Trans Fetishism as ‘Thin Recognition’**

Trans fetishisation represents a particularly difficult case for contemporary feminist thought, but an investigation into this phenomenon reveals a recognition relationship which has yet to be explored. In order for someone to fetishise a trans woman as a trans woman, it is necessary that the fetishist actively desires a woman specifically because she is trans. In this article, I argue that contemporary many feminist accounts of misogyny and sexual objectification fail to account for transmisogynistic fetishism because recognition and misrecognition are conceived as always opposed. That is, trans women are recognised as women and are subject to misogyny in light of this, or are misrecognised in a way that might itself be misogynistic. This binary, I argue, cannot account for the particular kind of misogyny faced by trans women when fetishised, which hinges on the way that the recognition of trans women as women is precarious and instrumentalized. I argue that the specific fetish for trans women lies in a ‘fantasy of creation’ which is not quite recognition as ordinarily understood, but neither can it be misrecognition. This fantasy of creation lies in a belief that this woman's womanhood is entirely dependent on his desire for her. This kind of recognition relationship is what I term ‘thin recognition,’ following Merleau-Ponty's sense of ‘thickness.’ Thickness is, for Merleau-Ponty, the sense that what I see in the world has more to it than is directly available to my senses—that what I perceive is there, for the world and for other people. Thin recognition is thus recognition that sees itself as wholly constituting what it recognises. The trans fetishist only recognises a trans woman as a woman insofar as he is attracted to her and ‘makes’ her a woman. He does not recognise a trans woman being a woman independently of him, as for herself and for others. Rather, he takes her as a woman of his own making. This thin recognition allows men to fetishise trans women while retaining cis-heterosexual



ideas of womanhood in their everyday life, particularly by turning this simulation fantasy into an instance of deception on the part of the trans woman. It is significant that he has not exactly mis-recognised her, since he correctly sees her as a woman (at least while fetishising) and therefore previous accounts of misrecognition do not easily apply. In the concluding section, I suggest that this is not a dynamic which is limited to trans women, but that trans women are an exemplary case of a broader form of recognition. Thin recognition is, in my view, a pervasive way that men are able to instrumentalise recognition relationships as a way of securing their power over women.

## **Matthew Robson**

*Durham University*

### **The experience and value of being infatuated**

Infatuation has been treated quite negatively across a large variety, and quantity, of contemporary works in the philosophy of love. It's frequently labelled as a deficient or juvenile form of love (e.g., Solomon 2011, Sternberg 1986). Sometimes, this devaluation is not explicit, but rather follows from the elements that philosophers have emphasised as being constitutive of the 'best' kinds of love; like the valuing of a relationship (Kolodny 2003), or a shared identity and life (Nozick 1995), and so on. Part of this, I argue, can be traced to the descriptions of romance that have been taken as paradigmatic of the most praiseworthy kinds of love. These descriptions tend to be able to be characterised as 'established loves.' Thus, all modes of loving that fail to match this standard are lumped together as, at least, 'less good' forms of romance (e.g., Jenkins 2022). Therefore, despite the frequent use of the term 'infatuation', it's not always clear just what ways of loving this concept is supposed to be tracking.

In this talk, I wish to begin the work of reevaluating infatuation. To do this, it's necessary to get clear on what we're referring to when we say that people are infatuated. By drawing on descriptions of infatuations in the arts, psychology, and those of philosophers, I will begin to sketch out a positive phenomenology of the experience of being infatuated. While this project of describing infatuation is itself helpful, I also want to explore the value of this mode of loving. To do this, I will draw on the work of Beauvoir and other theorists influenced by her (e.g., Bergoffen 1997, Cleary 2015). I will argue that two key features of the experience of being infatuated, namely our fascination with, and our vulnerability to the beloved, present unique ways of establishing authentic intersubjective relations; ones that are distinct from the ways we often do in 'established loves.' I will outline how the frequent impulsive thoughts and fantasies we often have of the beloved, along with the uncertainty of those judgements, while we are infatuated, can be understood as a kind of fascination. This fascination is valuable in that it tracks important elements of what it means to be with someone lovingly; as well as establishing a kind of openness towards, and a humility before, the other that grasps them in their individuality and freedom. Similarly, the way in which we become vulnerable to the beloved while infatuated involves a kind of risking of ourselves that allows for the exercise of generosity, by both ourselves and our beloved. Given the lack of a shared identity or established relationship in infatuations, I suggest that the risking of ourselves in this context becomes a particularly salient expression of trust, charity, and hope. The offering up of ourselves in our existential ambiguity is expressive of a loving orientation towards someone else more generally, but in infatuations this risking becomes generous in a particularly non-self-interested way, one that allows for, grounds, and facilitates intimacy.

## **Heidi Knechtel**

*University of Toronto*



## **Obstruction of the 'Romantic Situation': A Phenomenological and Existential Analysis of the Neuroscience of Romantic Love**

This essay concerns neuroscientific accounts of romantic love and what they stand to gain from phenomenology. I argue that neuroscientific investigation must be supplemented by phenomenology when providing accounts of romantic love. I demonstrate this by providing an existential analysis of a contemporary lesion study conducted by neuroscientist Stephanie Cacioppo (2018). The study runs as follows: following damage to the anterior insula due to stroke, Cacioppo's subject demonstrates a deficit in feelings of love, providing evidence that the region of the brain damaged otherwise serves as a 'love centre.' Cacioppo suggests that the involvement of this region indicates that love is best understood as an abstract representation of sensorimotor experiences (Cacioppo et al., 2013). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty concerns himself with a similar lesion case in discussing Gelb and Goldstein's study of Johann Schneider, providing an account of his motor and sexual disorders using existential phenomenology. I utilize Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Schneider as a tool for interpreting the results of Cacioppo's study, aiding descriptions of love more generally. Schneider's case reveals that his bodily and sexual relations cannot be representational, and I demonstrate further that they could not even be understood as more sophisticated sensorimotor representation. Rather, Schneider's case indicates that his pathologies are pathologies at the level of existence – due to his injury, his body has ceased participating in the unity of projection and solicitation, the unity of subject and world through a mutual exchange of sense, that comes to constitute existence. I argue that this phenomenological unity and fundamental structure of existence has also been affected in the case of Cacioppo's patient, and it is within this unity that the 'romantic situation' is established and wherein loving relations become possible. Taking Merleau-Ponty's analysis as a starting point, I thus defend his view that phenomenology is necessary for providing explanations of certain phenomena, like romantic love and sexuality, without needing to deny that there are indeed neurobiological grounds for these phenomena. This allows for a bridge to be constructed between neuroscience and phenomenology, wherein investigations in neuroscience can be furthered by the methods of phenomenology. Phenomenology, therefore, is shown to be necessary for descriptions of romantic love and must supplement investigations of romantic love in other domains.

### **Mark Burgess**

*Oxford Brookes University*

## **How transformative experiences of sexual pleasure alter self-understanding: from concealed and deficient to revealed and proficient.**

### *Background*

Modern sexual scientists promote positive sexuality as a contributor to self-understanding and wellbeing (Mitchell et al., 2021). However, the contemporary push for positive sexuality clashes with entrenched taboos existing across cultures from time immemorial (Batailles, 1956). These taboos script sexual pleasure as alienating (Schwartz, 2000), uncontrollable (Boul, et. al., 2009), and shameful (Rye & Meaney, 2007), and are deeply gendered and heteronormative (Thorne et al., 2019). How then, can sexual pleasure contribute to self-understanding and wellbeing in a world that challenges sex-positivity? This research uses phenomenology to investigate how transformative experiences (Paul, 2014) of sexual pleasure alter self-understanding, highlighting how changes relate to experience, intersubjectivity, and lifeworld (Beauvoir, 2011; Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Zahavi, 2014, 2019).

### *Method*



Phenomenological interviews (Høffding & Martiny, 2016; Køster & Fernandez, 2021; Martiny et al., 2021) were conducted with a diverse sample of 22 adults (27-68yrs) who described their self-understanding before, during, and after transformative experiences of sexual pleasure.

### *Findings*

**Before:** participants' self-understanding was stifled through pervasive sex-positive silence and their limited knowledge of what they and their partners found pleasurable. Cultural scripts dominated, inducing shame and fear of sexual expression. They felt incomplete and deficient, describing their sexuality as compartmentalised. They felt disconnected from self and partners, and their sex lives felt stunted.

**During:** supportive exploration with partners served as an embodied self-education. Participants' experience of sexual pleasure, and of self, was one of openness, acceptance, and the absence of shame. They experienced themselves as agentic, responsive, and proficient, feeling like a full person, and being treated as such by their partner(s).

**After:** discovering a new maturity and wholeness came with joy and relief but these positive feelings coexisted with negative ones. They felt guilt and disappointment for their previous lack of self-understanding. Feeling whole coexisted with feeling incomplete, but unlike previously, feeling incomplete was experienced positively, as a spur for broadening one's horizons for a process of further self-discovery. Participants described a deepening relation to self, noting greater alignment with their desires and lesser reliance on cultural scripts. They committed to a future self that is sexually empowered, using newly recognised capacities to co-create enriching experiences and to reject unsatisfying ones that do not correspond with their new self-understanding. Their relation to the wider world shifted, becoming more nuanced, adapting strategies for self-disclosure that contributed to wellbeing and guarded against stigma.

### *Discussion*

Sexual pleasure shifted participants' relation to who they are, to others, and the lifeworld, changing their self-understanding profoundly. They understood self as an ongoing process requiring an openness tempered with boundaries that suited their wellbeing. They felt capable of committing to that process despite challenges faced in a stultifying world. Further discussion will consider the implications of these findings for sex-positive education and how authenticity (Guignon, 2015; Sheehan, 2015), participatory sense-making (De Jeagher & Di Paolo, 2007), and "we" relations (Zahavi, 2015) contribute to positive self-understanding.

**James Martell**

*Lyon College*

### **Gender and Pleasure Surfaces in Malabou's Phenomenology**

In a conversation I had with the editor of Catherine Malabou's most recent collection of essays, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, Tyler Williams, he remarked that, contrary to what she had done throughout her career, Malabou asked to be described explicitly—on the back cover of the book—as a "female philosopher." Such an underscoring of the gender of her philosophy resonates with the release of her 2020 book, *Le plaisir effacé. Clitoris et pensée* (*Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*), where she examines the erasure of the clitoris (and its proper pleasures) from the hegemonic history of European philosophy and literature, together with the possibility of its reinscription. This recent turn to gender, sexuality, and pleasure in her work brings into question how such an emphasis might complicate Malabou's further developments of her notion of plasticity, especially as she demarcated it from deconstruction and phenomenology. In other words, through this turn into the lived experience of gender and pleasure, Malabou's avowed surmounting of Derridean deconstruction as a move from the trace to plasticity, highlights



Derrida's own purported move beyond not only Heideggerianism and Hegelianism, but also Husserlian phenomenology. Thus, if, as Ian James explains, Malabou interrogates throughout her work "the Kantian and Husserlian transcendentalism" bound to Derridean deconstruction, how does this new emphasis on bodily life-experience affect not only her view of the ties between deconstruction and phenomenology, but also and particularly, those between her own philosophy of plasticity and phenomenology itself. This last question is particularly important since, as we know, one of the main distinguishing traits of Malabou's philosophy has been a constant linking of her post-deconstructive experiential plastic ontology with the biological sciences.

In this paper I will try to show that, in order to understand the consequences of Malabou's new emphasis on gender and pleasure in her oeuvre, we have to revise her engagement with phenomenology, and phenomenological tenets, throughout her early work, especially where, trying to move beyond Derridean deconstruction, she proposes new ways of experience beyond "the logic of the trace." Such a revision will allow us to not only examine the future of her work as a gendered and pleasurable philosophy, but also to consider the future of phenomenology—and a phenomenology of love and sexuality—vis-à-vis other Malabouian subjects like anarchy (*Au voleur! Anarchisme et philosophie* [2022]), and neurological and physical suffering (*The New Wounded* [2012]). If Derrida saw the future of philosophy in what he clearly demarcated as a gendered new thought (*la pensée*), perhaps Malabou's new thought goes beyond deconstruction precisely by relaunching the potential of the phenomenology that inspired it.

## Shimeng Wang

*Goldsmiths College, University of London*

### **Face and Hands: A Phenomenological Reading of Representation in Amateur Lesbian Porn**

Emmanuel Levinas once argued that the face is the most naked part of the body, where exposure occurs. Face is deemed expressive as it transcends one's inner realm to the outer world. Compared to face, hands symbolize something less vulnerable and more reliable—we often say, "lend me a hand." While hands may not be often seen as expressive, within lesbian culture, they play a significant role in expressing desire, as accurately captured by Sarah Waters who titled her lesbian-themed novel "Fingersmith."

"Expressing hands" are commonly seen in lesbian pornography. A typical scene often features one participant reveals only her hands while the other reveals her face. The "hand-face" dynamic highlights a fundamental structure in lesbian love: manipulation and exposure. The hands often perform the manipulation while the face reacts to.

Unlike heterosexual desire, which often emphasizes the desire to invade "the other," the representation of same-gender sex holds a greater interest in "self-invading," as both participants share the same body structure. That is why anonymous hands hold great sex appeal in lesbian porn, blurring the boundary between self-touching and being touched by others. The hand symbolises a desire for invasion from within the body: simultaneously feeling and being felt. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, "I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable"

This desire to let one's hands to "see" one's face is especially represented in amateur lesbian porn. In comparison to professional productions, amateur porn often features simple techniques: fixed shots, minimal *mise-en-scène*, and often no use of microphones. Most creators choose to stick to one shot and occasionally one gesture to avoid the effort of extensive editing. Since three or four minutes are sufficient to garner millions of views, to capture the essence of lesbian desire in a short time is encouraged. Therefore, the fundamental structure of sex is often more evident in such videos than professional ones.





Furthermore, by playing with their viewers' imagination, these videos delineate the typical roles within lesbian love: the face (where reactions are observed) and the hands (where techniques are displayed) also embodies the communal imagination of roles in lesbian sex. As online platforms transcend the private realm into a communal experience, this imagination is solidified through the accumulation of "likes," which represent shared perceptions about the assumed roles in sexuality.

Between private memories and shared imagination, these amateur videos form a unique cyber-space, enabling the expression of what formerly deemed inexpressible and enabodying some deepest, unworded desires.

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### **"No pic, no chat": On the Phenomenology of Cruising and the Ethical Negotiations of Grindr**

This paper explores the phenomenology of two modes of queer sociality: cruising and the app Grindr. Specifically, it aims to interrogate the distinctions in the ethical relationships between the largely "in person" activity of cruising and the entirely virtual experience of using Grindr. Departing, somewhat counterintuitively from the phenomenological ethics of Levinas, I integrate insights from contemporary queer theory to account for and discuss the digital contexts that somewhat exceed the grasp of Levinas' philosophy. I write counterintuitively above because, for all the ethical insight emerging from the face-to-face relation, Levinas' philosophy patently avoids any conceptualization of sexuality, and his theorizations on love are processed primarily through 'fecundity,' something problematic for feminist and non-heteronormative readings. Nonetheless, I wager that there is something useful in Levinas to be retrieved and put into dialogue with queer (primarily but not exclusively gay male) sociality. In place of a theory of desire such as psychoanalysis or a theory of transgression such as found in Bataille, Levinas instead speaks of the erotic in terms of transcendental love. However, in this concept we find a capacious characterization of eros: "Love...grasps nothing, issues in no concept, does not issue, has neither the subject-object structure nor the I-thou structure. Eros is not accomplished as a subject that fixes an object nor as a pro-jection, towards a possible. Its movement consists in going beyond the possible" (Totality and Infinity, 261). Admittedly out of context, this notion of im/possibility of the erotic relation resonates with core tenants of queer theory. Indeed, whatever the gaze and the caress search for is something that "ceaselessly escapes." Yet, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, vision is a movement that both extends the body through the act of looking and opens the body to the world through this extension. Cruising, commonly understood, is the act of walking or driving around a certain locale in search of a sex partner, usually anonymous and one time only. The stuff of much cultural commentary and media representation, cruising, as James Parlett writes, "is a profoundly optical phenomenon, a perceptual arena where acts of looking are intensified and eroticized" (2). If we follow a Levinasian imperative, this means that cruising is also an ethical phenomenon. While there is a growing body of scholarship in queer theory, queer studies, media studies and literary studies (and beyond), the purview of my paper concerns the ethical space of the experience of cruising, whether "IRL" or virtual both as an environment and as (unspoken) interpersonal encounter. Specifically, it begins by mapping out the concrete distinctions between in-person versus virtual cruising, with illustrations from literary texts (Greenwell, Hollinghurst) and popular media (Looking, Tom of Finland). It then continues by comparatively exploring the intersection of ethics and (dis)embodiment in light of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. It finally concludes by discussing how recent work in queer theory (e.g., Smilges, Ahmed) can further help to clarify the ethics of cruising as a sexually charged but not necessarily sexual act of transgression, sociality, and perhaps even love.



## Campus Map

### Getting to/from the venue

The conference takes place in **room 4A-0-56**. To get to South Campus, you can take the metro to “Islands Brygge” metro station. From there it is less than 5 minutes’ walk. The map below shows the walk from the metro station. You can also access an interactive map [here](#). We will also put up posters near the room.

