

Amorous Distance

For
Maxivive

By Lanre Balogun

The concept of amorous distance first came to me at a birthday celebration of a friend. Here I was munching or better still slurping on my second bowl of Saoto soup and all the crunchy soft condiments contained within. All the while nodding my head slowly as the words from Papa, a friend, drifted towards me, slicing the air, sneaking into my ear canals... sneaking out the other way. But still something stuck, because I caught myself pondering what the fuck is amorous distance... Luckily for me, I was later asked me to write about it.

I went back home, added it as a task to my ever-growing list of to-dos. I slept over it the first night, the first couple of days, I ignored it on my to-do list. I literally will look the other way if it could look in my direction. The first week went by, and I took the next step... added it into my calendar as a one-hour block. The one-hour block came by unnoticed and before I knew it, it was dinner time. I dragged the calendar entry into the next day. And we did this for the next week. To clarify "we" still refers to the singular me but in this context, it also accommodates the inner dialogue I have with myself.

Eventually, on a train ride, with only three options:
1. Use my phone to waste time on the internet doing "god knows what" 2. Read a book I had with me about a Palestinian author trying to stage a play in the West Bank; A book lent to me by a guy I'd just been on a date with, and right after he came in me (in a condom), he handed me the book like a little intellectual cherry on top. However, I was not in the headspace to continue with that story. The next logical thing was option 3. To begin work on this piece.

Consequently, I started some desk research on the train ride. And what I discovered about the concept of Amorous distance lowkey blew my mind. Buckle in... cutie...

Amorous distance, which I will refer to as AD going forward has its origins in film and media studies, and apparently some French guy named Roland Barthes described it as "letting oneself be fascinated twice over, by the image and by its surroundings—as if I had two bodies at the same time (Barthes 1986: 349)". I find the concept of being fascinated twice over as Barthes describes to be so wonderfully fantastic.

If I were to put this in my own words ... picture this ... you are sat in the cinema, the lights are dim, the projected images on the screen are just the right amount of light so as not to hurt your eyes, the sound is all-enveloping of you, you are fully immersed in the experience, every sound hits your body and you can feel the subtle vibrations course through you, the moving images and lights transmitted to your eyes tell a story. Be it one of conflict, or loneliness, or longing or some other random emotion. You are firmly transplanted and immersed in that world which has been created for you. At the same time, you can feel the comfort of the rough wear-torn and weary fabric beneath your butt cheeks, the person sat to your left, with a pleasurable hint of cocoa wafting from their pores, they lean in every now and then to stroke your hands lightly, and even one time brushed their hands against the nape of your neck. This duality of your person, one being engrossed and enveloped in the movie, and the other present to enjoy the aura of attention wafting from this person to your left. This pleasurable choice to be fascinated by both the image and the reality of being in the theatre is my understanding of AD.

A week later after the train ride. After some more glorious procrastination. I was sat in my Amsterdam living room doing some more reading. Highlighting texts here and there. I wrote to Papa, the person who had given me the assignment; asking him what he understands by AD. He described it as the emotional and psychological space that exists between desire and proximity, as the paradox of loving, wanting, or being drawn to someone or something while remaining physically, socially, economically, culturally, or internally separated. It is intimacy stretched across distance." It continues further: "Distance is not only geographical. It can be emotional, temporal, social, economic, or psychological. Within this framework, distance becomes part of desire itself..." and it continues even further... but god damn it. Enough of Papa's definition. But I think his framing of intimacy stretched across distance, distance becoming part of desire itself stayed with me. It made me think of a memory I've been circling for years. So, here's a little story time.





I was either 4 or 6 years old. It was my sister's birthday, so she was either 8 or 10 years old. We got back from school, and she (we) were asked to invite our friends' home to have some cake, food and drinks after school. And we were all so excited all through the day. The previous day before leaving for school, we already had the crates of soft drinks delivered, some decorations hung, I think a cake as well ... but it's been almost 30 years now, and my brain is a little very hazy.

The plan was for our mum to be home from work around 4-5pm, then we'd start the party. I am not exactly sure why this was the case, I suspect she was supposed to come home to make the jollof rice after a long day at work, and she was also supposed to come home with the cake. Anyway, we invited friends' home, we sat in our living room, all cramped on the sofa, our tiny bodies in the cramped living room. Three little bodies or more on one sofa, some kids on the floor. Mostly neighbours and friends from school and church that lived in the neighbourhood.

We were all excited, and waiting, and very hungry from the excitement. For some reason, we couldn't eat or drink, we had decorations on our heads, wore our party clothes as well. We waited. And waited. And as I type this, I really do feel some sort of way. We were crushed. The midday Lagos sun turned fast to evening and night. She never came home. There was no telephone back then. Eventually, news got to us that she fainted while at work and had to be hospitalised. For the longest time, I actually thought that this experience was mine, obviously it happened to me, in my household. But I thought it was my birthday, until very recently when I was reminiscing over our mum with my siblings. And I was told otherwise.

How could we possibly examine this story rooted in a living room somewhere around Boys' Town bus stop in Ipaja, Lagos in the '90s through the lens of AD? As I was thinking about distance and desire, this memory kept returning. For me, the fascination is with the memory and its unreliability. The active work of recollecting this memory, its unreliability included, is itself a labour of love. The distance in this context is time past, and my desire to understand, to reconnect, to honour that moment.



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I keep coming back to that cramped living room. My memory keeps going back to an image of my sister sat on a stool, dressed up with a cone on her head, me, very hungry, dressed up and possibly with a cone on my head as well. Everyone dejected. Lagos daytime turning to nighttime. No idea what has happened to our mum in this city of Lagos. My memory has a grainy filter, almost brown, to a yellow tint. A hazy memory.

Thirty years later, me on a train, laptop on my lap, trying to hold the memory steady enough to write it down. Two bodies at once. The child who sat on that crowded sofa in a cramped living room, hungry and confused, and the adult who now types "I really do feel some sort of way" and means it. The labour is the return. The love is that I keep returning. Distance didn't erase the story. Distance made me work for it. Distance made me write it down. I originally asked what the fuck AD was. I think I have my answer now.

My version of AD is not a pleasurable choice of being in two states at once. It is a forced choice of not forgetting. Barthes described amorous distance as the spectator holding two worlds at once: the film and the theatre. My version is different. It is holding two times at once.

Earth Day

A close-up photograph of a person with dark skin wearing a black, quilted hooded jacket. A bright, teal-colored headlamp is mounted on top of the hood. The person is looking off to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.