Heartbrake – Giulia Damiani

Heartbrake by Giulia Damiani, video by Yana Khazanovich

[This text is from a performance-in-progress. A version of the script was presented at Dance Space Destiny (De Sloot, Amsterdam) in November 2023. For the iteration published here, further notes have been integrated to help the reader navigate the context behind the performance, making connections to the work of Sylvia Wynter].

Thanks everyone for coming. I appreciate you being here.

It is hard to land all together in a space like this. Your mind may be busy with a thousand “things to do.” Roaming. Already set on the to-do list for tomorrow. Maybe some of you were resting today or were trying to do so and, in the end, didn’t quite manage. Rest. Thoughts. Worrying about something or other. In our day-to-day life, worry takes up ample space, right? It’s like another body floating next to us, ready to whisper thoughts in our ears when we’re trying to be quiet. What if something happens or what if it doesn’t happen? And what about that email I should have sent? Worry, my old friend. Who’s free from worry here? Is it even possible to be free from it? There are worries of different kinds and origins, but when experienced to an extreme, it can become a painful sensation in the chest. I don’t know if any of you have experienced this. It’s like a thorn is piercing through you, here in the chest. And you wonder, how could this part of your body not have been there before? How can you feel it only now? Can you breathe through it? [Breathing.] Slow this sensation down. Stick with it.

[Sharp sound of a hammer on a chisel.]

Now imagine a hard geological surface made of sedimented sand, minerals, and clay, covered in a soft layer of moss. It is a big rock in a landscape of mountains. In this landscape, people are looking for construction materials to afford food and to survive and build houses and infrastructure. They know how to read rocks and split them apart to put them to use. They can distinguish between rocks that will too easily crack into many pieces from the ones with good fault lines. A fault line is a separation between two parts of the rock,

sometimes given by the layering of different geological events, sometimes caused by some stress factors such as an earthquake or intense weather conditions. These rock formations were once underwater. Something significant happened, slowly or suddenly, at the bottom of the sea. The trace of this event may be a gentle one, entirely hidden. Imagine a gentle touch tracing the vein on the rock. Repeat the gesture several times. Trace the line on the rock with your fingers. Now take up a hammer and a sharp chisel and first make a series of holes on the line into the rock. Hammer into the crack. Make the holes deeper. As the holes get bigger, a cloud of dust arises. The tension and energy of the body are like fire and get transferred through the chisel onto the rock. It’s a heavy load.

The rocks are from the Apennine Mountains in the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy. Until the 1960s, stone cutting and masonry helped the subsistence of small communities in this region. Stone cutters or rock splitters carried a specific knowledge of the land—for example, its fossils or the geology of its rock formations—working with groupings or creating small pits in the ground. Stone was used as construction material for houses and infrastructure. Activists and intellectuals in the post-war era—including poet and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini—decried how the rapid industrial growth from the 1950s to 1970s triggered an “anthropological change” in Italian society.

As the quarries expanded and became mechanised, the local community’s relationship with earth materials changed. Stories that had accompanied the stone cutting practices for generations began

to get lost, as understandings of the land as a “vehicle for the imagination” were superseded by a new conception of land as an abstract administrative concept.

Yet, until the 1970s, activities such as manual rock splitting offered glimmers of a different dialogue between people and earth. I wish to unleash the potentially resistant knowledges of this practice, while also upturning its male-dominated tradition.

[Sound of heavy breathing while hammering down.]

The rock splitter gasps for air, lets the breath out. The sharp sound of the chisel is also a vibration. It can be intensely annoying. It reverberates. Imagine this space being shaken by intense vibrations. Where will the split occur? And are we ready to take it?

I feel an attraction towards chisels, which are also called perforating tools. Something about their sharpness and their potential for harm, and at the same time, how they bring about transformation to reveal something that pre-exists. The cut in the rock, present all along but brought to an extreme consequence: crack. So, the tools are a way to get to some determining tension in the rock; the tools to split rock manually used to be called percussion tools in Italian. Rock splitters use percussion tools. Strike and vibration. Intense energy passes through. Fire. Make it break.

Place your hand on it. [Breathing.] Where to seek protection from the break? The folk saint Wilgefortis of Portugal was mainly known as an

image of a bearded figure on the cross with traits of different genders. Wilgefortis's name changed from place to place, not really having a voice in their story while offering protection to people breaking from violent conventions over the centuries. It was, in particular, women who wanted to leave abusive relationships and people whose gender was fluid who asked for Wilgefortis's mediation with a reality that was often too hard to bear. Take all the worries away.

I first met Wilgefortis in the film Freak Orlando (1981) by director Ulrike Ottinger. The narrating voice announces how heartbroken women, according to a legend, grow beards. Can everyone who has experienced heartbreak trace a beard on their face, please? Thank you. [Action by the audience.] Next, bearded Wilgefortis appears on the cross at the moment of their death, crucified by their father for not wanting to be married off. In Dutch, Wilgefortis's name is Sint Ontkommer; when I went to see one of their portraits, a fifteenth-century fresco in a church in Nijmegen, an older man said that Ontkommer means "take all the worries away." Wilgefortis set themself free, and I don't want them to suffer that gruesome death on the cross. Will they always be framed as a victim? They are said to have set their father's palace on fire before death, and I'd prefer to instead finish their story with this angry image.

Wilgefortis's name probably derived from the Latin virgo fortis, strong virgin. Other names point to their freedom or to anxiety and grief: Liberata in Italian, Kümmernis in German. In 1969, their story was found to be a "mere" folk legend and they were removed from

the official list of saints. Nevertheless, recent scholarship is considering the cultural significance of Wilgefortis, especially for medieval people. The cult around them seemed to have been particularly strong in Brabant where processions took place with people travelling from different parts of Europe, up until the early twentieth century.

One of the aspects I find important in Wilgefortis's story is the protection of people whose narratives weren't registered in official records, but who nevertheless existed and fought against oppressing norms. Sylvia Wynter describes a shift in Europe in the conception of man during the Renaissance, when the rising European states replaced the dominance of the Church with a political subject at their centre. The religious man was replaced by the political, rational man, whose civilisation differed from the racialised subjects encountered in the colonies. Wynter defines Man 1 as the political man, and Man 2 as the contemporary breadwinner, the bio-economic man as the capital accumulator. In the folkloric tradition of Wilgefortis, it is interesting to ask what kind of subjecthood was portrayed. Although they belonged to the realm of Christianity—and Christianity was one of the paradigms used by the European political subjects to "other" Indigenous and Black people—they also depicted a complex identity. Wilgefortis's protection was sought by groups of people who were subject to violence (women and gender-queer folks) and who were seen as irrational or not as rational as the political man. Because of the lack of written accounts, I wonder about the voices of those people who were looking for a way out from normative violence.

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I see Wilgefortis walking in the streets of a contemporary Dutch city. They carry a big hammer and chisels in their pocket. They cross roads, not on the zebra crossing, so cyclists get upset and ring their bells. Tin Tin. The beard changes from time to time; I am still unsure how to imagine it. I would love to hear from you later about how you think it looks. But I know they carry a halo. In the portraits of Wilgefortis, their halo is depicted as a circle of light around their head. In this portrait and others their hands are clenched in a fist.

The church I visited with the portrait of Wilgefortis feels like a theatre. There's a restaurant inside. Volunteers run guided tours, and a choir is rehearsing at the moment we visit. The singing voices fill the space with reverberations. Outside the church, there's a theme park, and its visitors scream as they go up and down the rollercoasters. The pink and red lights from the theme park shine from the distance. Wilgefortis sits on a patch of grass nearby and watches the scene. I find them very beautiful, elegant, and yet quite boyish. I get closer; we sit down together and order a drink from a nearby cafe. Finally, here. I notice they talk very fast; sometimes, I cannot keep up with the flow of conversation. They build structures to tear them then down; they work on building sites. They are quick to point at the origins of their pain, dealing with it makes them scattered. They keep moving from place to place to be themselves fully. They're an anxious type, I guess. Nervous chatter. I am tempted to sit closer. When I ask what happened to them, they tell me they need to walk to talk; there's tension, but they are happy to speak. They say it's a profound disillusion.

Let it release. You're golden. I want to whisper in their ears.

A lot of pressure built up over the years. Much stress accumulated in their body, like some invisible external force was wearing away at their flesh, and they didn't realise it. Now they notice the weight on their body. Stricken, vibration. How their posture became bent over the years. Every time they were made to feel that they were inadequate, they would start doubting themself to understand the other. Become one. No clear boundaries. Even when it was real pain, hammer it down. I can see their desire to be out and just be.

Hands clench in fists. Gasping for air. Breathing. At times, when brought to an extreme, the violence you experience can make it seem that all words have been taken away from you; you become unable to utter sounds that are intelligible as speech to other humans. Left speechless. Sped-up breath, gasping for air, feeling that fire in your chest and tension in your hands that remind you that, no matter what, violence has been there. So much contraction and need to release. So much contraction and need to release. Trace a line with your hand on it.

I tell them that at least when things reveal themselves, when they become material and felt, you become aware of them, and there's no going back. Wilgefortis smiles. How is it possible that even their eyes shine? I cannot help telling them I want to kiss them. They laugh and ask how could we, outside in the streets. I'm reminded that in Italian, we use the word fiamma, flame, for passionate love. A hot glowing body. Something of their light filters out through me when I talk

about them. A ripple of their smile, or mine. It is a shiver. A flicker of light.

Take all the worries away.

In her book We, the Heartbroken (2023), Gargi Bhattacharyya suggests that grief is a necessary component of a revolutionary imagination, and that “what comes before the high kicks of revolutionary badassness includes sadness. . . . Grief cannot be tucked away or managed because, without the consciousness of grief, we cannot remain open to each other and the implications and possibilities of our profound interdependence.” Heartbreak is more than an affective state. It is an analytical realisation that much suffering could be avoided if systemic violence against specific groups stopped. Bhattacharyya talks about racial capitalism and how it steals value through various methods, including the variable processes of expropriation and thievery. Her message to redirect grief towards the collective also leads to an ecstatic call for the dissolution of the boundaries between us.
She calls it “the jouissance of solidarity, and it feels like nothing on earth yet.”

Now the rock’s crack is a gap a few centimetres wide. Wilgefortis places their big hammer in it to keep it open. It’s a heavy load, so please help them hold the parts while you look inside. Take lots of time for it. A red light shines through the gap. Be careful, it is so warm and beautiful it may blind.

Giulia Damiani is an artist, writer, and teacher based in Amsterdam working with performance. Her research intersects body, place, and feminist creative methods to arrive at ruptures in language and context. Her first performance for the stage, *Heart Brake* will premiere in 2024 supported by AFK, Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst and Centrale Fies. She was the recipient of the 2020 Performing Arts prize (movin'up) awarded by the MIBACT Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (Italy) for her piece *Emma B. is Not Dead,* presented at Centro Cultural São Paulo (CCSP). She was the research fellow and collaborator for the *Ritual and Display* edition at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, Amsterdam (2019–2022), and in 2020 she curated *From the Volcano to the Sea: The Feminist Group Le Nemesiache in 1970s–1980s Naples* at Rongwrong, Amsterdam. In 2022 she curated part two of that same show at Chelsea Space, London. Her edited book for If I Can't Dance, *Ritual and Display*, came out in 2022. In 2022 she received her practice-based PhD in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London (AHRC scholarship).