



EROS

The Wisdom of Love

Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio

aka

Dr. *Serena Gaia*

Eros

The Wisdom of Love

Roman-à-clef

SERENA ANDERLINI-D'ONOFRIO

aka

DR. SERENAGAIA

Copyright ©2020 3WayKiss, Puerto Rico
(USA) dr.serenagaia@gmail.com
www.serenagaia.org

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

May this story be a portal to all the other beautiful stories that intertwine with it, and may this book help us create better worlds we need. Knowledge is love.

To my lovers, and their lovers, and their lovers'
lovers, and so on across the globe,
and to all children and parents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the people in my life who have made it so vibrant and interesting with their infinite contributions this book would not exist or would not be worth while. I am grateful for all the joys, sorrows, moods, moments, lessons, hopes, wisdoms, disappointments, and intensities we've shared.

A special debt of gratitude is owed to the early readers of the first edition of this work, in 2006, including Suzann Robins, Regina Reinhardt, Flavia Alaya, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, and Fritz Klein. I am also grateful to my daughter Paola Coda and my brother Luca Anderlini for their wise advice. A belated message of special thanks goes to my late mother and father who raised me to believe in the impossible and inspired me with their beauty and love. My gratitude also goes to the partners who have accompanied me for a stretch of the road; to the interlocutors who have shared their thoughts with me; to the mentors who believed in me and supported me in the most difficult moments; to the professors and students with whom I've shared a bit of the way; and to the communities who have hosted me and made me feel one of their own, including the bisexual community of San Diego, the holistic-health community of Encinitas, and the polyamorous community of Loving More. My gratitude also goes to the transnational community of AIDS dissenters, to the émigré community of UC Riverside, to my current academic community at UPR Mayagüez, and to all the other academic communities in which I have participated. I would also like to thank my neighborhood friends, interlocutors, and extended family in Rome and vicinities.

Much gratitude also goes to my first publisher, Haworth Press, and all of its collaborators, including Rebecca Browne, MaryLouise Doyle, Peg Marr, Bill Palmer, Josh Ribakowe, and others who have been patient enough to see this book through.

For the new edition of 2020, by the subtitle *The Wisdom of Love*, and for its simultaneous Italian translation, my gratitude goes to all the beloveds, the collaborators, the tribes, and the ecosystems that have hosted my life in the stretch since then, including my own very

resilient personal ecosystem. A special thanks goes to Giulia Siotto, Andrea Safir Stagliano and Selva Michele Galasso for their dedicated attention, and to Arianna, Prabhat, Gianni, and Federico for their encouragement.

THE HAPPIEST DECADE IN YOUR LIFE AN INTRODUCTION

Enter “Life”

Can you make this the happiest decade in your life, Serena? I asked myself when I became more aware of the energetic flows that animate life on our planet Gaia.

And I ask this of you now, dear reader, as I reintroduce my “life” to you.

At that time, I did promise myself that I would. And, now in my seventh decade, I can say I succeeded. Yes, this is the happiest decade of my life, and I hope for even happier decades to come.

How did I do it? It’s simple. And it’s a form of art. And, if I did it, so can you. As I send this book into the world again, that is my most sincere wish.

One simple way to turn your life into artwork is to write it into a narrative. It can be a memoir, or a *roman-à-clef*, or a journal or diary. If you’re a reader, you’re also a potential writer. You can share your stories with friends, and you may even feel inclined to publish them. Narrating one’s stories to others is a way of healing from the raw experience of living them. It’s a meditation-in-action that helps to find

the thread that creates coherence in our existence and its chaos. It's a simple way to create meaning at the school of life.

How can that be? You may ask. Reading this book for inspiration will lead you to your own answer. You'll notice, as I did, how my protagonist Gaia's belief systems determine many outcomes in her life. As a young woman, she is controlled by her fear of dying in a monogamous relationship because, she feels, that's what happened to her mother.

As she grows wiser, she turns this fear into courage. She explores expansive forms of love that are fluid and inclusive and explode out of bounds. Her existential crisis turns into an opportunity to go where few people dare to tread. She harvests on this experience when she realizes the unique gift it has become.

That gift is now yours in this book. Revere it like magic, and it will do magic for you. Experience gratitude for all of life's gifts. When we are younger, it's all spontaneous and natural. As we grow wiser, that nature requires more of the cultivation of an art. It requires discipline, inspiration, awareness, stamina. For those brave enough to listen, life is the most valuable teacher. Be one of them. You'll come to appreciate the rewards. Thank you!

Take Gaia, for example. As a younger woman who came of age in the free love era, she experiences the AIDS crisis as a loss of freedom. She feels lonely, depressed, abandoned. She becomes a sex-positive activist and finds her sacred tribe. In her wisdom years, she realizes this crisis has turned into an opportunity to revisit love as the ecology of life.

Interpreting crises as opportunities to co-create new balances is a valuable art in the Anthropocene. This is the era of human beings, when life is seeking a new symbiotic balance between the world and the planet, with Covid-19 as the first world-wide message from planet Gaia that the time has come. As one experiences crises this way, interpretations become more inspiring and agile. For example, in 2020, the newly founded School of Ecosexual Love has spawned the initiative The Resilience of Love. This is inspiring others to generate

their own happiness and thus support their own health and the competence of their immune system as they face the crisis.

What's the lesson in this? It's the awareness that guides Gaia to organize her experience into the narrative you're about to read. For in the sex-positive movement, the preoccupation of protecting oneself and those we love became an opportunity to invest in our amorous lives. The entire world now has a chance to reinvent the arts of love as the new global ecology the planet needs. This is the good news in which we can delight. We can all become artists of love.

And we can even be ambassadors of ecosexual love. This love inspires people to "know and love the ecosystem called Thyself," and to symbiotically expand that positive inner energy field to other beings. This intends to generate a new healthy and happy balance between the planet and the world.

In her journeys, Gaia the character seeks the love that reaches beyond genders, and numbers, and orientations, and ages, and races, and relationship status, and origins, and species, and even biological realms. It's a love that embraces all of life as a partner with equal rights. Eventually, she finds out that the love she intuitively knew was possible is the love that today we know as ecosexual love.

Turning crises into opportunities requires some magic. In her quest, Gaia the character experiences the arts of love as the tools that will reinvent and rediscover love. Love of the kind that will suit the swarm intelligence needs of a more amorously inclusive and sexually fluid planetary and human society.

This is Gaia's way to invent the practices, the rituals, and the belief systems we need so as to align our experiences with the metabolism of the Earth. This lover, mother, hostess, is the planet we are now blessed with, my character's namesake, Gaia.

This magic requires the wisdom of allowing memory to distill the beauty and joy of all experience.

Pentimento

Pentimento is an Italian word used in English to indicate how our memory changes as we distill our experience in time. Pentimento means both repentance and change of mind. It's a word from the visual arts and it was used by Lillian Hellman, one of my literary mothers, for one of her famous memoirs.

I want to invoke that word as I go through this amazing experience of revisiting my memoir 13 years after its first publication, which was in English, and as I translate it into the main language that I grew up in, Italian. Yes, the first edition of *Eros* in Italian is being released while we complete this one.

What is the repentance? What is the change of mind? These questions are in the back of my mind as I search for the inspiration to revive this narrative and expand its reach beyond Anglophone cultures. Here I will touch on the emotions, awareness, and courage this process brought about for me. Emotions surface more powerfully when the language is close to our heart. Awareness becomes more expanded as we open the heart chakra. Courage is stronger when we become capable of more love.

My gratitude goes to my allied spirits that have moved me to live on a more energetic level, to detox from city life, and find in nature a natural ally. Now I can sense the deep meaning of the locations that hosted my life. Central Italy was about coming into life. Intensity, tradition, beauty, art, drama, in a present that is dense with the past.

California was all about exploration time. The imagination expands on a blank canvas. It was the dream of existence out of bounds. It was total elation and excitement. Tennessee was a time for confronting fears, for bringing up ghosts buried inside. For overcoming phobias. Puerto Rico was a time of peace and alliance with the sea as a partner and witness at all times. A time to elaborate, reflect and produce the work that became the gift the world has received from my life so far.

These are my *Matrias*. They are the homelands that have hosted my life. Their energies have emanated the frequencies of its chapters, as I've come to fully embrace the sovereignty of the Earth and the sacred feminine of its power.

The Earth is wise, and while translating the narrative of my wandering life, I've come to heal more deeply the female genealogies damaged by patrilineal cultures. When I was 13, I lost my mother to death, the ultimate recycling, and all the female line of ancestors and allies was lost with her. When my daughter was about that age, she lost me, her mother, to the New World. When I became older than my mother ever was, I realized I was powerful enough to redirect the energetic flows of life within me and around me. That's when I vowed to make every decade I'd still be around juicier, and more fun, and more adventurous, and wiser than the previous ones. I wish this as a model for all women, and men, of my daughter's time and younger: may you all come to appreciate your longevity and the wisdom it acquires.

Advanced species evolve females that live beyond their fertile years. Scientifically, menopause is how life makes time for the wisdom and experience that needs to be passed on to others. The good news is that it can also be a blessed time of pleasure and health without the agonies of desire. In sharing this with everyone, I feel happiness for having come here. Sometimes I do wish I could live those early years with the wisdom of the present. And I appreciate the gift to share with those who come after, so they may absorb some, as I was blessed to do from my own literary mothers. Try it. It can happen for you. It's a matter of honoring our genealogies.

My desire here is to create hope in a time when the shadows of the past seem to be returning with a vengeance, when in certain realms "families" and "love" are being confined within very narrow structures. What's the good news? New synergies are forming, and new ways of sharing resources are being invented and practiced at the same time.

I envision this time as a prelude to the age of Gaia. A passage. In the age of Gaia, the sovereignty of our planet and her amorous way of presiding over life will be more widely honored and recognized. It will

be a time when more awareness will be coming of how we all share this partner we love. The good news now is that at this time many humans experience more openness to diverse practices of love. We are more aware of how our world impacts the planet, and welcome more connections with non-human forms of life that can teach us more languages of love.

Languages

Languages are very powerful. Languages unite and languages divide. They shape our perceptions and our inner wiring. They live inside us, often presiding over our inner conflicts and personalities. They have been cornerstones in my evolution and great gifts in my life. I feel grateful for my talents. As I reflect on my choice, as a writer, to use English rather than, say, Italian, or French, for the story you're about to start, I become more aware of the connection between finding that luminous space given by genderless nouns, and of the Lacanian split inside that still organizes parts of the narrative you're about to start.

For me, the genderless nouns of the English language created an awareness of the intermediate space between masculine and feminine. This space does not exist in Italian. As a kid I did not know about it. My extended travels in the Anglophone world made it possible for me to discover this space inside me. It's a space that makes you feel that first of all you exist as a human being, as a self-loving person, as a self-appreciating form of life, and then, if that's what you'd like, you also exist as a sexual element in a system of reproduction.

Awareness of this space is so powerful that I've wanted to transfer it to our translation in Italian. The original English writing sustains this luminous space for all nouns. In Italian, I've rendered it with a combination of circumlocutions, double articles and asterisks that represent gender neutrality. Hopefully, this will allow Italian readers to experience that space themselves, or at least to become more aware

of asymmetries that often go unnoticed while they emphasize the male line.

As a member of the human family, I've learned that love is the ecology of life. In this memoir, I observe my voice at times sound nostalgic of the lands, faces, gestures, foods known since childhood, while experiencing the New World's attraction as the promise of a culture where one can love the person, not the gender. Where one is a person, a self, before being a gendered form of life. As I revisit these memories in a *Pentimento* style, I can feel how this Lacanian split dissipates in the translation process. I hope my offer of a life narrative can inspire love, appreciation and compassion for the complex person that I am now.

Mistakes

So, what can I see through the *Pentimento* that my memory changes as I distill my experience through time? Mistakes in interpretation are very powerful. Because they are not really mistakes, but rather ways to approach deeper truths more gradually. That's the essence that longevity acquires, and I wish the time for that joyous wisdom to come for everyone. If we stay in a space of love, mistakes are our most significant lessons from the school of life. And they can be fun!

This book's narrative touches on my academic career, my love activism, and my evolving spirituality. They are interconnected, as I always saw the production of knowledge that research does as a form of activism to co-create the shared lives we desire. And that desire for a world more loving, more peaceful, and more balanced, is the source of my spirituality.

In my academic career, the *pentimento* comes from a mistake I made while on my first tenure-track job, in Tennessee. When I lost it, I rationalized that it was because of being associated with a colleague in disgrace at the time. He felt offended by this. And he was right. My

heart was too broken to really do the job as well I would have liked to. For, as a woman, to get the job I had been asked to give up my daughter, my partner, and Italy, my first *Matria*. It was just too hard!

In my love activism, the pentimento comes from overlooking the opportunities inside the AIDS crisis when I became very passionate about AIDS science. AIDS was a big trauma, for the whole planet. I don't think we've fully recovered yet. There was of course a strong desire to deny it, present in me as in many others. And in hind sight, this crisis can be interpreted as the disaster that turned into the opportunity to resurrect the arts of love. Alternative medical perspectives evolved parallel to the holistic health movement that has expanded worldwide, while the establishment faced the situation in the ways that it knew how. Gay communities were largely protected from fundamentalist attacks, and many in health care felt invited to consider the body's energetic aspects besides the material ones.

Gradually, the connection between ecosystemic degradations and immune-related health problems was established. (A connection which is largely confirmed by the Covid-19 crisis.) This has opened spaces for holistic and shamanic health practices that evolved, as they were reinvented and actualized from pre-modern and indigenous cultures. More awareness of love as medicine evolved in sex-positive cultures. And that love was extended to the forces of nature with ecosexuality.

Thanks to my spiritual evolution, these connections are present to me at this time.

In that realm, the pentimento comes when I listen to the voice of my protagonist. She is angry, sad, cocky, arrogant, critical, dissatisfied. And often for reasons good enough. My wisdom now tells me that many of the disappointments and defeats she experienced were a direct result of early programming, which can go back several generations. At that time negative expectations were set and were never removed. This allowed the heart/mind to amplify their chance to come to pass.

The awareness of energetic frequencies, auric fields, and vibrations I have now tells me that what seemed so out of reach could

have been very close by with a different program in my mind and heart.

In *Pentimento* I see that being raised with very little touch has helped me to become the activist of loving touch that I am now. So in hindsight I feel all the joys, love, privileges, access, luck that have blessed my life. And I am persuaded that we all did our best with the tools we had under the circumstances.

Genres

I was trained as a literary critic and as a Virgo I can be a meticulous analyst. There is a quandary about the genre of this narrative. Is it a memoir, a *roman-à-clef*, or other? A memoir is a narrative that focuses on one particular segment or aspect of a person's life. A *roman-à-clef*, or novel with a key, is a life narrative where names are lightly disguised to protect people's privacy. Names are destinies, and a correspondence with original names must be established. For mine I was guided to Gaia. Serene, namely peaceful. Gaia, namely happy. The affinity was there.

Choosing Gaia as a key to my character eventually guided me to the theory of Gaia, which promises evolution if we all collaborate well enough. This could not be more appropriate for someone seeking forms of love that include everyone.

So, the story you're about to embark on is both a *roman-à-clef* and a memoir. The memory is the *Pentimento* distilled through time. The key is love for Gaia, our symbiotic planet.

As a way to fulfill the pioneer karma I got from California, my second *Matria*, I hope: may this life narrative sustain the belief of people with the courage to become wiser and happier through time.

I love you. We are one.

I ÉMIGRÉS

The “New World” turned out to be full of all its promises. My move functioned as a proverbial “new start” which granted forgiveness for my youthful mistakes. I had never believed in the separation of body and mind, which reminded me of Marilyn Monroe’s suicide for it seemed to be the result of the world’s disbelief that the power of her beauty was a form of intelligence. To my wonderment, in the “New World” being sexy was considered compatible with being fit for academic work. Indeed, the very result of that supposed sexiness, my baby and responsibilities as a parent, only made me more credible for they were viewed as motivations for me to do more. In 1981, at 27, I was part of the first generation of Italian women who embarked alone on our journeys to the New World. It was a step in the direction of a long process of hybridization out of which the boundaries of my eros would be radically transformed. Giulio, my not-quite-ex-yet, was a major enabler of my adventure for he graciously offered to take care of our daughter Sara for the first nine months during which I was going to be away.

Strong with joy and trepidation, I embarked towards my New-World destination in the academic system that represented the kind of knowledge that was regarded as truly scientific in those modern days. It was like being catapulted in an entirely different, often incomprehensible world, a lifestyle about which I had to learn so

much that I felt like a newborn. As I gradually became accustomed to the high-desert climate of Southern California, I also acclimated to on-campus living at UC Riverside, a highly research-oriented university situated at the extreme eastern periphery of the LA metropolitan area.

I remember being entirely unprepared for driving on the freeway system. The regular traffic flow baffled my expectation that I would have to work my way around other drivers' erratic behavior. I also thought I had turned into a monster, since when I walked on campus young men passed me by without glancing at me or making comments on my sex appeal. I didn't consider myself a star, but thought I was noticeable nonetheless. In Rome, I had been accustomed to exchanging gazes with passersby of the opposite sex, a street game as pervasive as Italian men's passion for soccer. Now I missed that sense of living body-against-body, and being left alone felt like an abandonment rather than a liberation. Then I realized that there were places where men gazed, the downtown areas where cruisers paraded in their shiny cars, and the "meat-markets," bars where one went to get laid. Neither one of these matched my style, since my car was not something to show off, and I found the bars depressing.

Part of me was searching for a new mode of sexual play, so the fact that the Italian American community was out of reach felt like a blessing. Fortunately, I spoke French, which gave me access to the émigré community that used that language. And that's where I met Stephane, finally the lover who was my peer, and, someone my father Dario would approve of. He was the person with whom my heterosexual development culminated. With him I was going to have the relationship that turned out to be most difficult to process into a friendship in the light of later developments, precisely because it was based on equality and freedom both in intellectual and erotic expression, and in parenting.

As a teacher and student of many years, I know that, no matter what sexual-harassment policies say, learning is erotic since it activates the pleasure of discovery by putting brain cells in motion, and stimulates the body-mind by opening up new vistas and possibilities to the imagination. The erotic energy emanating from this process is what keeps people in schools—it is what keeps us engaged

in the learning process, be it as students or as teachers. That this energy needs to be channeled in socially productive and acceptable ways is just as necessary as denying its existence is perverse. I was not fully aware of this when I first entered the classroom where I was going to teach my first course. But soon I was going to find myself in the perfect situation where falling in love with a student was not only permissible, it was even encouraged, and where I was going to become my student's teacher of language as well as of love. The eerie sense of omnipotence that this gave me had a price that was to be exacted later on.

Stephane was a shy student in broken Mexican sandals and knee-high corduroy shorts. He had silver-rimmed eyeglasses and slightly uncouth hair, with a rebellious lock overshadowing his eyebrows. His English had a thick French accent, and he was visibly out of place in the high-desert campus where we met, yet he was brave enough to stick through it and make things work. He was a graduate student and research assistant in Soil and Environmental Sciences, and was taking Italian for his own contentment. We were about the same age, our mid to late twenties, and I was just as incongruous in my white cotton shirt, wide-pleated skirt, and pumps. I did my act fairly well in the beautiful seminar room to which our Italian class had been assigned, with an enrollment of about 12. When I asked around where students came from, none of the mentioned LA suburbs rang a bell. I didn't have the foggiest idea of what Pasadena, Monterey Park, Pomona, and Claremont were like, or how to get there. But I had heard of Stephane's birthplace, Paris, France.

He seemed a bit lonely and I thought I'd like to get to know him better. I asked some Algerian friends to organize a party and invited him. We danced, and he seemed a bit naïve for his age, a rookie, or somebody who could use a teacher in many ways. We left and rode our bikes home. A vernacular saying from the city of Rome, "*fatta e magnata*," "make it and eat it," is used for things that are too good to be left for another day. Images of great foods like pasta al dente and hot cakes popped up in my head. How juicy and delicious when they are cooked and gulped down right away, but later, how quickly they become mushy and stale!

We came to the crossroads where my way home and his diverged. We knew that I had a roommate and he didn't, as I hinted that we make the turn his way. He rented a nice room on university premises, in a wooden building with nifty landings and lofts. I found his decorations indulgent: the stained-glass lamp flooded the alcove with an aura of deep purple, a decadent flavor of French aristocracy mixed with bohemian artistic flare as we lay on the carpeted floor. I remember watching his naked body covered with hair, the pleasure of smelling and touching it in every detail. He was on the meaty side, with narrow shoulders, large hips, prominent chest almost feminine in shape, with an inspired, thoughtful face. The androgyny of his hairy breasts almost drove me crazy. I noticed how he relished my gaze. He was a blank slate, and I could finally pass my erotic lessons on to someone else.

We spent many hours in our love embrace, and then I exclaimed, "now you have to drop my course, for I can't sleep with my students, didn't you know?"

"No I won't," he said, "I've decided to learn Italian and yours is the only course."

I was taken aback and made him swear he would pretend this episode never took place. The image of Gabrielle Russier, the French female teacher in Paris who had fallen in love with a student during the revolution of May 1968, and then committed suicide, kept popping up in my head. We heard about her in Rome, while we were having our own "May '68." The scandal was that the student was not a girl, the professor not a man. But they were in love, and her death became an emblem of how our revolution was right and necessary. "*One sacrificial heroine is enough, though*" I reflected in my UC Riverside dorm. To assuage my anxiety, I decided to consult with the only female professor my department was fortunate to have.

"Going out with a fellow graduate student is perfectly OK," she reassured me to my astonishment, "even though he just happens to be taking your course. In fact," she suggested, "this relationship could be a good investment for all involved. If you two like being together, you'll be more successful and happier to stay in our programs."

I could not believe I deserved such happiness and congratulated myself on truly discovering a “new world.”

“In case we continued our relationship,” I said the next time I saw Stephane, “there will be no cheating whatsoever in the course, and no letting on that we are together while on campus, OK?”

I lived in the dorms, and after one semester a loft next to Stephane’s place became available. I don’t know how the system conspired to pander to our relationship, but, without asking, I moved in.

The shell of my “troubled child” identity was breaking to give birth to a new person. *“What a great deal,”* I thought. *“In Italy I’m in a no-win situation where I’m either sexy and stupid, or ugly and nerdy. Sexy students are expected to sleep with professors, for lusty professors are always ugly and male, sexy students are always pretty and female, and sexual harassment is not even a concept yet. If I am sexy and make good grades, then the burden of proof that I’m really earning them is on me, for, as the thinking goes, ‘it would be so much easier for her to get A’s the other way.’”*

In my experience, the Italian system made it impossible to upgrade girls like me from student to professor. Graduate degrees did not exist yet and teaching assistantships were unknown. The few young graduates who were asked to assist professors—in view of possible career developments—did it all without pay. Nor was there a way to find an instructor with whom sex could be fun, for, at least in the humanities, academics had to keep a reputation for being intellectuals, and a droopy body in shabby clothes was necessary. Now I get to be the teacher, and I’m obviously sexy. My favorite student only asks to make love to me, and this is considered great! Had I been able to design a New World for myself, I couldn’t have asked for more. Obviously, the version of academic culture that prevailed in Southern California dealt me a generous hand. In the wider halo of Hollywood, a person’s body and mind had to be handsome. Of course, I could not imagine what this culture would do to one who looked weak, sick, or old.

In the decadent dorm room, I'm a confidante to my new lover. "I've never really been with a woman before," Stephane admits one night as we lie in bed under the boudoir lamp.

"As an adolescent I was molested by an older man—a friend of my parents. He claimed to be a mentor who'd show me the wonders of geology. I was a very diligent boy." He proceeds to describe the enchanted world of his parents, full of lofts, studios, canvasses, colors, sculptures, paintings, and all the things that I, from a more conventional family, had always dreamed of. "My mom and dad are artists," he explains as he elaborates on the cozy intimacy of their bohemian lifestyle.

"The magic must have been bedazzling," I comment, as the thought of oil-paint odors and textures turns me on.

Stephane is accustomed to his parents' frugality and artistic devotion. "And yet," he explains, "I long for something more scientific—more solid. I've always done my homework, never cut class, never talked. I was almost too obedient, and my parents were worried that I would not truly have a rebellious, adolescent phase—that I would not go through the crisis that makes one a man. They told their friend who proposed to help. 'I'll show the boy something he can enjoy,' he promised. The older man came to pick me up at the small apartment in the historical center," Stephane continues. "We went hiking in geologically interesting areas, and that's where he masturbated me to orgasm. We were in the fields, and I did not find it all that strange. At home, I was used to nudity from my parents' paintings. But of course I would not keep such a secret from them, and so the trips came to an end. I quit geology and never matured sexually."

I look at him puzzled, "last time you did fairly well," I comment.

"Before you, my only experience with a girl was when my best friend's girlfriend agreed to have him watch us while I made out with her."

I think that being with a *fils d'art*, a child of artists, is wonderful, and don't mind a bit passing my lessons along. "I'll teach you everything I know," I reassure him.

Now our first Halloween party is going on. My new French lover knows that back in Italy, my quasi-ex husband Giulio is a Mardi-Gras cross-dresser. Stephane and I reinterpret American Halloween in a similarly transgendered way, with me showing up for the party in male drag, impersonating—with a bit of chutzpa—Rodolfo Valentino. I like the way I look in male attire, I feel excited and horny. My friends don't recognize me, and actually guess correctly as to whom I am disguised as. I feel I'd make a pretty appetizing male and enjoy the freedom of movement I have. Stephane is dressed as a doll, with ponytails and a pink dress clashing with his carved, angular face. He wears red lipstick and blush, his shoulder straps show a white, chubby chest covered with dark, curly hair. He is melancholic and campy. I can't help thinking that my quasi-ex Giulio, with his flat face and hairless body, makes more of a good-looking girl. But then this tells me that probably Stephane is the man my father Aldo will approve of.

“When dressed appropriately, we look like the perfectly gender-adjusted couple. We make a good-looking pair,” I reflect. *“He is a bit taller than I am and with a slightly larger bone structure.”*

His masculinity is denoted by his arched nose and hairy chest, my femininity by my slender chin and long legs. The way we look as a couple reminds me of my parents. I get the feeling that keeping my centeredness while in this relationship will prove as difficult as giving up the relationship altogether.

Piqued with queer curiosity, Stephane and I visit San Francisco, the famed Mecca of gay culture, the city that, at least before the AIDS scare, held the promise to reveal everything to those curious about sex beyond the straight borders. We visit Castro with its displays of hyper-masculine gay men. “Not a bit of effeminacy,” he observes. Not much lesbian culture on display, I notice. As provincial tourists from a small satellite town near LA, we reflect, “Wouldn't it be great to be part of this scene? So much to learn!!” But both of us are foreigners with no working permits. Our student visas have been obtained based on the

statement that all the activities in which we engaged before we came were neither homosexual nor communist in nature. “Are we now free to do what would warrant INS the right to send us back home?” We realize we are prisoners of the ivory towers that brought us here in the first place.

Back in Riverside, the sexual behavior the émigré community accepts is monogamous and monosexual. Sex happens between a male and a female and does not involve other sexual players. Good sex implies an exchange of pleasure that is both reciprocal and simultaneous. The “other” is both a person of the other gender, and the cosmos to which one becomes connected via erotic energy. On the sidelines, some self-pleasuring might be going on, but it is never discussed or acknowledged in a positive way. There is no understanding of the mere giving and taking of pleasure as erotic experiences in and of themselves, nor is there any awareness of how toys and other technologies might enter the game.

My bisexual impulses are sublimated in my interest for female writers. I can safely pursue it as a professional goal, for it is not emotional or sexual and so it does not threaten my straight identity. In the UC system, all existing books are held in the library and I can check them out any time I want. There are no apparent restrictions on pursuable objects of knowledge, hence, as I discover, one can study female characters and female writers as well.

I make a secret deal with the academic world: *“I stay in this bankrupt system of male knowledge as long as I can subvert it at least enough to focus on women all my research energies,”* I promise myself.

As a teaching assistant, I accept to teach male knowledge. “In Italian,” my students learn, “all nouns have a gender. It’s as if words were more sexy in a way. But the trick is, the default gender is male, so, for example, if in a group of girls there is just one boy, the whole group is masculine for grammatical purposes.”

“Isn’t this unfair?” Stephane asks from his nearby desk.

“Of course, but I’m not making the rules, just passing them on.”

I split the teacher’s persona from the researcher. The teacher belongs to the system, but as a graduate student, one better not ask me

to have men be the subject of my research or I quit right away. The library frees me for I can point to respectable female writers whose books are there and about whom my male professors don't even know. They want to keep me in their graduate program, for they need me to teach their basic courses, so they let me do what I want. The horizon of my imagination expands. There is a year when I decide I'll only read books by women, just to get a sense of how it feels to be immersed in a female world. I bask in this new discursive space, even though, at some level I am still hooked on male energy—I believe that only males have the power of enabling me to become who I want to be.

As I started my life as an émigré, I found myself in an international community that was closely knit but culturally suspended between the Old and the New World. We lived on the American continent but had a European imaginary, which was confirmed and even made stronger by our presence to each other. We were everything to each other, for our families, and all the other people, things, and places that had been familiar since childhood were far away—even as they were ever present to our imagination. As a Francophone community, we shared an existentialist attitude toward the New World, which at times verged on hyper-realism, as in a book by Jean Baudrillard. It was a mixture of fascination and contempt, which really did not resolve the issue of why we were there in the first place.

Our existentialism was a rejection of zeal and perfectionism, it was a response to the totalitarianisms that had swept our parents' worlds. Its emphasis was the individual and a human dimension, but as existentialists we overlooked integration within a larger whole, and our dependence on it for our life's work. Perhaps because we flaunted our lack of faith, be it in the system or in some divine force, a distance between the émigré community and white America was maintained. It was a mixture of mutual fear and lack of respect. It felt as if whites expected from us an ecstatic attitude towards the New World we were unwilling to deliver. Little did we know that they were past that

attitude themselves, but were aptly trained in faking it and in counting on foreigners to do their dirty work.

Things were different with African Americans, whom we admired for their role in the Civil Rights movement, and whose heroes we worshipped, including Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Cassius Clay. African Americans were eager to get near us and valued our friendship, perhaps as a result of their memory for the respect encountered by Black musicians and writers in Paris, even before their white compatriots bothered to notice their works. It was a way to bond with a kind of America that was not quite so fully persuaded of its own decency and right to exercise mastery over the rest of the world.

The part of the New World where we were stationed also offered access to a different dimension in the concept of nature. In the west, entire landscapes were still untouched by human endeavor. Visiting the wilderness and hiking the national parks put us in touch with a dimension of nature foreign to our European imaginary, every inch of the old continent being marked by a millennial human presence. In the nearby deserts one could access a sense of the earth as an embodied maternal being who was naked. Our scientifically-oriented campus hosted a pioneer soil and environmental science department and scored high in environmental awareness. We knew how dangerous environmental pollution was, especially since Riverside received all the smog produced by LA, but we still saw the environment in relation to ourselves. A more holistic sense of ecology had not yet entered our consciousness and we did not see animals, plants, and minerals as beings with meanings and a purpose of their own. Our sexual practices, enhanced by the arts, and based on codependence of males and females, further marked our separation from a holier sense of embodiment and cosmic connectedness.

As a woman who had already had a baby, I was fortunate to enjoy the benefits of mechanical birth-control technology, for I could easily wear an intra uterine device, or IUD. Since my uterus had already been inhabited by a long-term host, it was capable of tolerating a small metal spiral within itself. Its effect was that of saturating the intrauterine environment with copper, which rendered it inhospitable

to newly fertilized eggs. For those able to wear them, IUD's were less risky than birth-control pills, for they functioned mechanically and were not based on long-term use of hormones suspected of being carcinogenic. However, IUD's were not devoid of effects on the body's ecology. The lining of the uterus was often irritated, and this resulted in ongoing infections such as candidiasis. Their long-term effect was a reduction of the friendly bacterial flora that facilitate the absorption of nutrients by the body, a reduction that weakens the immune system. In my mechanistic knowledge of my own body, I was not aware of these problems, and welcomed the privilege of being at all times ready and available for unprotected sex. The free and complete exchange of fluids we enjoyed enabled Stephane and I to often experience previously unattained peaks of erotic ecstasy.

After the Halloween follies, we spent the year studying together, our social life revolving around Geraldine and José, a female and a male friend from Switzerland, who were also together. I told Geraldine about Sara, my four-year old daughter back in Italy waiting to join me. "I don't know how to break the news to my new boyfriend," I said one evening as we walked in the quad.

"Stephane loves children," she commented, "he volunteered at a child care center in Paris the year before he came."

"Then I can tell him?"

"He'd probably be excited to step parent" she said softly as she smiled and cocked her head.

Geraldine turned out to be correct, and I found myself in a perfectly balanced emotional triangle, with a female friend and confidante on one side, and a male lover on the other. This arrangement reminded me of my high-school days, when my friend Emanuela was my soulmate, and both of us engaged in sexual and erotic experiments with our respective boyfriends. José and Stephane were scientists, a biologist and a chemist respectively. Geraldine was a historian, and I was a literary person. It was such a perfectly balanced combination of intellectual and emotional energies that almost all areas of our creative intelligence could be fed. Our physiques were also similar. Both Geraldine and Jose looked

European, with their elongated bodies, thin muscles, and long, wavy hair. Geraldine had more of a French flare, with brown eyes and a sculpted, delicate face. Jose was more of a German type, with blue eyes and blonde hair. Stephane was dark and handsome like a romantic hero from France, and I was the sensual Italian with a long body and wavy hair. Not that there was no jealousy or competitiveness amongst us.

For one thing, I was sometimes jealous of the confidence Geraldine and Stephane had. And, since I found José especially mature and handsome, I was a little envious of Geraldine for getting the best-looking guy. But overall these feelings were secondary and our friendship was so encompassing of our whole beings that we could have swapped partners any time, for our auras were melted anyway.

Throughout the first year of my stay, my student/lover learned Italian religiously, as the language that would soon give him access to our planned shared parenting. Major steps were taken also in our erotic development. I explored the woman-on-top position fully, and discovered the pleasure of having the head of a penis stroke over my labia and clitoral area. He learned to control his erection so that he would prolong his pleasure and I would always come first. I even got early hints of what was hiding in one of my closets, when we made love in our friends' bedroom, and I discovered that Geraldine's nude photographs turned me on.

When my daughter Sara joined us, in the second year of my stay, Stephane and I moved out of the single-student apartment complex and got a small family-student house of our own. She was a thin and feisty five-year old, with wide green eyes and ubiquitous hands. We formed a great blended family, with three languages in use: Italian between us and the little girl, French between the two of us, and English between the three of us and the outside world. Our sleeping arrangements rotated between the two available bedrooms, so that each one of us would have a time with a whole bedroom to him or herself. We were perfectly comfortable with our bodies and nudity in the home. Sexual activity was a little bit on the low end, since so much more was going on, but household and parenting chores were always shared.

It was at that time that the Riverside pollution became a serious concern. Close to the upper end of the major hydrological basin of Southern California, Riverside was about sixty miles East of LA, the metropolitan area that produced the carbon monoxide the sea winds blew towards us. Riverside's high-desert climate was favorable to orange groves, and, in the early Hollywood days, the city had been a resort for stars in search of repose, with its dry, perfumed air. But as the metropolitan area grew—and as the train system was bought away by car companies—the exhaust gasses of the four million cars in circulation in the basin formed a huge cloud of a dusty brown color, and one could see its ominous volume take over the valley at around 10 a.m. As the smog set in, the buildings across the road looked wrapped in a thick light-gray, brownish veil. In the winter there were a few clear days, when the North winds blew the smog away.

The city had gradually been co-opted by the larger metropolitan area, and was now a commuter town and affordable residential area. Riversidians, of course, were innocent of any harm. All of us residents were victims of mal-development, proof of the kind of environmental degradation that can be produced by urban sprawl—especially when accompanied by inadequate public transportation. “Rome,” my birth city, “is also in a bowl, but compactness and public transportation keep fuel use down,” I reflected. I had never questioned the faith my father Dario had in technological progress and the belief in modernity that still held sway in his world. But the ecological disaster of Southern California was way beyond my direst imagination. Being the powerless parent of a fragile creature entrusted to my care began to change my consciousness. Stephane and I did what was possible, and, as soon as school let out, we'd ship Sara back to Italy, in Bosa, the beach town where she stayed with her Sardinian relatives until her return in the fall.

The compound where we lived had belonged to the military. It was a park with willows and oaks; the campus a ten-minute walk away. The barracks had been turned into duplexes with diminutive rooms and low ceilings. The child-care center was right next to our little home and one could see it from the kitchen window while sharing meals during which our cultural differences emerged. Stephane's idea of pasta was a mushy thing out of tin cans that one's parents serve

before going out to dinner on their own. He had never learned to roll spaghettis, and I would not allow cutting them. Sara intervened, and taught him how to set a few apart on the edge of the plate, and wrap them around his fork, until the roll could be brought to his mouth without splurging. We often laughed about this amusing role reversal. Stephane was open to the hybridization and Sara felt proud of her bedrock Italian manners. Stephane always felt that both Sara and I had a strong ethnic community in which to belong, and of which he felt deprived as an expatriate from a major colonial power of the modern age.

When Sara came to California, Geraldine and José went back to Switzerland, and I became aware of erotic triangulations in romance and parenting. When Sara, Stephane, and I moved in together, I realized that for Stephane Sara was the gravitational force that made him stay. She was a third pole in the energy field between Stephane and myself, and it felt great that biology didn't matter. But I also felt this was unfair to Sara's dad. Sara was forgetting Giulio, and I was afraid this would alienate him further. I wanted to keep both parental options open for my daughter.

Geraldine and José returned to Europe in the Fall of 1982. Before I arrived, the two of them and Stephane had been inseparable, Stephane functioning as Geraldine's confidante. They were so intimate one could have bet they were a triad. I completed the quadrangle, and everybody felt safe and happy, everybody's emotional and sexual needs being met in an acceptable way to the heterosexual world. Later, with Geraldine and José gone, I felt bereft and started having problems, both sexual and emotional, in my relationship with Stephane. He could not meet my emotional needs, and so even the sex became bad. I missed my female friend. I needed a triangle, and the third corner was gone. Back in Geneva, Geraldine was also very unhappy, had problems readjusting to Europe, and missed José who'd gone to Germany. And perhaps she missed Stephane and me as well—the intimacy the four of us had shared. I remembered Geraldine's bedroom and her nude photos plastered to the walls, when for the first time it had been in my face that a woman's body could turn me on.

That winter, Geraldine wrote us you a letter about José. Her now long-distance boyfriend was going out with another woman. “He writes that both he and his girlfriend think they’re gay, but too afraid to come out, and so they feel somehow imprisoned by this secret together,” Stephane said as he read aloud from her letter. “I don’t believe a word,” Geraldine’s letter continued, “this is just bullshit José made up to make me feel bad.”

“I’m sure she’s right,” Stephane commented as he sat on the edge of the bed.

I took the letter in my hands and asked, “How can you be so sure? Maybe it’s not bullshit. The guy could be just trying to be honest.” I could see how, now that he had confessed his queerness to his new girlfriend, and she to him, their secret kept them together, at least until one decided to act on it.

Stephane looked upset, “I think José’s wrong” he insisted, unable to even contemplate his own longing for that friendship.

Yet this biphobia would not keep us from playing gender-bending games. Campus culture was increasingly aware of rape, and Stephane and I could not help but notice that the rapist was always male, the raped, female. Both of us were proud of our egalitarian mentality and felt that this underestimated females. “There must be a way in which a woman can rape a man” I commented. And that’s how we came to see your private erotic performances, especially those in which I was the initiator, as examples of male rape.

In the past, a respectable woman was supposed to say no, for she had been trained to do so to protect her reputation and her value as a marriage commodity. A woman’s “no” meant that she was performing well as a coy, feminine person—that she was playing hard to get. Alluring young men always presumed that their ability to arouse her senses would prevail on her intellect, and that, in the middle of their passionate love embrace her “no” would become so feeble as to turn

into a “yes.” Since most women did not receive any sexual education, and were unaware of how else their body could be pleased, many times this was exactly the case.

Now, in an attempt to fully and definitively regulate this highly subjective matter, sexual-harassment codes legally established that, no matter how, with whom, and where, “when a woman says no it means no.” Would this mean that when a man says no it also means no? Indeed, when a woman’s voice says no, it is hard to prove whether or not her body gives another message, for one cannot see what’s happening inside her vaginal walls until one is in there. But when a man’s voice says no, his body might be saying yes with a flamboyant erection. In this case, the man’s genitals and his voice make two opposite statements. “Which one is more correct?” we wondered. In the past, rape had been a crime against the woman’s family, often repaired with the rapist marrying the girl. Now rape was a crime against the person, and rightfully so, but then, the will and intent of the persons involved would have to be determined, rather than its mere verbal expression. Would this always be possible? I raped Stephane when his body responded to my pleasure to find his own pleasure in the surrender of his will to my desire. He raped me when he insisted on anal penetration and allowed it to happen slowly enough for my sphincter to open. But these were totally consensual rapes, games symbolic of the erotic power we had over each other.