

Tense

bio **author** Simon(e) van Saarloos **author** is a writer and philosopher, living in Amsterdam and New York City. Simon(e) writes the "e" in her name between parentheses because she questions gender norms and doubts anything that appears 'as given' or self-evident. Also, what's between parentheses might be more meaningful than what is said to be meaningful. She is the author of three books (columns, essay, fiction) Ik deug/deug niet [To Be Good or Not Be Good], Het monogame drama [The monogamy Drama] and De vrouw die [The Woman Who]. She also writes theatre and poetry and performs on stage as a lecturer, activist and interviewer. In the last Dutch general elections Simon(e) was a candidate for the political party led by Sylvana Simons. She is currently writing a book on the trial against Geert Wilders. **bio**

song

line: You want me to give you a testimony about my life

line: And how good he's been to me

line: I don't know what to tell you about him

line: I love him so much with all my heart and my soul

line: With every bone in my body I love him so much

line: Because he's done so much for me

line: Every morning

line: Every day of my life

line: I won't always be crying tears

line: In the middle of the night, and I won't always have to wake up

line: By myself wondering how I'm gonna get through the day

line: I won't always have to think about what I'm gonna do

line: And how I'm gonna, how I'm gonna make it

line: How I'm gonna get there, because he...

line: He's gonna be there for me

line: (...)

line: It feels so good to be free

line: To be accepted for who you are and loved no matter what

song

footnote 1

about

title Tense

info Original contribution

author Simon(e) van Saarloos

artist Martin Foucaut

info Interpretation

about

Words That Do Not Kill

paragraph 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 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).

footnote 2 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.

footnote 3 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

paragraph 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.

paragraph 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 confirming and producing realities.

footnote 4 As love is an abstraction, and not, for example, a chair one can point to, stating 'I love him so much' is the love.

paragraph 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.

paragraph 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.



paragraph 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 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

paragraph 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.



paragraph 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

paragraph 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.

paragraph 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

paragraph 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.

footnote 5 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