

# TENSE

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WORDS THAT DO NOT KILL.

You want me give you a testimony about my life  
And how good he's been to me  
I don't know what to tell you about him  
I love him so much with all my heart and my soul  
With every bone in my body I love him so much  
Because he's done so much for me  
Every morning  
Every day of my life  
I won't always be crying tears  
In the middle of the night, and I won't always have to wake up  
By myself wondering how I'm gonna get through the day  
I won't always have to think about what I'm gonna do  
And how I'm gonna, how I'm gonna make it  
How I'm gonna get there, because he...  
He's gonna be there for me  
(...)  
It feels so good to be free  
To be accepted for who you are and loved no matter what<sup>1</sup>

For someone growing up non-religious, this intro on Kayne West's new album, *The Life of Pablo*, made me understand something I never had before. The song starts in such a sensuous way, that I truly thought the singer was giving me an account of her longing for 'him,' a fleshy him, a human him, a flawed but trustworthy male. Instead, she was expressing her love and trust in God. This only becomes clear at the end of her pledge, in the last two sentences: "Oh Lord thank you, You are the joy of my life." Interestingly enough, it was only

1. West, K. 2016. Low Lights. *The Life of Pablo*.

then that I was able to enjoy this spoken song called “Low Lights.” As, when I still thought the singer was displaying her love for a human him (not Him), I considered the lyrics overtly romantic, overtly dependent. This of course says a lot about my own beliefs about love (just as much as it says about what we are conditioned to expect and recognize as love in music, movies, and other popular expressions).<sup>2</sup> As soon as I realized it was about her love for God, I was totally drawn in, immersed by the intensity of her submission to Him.<sup>3</sup> And suddenly I understood that it was her strong language that displayed, inhabited, shaped, constructed, and created her love and trust for him. Her language wasn’t just a true account of her worship, the language generated and endorsed the love. The love existed because of her saying it out loud.

## SURRENDER

For me, growing up secular and without spiritual rituals, it seemed impossible to start believing in a higher power that can be named as ‘Lord.’ Theoretically, I may want to submit to one idea or force, but it is exactly this longing to surrender that seems to suspend the possibility of actually belief. *Wanting* to submit isn’t the same as submission itself - it is the incapacity of submitting to submission. Being able to view submission, as something one can *do*, is exactly what withholds submission. However, when I heard this singer in “Low Lights,” I suddenly realized I could do *that*, I could express a message in a convinced, rhetorical, and descriptive manner, without necessarily believing the content of this message.

I love language. I love language so much that I can sound very convincing saying just about anything. I could express submission, whether or not I believe that I am truly feeling submission. In this convinced language, by expressing surrender I would experience surrender because the language of worship and submission is not descriptive but performative. Words create. Words do not just describe, they are gestures

2. My expectation that her worship was meant for another human, might not only say something about my secular upbringing but may also reveal that I’m listening with white ears - taking in consideration that my white, secular Dutch background probably limits my interpretation of Kanye West’s music.

3. I’m here using ‘Him’ to refer to God, as the singer does. Let’s acknowledge that some also refer to god as She (‘I met god, she’s black’) or without using gender binary terms. Islamic scholar Amina Wadud refers to Allah as ‘Trans.’ I am also speaking about heterosexual love here, because “Low Light” refers to girl-boy love. This fits well with my argument, as my initial hesitation with the text - finding it overtly romantic - certainly has to do with encountering a surplus of straight love in songs, movies, commercials. As I state in footnote 1, I might be ignoring specifics about black love by considering this girl-boy love ‘straight.’ Scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Alexis Pauline Gumbs would argue that ‘black’ and ‘queer’ are interchangeable, as black people are never gender conformative in a world ruled by white norms.

confirming and producing realities.<sup>4</sup> As love is an abstraction, and not, for example, a chair one can point to, stating ‘I love him so much’ is the love.

My understanding of “Low Lights” comes from this trickle-down scheme:

1. Being unable to hear a person expressing Person-To-God Love (PTGL).
2. Rejecting Girl-To-Boy Love (GTBL), but expecting and thereby accepting GTBL’s existence.
3. Realizing that GTBL is actually PTGL; thus by acknowledging GTBL, becoming able to acknowledge PTGL.

It wasn’t just this trickle down love-scheme that allowed me to gain some understanding of the depth of expressing worship. It was the singer’s voice too. Her voice sounds so joyous and rich, it actually reminded me of having sex, of my lover telling me I scream ‘like a wounded animal.’ Because my lover draws this image, allowing my screeches of joy to leave the bedroom through a metaphor, the sounds I make became something totally new in my own ears. My lover illuminated my responsive sounds through a metaphor, joyfully describing my joy. I had forgotten to hear my own sounds, they belonged to having sex, but until then, they had no identity or noticed existence outside of that moment. The same happened when she described my cunt. She described its shapes and textures and colors. At first it made me shy. But the next time we had sex, I noticed how her descriptions made my experience different. For the first time I consciously experienced the thickness of my inner lips, the swollenness of my clit. Her words had set these parts of my cunt ‘aside;’ her words placed them outside of my body and allowed me to have a fuller experience of my body. For me, the words she used are more than a description working as an intensifier. Her noticing evoked noticing. The unquestioned way she described my body made my body feel - totally, fully - as she had described it. I have never experienced myself as *one thing true* or *full*, but due to her confident description I could feel myself fully *being* her description: thick, swollen, screaming.

This, however, does not mean that I feel defined. I can confidently say that her descriptions are relative as no genitals are average and all adjectives that she finds truth in are a matter of perception. It is not like her description became ‘facts about my cunt.’ It is not the exact truth of her words, but our joint submission to her expression that shaped the totality of my experience. If her description had any other goal than

4. Think about the way the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte defended the racist figure Black Pete (“Zwarte Piet”). He stated: “Black Pete is Black, the word itself says it, nothing I can change about that,” pretending the nature of the figure itself creates the description ‘Black Pete,’ while not acknowledging that naming something ‘black’ makes it black, while reproducing the possibility of using ‘black’ as a description and pretending it is a description only.

lovingly celebrating my body and its sounds, her words would have had a different effect. If she had meant to scale my genitals and sounds, comparing them, rating them, her metaphor would have felt reducing. The metaphor wouldn't allow me to experience full oneness, the metaphor would reduce me to *being* my inner lips, just because her description was meant value determining. In that case we'd encounter the moment when words and metaphors turn into definitions, locking a reality down in order either to compare, classify, appraise.

## TENSE

Why am I describing this intimate body/language experience? Because I was surprised by the thorough, alive, and bodily experience of words. I'm a lover of words, but I'm very much aimed at language's shortcomings. One of the difficulties of language I have recently been involved with, is the gap between an event and the moment this event is described. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls this gap 'tense.' Even now, just by recalling her theory on tense in her book *Economies of Abandonment*, I'm sort of finalizing her theory, presenting it as something done and seizable, instead of as the continuous thinking she is trying to surface. Language kills continuation. When we describe something, we deny the continuity of that which we describe. When we describe something or someone, that something or someone still exists beyond and without our description. The description itself however is seen as the carrier of some kind of truth. The description is taken serious. The description allows us to look *at* something, rather than living *with* it.

The dilemma that *tense* puts forward has been bugging me: how can I use words without killing what I'd like to draw attention to? How can we display continuous time while using language? Language itself is constantly drawing from the past. You do not have to be a scholar in linguistics to understand that every single word needs a memory - not a sentimental or deeply felt one per se - but in order to use a word we need to at least remember its meaning, remember that it has a meaning, remember that a word has a certain length and shape - that certain letters are part of the word while others are not.

I felt I was experiencing continuousness of language when I was having sex and feeling my cunt and hearing my screams as my lover had described it. The descriptions became experience.

The in-between time defined as tense, creates a certain superiority of the person speaking, especially as the person speaking starts to claim a moment in time and space. While language kills what is being described, it enlivens the speaker. Questioning tense is a feminist practise, as feminism is concerned with power relations and the inequalities and precarities it produces. Feminism maps and redistributes who

holds space, time, and liveability. Questioning tense means one is focused on the *livingness*, the aliveness of what is described. It means that the continuous (well-)being of what is described, has priority. This demands the courage to let difficulty appear and remain, instead of crediting oneself (or the speaker) with making the described *understandable*, captured, or seizable.

Continuity is a feminist practise, as it asks for constantly paying attention. A noticing and attention not only aimed at what you already know or what feels close to you, but also of that which escapes your attention because of your positionality. This continuous noticing is necessary to re-direct and prevent an unequal distribution of attention. For example, the quotidian has often been seen as less important, than explicit political and public events. While feminist speakers often want to give an account of the more 'forgotten' narratives - realizing the status quo rests on benefiting a few dominant narratives - using language to create proximity can just as well trap what is described. What is described can sometimes even be more easily celebrated and embraced, because it appears dead and can be embraced as something standing still, a non-continuous world. Therefore, this feminist practise, or releasing tense, needs to be a queer feminist practise. Queer because the embrace of what's described cannot be a straight one, it is a messy sort of embrace in which it is unclear what embraces what: does the language embrace the listener, does the listener embrace the description, does the event described embrace the continuous language that is trying to linguistically engage the event? It's an amorphous embrace with few coordinates. It's an embrace of which it is unsure whether it is an embrace. It is moving, taking form, forming. Looking *at* it does not exist, it demands noticing *with*. The noticing and the performative effect of this noticing happens simultaneously and inseparable. There is neither an end to the change nor to the noticing. Noticing change is not meant to formulate strategy, or to expect an outcome. The queer part about this is that change is valued in itself; the change is a goal in itself.

### SUPERIORITY OF ARRIVAL

Traditionally, there is the assumption that any act that appears queer and rebellious will disappear when a person matures. Age gives transitional possibilities. Ageing is a hopeful thing for those unwilling to accept present conditions. Underlining age, gaining years as the passing of time, and expecting evolution when ageing, reveals a linear conception of growth: when you get older, you will 'move past' things. It is very difficult to do without this notion of progress, to imagine a life without progress seems almost impossible, let alone: "to imagine justice without progress," as anthropologist Anna Tsing so beautifully questions in her book *The Mushroom at the*

*End of the World: On The Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.*<sup>5</sup>

Often, when we speak about progress, progress is not only seen as a way to 'improve' life; celebrating progress is often used to debunk what was before. We see this with children displaying 'queer behaviour,' that parents think they will get over it and say, 'It is just a phase' (this too is often said of bisexuality, also among adults). Here I want to include the notion of 'arriving.' The expectations that we will later 'arrive' at a certain insight, we arrive at a better place in our lives, closer to something real, an arrival at 'home.' We tend to forget that what we understand as real *is* and *only is* the present. When we feel 'unheimisch' or 'unreal,' this is the real unreal feeling of the present.

By inserting the word 'arrive' here, I also come to think of 'superiority,' similar to the superiority of the speaker or writer claiming and deadening the continuity of the described.

Columbus 'discovered' the Americas, meaning all the life that was there before Columbus arrived, was not considered meaningful or even living at all. It was no life. It only became life as he recognized it. Or so the history narrative we are accustomed to, latently (but bluntly) assumed. When one arrives, one remembers the journey, but one does not acknowledge what was there before arrival or during the journey. Whenever there is a place to arrive, the place must have - in some way or another - existed all along. Those who arrive - whether at an insight, a conclusion, at happiness, or at mature behaviour - neglect the existence of that which already there. This goes hand in hand with a certain feeling of superiority, as it is one's own arrival that's central, not the ongoing existence that one comes to recognize. The efforts of the journey get the most attention. The common, inspirational motto 'It's all about the journey' forgets that the person journeying demands an awaiting point of departure and arrival, unless one would state, 'all is journey.'

When we think about progress, similar feelings of superiority come into play. Often, when someone poses, like Anna Tsing, that it might be possible and at least interesting to try and imagine a world without progress, this has historically been countered with a positivist belief in science. Especially medical science sounds very convincing. It's a doctor's duty to improve and possibly prolong (and thus progress?) life.

I have experienced a short lifetime in a wheelchair. On a cold day in March, I woke up, then ten years old, and my hip was hurting so much that I couldn't walk. Before that, I did sports everyday. Since that morning, I could only move in a wheelchair or walk short spans using crutches. I'm grateful that this sudden injury slowly disappeared after two years. Doctors used prednisone medications on me, the physical therapist tried different exercises, and my parents were wealthy enough to rent a better wheelchair than the free chair you are given

5. Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

by Thuiszorg.<sup>6</sup> All of these factors helped me get better. But I was only helped to get *through* this. Why did I not learn to live *with* this injury? Even signs of progress, such as managing the wheelchair better, were seen as a sign of decline at the same time, as it meant I was getting better at something which was not considered 'good' or healthy. Living in a world made to be unsuitable for wheelchair users or other non-conformative bodies, I'm utterly happy that the pain in my hip went away. The point is, I have lived two years in my life in which I was getting *through* a situation. I was living *through* life, while not actually *living* life, living *with*. Is this why I remember nearly nothing of that time? Because I arrived at the other side - being able to walk again, lucky and 'healthy' - and upon my arrival I could forget that all worlds and all sides that are always already out there, even if you are not experiencing and enduring them.

### BEING WITH INSTEAD OF GETTING THROUGH

In retrospect, this way of living may have mirrored the way I was living life before landing in a wheelchair. As a child, I was rather unhappy. I listened to Marilyn Manson to express this unhappiness, not to fuel it. I dressed in black and painted my room black, I collected fake skulls and bracelets with studs to feel surrounded. People wanted to make me feel better, but they especially told me that I *would* feel better. It would get better, I was told, because I would grow older and find my way. People trusted I would find my way maybe especially because I was a white kid from a reasonable wealthy and educated family. All would be fine as the society I grew up in, had space for people like me (white, wealthy, educated). I am fine. But maybe it would have been good if someone told me I was already fine. Not to build my self-confidence (though no harm in that), but to acknowledge the world as a continuous place, instead of believing that one will 'arrive' in the world. We cannot arrive in the world, as worlds are constantly arriving. We need continuous language. There is no platform waiting for you to get on board, there is no 'way of being' or mode awaiting your growth.

What can we give to a future that is not awaiting our arrival? The future needs a language that does not identify the future as a separate era. It needs a language in which the deadening force of words - *tense* - is countered with *presence*, continuous life. We need a language that is not old, nor presents itself too enthusiastically as 'new,' thus becoming commercial-like, claiming and promising 'newness' in order to legitimize its existence.

What does language need? It needs faith. It needs speakers (and listeners) who believe in its performativity, who recognize the effects of language, understanding that the expression (of an event, an experience) actually changes the event, the experience. It needs speakers who believe in plurality and constant noticing. This way,

the performativity of words will not create a chain of sameness and definitions will not stall life into comprehensible situations that can be compared and strategically used for progress.

I listen to “Low Lights” nearly every day, when running in the same park and making the same laps. I only run when I feel healthy, but when I don’t run, I don’t feel healthy. That too is a lapse. The running is by no means *making* me healthy. There isn’t one assignable cause for how I feel. When I run, it is not like I’m trying to get *through*. It is the actual running, the moving, that excites me. I pass people whom I have passed for years and I always see new people. Some may see me. I don’t hate the hill halfway through my 6K run, I’m with the hill, not getting over it or through it. My heart beat rises and I hear the singer’s worship, her expression of love and thereby the existence of love. I suddenly realize that, of course, talking to or about or with God is a way to eternalize the conversation.

A feminist queer language may well be that: God-language. A God-language without the need for one grand Lord listening and speaking, but an eternal effort from all, allowing everything to be alive - amorphous and recognized.



