

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

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CHIEF EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

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VOLUME 7 ISSUE 2
AUTUMN 2023

SPECIAL ISSUE: SITUATED KNOWLEDGES OF GENDER AND LOVE

Guest Editors

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Editorial

Feminist Encounters with Situated Knowledges of Gender and Love

Wernmei Yong Ade ^{1*}, Deirdre C. Byrne ², Kelly Gardiner ³

Published: September 1, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Not so long ago, in the second half of the twentieth century, ‘gender’ and ‘love’ meant the same things to all scholars in the field. ‘Gender’ meant the binary system of men and women, masculinity and femininity, while ‘love’ meant dyadic, romantic coupledom. Since those rather simple days, our understanding of gender and love has become much more complex. We have learned to recognise more than two gender identities, sexual orientations, and forms of gender expression. Battles have been waged, in classrooms and elsewhere, about the use of the third person plural to refer to individuals who choose not to identify themselves with either pole of the gender binary. A pronoun once thought obsolete – *themself* – has become current again, being used to refer to reflexive acts by a non-binary person, as in ‘Rae has been entertaining *themself* by tracing their genealogy’. These developments complicate the dyadic relationship known as ‘love’ considerably. What Sara Ahmed calls ‘the straight line’ (2006) – the trajectory from adolescence to heterosexual romantic attachment, and from there to marriage, home ownership and children – is understood to be a path that fewer people will take, instead of being the universal progression that it was once thought to be. Following these developments, the study of gender and love, and particularly how these two concepts intersect, intertwine and inform one another, has likewise shifted its focus into multiple directions and tributaries.

The topic for this special issue was conceived on the basis of another pressing concern: the decolonisation of knowledge production. Feminist theorists and scholars have recognised for decades that knowledge is neither universal nor transcendent, but is always produced within specific social, temporal and geographical contexts. Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding and the standpoint theorists of the 1980s (and later) insist that claims to objectivity and universality – that is, to ‘truth’ – in Western philosophy and theory amount to no more than attempts to seize epistemological power and conceal patriarchal and racist agendas. The call for scholarly attention to be paid to *situatedness* (however conceptualised) is made more urgent by calls from the Global South to decolonise education and scholarship by foregrounding the context of epistemological production. If we recognise explicitly that knowledge is shaped by the specificities of its context, including the individuals who produce it, their geospatial locations, and the contingencies of race, class, sexuality and gender, what does that say about what we know about gender and love and the spaces and connections between them? Is it possible to lift situated knowledges of gender and love into onto-epistemological reflections on the characteristics of gender and love, including their methodological consequences?

The decolonial turn in scholarship, broadly understood, has brought the importance of context to the centre of our understanding, not only of knowledge production, but of experience. ‘Spacetimemattering’, Karen Barad’s (2007, 2011) neologism for the entanglement of space, time and matter, highlights the fact that being in a place, which is also a time, matters for how we see and understand all phenomena, including matter. So, taking Haraway’s understanding of situatedness together with Barad’s theory of intra-action seriously means that our context engenders specific kinds of entanglements with gender and love.

Together, our contributors offer a range of theoretical frameworks and approaches to questions of gender and love, particularly intersectionality and intertextuality, and often from decolonial and postcolonial perspectives, drawing on research which also reflects a decentring away from Europe, Britain and the US, often looking towards

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Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, and in many cases focused on marginalised communities. We are primarily scholars of literature and writing, but decided to cast our net wide in the call for papers and review of abstracts received, intent on attracting contributions from a wide range of disciplines. As such, we are pleased to present perspectives from fields including sociology, gender studies, psychology, sexuality studies, anthropology, postcolonial studies, social work and cultural studies. The work presented here also draws on complementary disciplines such as mythology, politics, psychotherapy and history, aimed at broadening and challenging our understandings of situated knowledges of gender and love. This special issue contains a number of articles from the disciplines of literary studies, theatre and cinema, and we are delighted to be able to showcase a range of approaches largely on texts beyond the traditional Western canon, including many, again, from the Global South, bringing these works to a broader readership and into the slipstreams of scholarly attention.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In the article that opens this special issue on situated knowledges of gender and love, Peace Kiguwa's article on love in Black and African feminist imaginations, some of these possibilities are considered in the specific light of liberation activism and Black women's struggles for social justice and, eventually, healing. Kiguwa places love at the centre of a reconsideration of the feminist adage that the personal is political, and suggests the critical importance of love in women's method of naming and writing, and therefore to any process of political resistance and personal and creative recovery. Women's understandings of love and justice also thread through the timely article by Sui Ting Kong, Stevi Jackson and Petula Sik Ying Ho, outlining their recent research on the political upheavals in Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The authors' innovative research methods, including performance and collaborative focus groups, and long-term engagement with women activists, enabled them to gather and analyse changing attitudes to justice, and shifts in emotional reactions – particularly women's understandings of love – to the political environment and protest in a city undergoing an often violent transition.

The work of resistance is also central to Mustafa Kemal Topal's ongoing project on women of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In his article for this issue, he draws on his extensive fieldwork as well as a range of posthumanist theorists to illustrate and analyse the many ways in which the PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan draw on the stories of the past to inspire the movement today. The female character Zin, who features in a seventeenth century Kurdish love story, *Mem and Zin*, by Ehmedê Xanî, is today given new life, being now an amalgamation with Zilan, the PKK's first suicide bomber. This new woman is a cyborgian feminist figuration, symbolic of love for the homelands and the movement, and an inspiration for the PKK's women freedom fighters. Similarly, Amrita Chakraborty examines the uses made of ancient stories for political purposes in her article on the construction of Bengali fairy tales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She reveals that although many of the stories appeared to be about Indigenous women as a symbol of the nation, they were in fact created and perpetuated by nationalist men and featured self-sacrificing heroines created to support the cultural resistance against British rule, and a vision of Indian women past and future. Far from empowering, then, these fairy tales now can be seen as masculinist constructions of womanhood and of gendered love. In a similar vein, Beth Roberts's article, 'Using Haraway's Split Researcher in the Context of Theatre: A Case Study of Subject/Object in Romantic Love' explores another culturally canonical text, namely the love relationship of Voltaire and the Marquise du Châtelet during the time of the French Revolution in eighteenth-century France. The splitting of the character of Emilie du Châtelet in Lauren Gunderson's play, *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends her Life Tonight*, is innovatively compared with Donna Haraway's ideas of feminist fragmentation and splitting in order to achieve a degree of objectivity.

For a long time, scholarship on love within the field of feminist studies tended to focus on love as it is experienced by women, and often in the context of heterosexual coupledom. Our next two articles shift our focus away from heterosexual romantic coupling, towards love as it is practised by men, queer and otherwise. In 'Intersecting Geographies/intertextual Traces: Queered desire and imperilled love in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*' Gregory Graham-Smith investigates the dialectic between (queered) desire and death/self-dissolution, using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to interrogate the permeable boundaries between homoerotic love, beauty and death. Men of colour comprise another marginalised population overlooked in love studies, a gap Melusi Dlamini attempts to address in his contribution on love practised by young black men in South Africa. Dlamini challenges limited understandings of young black men as violent and emotionally inept, a portrayal resulting from research that disproportionately emphasises women's experiences in intimate partner violence, where men are often the perpetrators. Dlamini examines ways in which love can, in fact, be a productive force in the lives of young black men, which offers opportunities to resist normative masculinities.

The next three articles ask us to imagine differently, all with the aim of dispelling common myths found in discourses on love. Antoinette Pretorius analyses the ways in which food discourse is employed to destabilise essentialised notions of culture and gender in South African author Zinaid Meeran's début novel, *Saracen at the*

Gates (2009). Meeran disrupts stratified conceptions of culture through his alimentary cartography and how food is used to disrupt religious identification, allowing for the creation of alternative constructions of identity that coalesce around the gustatory. Likewise, Nadia Sanger, in her reading of Shaida Kazie Ali's *Not a Fairy Tale*, looks at how the re-writing of conventional fairy tales, framed within decolonial epistemologies that open up space for marginalised knowledges, allow us to think differently about selfhood and our relations to others. Sanger argues that Kazie Ali's tales take seriously a feminist re-thinking of gender, and is unique in destabilising myths about women and men of colour. Reading Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House: A Memoir*, Deirdre C. Byrne and Nadine Lake set out to dismantle a commonly held misconception that relationships of domestic violence and abuse are the purview of heterosexual relations. This myth is consistent with patriarchal media images of men as violent aggressors and women as passive victims, reinforcing heteronormative concepts of gender and sexuality as binary.

Our next two contributors, Dorothea Boshoff and Mary-Anne Potter, turn to the marginalised speculative fiction genre as they explore how situatedness shapes the experience of gender and love, specifically as it pertains to patriarchal denial and erasure of women's potency and potential. Boshoff explores the ways in which women are excluded from the academy in Marianne de Pierres' space opera series, *The Sentients of Orion*. The series fictionally intensifies the patriarchal control of knowledge production, in an impoverished planetary world where most characters are stripped of, or crippled in terms of displaying and accepting love, affection and emotional intimacy. The series thus holds up a mirror to a trend in our own consensus reality, albeit in more muted terms. Potter teases out the intertextual resonances between two classic science fiction films (Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*) and Haraway's iconic cyborg figure. By unpacking the different perspectives brought to the figure of the cyborg in the two films, she reveals how the machinic, dependent as it is on human intention, can serve patriarchy by significantly limiting women's choices.

Juxtapositions between phenomena that may appear, at first sight, incompatible, are continued in Carissa Foo's article on Chinese author, Xiaolu Guo's novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). As the protagonist, ambiguously named Z (the final letter in the English alphabet), struggles to learn English, she also grapples with the consequences of loving in a different tense (grammatically and emotionally) from her lover. Foo conceptualises *situatedness* as not only possessing spatio-temporal dimensions, but also linguistic ones, and argues adroitly that the linguistic and the spatio-temporal, as well as the cultural, are all intertwined. In a similar vein, Kelly Gardiner writes of the textual representations of gendered love in a particular situation: the lighthouse. Lighthouses, she shows, mark borders, both on the edges of countries and the edges of empire, and on the edges of gendered identity. Lighthouse keepers in most fiction about lighthouses were stereotypically men, and as stereotypically, were as lonely and emotionally stunted as their locations are remote and buffeted by wind and water. As Gardiner's article shows, in her characteristic well-informed and witty manner, this is changing, as more women take up residence in lighthouses and the gendered trope of the man shut up in his own heart is subverted.

Nicoletta Mandolini's article on 'Re-appropriating Abjection: Feminism, Comics and the Macabre Coming of Age', focuses on an under-researched form of popular culture, showing how comics deploy the Kristevan category of abjection as a tool that assists young women's subject-formation. For Mandolini, the comic genre becomes a point of entry from which to explore how Kristeva's vision of 'anti-love' in the abject – that which repels the subject, rather than attracting it – can serve feminist ends. The protagonist in Ana Caspão's comic zine, *Funda do nada*, attains fuller gendered subjectivity as a young woman through her encounters with the abject.

The final item in this special issue is 'On the Edge: New Research on Gender and Love'. It is a transcript of a roundtable discussion in early 2023 with Serena Petrella (Brandon University, Canada), Amanda Gouws (Stellenbosch University, South Africa), and Danai Mupotsa (University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa). The discussion ranged from Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships and their implications for our understanding of gendered love, to the role of patriarchy in perpetuating the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa and what can be done about it in the absence of political will from the sovereign. From there, it segued into domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in romantic relationships among LGBT+ people and the ways in which this contradicts dominant tropes of men as strong and violent, while women are weak victims. Finally, we explored queer relations of kinship among black women, who are still, often, written out of mainstream concepts of maturity, life trajectories, and family structures. We continue to feel encouraged by the fact that gender and love are important and constantly evolving forces of subject-formation and political life.

There are five book reviews in this double issue. Jacqueline Zhenru Lin reviews *Gender Dynamics, Feminist Activism and Social Transformation in China* (editors Guoguang Wu, Yuan Feng, and Helen Lansdowne). Kaiwen E. Tsao reviews *The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan* (editors Gitte Marianne Hansen and Fabio Gygi). Didem Unal reviews *Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity and Affect in Postsecular Turkey* by Zeynep K. Korkman. Bih-Er Chou reviews *Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa* (editor Amanda Gouws). And lastly, Sarala Krishnamurthy reviews *The Sexual Politics of the Empire Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti* by Erin L. Durban.

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Love as Method: Tracing the Contours of Love in Black and African Feminist Imaginations of Liberation

Peace Kiguwa ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

ABSTRACT

What imaginations of the self are evident in Black and African feminist visions of Black liberation? How is love framed as a centring politics of Black liberation across social and political struggles? These two questions address two features of Black and African feminist social justice politics: first, a re-imagining of the self via routes of the communal self and love of oneself; and, second, a centring of love as fundamental to any project of Black liberation. Exploring these two trajectories, the article engages gendered love in terms of its material and affective registers within feminist struggles for justice and healing. To do this, select readings of African and Black feminist theorising, reflections, and activist works are explored including Pumla Gqola, Sharlene Khan, June Jordan, bell hooks amongst others. The intellectual diversity of these feminist contributions connects with reference to a feminist project that is rooted in (re)imaginings of love and self that are simultaneously personal yet also political. In the end, the project of Black liberation must address itself to the place of love in healing. The article explores what some of these features of love liberation could entail.

Keywords: African and Black feminism, love, self and other, activism

WHERE IS THE LOVE? MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF LOVE IN MODERN PSYCHIC AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. (...) This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people (...) More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison, 2005: 103)

'We now know that when men fight, women die,' Makhosazana Xaba writes in 'Women of Xolobeni' (Xaba, 2021: 11). Xaba is a South African poet and scholar, whose evocative poem bemoans the raiding of land brought on by foreign mining corporations; their cold threat against a people who have populated and cultivated that land over generations; the inevitable conflicts, divisions, and deaths that have occurred as different stakeholders attempted to lay claim to the land and its precious minerals. But more than this, Xaba also names the absent women of Xolobeni who have challenged this invasion of their land and homes. They are absent because their stories have been wilfully erased from the archival accounts of the community of Xolobeni and its struggles. Xaba's lament not only connects the struggles of the community of Xolobeni to land wars across the continent; she is also at pains to demonstrate that women's erasure from historical accounts of struggle against systemic, colonial, and patriarchal structures is a continuous practice. Her project, then, is both recovering and naming these women: 'While foreign capitalists and your brothers, fathers and sons fight for memorialisation in monuments, tombstones, songs and books we write your names in poems' (Xaba, 2021: 12).

Xaba makes it clear that the project of recovery and naming is also a project of form. In the absence of authorising national and institutional recognition of women's value and contributions to community building, the work of recovery and naming must engage forms of dialogue that reside outside these muting systems. Xaba's poetry engages resistance and recovery by speaking truth to power. This question of form is one that I will explore via a deliberate reading of women's writing as method. Xaba's naming project constitutes an important forum for

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us to consider the broader project of gender and love in feminist activism. Through naming, she excavates buried memories and histories; rejects the formalised and perhaps even valorised sites of memorialisation (monuments, tombstones, books, and songs) and returns these buried histories to a site that is made sacrosanct with honour and meaning. In the oral traditions of ancestors, in the practice of narration and storytelling, in the way that women across generations have passed on stories of their lives, Xaba is able to assert: 'The naming war has now been declared' (Xaba, 2021: 12).

In the quote that opens this article, US writer Toni Morrison (2005) in her novel *Beloved* engages love politics via the rituals of care that her character, Baby Suggs, advocates to the rest of her community. Suggs' project of recovery involves a ritualised care practice that centres love of oneself. Her incitement to the slave community centres a deliberate love of one's flesh and all of what it means to be Black in an anti-Black world, a world that actively hates this flesh and its material presence in the world. The religion she preaches takes love as its starting point for healing. Similarly, US poet Maya Angelou, describing her life's work, centres love as the thrust of redemption and recovery (1992).

In beginning with Xaba's honouring of the women of Xolobeni village located in Pondoland, South Africa, I connect with the historical and current struggles of Black and African women across the continent and the globe against diverse and interconnecting systems of oppression. The category 'Black' is used with full cognisance of its socially constructed and ideological origins rooted in systemic logics of racism and White supremacy, and also with recognition of the material and symbolic effects of these constructs for a designated group of people who have been categorised in this way. I will use it here to refer to all peoples across the globe who have been so categorised by these systems of logic, irrespective of geographical and other contextual particularities of racialising systems. In the South African context, I use the category 'Black' to include diverse population groups, such as Indian and so-called Coloured, which were part of Apartheid's hierarchical racial classification logics against the normative White category.

The category 'African' is also used with cognisance of the different and multiple claims to being African. I will use the category here to refer to Black women born in and who live in and from the continent. The categories 'Black' and 'African' are further used with appreciation of their intersectional underpinnings that influence how we live, love, and even die as Black and African women. I further agree with Shireen Hassim's (2022) recent caution not to read global North and South feminisms in over-determining frames that erase their synergies of struggles and politics. This is a sentiment echoed by Jennifer Nash (2018) and Falcón and Nash (2015) in their push-back against the critical trend to whitewash feminisms originating from the North in ways that erase Black feminist contributions and disconnect them from global South feminisms. These struggles attest to the long history of women's organising for change, for the betterment of their and their children's lives. From the Women's March of 1956 in Apartheid South Africa against the Pass Laws for Black women (led by Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, and Sophia Williams) to women's protest marches across Nigeria early in 2022 against the National Assembly (which had initially rejected five proposed Bills that would see greater freedoms for women in the country). In South Africa the #TotalShutDown¹ march in 2018 was an intersectional womxn's² movement that aimed to address the crisis of gender-based violence in the country. In Namibia, the #ShutItAllDown³ marches across the country in 2020 were also aimed at addressing gender-based violence. In Uganda, the feminist and activist, Stella Nyanzi, waged a public protest against the dictatorial government of Yoweri Museveni, which resulted in her forced exile following imprisonment and intimidation by the police. On 4 July 2018, in the United States of America, Congolese-born activist and immigrant, Therese Patricia Okoumou, scaled the Statue of Liberty in protest against the separation of migrant families at the US-Mexico border.

These collective and individual acts of resistance by women and gender-nonconforming people attest to different legacies of challenging patriarchal violence in all its forms across the continent and globe. They have typically been read as rage-in-action against patriarchal and racially violating systems and cultures, which indeed they are. I want also to read them as love-in-action. Harrison, Phillips, and Jackson (2022) similarly read Okoumou's actions as embodied radical solidarity that is based on love. Okoumou herself, following her sentencing, described her activism as guided by empathy and care for those less unfortunate. Through practices of resistance and through radical writing practice, Black and African feminists across the world have protested systems of oppression, and they have also engaged love as praxis. In considering the situatedness of love, I must also flag a necessary caution. The temptation to take healing and community for granted within many feminist social justice spaces is a fallacy that must be named and addressed if healing is to be nurtured authentically. This article explores

¹ On 1 August 2018 thousands of womxn in South Africa from all walks of life marched in protest against the increasing violence against womxn in the country.

² In keeping with the movement's values of intersectionality and diversity, I retain the original usage of 'womxn' to encompass all women and gender-nonconforming persons.

³ Following the murder of Shannon Wasserfall in Walvis Bay, Namibia, in 2020, protestors embarked on massive protests against sexual and gender-based violence in the country.

two key contours of love in its exposition on some of the fallacies of feminist activism that may inadvertently fragment community and interrupt healing. This fragmentation is inevitable when a centring praxis of love is absent from our imaginations of freedom.

But why love? On the scale of desirable affects, it may be common to think of love as one of the more pleasant and necessary affects. Whether as a solitary or collective surfacing, love is often understood to incorporate a good feeling. Indeed, popular culture frequently decries love's absence as a key causal factor in many of our personal and collective ills. Despite this, early feminist scholarship on love has demonstrated the dark side of love, from its social construction to its function in solidifying women's lack of freedom in marriages (see Jónasdóttir and Ferguson, 2014). Furthermore, how can the surfacing of love be central to the surfacing of impermeable and bounded communities that actively hate? Put differently, 'What is the primacy of love in the stirring of hate?' For Sara Ahmed (2004), this is part of the political work of emotions: they surface bodies, align them to some bodies while simultaneously *aligning against* other bodies. In *Affective Economies* (2004), Ahmed presents a brilliant examination of love as an emotion that may be surfaced in both a negative and positive capacity. We may thus consider love as a socially shared emotion that does something, makes social and political realities im/possible, and sanctions the dehumanisation of real material bodies, while elevating other bodies to the status of human. Love as a socially shared emotion also attaches to social histories and practices that organise different material bodies as worthy of love. Love, then, is an important site of inquiry into understanding the politics of social order and disorder in modernity and in the framing of a social imaginary that considers the value of different bodies to building community.

If we agree with Maya Angelou's conviction that 'love liberates', what is it, then, that withholds love from us? What seems to wrestle love from its coveted status as a liberating force? In the rest of the article, I trace some of the contours of love within the work and activism of a cohort of Black and African feminists and activists. I am interested in how these womxn scholars not only question the problematic gendered social arrangements of society, but also consider the intricacies of intimacy and our relationships to others and to ourselves. I want to suggest that these scholars and activists implicitly engage love as a method. I trace two strands of this method: love of self and love of the other.

SITUATING THE MATERIALITY OF GENDER AND LOVE: FEMINIST AFFECTIVE IMAGINATIONS

And it is here, in this extremity, that as a Black feminist I ask myself and anyone who would call me sister, *Where is the love?* (Jordan, 1978/2003: n. p., 1978 opening address as part of panel on Black women writers and feminism at the National Black Women Writers Conference at Howard University, Washington, DC)

US poet June Jordan's question in her 1978 opening address signals her centring of love to the feminist project of freedom and self-determination. Juxtaposed alongside the boundaries of racial and gendered oppression and the striving toward self-reclamation and healing, Jordan's question: '*Where is the love?*' tackles these dual continua of being-in-relation with each other and with ourselves. This centring of love flags a reading of love that foregrounds feminist and Black social justice organising focused on building communities of praxis and healing. In her question, she simultaneously underscores the presence and absence of love in our politics. Jordan's question invites us, her audience, to attend to the urgency of what may be missing in our imaginations of freedom and struggles for change. This quest for love's materiality similarly crosscuts Toni Morrison's interrogations of freedom in all her novels. While Wardi (2005) pinpoints Morrison's novel, *Love* (2003), as the moment Morrison directly engages love as action, that is, where she underscores love as a verb and not a noun, I would argue that this consideration of love in terms of its materiality and actions is evident in all her novels. This latter imagination of love as a question of what we *do* challenges popular constructs of love as interior feeling and emotion. In thinking through nuances of psychic and social freedom, Morrison centres and engages love as a fundamental constituent of freedom. She is not alone in her rendering of love via psychological and social embodiment and action. bell hooks (2000a; 2003) has been at the forefront of feminist explorations of love as central to self-healing and community building. In *All you Need is Love* (2000) and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2003), amongst others, hooks continuously centres love as revolutionary and as practice. The same trend is evident in Jennifer Nash's (2013) *Practising love: Black feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality*. Danai Mupotsa's début collection of poetry, *feeling and ugly* (2018), explores nuanced ways of engaging feminist politics, by traversing domains of pedagogy, politics, and questions of what it means to be hopeful. Her quest includes grappling with positive and negative affects in what she interestingly describes as 'love poems'. As these examples show, feminist scholarship is at pains to unravel this complexity of love: its political work and capacity for healing.

While love studies has enjoyed a cross-disciplinary and wide-ranging interest amongst scholars, feminists have, arguably, shown a rather sparse interest in the field, maybe because of their suspicion of love politics for women (see Jónasdóttir and Ferguson (2014) for an overview). In her critique of feminists' ambiguous relationship to love, bell hooks (2000a) argues that academic feminist ambiguity toward love is tied to the erroneous postulation that love has no place in revolutionary theorising and struggle. She observes that the dominant feminist orientation involved the flawed separation of struggle for rights and power from the practice of love:

We were to do away with love and put in its place a concern with gaining rights and power (...) rather than rethinking love and insisting on its importance and value, feminist discourse on love simply stopped (hooks, 2000b: 102)

For Jónasdóttir and Ferguson (2014), however, love scholarship amongst academic feminists did not stop altogether but tended to emphasise love's ideological character and function in the subordination of women. Nevertheless, I agree with Jónasdóttir's (2014) sentiments that perhaps it is time to confront this character and function head-on. Indeed, perhaps it is time to render love worthy of study, to reframe it, explore its complexities outside relations of subordination. Thinking beyond the realm of the discursive, materialist feminists have been especially insightful in engaging love in terms of its embodied and material practice. Feminist theoretical contributions spanning from the 1970s document a significant body of contributions to love studies in terms of lived experiences and situatedness (Jónasdóttir and Ferguson 2014, 1-8). Jónasdóttir and Ferguson further identify three strands of scholarship:

1. *love as ideological force*: thematic work that is largely heterocentric in focus, exploring romantic love between men and women, and questions of sexuality and desire largely via a lens of patriarchal male domination and subordination of women;
2. *love as ethics*, centring a praxis of love as underscoring our knowledge of life and the world at large, and engaging a poetics of love that reimagines social practices of possession and objectification; and
3. *love as politics*, which considers the political work that the construct of love and its affective surfacing does.

In this article, to arrive at an analysis of love that engages its affective character, that is, in terms of surfacing bodies, I rely on a reading of affect that engages the *sociality* of love: that is, its relational character. My aim is to consider how political economies that frame racial, gendered, classed, and other social arrangements influence how we may love ourselves and others. As Judith Butler observes:

One finds that love is not a state, a feeling, a disposition, but an exchange, uneven, fraught with history, with ghosts, with longings that are more or less legible to those who try to see one another with their own faulty vision. (2007: 66)

Butler's relational framing detaches love from inward and individualising sentiment, which exists outside a social and political economy (Ahmed, 2004) and places it within these economies and histories. Love, as an exchange inflected by and within these social arrangements, becomes a radical strategy of resistance. While these and other examples of feminist scholarship on love have provided significant insights into love's politics and practice in both personal and social domains, I want specifically to attend to the contributions of Black and African women's writing. In so doing, I claim the reading of Black women's work and activism as a deliberate strategy of recovery and naming, akin to Xaba's achievement in 'Women of Xolobeni'. Similar projects of recovery include Yvette Abrahams's (1996), Desiree Lewis' (2011), Gordon-Chimpembere's (2011) and other community recovery projects of Saartjie Baartman. Also see Sisonke Msimang's (2021) recovery of Winnie Madikizela Mandela in *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa* and Siphokazi Magadla's (2023) recovery of the life histories of women veteran who participated in the armed struggle against apartheid.

READING LOVE AS METHOD: BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER

Method is a procedure for approaching something. In making an argument for reading love as method, I argue that Black and African feminist and activist practices of resistance constitute a critical toolkit that engages procedures and strategies for achieving freedom and healing. Part of this toolkit, which I aim to trace via a reading of select texts, engages love as a site for recovery and resistance.

First, love as method is about exposure of *techniques of power and oppression* that affect women. This includes the project of naming women's agentic presence throughout history and current social and political contexts; of oneself as a being worthy of recognition for one's humanity; of naming silences and erasures that deny women's suffering and experiences of violence. The erasure of self has been a central dimension of the colonial and patriarchal project.

The work of decolonial scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981) and Walter Mignolo (2007; 2021), amongst others, have flagged this micro-politics of power: that is, the systemic attention to the interior lives of the colonised – as a significant aspect of countering state oppression. Questions of intimacy, how we relate to ourselves and others, are part of a micro-politics of freedom and these scholars have rightly argued that the project of decolonisation must also attend to how we recover dimensions of self. The explicit naming of love as a strategy that must be taken seriously, alongside other valorised strategies of resistance, has, however, been prominent in the work of feminists and women activists.

Second, love as method involves a strategy of *recovery*. I argue that Black and African feminists, in their myriad acts of resistance and writing, have always engaged this project of recovery in ways that centre love. The strategy of recovery includes the *recuperation* of lost stories and histories of women's lives; the *recognition* of the myriad forms of violence that influence how we relate to ourselves, our bodies and others; and it centrally aims to recover our voices and worthiness.

Third, love as method involves reflecting on and imagining *temporalities of past, present, and future*. Feminist imaginations have long grappled with the meanings of navigating past and present traumas and dreams of better futures. The work of temporality exists in the acts of refusal and protest against oppression. Love as revolution names the present in terms of its particular social and political ills; it recovers the past in its haunted memories; and imagines futures in its hopeful striving for something better. In Nyanzi's disruptive protest against corruption and dictatorship, in the 1956 South African Women's March to Parliament demanding freedom of movement and employment for Black women, and in present-day marches and protests against gender-based violence, women use their bodies to fight against their systemic violation and erasure. Women's acts of resistance re-imagine temporalities that bear the hopes for futures not yet seen. In considering these three intersecting strategies of love as method, I turn now to two specific contours that I identify in the writings of Black and African feminist writing: love of self and love of the other.

LOVE OF SELF: WHEN THE OTHER DANCER IS THE SELF

Homing in on love of self as a distinct project of recovery, I identify seven sub-themes across my selected texts that engage this feature of love as method. I am also questioning how systemic and micro-technologies of violence and power sediment and take hold in the lives of Black women. Elsewhere, I have discussed what I call the psycho-social entanglements of rage as an affective surfacing between Black women (Kiguwa, 2021) to argue that social and political histories of oppression influence how Black women not only relate to each other, but also how they relate to themselves. If we are to consider love, then, as a critical dimension of the project of recovery and decolonisation, what features of love of oneself do Black and African feminist writers engage? Earlier, I stated that resistance and protest by women activists must be read as instances of love and not just rage. I further this argument in highlighting the following seven interlocking features of the project of loving oneself: 1) the practice of naming; 2) relationship to one's body; 3) recognition as recovery; 4) engaging the feminine; 5) loving in a neo-liberal, capitalist, patriarchal and racialising context 6) rituals of love and care; 7) engagement-in-the-world and celebration of aliveness.

In the context of decolonising knowledge and knowledge production, Daley's (2021) interrogation of the encoded racial scripts of innocence and whiteness in popularised constructs and ideals of the development phase of coming of age is useful. She asks:

(...) if coming of age is foregrounded upon a naïveté and virtuous immaturity that is raced white, how do we then represent, understand, explore, and classify the maturation processes of Black girls? How do we recover, repair, and redeem their exclusion from the genre? (2021: 1036)

In proposing an alternate reading of how Black girls come to know and experience their social worlds, Daley introduces a new term: '*lit*', to describe these nuanced experiences inflected via racial, classed, gendered, and other social registers. I would add that to enter symbolic and discursive worlds is to also encounter affective surfacing that interacts with one's embodiment as Black and woman. For Daley, this encounter includes coming-of-age in tandem with affective economies inflicted with, through, by, and in rage. Daley argues:

I argue that to be lit is to be young, Black, and female experiencing the light and shadows that result from life's euphoria and its withdrawals. I define lit as both the liminal space between Black girlhood and Black womanhood and the affective spectrum between Black-girl joy and Black-girl rage. As a result of these lit experiences, I assert that Black girls do not come of age. Rather, they come of (r)age. (2021: 1036)

These affective economies, which surface shame and hatred of self, are also part of Black girlhood. Thus, while Audre Lorde (1984) describes a lack of access to language that does not allow her 5-year-old mind and heart to understand the act of racism directed at her by an adult White woman on a train, her body is still able to read and recognise racial disgust as it unfolds on the woman's face. Her arrival at knowledge involves being able to 'read' this disgust as exclusively attached to and surfaced by her young Black body, that is, the mere existence and proximity of her Black body to the woman. Children's inability to access language and symbolic resources does not mean that they fail altogether to recognise the social and affective codes of language that may be surfaced within a given context. Alice Walker's (1983) autobiographical reflection in *Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self*, from which the title of this section is drawn, narrates her own entry into young girlhood and later adulthood. It attests to this intuitive insight to read how her young, disfigured body (she was permanently blinded in one eye by a pellet gun fired by her brother) invites disgust and ridicule. This first entry into a sustained habit of loathing her Black body is a critical site for interrogating beauty politics handed down to Black women. She observes that this 'erosion of self does not happen overnight' (Walker, 1983: 358) but is gradually inculcated into the imagination of how young Black girls, and later young and mature Black women, inhabit the world.

In *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon's classic psychoanalytic reading of racialisation and its debilitating effects illustrates the abnormality of encounter with a hostile world that refuses to recognise one's humanity. For Fanon, a Black child's contact with a White world (and its predictable racial ideologies of Black inferiority) invites psycho-existential complexes centred on navigating and making sense of one's place in the world via an embodied Blackness coded as a problem (also see Du Bois, 1903). While Fanon and Du Bois explicitly engage moments of encounter between Black and White, I am also interested in the intra-group dynamics of Blackness. Part of the psycho-existential complex of racialisation, I argue, includes surfacing and circulating the affective economies of hatred of those who are similar to us (see Kiguwa, 2021). The South African feminist scholar, Pumla Gqola, reflects on this context in an autobiographical reflective essay in *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (2017: 6):

I am seven years old; it is 1980 in apartheid South Africa. I live in what I am later to learn is something that can be called 'a remote part of the country' in a small town with much history (...) My teacher is not talking about a world in which white people are superior to Black people. This man is talking about gradations within Black society, within Blackness, between Black people, between who counts and who cannot. At this school I am to learn that the fair-skinned girls are prettier. Always.

Gqola's reflections on racial and gendered interiority as a young Black girl coming of (r)age in a society marked by systemic racial, classed, and gendered oppression of a Black majority is an important reminder of the social character of deeply personal feelings. These circulations of shame and disconnection from one's body must be understood within their social and political contexts. A situated feminist politics and analysis must therefore attend to the emergence of gendered and racial subjectivity by considering the psychic dimension of social lives and the social dimension of psychic lives. The problem of naming here evokes Lorde's embodied understanding of the events happening to her and her inability to engage language to describe it. Despite their insightful analyses of racialised subjectivity, Fanon and Du Bois fall short of engaging the intersections of race and gender. The work of Black feminist scholarship on intersectionality is therefore a much-needed analytic layer to further understand the intricacies of racial and gendered subject formation. What are we to make of young girls' entry into the patriarchal world? How does a Black girl child negotiate struggles of naming as part of her coming into (r)age? This difficulty in touching the meanings of experiences ignites feelings of gaslighting and alienation from one's own intuitive knowledge: '*Did I imagine the anguish of never looking up?*', the young, partially blind, Alice Walker continually asks herself in response to external invalidation of her experiences of violence and shaming (1983: 359, emphasis in original). Her entry into an interior and exterior world of shame and ugliness is solidified in her prayers as a young girl: 'I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty' (1983: 359).

The act of naming what has happened to us is an act of recovery (Kiguwa, 2022). This is intertwined with recognition. For queer activist and feminist, Zethu Matebeni, recognition also encompasses what was stolen. In her autobiographical essay entitled 'Black Lesbian Feminist: Thoughts of a Born Queer' (2021), Matebeni reflects on what it means to be a Black woman with a sexual orientation that is not recognised by her society. Her early confrontation with a homophobic and patriarchal world takes multiple forms, including the erosion of female friendship and community (note: this is a critical strategy for destabilising women's resistance against patriarchal oppression more generally). But it is in a single act of direct violence against her body that Matebeni confronts head-on the systemic and insidious hatred of women and of lesbians. She reflects:

How do you hold on to yourself when you have been invaded? (...) Each day you yearn to come back to yourself. Yet fragments remain. (...) Reclaiming yourself is a difficult task. You did not lose yourself. Something was taken from you, a part of you. (2021: 136)

Ntozake Shange's classic play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* (1977) notes a similar act of theft of Black women's aliveness. Shange's play is an ode to Black women's struggles, celebrations, and recoveries of self. Central to the practices of recovery explored in the play is the recognition that Black women's selves have been stolen. Zethu Matebeni's reflections equally centre this recognition as a critical site of recovery. The act of naming and recognition of the violation against oneself becomes a site from which one may reclaim love: 'The recognition of theft is an important starting point' (Matebeni, 2021: 136). Recognition of a theft and recovery of self is also evident in South African poet Gabeba Baderoon's poem 'The Word', which locates recovery of self in the act of writing (2018: 56):

Until one day I began to write
and I wrote until I could not forget
myself anymore
On the page appeared
each breath and gesture, each posture
of the body I had torn away
On the page appeared the years
and the words I could not speak
On the page appeared the pages
and the emptiness I had erased
On the page appeared my bones
and my memories
and at last I stepped again into my body. (2018: 56)

Against a background of the violation of women's bodily integrity through sexual and other violence, Baderoon, Matebeni and Shange centre the work of recovery that begins with recognising that a violation has taken place. Baderoon's recognition of a violation long suppressed becomes the step toward healing that recovers self, body, and wholeness.

The work of reclamation further entails a recognition of the healing capacity of community. Audre Lorde (1984) eloquently locates part of this reclamation in terms of an erotic of feminine energy. She further engages the maternal as a site for theorising Black women's healing: 'the source of the romance between Black women and our mommas' (1984: 158). Paradoxically, this romance may sometimes exist alongside erasures of young Black girlhood by Black mothers. Danai Mupotsa (2018) captures this intergenerational rupture in her poignant 'Recitatif/For My Daughter'. In her poem 'listen up child' (2021), South African poet Natalia Molebatsi uses poetry as a medium to reflect on the generational differences between herself and her unborn daughter. Poetry is a tool for her to reflect on her own wounding, and potential for recovery and healing: 'infant of my skin, never step into boxes, these aren't enough to hold our stories alive' (2021: 74). Similarly, in her ode to her grandmother in 'Summers at Your Feet' (2021), Molebatsi further thinks through sites of woundedness and healing that cut across three generations, from her grandmother to her own experiences of being a Black woman growing up in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, to an unborn girl child with the promise of a different future. In 'When the Moon Waxes Red' (2019), South African feminist scholar and activist, Sharlene Khan, reflects on the challenges of telling women's stories. Khan's work engages the intergenerational experiences of gender of the women in her own family. The difficulty of excavating such secretly intimate experiences in the absence of linearity and even coherence. These absences and incoherence are tied to the silences passed down through generations of (non)storytelling, Khan wonders:

How to tell our story? (...) Not just our personal baggage and failings, but how to speak when those meet the social: colonialism, apartheid, racism, religious ethnic patriarchy, poverty, sex. How to speak and not be a 'type', 'representative', 'indicative', 'archetypal'? (2019: 8)

Reflecting on the recovery of herself in the aftermath of her violent encounter and the ritual of healing (*iyeza*⁴) prepared by her grandmother, surrounded by her sister, aunt, and mother, Matebeni (2021) likewise clearly identifies the women in her family as vital anchors. South African filmmaker and activist, Bev Ditsie,⁵ recounts a similar immersion in strongly female centred modes of care:

⁴ An IsiXhosa term for traditional medicine that includes a mixture of herbs.

⁵ Ditsie's activism spans a long history back to struggles against the apartheid regime in South Africa. She was also a key organiser of the first Pride March in Africa in 1990 and addressed delegates at the 4th UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. This was the first time that the United Nations was addressed on LGBTI rights and struggles.

I am very fortunate to come from a family of very strong, independent women. I grew up with my mother, my grandmother, my sister and many aunts and great-aunts, who all taught my sister and me about resilience and self-sufficiency. (2010: v)

Ditsie cites her grandmother's unfailing responses to the loud cries for help of women in her community in the face of attempted physical and sexual assault as her first real idea of women's activism. Recounting her own encounter with attempted violence in her home, surrounded by a group of at least 10 men, 'adamant that they had every right to teach me a lesson for daring to come out as a lesbian and demand equal rights'. Ditsie recalls her grandmother walking out 'with her iron rod and stop[ping] them before they even entered the yard; only she and God know how she managed that' (2010: vi). In *Queer in Africa* (2018), Matebeni and others note the struggles of many LGBTQI communities across the continent who face hostilities and violence in the face of state-legitimated policies – remnants of colonial anti-sodomy laws – because of their orientation, identities, practices and gender expression. While South Africa is significantly different in its more liberal protection of all sexual orientations in the Constitution, many social and cultural norms remain deeply pervasive and entrenched in their rejection of non-heteronormative sexualities and identities.

In *South African Feminists in Search of the Sacred* (2021) another South African feminist, Fatima Seedat, notes the absence of recognition of African traditional spirituality. Describing the women's #TotalShutdown march to parliament in 2018 and the ensuing discontent amongst the group when the march was opened with prayers invoking Christian deity, Seedat notes: '[T]here was no woman *sangoma*⁶ asked to open the formalities and to bring African women's ways of Being Divine into the march'. Bemoaning the masculinist imaginary that takes for granted a universal imagery of spirituality, Seedat argues that 'feminist activist spaces either stumble carelessly when it comes to religious expression or remain oblivious to feminist readings of religion' (2021: 99).

Love as method is also centrally concerned with celebration. The conscious recognition of one's aliveness is a testament to survival and worthiness. Kevin Quashie engages a Black poetics of aliveness as a strategy of healing in his book *Black Aliveness, Or a Poetics of Being* (2021). I locate the celebration of aliveness (among other texts) in Lucille Clifton's 'Come Celebrate with Me' (2012: 427):

won't you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into a kind of life?
(...)
come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

LOVE OF THE OTHER: BUILDING COMMUNITY

This work is not for yourselves. Kill that spirit of self and do not live above your people but live with them, and if you can rise, bring someone with you. (Charlotte Maxeke, 1939, n. p.)

Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke (1871-1919) was a woman of many firsts in South Africa and Africa. One of her key achievements is being the first Black South African woman to obtain a B.Sc. degree in 1901. Honoured as the 'Mother of Black freedom in South Africa', Mannya-Maxeke's work and activism includes fighting for equality and betterment of lives of African women (South African History Online, 2022). In this section of the article, I want to engage love in terms of its exterior affective capacity, in which bodies are surfaced as part of a project of healing communities. I am interested in the ways Black and African activists and feminists have engaged a material love, that attends to new imaginations of social and political contexts. Mannya-Maxeke's call, in the excerpt that opens this section of the article, engages a love of self that is *rooted in community*. Mannya-Maxeke does not condemn the liberation of self, which I have advocated for in the first section of this paper, but a corrupted version of self-interest, which is complicit in the fragmentation of communities. In *All about Love* (2000) and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2003), bell hooks turns to this centrality of love in building communities. Nick Malherbe, in *Considering Love* (2021), similarly notes love's radical potential for engaging social justice struggles in building and healing communities with histories of trauma and violence. Likewise, the social activist Dorothy Day returns to love's affective energy at the end of her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness* (1952: 317):

⁶ Traditional healer in South Africa, highly revered, who diagnoses and performs rituals of healing.

The final word is love (...) To love we must know each other (...) and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. (...) We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

Maxeke, as I mentioned, writes about ‘killing’ self-interest and embracing the practice of love of community that Day highlights: considering love in terms of care for the other and striving for utopian futures founded on the worthiness of the other. Circling back to the maternal as a driver for engagement in love politics, Stella Nyanzi, in an interview, locates her politics in her identity as a mother:

I think if I weren’t a mother, I probably wouldn’t do at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the activism I’ve done. If I were just thinking about myself, I wouldn’t know if I would be fighting for a better Uganda. In a way, motherhood keeps me very grounded. The children who play with my children reveal the reality of everyday Ugandans to me. I think I wouldn’t so much be interested in ‘a good world’ if I didn’t have any children of my own. (Dania, 2021, n. p.)

Nyanzi’s declaration articulates love through community engagement, being of service to one’s community, and care for the environment. In a similar vein, Darnell Moore’s public lecture ‘On Love, Empathy, and Pleasure in the Age of Neoliberalism’⁷ engages love’s affective energy to reflect on possibilities for bodies to serve as agents of change:

Love is a movement. Actually, love is *the* movement. It is that which *moves each of us toward one another*. That is to say, it is the eradication of the distance that exists between us and the other. Indeed, the radical potential in love is its ability to destroy the walls, fortifications, edges, spaces, which work to separate us. (2012: n. p., emphasis added)

In relation to Moore’s observations, Zygmunt Bauman’s (2003) dissection of love’s fragility in modernity begs the question: What is the radical potential of love to imagine anew, to build a better world? If modernity is defined (in part) by the erasure of love, in the sense of care and goodwill for the other, what hope is there of engaging love as a radical site for revolution? Audre Lorde (1984) expresses a similar concern in her critique of capitalism. In *The Uses of the Erotic*, she bemoans the devaluation of the human in favour of profit. This devaluation erodes the sense of community necessary to fostering connections and working together to build lives in harmony with the environment. Similar concerns are echoed in the activism of the Kenyan environmentalist, scholar, and human rights champion, Wangari Maathai. During her lifetime, Maathai worked diligently to improve the lives of women and the environment. Her activism refused the binary opposition of human and natural ecologies, and considered the intricate ways in which gender politics is interwoven in environmental politics. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2004, she observes:

Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tiling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families. (in Musila, 2020: 154)

To speak of the materiality of gendered love in postcolonial Africa is, thus, to attempt connections between situated contexts and the affective economies that circulate within them. The systems of governance and the social contexts that influence social formations must be analysed so that we can understand the intricate ways these formations become sedimented in our psyches. Considering the sociality of emotion, then, is to take seriously the work emotions do in sedimenting social formations and the organisation of social life (Ahmed, 2004). The ‘female fear factory’ that Pumla Gqola (2015; 2021) describes in her exploration of rape in South Africa exemplifies this. Earlier I argued that negative affects, such as shame, can form part of the constitution of a gendered subject. What would it mean to consider love similarly? That is, is it possible to consider the ways in which gendered love becomes distorted, trivialised, and even erased in the emergence of the gendered subject? I have argued elsewhere (Kiguwa, 2021; 2022) that such distortion, trivialisation, and erasure and is indeed possible in the context of neo-liberal and racist capitalist economies that favour the social organisation of subjects in terms of profit and not in terms of their humanity. In *Changes: A Love Story* (1993: 50) the Ghanaian writer and feminist Ama Ata Aidoo’s fictional story tackles this entanglement of love with power and inequality head-on:

Love? Love? Love is not safe, (...), love is dangerous. Love is fine for singing about and love songs are good to listen to, sometimes even to dance to. But when we need to count on human strength, and when

⁷ Delivered as part of the Audre Lorde Human Rights Lecture Series on 7 November 2012 at Harvard University.

we have to count pennies for food for our stomachs and clothes for our backs, love is nothing. (...), the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves.

Gendered social hierarchies and their interaction with social and political and economic arrangements is at the heart of many feminists' dissection of the politics of love. Also see South African activist Pregs Govender's (2007) *Love and courage: A story of insubordination*. For example, the Nigerian feminist scholar and activist, Amina Mama, identifies love as part of a system of social arrangements when she asserts that:

The confinement of women to the economically dependent role of housewife is a condition that has made it difficult for many women to leave otherwise unbearably violent situations. In other words, *the domestication of women is a precondition for the crime we define as domestic violence*. (Mama, 1997: 53, emphasis added)

The Zimbabwean feminist scholar and activist, Tsitsi Dangarembga, similarly uses her novel, *Nervous Conditions*, to make a biting commentary on the distortion of love in the context of patriarchal gendered inequality. The novel opens with the words 'I was not sorry when my brother died', spoken by her female protagonist, Tambu. She continues: 'Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days' (1988: 1). Lauren Berlant's (2004) idea of compassion as an affect that is bound up with material practice, which may disrupt its moral character, is interesting to note here. Tambu's lack of feeling and inability to mourn the loss of her brother is tied to her awareness of the opportunity his death opens for her as a Black African girl: to receive a formal education. The gendered inequalities of young girls' access to education continues to be a concern across the continent. Ama Ata Aidoo (1990) reclaims African feminists' activism in terms of the broader political and social challenges of the African context (Frías Rudolphi, 2003). The articulations of affective states, and the material contexts that shape them, are vividly portrayed in Aidoo and Dangarembga's works.

These articulations are also present in social organising against injustice in different contexts (Shaw *et al.*, 2022). Yaliwe Clarke and Constance O'Brien's (2019) documentation of women's activism in Northern Uganda in the aftermath of war highlights the social and cultural fragmentation that happens in a context of destabilisation. The fragmentation of patrilineal ties and other social strongholds facilitated the active organising of women in the community in working to rebuild and engage a practice of community care as part of healing and recovery. The women's work included building care groups for orphaned children; building small group savings schemes; soliciting aid from humanitarian groups; harvesting; working the land, and so on. Clarke and O'Brien find it noteworthy that women's peace activism in this context involved occupying spaces previously held by men and engaging a reimagined gender politics that place women at the forefront of change and community building. In her work and activism focused on women's experiences of trauma, the South African scholar, Puleng Segalo, engages forms of critical participatory action research with women in the Daveyton community to reflect on the structural and everyday violence in their lives. Segalo asks: 'What does it mean to theorise suffering and trauma as gendered?' She argues:

Many women are suffering from 'enforced' amnesia, which may be personally or systematically imposed by the ruling structures. When encouraged messages are that of forgiving and forgetting and the promotion of equality without acknowledging women's everyday lived experiences, then 'amnesia' kicks in – society starts to forget. The challenge becomes the ghosts that continuously haunt these women. (2022: 4)

Segalo's task is to engage modes of listening and telling women's stories that are not recognised in formal dialogical spaces. I began this article with Makhosana Xaba's project of naming in her poetry about the women of Xolobeni and their struggle against land invasion. As poetry is to Xaba as medium and as a site for honouring women's lives and stories so is Segalo's reimagining of embroidery as a critical site for reclaiming voice and agency.

In the women's marches against gender-based violence in Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa, a reimagining of material, social and political contexts is at the heart of women's resistance. Reimagination is also at the heart of Wangari Maathai's project, including inculcating a sense of accountability in agents of both state and community to the environment. In activism, scenes of love are intrinsic to practices of refusal and resistance. In demanding social accountability, women activists perform an act of hailing (Althusser, 1970) that simultaneously brings to light their interpellation in society as disempowered but also refuses the simple interpellation as non-agentic subjects. They do this via a surfacing of a gendered subject both within and outside law. The hailing of women's activism surfaces a subject worthy of love and not just a subject recognised in law. In this vein, Diana Fuss (2017) reframes hailing acts as moments of recognition that embody love: 'these scenes of ideological recognition are stories not of suspicion but of friendship, not of guilt but of anticipation, not of law but of love' (2017: 354).

As I have argued, it is useful to think about women's acts of refusal through the lens of love. Feminist refusal incorporates feminist rage to imagine new configurations of social formation. Gqola (2017) suggests that continued acts of refusal must be thought of alongside re-energised feminist activisms. Given the configuration of social formations via affect, refusal and resistance should also be imagined in terms of their affective energies and capacities. I read these activisms as labours of love that engages the erotic potential of the human in terms of full understanding and acceptance of our interconnectedness. For example, for Maathai, her environmental activism and struggle for women's rights aims at women in the community 'com[ing] to recognize that they are the primary custodians and beneficiaries of the environment that sustains them' (in Musila, 2020: 155). The Ugandan feminist scholar, Sylvia Tamale (2020), similarly centres Africa's decolonial project alongside gender struggles, both within the decolonial narrative and more broadly as part of the contributions of Afro-feminists. These activists and scholars foreground justice as love. They do not engage love in its abstract and perhaps apolitical form: rather, they conceive of love via a social justice lens that firmly locates justice for women at the centre of their activism. The labour of love that they perform is their fight for social justice. In the end, then: 'Love, empathy, and pleasure may be the types of affect necessary to transform our selves, our communities, our world, our souls: that which is necessary to move us to do our work' (Moore, 2014: n. p.).

CONCLUSION

I will learn to love myself well enough to love you (whoever you are), well enough so that you will love me well enough, so that we will know, exactly, where is the love: that it is here, between us, and growing stronger and growing stronger. (Jordan, 1978/2003: n. p.)

'Where is the love?', June Jordan's important question to feminists, activists, and social justice movements, remains fundamental in considering situated feminist knowledges. In Jordan's view, genuine community-building is only possible because one can love oneself. Self-love underscores love of the other. The complexities of love for feminists notwithstanding, the article has demonstrated that love remains a critical starting point for change. In reading love as method, the article explores how women's bodies are surfaced within patriarchal and racialising contexts, and in turn recovered in feminist activism. Through a select reading of Black and African feminist texts, I have demonstrated that these scholars and activists engage a politics of love that attends to love's labour: *love of self* and *love of the other*.

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Seeking Love and Justice Amid Hong Kong's Contentious Politics

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong women activists' understanding of love and justice has shaped, and been shaped, by their political engagement under changing circumstances through two phases of mass protest: in 2014 and 2019. This article is focused on the sentiments of love and justice and how they evolved over time, from the peaceful protest of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 to the violent confrontations of 2019 in the context of the rise of ethno-nationalism. This shift reflects a changed understanding of justice – revenge against China – and a specific version of passionate love for Hong Kong and protective love for their comrades. Women activists' experiences offer insights into how a social movement has engaged women's emotional energies in particular gendered ways, while persistently marginalising gender issues. In the aftermath of the movement, when protest was effectively banned by both COVID-19 restrictions and the 2020 National Security Law, these women's emotions have found a new object of their fierce love for Hong Kong: the boy band Mirror, which has come to symbolise Hongkonger pride, belonging and resistance.

Keywords: Hong Kong protests, gender and social movements, popular culture as protest

INTRODUCTION

In June 2021 Sik Ying Ho hosted a reunion dinner of The Women Activists' Support Group,¹ which had begun as a Facebook group in 2015. It was set up by young women involved in the 79-day occupation of major thoroughfares in Hong Kong during 2014, known as the Umbrella Movement. It was so called because protesters used umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper spray and tear gas in skirmishes with the police preceding the occupation. The support group was a response to young women's felt need for mutual support after experiencing online and offline gender-based and sexual harassment within the movement. Sik Ying, despite being older, was invited to join them due to her reputation as a scholar-activist. The group met in person, from time to time, to share their experiences of social movement participation, to mobilise support for political prisoners, and to engage in various other forms of activism.

By the time of the dinner in 2021 these women were veterans of two major protest movements: the Umbrella Movement, which despite early clashes with the police, was largely peaceful, and the mobile and increasingly violent protests of 2019. They had not all met since the protests were at their height in late 2019 and the global pandemic had not yet taken hold. Since then they had lived through lockdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions for over a year and, in 2020, the Chinese government had imposed a draconian National Security Law on Hong Kong, which criminalised any open dissent, effectively outlawing protest. Over a long dinner, the conversation ranged from discussion of the recent protests, and how they differed from the Umbrella Movement, to the nature of populism and democracy.

Although none of the women apart from Sik Ying identified as feminists, they had always been concerned about gender inequality and injustice; but in recent conversations about Hong Kong politics, gender issues seem to have slipped away, rendered unimportant relative to the suppression of Hongkongers' democratic aspirations. Members of this group are not unusual in this respect. Elsewhere we have noted the same disregard of gender issues among other Hong Kong women activists – including those who *do* identify as feminists – to the extent that

¹ In order to protect these women's anonymity, the group's name is a pseudonym as are all the names of individual research participants.

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they now often refuse to criticise the misogyny and homophobia openly expressed within some influential sections of the movement (Kong, Jackson and Ho, 2024). There is nothing new or unusual in gender issues being side-lined in the interests of a 'bigger struggle'. However, in the Hong Kong context, there is a discernible shift in women activists' politics, which is frequently articulated in terms of love and justice. This is what we seek to analyse in this article, explaining how and why understandings of love and justice have changed between the Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests and their aftermath.

In the rest of the article, we briefly describe our methodology and the theoretical resources on which we draw, before providing some background on the postcolonial context in which the protests occurred. We then move on to discuss the two protest movements in turn, analysing the way love figures in women's accounts of them. Finally we consider the aftermath of the 2019 protest, in which love for Hong Kong found new outlets.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL NOTES

We (the three authors) are academics who have been researching the lives of women activists since the Umbrella movement as part of a series of projects exploring the impact of political involvement on personal life (Jackson, Ho and Kong, 2018; Kong, Ho and Jackson, 2020; Ho and Li, 2021; Kong, Jackson and Ho, 2024).² We are two ethnically Chinese female Hongkongers and one white British woman with longstanding ties to Hong Kong and we all have direct experience of the movements we discuss here, with varying degrees of participation in them. As feminists we recognise that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988). We are not disinterested observers; our analysis is coloured by our own social locations, experiences and preoccupations.

The accounts we draw on here include some from the Women Activists' Support Group and some from a larger sample of activists who have participated in our research (Ho, Jackson and Kong, 2018; Kong Jackson and Ho, 2024). We have followed the trajectories of a number of individual women who participated in both protests, involving them at different stages of the research. Since we wanted to investigate how activists made sense of their experiences, we have used a variety of qualitative methods, aiming to create diverse opportunities for activists to express their views and feelings. In addition to well-established methods, such as individual and group interviews and focus groups, we also experimented with some innovative approaches. In our collaborative focus group analysis, a focus group's discussions are observed by an academic 'reflecting team', followed by a reversal of roles, with the reflecting team providing an analysis of the focus group discussion observed by the original group, who are then able to speak back to the researchers and challenge their interpretation (Kong, Ho and Jackson, 2020). Additionally, we have combined this method with a multi-media theatrical performance in which women activists dramatised their experiences, finding new ways to convey their thoughts and feelings (Ho, Chan and Kong, 2017). Through maintaining contact with these activists over time, we have been able to chart changes in their political stances and gain insight into their shifting emotional investments in the democracy movement.

One lesson we learnt from enabling our research participants to talk back to us in 360-degree feedback exercises, as well as from ongoing contact with them, was the importance of emotions: they wanted us to understand what they *felt* about the protests, not just what they thought. Emotions have, in the past few decades, been recognised as an important aspect of social movements and especially of protest, 'a process overflowing with emotions' (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001:7). Feminists have made significant contributions to this 'affective turn' in their engagement with and critiques of mainstream social movement theory (Zemlinskaya, 2010; Holmes, 2012; Craddock, 2020). Most feminist social movement scholarship, however, has focused on women's, and especially feminist, activism (for an overview, see McKee and Crossley, 2018). All social movements, however, are gendered, regardless of their goals and the gender composition of their adherents (Einwohner *et al.*, 2000; Zemlinskaya, 2010; Craddock, 2020); they operate in gendered social contexts and 'movement participant, targets, and/or third parties (...) construct or manipulate gendered meanings' (Einwohner *et al.*, 2000: 692). In movements with a mixed gender composition, women have often been side-lined, their interests marginalised, and/or their contribution ignored or minimised (Zemlinskaya, 2010: 635-636).

In analysing women's experiences within such a protest movement, we must address the gendering of internal movement dynamics and, in order to do so, we take a relational approach (Holmes, 2012; Crossley, 2016; see also Kong, Jackson and Ho, 2024). Social movements, and people's subjective experience of them, are relational in a number of ways: they have a self/other dynamic, us and them, which is shaped by interaction amongst allies and with opponents; by relations between groups as well as individuals; and between individuals, groups and corporate or state entities. In the case of the Hong Kong protests, activists are oriented towards a variety of others: their comrades, friends and supporters, the idea of Hong Kong itself, and those cast as enemies: the Beijing and Hong Kong governments and (especially from 2019) mainland Chinese individuals and the police. A central motivation of women's involvement in these movements, especially in and since 2019, is the defence of the Hong Kong they

² These projects all had ethical approval from the University of Hong Kong and/or Durham University.

know and love against the threat posed by the Chinese government. How has their ‘knowing’ evolved through their embodied experience and perception of Hong Kong society, culture and politics as under threat? How has it affected their understanding of love and justice?

Feminism has a long tradition of theorising love, especially romantic love in heterosexual relationships (see Jackson, 2014), as well as love within families and among friends. Here, however, we are concerned with love in the context of a social movement where it is both interpersonal and directed towards collectivities: Hong Kong itself and the movement to defend it. In exploring these loves, we follow Jackson’s past emphasis on the sociality of love (1993; 2014), drawing on Anna Jónasdóttir’s theorisation of ‘love power’ (1994, 2009, 2011, and 2014) and Arlie Hochschild’s (1983, 2003) conceptualisation of ‘emotion management’ and ‘feeling rules’. Love is social in that its meanings are contextually, culturally and historically variable. It is associated with similarly variable socially patterned practices, some of which are subject to state regulation; it is relational, ‘something one “does” and “feels” with others rather than a pre-existing emotion that one “has”’ (Smart, 2007: 59); and it is also something made subjectively meaningful through reflexive processing of what we learn of love from our wider culture and through everyday observation and interaction.

Jónasdóttir’s theory of love helps us to theorise the ways in which Hong Kong women’s love has served the interests of both the democracy movement and their male intimate others. She applies a Marxist methodology to ‘socio-sexual relations’, or gender relations (Jónasdóttir, 2009), conceptualising love and love power, in Marx’s terms, as ‘practical human-sensuous activity’ and ‘a creative/productive – and exploitable – human capacity’ (2011: 45). Love power is envisaged as comparable to, but distinct from and irreducible to, labour power. Jónasdóttir focuses on love in heterosexual relationships as an explanation for the persistence of male dominance, but she argues that the way heterosexual love is practised influences other love relationships and ‘person to person relationships in other social contexts’ (2011: 46; also 2009: 78–79). Of the two aspects of love she identifies – care and erotic ecstasy – only the former resonates with our data. Moreover, Jónasdóttir is more interested in relational practices and the macro-social structuring of love than subjective feeling – hers is ‘not primarily a theory of the self or *subjectivity*’ (Jónasdóttir, 2011: 13, emphasis in original). Love, however, must also be understood as a subjectively felt and often powerful emotion in order to do justice to the feelings of the women who participated in our research.

If we are to avoid universalising, essentialist assumptions, it is problematic to think of love as a natural pre-existent emotion and the social as merely moulding or constraining it. Feminist anthropologists have often emphasised the cultural specificity of emotions. As Michelle Rosaldo puts it: ‘feelings are not substances to be found in our blood (...) They are structured by our forms of understanding’ (1984: 143). Sociologists tend not to go so far, but Arlie Hochschild (1983) has suggested that when we are required to manage our emotions, such management contributes to the actual creation of them. More recently, writing of love, she argues that the ‘feeling rules’ appropriate to any given social context mean that ‘some feelings are feelable and others are not.’ Further, how love ‘feels’ depends on ‘cultural dictionaries’, which define what is ‘pre-acknowledged, pre-named, pre-articulated, culturally available to be felt’ (Hochschild, 2003: 121). It is important, however, not to forget the relational and interactional processes that mediate between cultural dictionaries and subjective feelings (see Jackson, 2014). In the context of Hong Kong’s social movements, then, we should consider how the interactional setting of protest may require emotion management and/or engender particular feeling rules.

Before going on to consider how love (towards comrades, the movement and Hong Kong) is felt, and in what sense that love might be exploited, we need to provide some background on Hong Kong’s peculiar post-colonial situation and the development and characteristics of the two protest movements. The aspirations and emotions of the women activists we worked with only make sense against this backdrop.

POSTCOLONIAL PECULIARITIES

The British colonisation of Hong Kong began after first Anglo-Chinese War or Opium War (1839–1841) whereby Britain forced China to accept the British East India Company’s imports of opium from India. Under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 Britain acquired Hong Kong Island and subsequently, after the second Opium War (1856–1858), the tip of Kowloon peninsula across the harbour. While these territories were ceded to Britain ‘in perpetuity’, the bulk of Hong Kong’s landmass, known as the New Territories, was secured on a 99 year lease in 1898. The expiry of this lease determined the date when the whole of Hong Kong would be returned to China: 1997. The ending of British control did not come about through the will of Hong Kong’s people: they were not consulted. Far from wanting to ‘return to the motherland’, being handed back to China was not, for most, a welcome prospect, despite the ills of colonialism. For most of its history, the British colonial administration had presided over a grossly unequal society and neglected local people, except to keep them under control. As late as the early 1970s, most of the population still lived in abject poverty and overcrowded substandard housing, labour

conditions were appalling and welfare provision was extremely limited.³ Things began to improve in the 1970s when, partly in response to major protests in 1967, the government initiated a campaign against corruption (which had previously been rife); a new public housing programme; better healthcare; the introduction of free compulsory schooling; and partial recognition of Cantonese as an official language (Carroll, 2007). These reforms were limited, but were enough to persuade the populace that the government 'had become relatively reasonable' (Cheung, 2009: 140). Local people continued, however, to have little political influence, with only a few members of local elites drafted into the otherwise exclusively European legislature. From the 1980s onwards, due to its increasing prominence as a global financial centre, Hong Kong became richer, and a growing middle class was sharing in the new prosperity even while inequality was increasing (Goodstadt, 2013). At the same time, popular culture began to flourish and a distinctive Hong Kong identity emerged, alongside the prospect of the inevitable return to China in 1997, finalised by the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The impending handover did prompt the colonial authorities to introduce a degree of democracy in the form of some indirectly elected representatives to the Legislature.⁴

In the final decades before the handover, the worst aspects of colonial rule had been ameliorated, helped by greater affluence, though poverty and inequality persisted. Hongkongers had come to see British rule in a positive light and to value the rule of law, a reasonably fair judicial system, relative transparency in government and a degree of freedom of speech unimaginable in the People's Republic of China (PRC). They therefore anticipated the return to China with some trepidation, heightened by the Tiananmen massacre of 4 June 1989. The provisions of the handover agreement, however, offered some reassurance: under the 'one country two systems' provision, Hong Kong was to be a Special Administrative Region (SAR), retaining its existing legal and political system, along with freedom of speech and assembly, for 50 years after the resumption of Chinese sovereignty. There were also pledges of future democracy, which were never honoured, providing the focus for a long campaign to achieve what had been promised.

As a result of its colonial history, Hong Kong is culturally quite different from the PRC. Hongkongers see themselves as more sophisticated, civilised and cosmopolitan than the mainland Chinese population. At the same time, they have their own local culture and language (Cantonese), which is valued and seen as worth protecting against mainland Chinese influence. This sense of distinctiveness increased as more Chinese 'mainlanders' (as they are called) came to Hong Kong as tourists or settlers after the handover. Even as China became richer and more powerful, Hongkongers continued to see mainlanders as inferior, although more threatening (Liu and Shi, 2021). Resentment of China and mainland Chinese people became more marked in the second decade of this century. The situation worsened after Xi Jinping's accession to power in 2012:⁵ China became more authoritarian and Beijing increasingly interfered in Hong Kong's internal affairs and, in particular, dashed hopes of future democracy. On 31 August 2014, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) ruled that, instead of the promised democratic election of the SAR's Chief Executive (head of government), voters would only be able to choose candidates loyal to the Beijing regime selected by a nomination committee. The Umbrella Movement was a response to the injustice of this decision.

LOVE AND PEACE

The plan for an occupation was initiated by three veteran democracy campaigners (Benny Tai, Chan Kin-man and Chu Yiu Ming), advocates of non-violent civil disobedience, under the slogan 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace'. In the event, the occupation began after the police fired tear gas against students who broke into Civic Square, the site of the government complex, on 28 September 2014. The police action proved counter-productive, increasing support for the protest. Subsequently, until the occupation was cleared, the police adopted a low profile and the occupation remained peaceful. While the original trio stepped back and leadership was assumed by younger, mainly student-run, organisations, the commitment to non-violence remained. In addition to the tents provided by supporters and the banners flying from overhead walkways, the main site along a mile or so of dual carriageway included study spaces, stalls, and art exhibits. 'Love and peace' were still evident in the support protesters gave each other, the flow of donations from sympathisers and the care taken to ensure that the occupied

³ We have covered the history and legacy of the colonial era in much greater detail elsewhere (Jackson and Ho, 2020).

⁴ Indirect elections to the Legislative Council, known colloquially as the LegCo, were organised via 'functional constituencies' representing various, mostly business and conservative, interests. This situation persisted until after the handover, with the addition of some directly elected representatives – but the number of seats directly elected was reduced in 2021 to 20 out of 90, along with other measures to reduce democratic participation.

⁵ Xi became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (and thus effectively paramount leader) in 2012 and has been president since 2013. He has since done away with restrictions on terms of office and, in 2022, secured a third term in office and now holds near absolute power.

space was kept clean and tidy. It was so safe, orderly and colourful that it became a tourist attraction; visitors strolled through with their cameras at the ready; gowned graduating students posed for photographs alongside their proud parents.

The peaceful ambience and cooperative relational practices allowed plenty of opportunities for political discussion and for raising wider issues of social justice, including gender inequality and LGBT+ rights (see Kong, Jackson and Ho, 2024). The leadership of the movement, however, remained male-dominated. Women, although centrally involved in a variety of organisational activities, rarely received due recognition, especially if their boyfriends were leading activists, as has been the case in many mixed-gender social movements (Einwohner *et al.*, 2000; Zemlinskaya, 2010).

The movement encompassed a range of political positions. While most focused on democracy and securing the autonomy granted to Hong Kong under the handover agreement and Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-constitution), a small minority wanted to go further. These were primarily right-wing, nativist groups, who wanted China and mainland Chinese out of Hong Kong altogether. They did not embrace the ethic of love and peace; on the contrary, they sought to escalate political confrontation to bring about a revolution. Nativists used the derogatory term 'Left Plastic' to refer to the left, whom they saw as obstacles to revolution. In particular they attacked outspoken left-leaning women within the movement, unleashing a torrent of sexist abuse, sexual harassment and cyber-bullying against them, which continued in the years following the Umbrella Movement. Women activists were told to keep quiet and stay home. In online forums they were sexualised and objectified, with repeated comments on their breasts, vaginas and their sexual life: for example, they were called 'public toilets' (meaning promiscuous (Ho, Chan and Kong, 2017)). Such conduct is not unusual in the context of political protest, and nor is the trivialisation of the hurt caused by it (Einwohner *et al.*, 2000; Zemlinskaya, 2010). The Hong Kong women activists received limited support from male comrades, including from their intimate partners, who were, themselves, prominent activists. Even when these men were sympathetic, attacks on the women were deemed unimportant relative to the 'bigger issue' of Hong Kong democracy. Comments they received from these men included: 'Just ignore them, it doesn't hurt'; 'You should be able to tolerate it'; 'It's nothing' and 'You should focus on the big picture'. These experiences prompted some women activists to form a support group and to push back against their male comrades' attitudes. In the years that followed the Umbrella Movement, they had some success in having gender issues accepted, albeit sometimes grudgingly, as part of the political agenda and took pride in this achievement.

LOVE IN GENDERED SPACES

As women activists continued the struggle to find a place for themselves within Hong Kong politics, one was offered to them: a highly gendered space defined by their relationship with others. As some, mostly male, leaders of the movement were arrested and imprisoned, including friends and partners of the women activists we worked with, they faced pressure to step into these men's shoes and take up leadership positions. Yet they were seen as inferior and temporary proxies for the 'real' leaders. As Cora commented, despite her increasing political visibility, she was depicted as 'ONLY his girlfriend'. Women were also expected to take up the burden of care for imprisoned boyfriends, adding to their responsibilities and, in so doing, felt obligated to remain positive because, as Cora said 'I don't want to worry him [her imprisoned boyfriend]'. Gigi, who was also in this situation, discussed the way in which it had come to dominate her life. She told us:

Because I love him, my first reaction to his imprisonment was to devote myself to taking care of him. It reached a point when I felt I had lost myself. Should I really use all my time and energy on him? I could not concentrate on my work or study (...) even though it was him who was imprisoned (...) I also feel like I am in gaol.

In this context, these women's 'love power' was being appropriated, both by their boyfriends and the wider movement. While Jónasdóttir makes a distinction between love power and labour power, here labour and love appear to be fused. In the name of love women were doing a great deal of political work and emotional work (Hochschild, 1983), as well as the organisational work required to manage their multiple burdens. They were also having to engage in emotion management (Hochschild, 1983) to conceal the pressure they were under and the toll it was taking on them.

Those who belonged to the Women Activists' Support Group described in our Introduction, found within it a place where they could receive care and affirmation, where their suffering could be acknowledged, and mutual understanding enhanced. As Tammy put it: 'This is the first time I could hear a more complete self-articulation of themselves [other group members] although I have been very close to them. This process itself is very therapeutic.' Jónasdóttir argues that the care element of love power empowers the cared for, enhancing their self-actualisation.

In the support group, the mutuality of care had positive and creative effects. It made it possible to make personal experiences politically relevant, as Cora did when she argued that 'if the movement is supported by people, the pain experienced by them should be taken care of. The movement can then be sustainable.' Although the women could still be said to be engaging in feminine love practices, subject to feeling rules that encoded an ethic of care and self-sacrifice, they had begun to demonstrate a reflexive critical awareness of its gendered dimensions and dynamics and to question the way they were positioned as women. They were, then, developing a situated knowledge of love and an understanding of it as gendered. This knowledge was embodied and experiential (emerging from simultaneously managing personal relationships and political engagement), but also intellectual (deriving from individual and collective reflection).

We have characterised the love these women practised as protective love, directed towards promoting the wellbeing of others and shielding them from distress. This love is consistent with Jónasdóttir's conception of love as care, as an aspect of love power. The protective love these women demonstrated and articulated was carried into the 2019 protests, when it acquired new valences, new sources of legitimacy and new legitimating purposes, in combination with another form of love that features in their narratives, which we have conceptualised as passionate love for Hong Kong. Love for Hong Kong was always a factor, but gained a new urgency and ferocity in 2019. Pitted against the Beijing government's insistence that Hong Kong people should love China, it inspired the opposite: a hatred of all that China and Chineseness represented. This was to have an impact on the gendered politics of love, as we will explain.

LOVE, FEAR AND HATRED

The Umbrella Movement did not achieve its objective: no concessions were made by the Hong Kong SAR or Beijing governments. Hong Kong opinion was split between those who sought to promote democracy and protect Hong Kong's autonomy (known as 'yellow ribbons') and those who were pro-China (known as 'blue ribbons'). The situation worsened as leading activists faced prosecution and gaol terms and some pro-democracy members of the Legislative Council were disqualified from holding public office. In addition, five men who ran a bookshop selling scurrilous publications that were critical of Chinese Communist Party leaders were kidnapped and subjected to extra-judicial imprisonment in mainland China. These events added to the antipathy to China, intensifying sources of discontent that had been evident for a decade. China's moves to integrate Hong Kong more tightly into the mainland economy and an unabated influx of mainlanders exacerbated Hongkongers' anxiety about threats to their language, identity and way of life. They saw their city being transformed, as authentic *cha chaan teng* (local cafés), corner shops and hawker stalls gave way to high-end designer shops, jewellery stores and pharmacies catering for mainland Chinese tourists and parallel traders. This sense of loss lay behind the so-called 'fishball riots/revolution' during lunar New Year in 2016, when protesters came out on the streets to resist police efforts to clear hawker stalls from Mong Kok, leading to violent clashes.

This event presaged the change in politics and tactics that were to characterise the 2019 protests. The shift was fuelled by a 'politics of resentment', which, as Bonikowski (2017) has argued, underpins ethno-nationalist populism in many parts of the world. The fear that Hong Kong was in danger of being absorbed into China and overtaken by mainlanders intensified anti-Chinese sentiment. Mainlanders were already racialised as 'other', as in the infamous 2012 front page of *Apple Daily* depicting them as locusts. In the years between 2014 and 2019, localist feeling became increasingly nativist; the politics of belonging became a politics of exclusion, and democracy came to be envisaged as 'ethnocracy', for Hongkongers only (Ip, 2019), marking an ideological shift to the right. Among those who were attracted to this brand of politics, there was also a turn to violent tactics. In the eyes of radical nativists, the failure of the Umbrella Movement was attributable to its peaceful character and to its insufficiently radical aspirations. They wanted revolution, a Hong Kong for Hongkongers, and, in some cases, independence. Nativists had been small disruptive element in the Umbrella Movement, but in 2019 they became much more prominent, especially among newly-radicalised young people. Nativist groups had always expressed an antipathy to the left, and especially to feminists. At best, their supporters thought gender issues irrelevant; at worst, they were openly hostile to feminism (Choi et al., 2020). As Cho et al. note, sexism worsened in the years following the Umbrella Movement, with 'unequalled hatred and attacks against feminist activism' (2020: 100). Yet women, including feminists, remained active in politics and in the 2019 protests.

The extradition bill proposed in 2019 united people in Hong Kong across a wide swathe of political opinion. It was feared that the possibility of extradition to mainland China would both undermine Hong Kong's judicial autonomy and render its inhabitants vulnerable to politically-motivated prosecution under China's repressive legal system. The resultant protests started with huge marches, the largest drawing in two million participants (out of a total Hong Kong population of 7.5 million). Heavy-handed policing in response to early episodes of direct action initiated a spiralling rise in violence within fluid, mobile leaderless protests. Where protesters in 2014 had responded to police attacks defensively, in 2019 a substantial minority, who became known as the valiant, fought

back. Amid the escalating violence, the demands of the protests widened and anti-government and anti-police feeling intensified. This confrontational situation strengthened nativist sentiment; anyone with connections to mainland China or the SAR government came to be seen as the enemy, justifying vandalism against ‘blue ribbon’ businesses. Hostility towards Beijing extended to individual mainlanders, who became targets of xenophobic hate speech, threats, harassment and sometimes even physical assaults (Palmer, 2020). Yet support for the movement among the populace did not wane. The use of force by the police angered many bystanders, particularly through the excessive deployment of tear gas in residential areas and indiscriminate use of water cannons and other projectiles in the police armoury. These tactics reinforced the conviction that the police were enemies of the people and that protesters’ violence was both legitimate and in a just cause. The strength and resilience of support was made clear in the District Council elections in November 2019, the only truly democratic elections in Hong Kong.⁶ In the highest ever turnout, pro-democracy and anti-government candidates, including many young activists, won 17 out of 18 districts and 392 out of 452 seats, most by large majorities.

As this electoral activity indicates, not all pro-democracy activism in 2019 involved violent protest. Peaceful actions went on alongside more confrontational ones. Women participated in a number of ways. As well as attending the larger, mostly peaceful marches and vigils, some were frontline fighters, or supported the frontliners as first aiders. Some stood for election in the District Council and later Legco elections (most of whom were subsequently disqualified from public office). There were feminist-led women’s actions, such as the mothers’ protest against police brutality and protests against police sexual harassment. While those women who were active on the front lines earned respect within the movement, feminist events were only acceptable if they were seen as serving the movement’s aims and as long as feminists refrained from criticism of sexism and harassment within it. Sexism, and indeed misogyny, were most evident in attitudes to ‘the enemy’ – police, mainlanders and pro-government Hongkongers, for example in rape threats against male police officers’ wives and the joyous, champagne-fuelled celebrations of the death of pro-China female activist, Leticia Sze-Yin Lee. Racialised Sinophobia intersected with sexism in the denigration of mainland Chinese women, for example the public humiliation of *dai ma*, (older mainland women who enjoy dancing in public spaces in New Territories towns). To criticise such behaviour was to be a traitor to the movement and, if a feminist, to attract the same misogynist taunts and harassment as ‘enemy’ women (Ho, 2019; Ho and Li, 2021). Any activist who wanted to avoid vilification from within the movement had to prove their love for Hong Kong; and love for Hong Kong meant hatred of the enemy and of alleged traitors.

Where it had been difficult, but possible, to call out sexism and misogyny within the movement in earlier years, in 2019 it became dangerous to do so. A particular ethic of solidarity was developed early in the protests, which aimed to keep the movement together across left and right, peaceful protestors and the valiant, encapsulated by such slogans as ‘brothers climbing mountains, each offering their efforts’ and ‘going up and down together’ (Shum, 2021). While this did foster an impressive degree of cooperation within the movement and from sympathisers, it also had a darker side. Not only was empathy for comrades bolstered by enmity for hated others, but it became coercive; it was simply not possible to criticise violence or Sinophobia within the movement, or the pro-western rightward shift of its politics.⁷ In particular, the valiant were above reproach: they were brave defenders of the people, they risked injury and arrest in the pursuit of justice, their love for Hong Kong was beyond question; and any true Hongkonger should love them unconditionally. As Carmen put it: ‘I wouldn’t cut ties with them [the valiant] ... I just won’t. Even if they burned down the dogs’ hut [police family living quarters], I still won’t cut ties’.

PASSIONATE LOVE, PROTECTIVE LOVE AND VENGEFUL JUSTICE

Other women activists echoed Carmen’s unconditional support for the valiant. In doing so, Dorothy simultaneously referenced the change in attitudes that the 2019 protests had fostered: ‘in the past if they [protesters] physically attacked another person I would have condemned it publicly, but I won’t do it now.’ As Craddock (2020) notes, emotions matter, not only in mobilising political engagement, but also in sustaining it. Maintaining solidarity and commitment during the protests required harnessing feelings to the cause, expressed through attachment to the movement and hatred of its perceived enemies. This confrontational context engendered new feeling rules, in

⁶ These elections will, in future, no longer be democratic. In May 2023 Hong Kong’s Chief executive announced that 80% of District Council seats would be filled by those appointed by the SAR government, with only 20% elected.

⁷ The rightward shift is evident not only in xenophobic attitudes to Chinese people and widespread antipathy to feminists and ‘left plastics’, but in the aspiration to preserve Hong Kong as it is: a grossly unequal capitalist society. It is also demonstrated by glorifying the USA as defender of freedom, and in the widespread support for Trump, to the extent of buying in to his ‘stolen election’ narrative, and also in colonial nostalgia (Li, 2020). Both the US flag and the old colonial flag were visible in street demonstrations in Hong Kong and the latter in solidarity marches in the UK. Not all protesters supported such views and actions and most of the women activists we worked with did not, but there was a near-universal reluctance to challenge them.

Hochschild's (2003) terms, binding what it was possible to feel to the only social relations that mattered: the dynamic of 'us' and 'them'. It became both emotionally and morally possible to excuse violent attacks on individual mainlanders and government supporters that might otherwise be felt and thought to be abhorrent.

Many of the women activists articulated their feelings in terms of love. For example, Rosie, who served as a first-aider during street battles, said that love between the valiant and pacifists created an obligation for the latter to defend and care for the former. Such protective love, adapted to new circumstances, was commonly expressed towards fellow protesters, especially the young valiant street-fighters. It became fused with passionate love for Hong Kong, which, during the 2019 protests and the repression that followed, became conflated with love for the movement. The love we define as passionate was articulated as superseding all other loves, as when May asserted that her 'big love for Hong Kong' was greater than her love for her family: a powerful statement in a society that is so family-centred. The love the activists declared for Hong Kong was a fierce love, relying for its force on the hatred of all who stood in its way. The combination of passionate and protective love figured prominently in the accounts we heard from women activists.

One of the activists, Phoebe, exemplified the shift of sensibilities since 2014. She has a brother in the police force and, during the Umbrella Movement, had done her best to preserve their relationship. As she told us soon afterwards, she had written him a long, affectionate letter, explaining that her involvement in the protests was for the benefit of all Hong Kong people, including him and his family. In 2019 she became a front-line fighter, one of the valiant, and repudiated her brother completely in the name of love for Hong Kong, the movement and justice. She also voiced a strong commitment to protecting the young people in her small band of street-fighters.⁸ Phoebe attributed her changed stance to contempt for the government and anger towards the authoritarian regime, which also affected her political priorities. She is anti-capitalist, yet strategically pro-USA and pro-UK and explicitly subordinated equality to democracy: 'You people who are concerned about equality, please fix Hong Kong first, otherwise there is no way we can even talk about equal rights'.

May was as uncompromising in her political position as Phoebe, and as willing to adjust her perceptions accordingly. She depicted populism as 'a demon we have nurtured together.' She was well aware that the right-wing politics of Hong Kong's populism conflicted with her own leftist position, but was willing to accept it because it strengthened the movement: 'the winner takes all, and democracy is defined by power. You need to bring the power [China] down so that you can get a chance'. May has embraced a rather bizarre twist in passionate love for Hong Kong: the ethos of *laam chau*, mutual destruction or 'burnism', translated into the English slogan (derived from *The Hunger Games*) 'if we burn you [China] burn with us' (Chan, 2020; Chan, 2022; Manzoor and Liu, 2022). The aim is to undermine the economy on the assumption that, if Hong Kong were doomed, there was 'no need to preserve the value of Hong Kong as a global financial hub', which benefitted only elites and the Chinese party-state (Manzoor and Liu, 2022: 67). This objective came to justify much of the destruction during the protests; and also motivated lobbying foreign governments for sanctions against China and the Hong Kong government. While this can be seen as 'populist nihilism', fuelled by 'an exclusionary politics of rage' (Li, 2020: n. p.) and a desire for vengeance, May insisted that it was entirely rational. She claimed that the only hope for Hong Kong is to bring China to its knees; even if this does not happen immediately, for her the destruction of Hong Kong reveals the evils of China's authoritarianism to the world.

Whereas Phoebe and May appeared to have fully internalised the new feeling rules that emerged during the 2019 protests, others were engaged in emotion management, keeping any doubts in check, at least publicly. They were not so uncritical in their support for the valiant and the right-wing political agenda. Gill, for example, acknowledged the problems of populist sentiment but nonetheless reiterated her trust in 'the people', saying: 'I have chosen to be naïve.' Some were willing, in private, to raise questions about the pro-USA stance of the movement, or were aware of the coerciveness of unconditional love and solidarity. Cora had reason to fear being discredited within the movement and worried that evidence of her past commitment to peaceful protest might surface and lay her open to attack: 'the LIHKG [main protest online forum] might start saying stuff ... pointing fingers at me the damn left plastic'. Tammy was also aware of the need for self-surveillance, saying: 'It is the greatest mistake to criticise the People! ... I will never criticise the 2019 babies [young frontliners]. I am too nervous about doing so! I know I cannot afford the consequences!' Even for these women, however, fear of retribution was not the only factor that ensured their support for the movement: like other activists, their commitment was sustained by a sense of righteous anger and by their passionate love for Hong Kong and protective love for others in the movement.

These sentiments provided a rationale for judgemental and punitive attitudes to those seen as betraying the protest movement, which meant demonstrating insufficient love for Hong Kong. In the name of love, they silenced and trivialised the struggles of those who could not display the same level of loyalty to the movement, including

⁸ The valiant operated in small crews of trusted others and thus were anonymous to other bands of fighters: a tactic that offered some protection against informers and also fostered a sense of comradeship. Phoebe was referring particularly to these immediate comrades, who were mostly younger than she was.

those who had chosen to emigrate and remain silent after the implementation of the National Security Law. Lauren admitted to having been ‘an emigration Nazi’, saying, ‘I don’t know why people would just run away so quickly especially those who are not at high risk.’ Later, however, she came to be more accepting of the mass emigration, especially after confronting her own fears and seeing how many activists who stayed ended up in gaol. Her hostility towards the ‘traitors’ who abandoned Hong Kong had been unquestioned until she began to share the suffering of those who could not uphold the high standard of loyalty to the movement.

Such intolerance, which is widespread among Hong Kong activists, is reinforced by a hierarchy of victimhood: the perception that the real victims were those who were subjected to state and police violence and oppression (Ho and Li, 2021). Only they deserved love and empathy. Other forms of victimisation, including gender-based violence and harassment, lost their salience and became irrelevant in the face of the struggle against an authoritarian state. Whereas, in the period following the Umbrella Movement, these women had demonstrated some understanding of the gendered dynamics of movement politics, that understanding was no longer evident in their more recent reflections. It was as if the gender lens had been removed from their perception of the political landscape they inhabited.

Meanwhile, women activists continued to live gendered lives through the turbulence of the protest and its aftermath and to negotiate love in their personal lives, with many changes in their attachments. Some found themselves, once more, facing separation from loved ones through imprisonment: and this time the women activists themselves are facing the risk, prospect or actuality of gaol terms. Others, such as Gill, have once again taken up the care work of visiting imprisoned partners and comrades and ensuring that their needs are met. Detailed consideration of these women’s personal lives is beyond the scope of this article, but it is significant that when they discussed personal loves, it was never with the passion that they discussed love for Hong Kong, the movement, or their comrades.

FROM FORBIDDEN LOVE TO A NEW LOVE

Since Beijing’s imposition of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020, open expression of passionate love for Hong Kong, as an entity separable from China, or protective love for valiant fighters, is now forbidden. Since then, hundreds of pro-democracy politicians, journalists, lawyers and activists have been arrested; opposition political parties, trade unions and human rights organisations have been disbanded for fear of violating the law; pro-democracy newspapers and websites have been shut down. In a climate where no open dissent can be voiced, Hongkonger identity is sustained through cultural means. Many have found a new, seemingly safe, object of love: the boy band, Mirror, twelve young men who emerged from a local TV talent contest in 2018 and have attracted a huge following.⁹

Popular music has, for decades, contributed to Hong Kong’s cultural identity (see Ho, 2011), but the immense popularity of Mirror is something new. Whereas boy bands of this kind usually appeal primarily to pre-adolescent girls, Mirror have attracted a far wider range of enthusiastic, mainly female, fans. The South China *Morning Post* magazine, for example, quotes a 74-year-old grandmother who called them her ‘source of positive energy and happiness’ and a 40-year-old woman who expressed her pride in the band in a situation where Hong Kong citizens’ grievances cannot be aired (*SCMP*, 2021). Described as ‘the voice of a city under crackdown’, the band’s music ‘combines catchy beats, layered lyrics, and a hearty dose of pizzazz’ and has become ‘a source of entertainment and escape, but also a reflection of the city’s political consciousness’ (Hui, 2021). Mak and Poon (2023) similarly argue that the expanding fandom of Mirror is a form of political consumerism, which revives collective memories that cannot be articulated under the National Security Law. For example, the song ‘Warrior’, with its repeated refrain of ‘never give up’, became a great hit in 2021 due to its resonance with the revolutionary spirit of the 2019 protest movement. Tactics used during the protests were repurposed – where Telegram groups had been used to coordinate demonstrations and mutual support, now they served to raise money for promotional campaigns and to organise public gatherings to show support for the boy band.

Mirror, then, have attracted many erstwhile political activists among their fans, including some of the women participating in our research. These young women activists’ attachment to Mirror seems to have absorbed the love that went into the movement when it was at its height. We suggest that their love for Mirror incorporates the two dimensions of love previously manifested politically – it is both passionate and protective. It is passionate in that it expresses their fierce pride in Hong Kong, their sense of belonging and longing to belong to the city that they call home. It is thus also encompasses, in Vanessa May’s (2013) terms, cultural, relational and sensory belonging. Culturally, it expresses the value invested in Hong Kong’s local culture, way of life and people, especially as the

⁹ Mirror has a Facebook site available at: <https://www.facebook.com/MIRROR.WeAre> and a YouTube channel: [MIRROR – YouTube](#). More information can also be found on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_\(group\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_(group)) (All sites accessed 29 May 2023).

band, having won a talent contest, is seen as the people's choice. Fans can position themselves as part of 'the people' and part of a political community, albeit one that is otherwise silenced. In sensory terms, aside from the experience of the music itself, the band's performances evoke embodied feeling of comfort in a home that is known and loved. In using ostensibly apolitical cultural consumption, the reoccupation of Hong Kong's streets rekindles a place-based sense of belonging, of ownership of space, which the suppression of protest has taken away from many Hongkongers. Mirror thus capture all that Hong Kong means for activists as a place to be defended and preserved. Women activists' protective love is aroused by the image of these twelve attractive young men: their youth and their apparent vulnerability and humility. They represent Hong Kong people and stand in for the young valiant fighters who were previously the object of protective love.

In the present circumstances of political persecution, the women activists can express this love openly, without falling foul of the National Security Law or other repressive legislation. It may seem that they have displaced their love for Hong Kong and the protest movement on to a safer object, but they resist this interpretation. In a focus group where love for Mirror was discussed, May contested our suggestion that this was displaced love:

It's not a one-sided love or our displacement of love, it's a mutual support with an implicit understanding that it's an extension of a common love for Hong Kong! The boys know that they can never betray their fans by going to China to earn RMB [the Chinese currency]! Loyalty to Hong Kong and anti-China is the rule!

This love, however, is not unconditional. When she was challenged by other group members to compare her love for Mirror with that for her husband, May added:

I have only one husband and I do not intend to have a second one! But if one day Mirror decided to go to the Mainland to embrace our motherland, I will quit the group! I know very clearly what my love and hate is about! It could come and go really quickly.

Passionate and protective love, the product of political engagement and redirected towards Mirror is, it seems, different from everyday love. The passion of this love depends on its obverse, as in May's avowed knowledge of 'what my love and hate is about.' The love for Hong Kong that came to the fore from 2019 onwards is defined against all that seems to threaten the city, in particular China and the Chinese, and traitors to the movement – which Mirror would become if they went to China. The intensity and scope of this passionate and protective love is only understandable in terms of the rage expressed against the myriad injustices to which Hong Kong and its people have been subjected and the source of those injustices: China. Thus, while this love is protective of all that is deemed vulnerable and weak, it is selective; only some vulnerabilities are worthy of protection. Justice is no longer seen in terms of equality, but in terms of retribution: the hoped-for vengeance against China.

CONCLUSION

The women activists' participation in Hong Kong's democracy movement since 2014, and the changes in politics and strategy that have occurred along the way, have shaped their ideals and expressions of love. There are continuities in the protective dimension of love, but also discontinuities in its development in a more partisan direction: love for their comrades, whom they refer to as their hands and feet (extensions of their own bodies), is exclusionary and cannot be extended to those outside the movement. This, since 2019, has merged with their passionate patriotic love for Hong Kong, their imagined nation, a love forged in the heat of felt injustice at the treatment of Hongkongers by the police, the SAR government and, above all, the Chinese party-state. This leaves little room for any kind of justice, except the desire for vengeance against those who have harmed their beloved Hong Kong and comrades. Wider issues of justice, including gender and sexual justice, have disappeared from the agenda in consequence.

We have focused here on these women's knowledge of love as experiential, as emotionally driven as well as rationally justified, and as situated in a particular political context. These women have, one the one hand, made gender irrelevant in the public domain (by not criticising any aspect of a movement that sought to defend Hong Kong), while on the other, they have developed and embraced distinctively gendered and feminine ways of expressing their love through integrating protective and passionate love and ultimately transferring it to a safer object than the political movement. The understanding and knowledge of gender justice and gendered love that they demonstrated in the years after the Umbrella Movement has dissipated. It was situated in that particular moment and could not, it seems, survive the confrontational politics that emerged in 2019. Women activists' narratives and our observations of their practices suggest that women's love was, in Jónasdóttir's terms, productive/creative for the movement in sustaining solidarity and commitment, for the women themselves in making sense of their activism, and was appropriated both by individual men and in the service of the movement

as a whole. This appropriation often trapped them into traditional feminine caring roles, whether as lovers of male comrades or maternal protectors of young front-liners.

Recognising that all knowledge is situated, we need to acknowledge our own investments in the Hong Kong situation and how this shapes the way we represent the women activists and the politics of democracy in Hong Kong. Our own feelings about Hong Kong, along with our feminism, have shaped the knowledge we seek to produce. We are emotionally implicated. We empathise with the injustices Hongkongers have experienced and are deeply troubled by the repression they now face, but our emotions have taken a different turn since 2014. We began our research from a position of positive identification with the democracy movement during and after the Umbrella Movement, which survived into the early stages of 2019, followed by disillusionment with its rightward populist shift, culturally essentialist ethno-nationalism, xenophobic attitudes to mainland Chinese people, endorsement of US imperialism, disregard of wider forms of injustice in Hong Kong society and, of course, hostility to feminism. This article, then, should be understood as a product of our own situated knowledge.

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From Zin the Mythical Heroine to Zilan, the First Kurdish Female Suicide Bomber: The PKK's Creation of a New Feminist Figuration

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan draw inspiration for their national struggle, through an appropriation of the female figure Zin from the 1692 classic Kurdish love myth *Mem and Zin* written by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), turning her into a symbol of love for the nation. Based on interviews with some fully-fledged members of PKK and Abdullah Öcalan's written works, as well as observations from fieldwork conducted in the mountainous areas of Iraq, this article will analyse how an old love story has become entangled with the PKK's national struggle and its pursuit of a new human type, one that might truly represent a new type of freedom fighter. In this re-configuration, love for the opposite sex must be transformed radically into love for the native land, with death as a consequence if sacrifice is seen as necessary. Drawing on the work of Donna J. Haraway, Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, this analysis examines how history, nature, geography, myth, and nostalgia are employed in the re-configuration of gender and love, and in the creation of a new feminist figuration that recalls Haraway's cyborg figure.

Keywords: women fighters, PKK, the story of Mem and Zin, gender and love, cyborg

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses how the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) – also called the Kurdistan Workers' Party – and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, draw inspiration for its national struggle to free itself from the stronghold of feudal societies, through an appropriation of the female figure Zin from the 1692 classic Kurdish love myth *Mem and Zin* written by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), turning her into a symbol of love for the nation. Öcalan draws a comparison between the heroine of Xanî's story, Zin, and the PKK's first suicide bomber, Zilan (d. 1996), whom Öcalan considers to be the PKK's most successful female fighter. Based on Öcalan's written works and interviews with some fully-fledged members of the PKK (known as *cadres*), and my observations from fieldwork in the mountainous areas of Iraq where the PKK has its camps, this article will analyse how an old love story has become entangled with a national struggle in the pursuit of a new human type, one that might truly represent a new type of freedom fighter. In the PKK's re-configuration of gender and love, love for the opposite sex must be radically transformed into love for the native land, with death as a consequence if sacrifice is seen as necessary. Drawing on the feminist work of Donna J. Haraway, Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, this analysis examines how history, nature, geography, myth, and nostalgia are employed in the PKK's construction of gender and love, towards the creation of a new feminist figuration that recalls Haraway's cyborg figure. Applying these feminist perspectives affords a broader and more in-depth understanding of the capacity to act in militant and national conflicts in ways that transform the phenomena of gender and love, thereby contributing to new understandings and visions for the formation of identity without falling back into determinism or essentialism. On this basis the article will examine the interaction between cultural and material factors behind the PKK's understanding of gender identity, and consequently, their re-configuration of love. This re-configuration, with roots in Kurdish culture, seems able to mobilise women and generate new horizons for them, even as they continue to fight to secure the freedom of the Kurdish community.

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METHODOLOGY

This article relies on empirical data that I collected for my PhD thesis, entitled *Female Fighters in the Kurdish National Movement PKK: A Gender-Reflective Perspective* (2020, Roskilde University, Denmark). The crucial part of the data consists of 10 days of fieldwork studies conducted in Iraq in the company of cadres who are members of PKK and qualitative interviews with members of the PKK. The 22 interviews were carried out in Iraq and Europe between June 2017 and April 2018. I have interviewed 16 women and 6 men, who consist of new participants, experienced members of the PKK and the leadership. The youngest was 20 years old while the oldest was 53 years old. That way I could focus on several generations in the PKK. 18 of the informants were fighters, while the last four were stationed in Europe in political work for the PKK.

Secondary sources of empirical data include written works by Öcalan (1997; 2001; 2004; 2009; 2012) and periodicals by the PKK. The interviews with informants of Kurdish origin and one Iranian were conducted in Kurdish. All interviews have been transcribed by me and translations into English are mine. Before the interview, all informants were verbally informed about the purpose of the interview and the research. According to an IRB (Institutional Review Boards) protocol, all interviewees were told that the conversations were anonymous: the interviewees' original codenames, places of birth or other personal details were anonymised, to prevent putting them or their networks at risk. All have subsequently given oral consent to the interview and their consent was recorded on a Dictaphone.

The doctoral fieldwork took place in a war zone, which creates an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion affecting all parties in addition to the usual ethical and moral dilemmas (Fujii, 2010). My own Kurdish ethnicity probably made a difference in creating access to the movement, and made it possible for me to carry out my fieldwork. While my background as a Kurd conferred a number of advantages, I also had to establish an analytical gaze 'from outside' to produce knowledge and not take things for granted. As a researcher, I had to take account of the significance of my own position and of attitudes, prejudices, norms and so on that might hinder me in revealing hidden social mechanisms (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 62-75); I also had consciously to avoid being subjective in reporting my research (Bourdieu, 1993: 51), as a male researcher. I believed it was important to work from an intersectional perspective to develop a richer understanding of the 'becomings' of researchers and informants, where gender is constituted and interacts with many other categories. For these reasons, I did not want to make my gender invisible in the analysis, especially not when gender is so central to my study. Overall, as Haraway says, the researcher's gaze and access to the field comes, not from 'nowhere', but from 'somewhere in particular' (Haraway, 1991: 188).

THE PKK AND ITS UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER AND LOVE

The PKK was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey. Today, the party fights for the recognition and improvement of Kurdish people's rights in the region extending across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In 1984, with most of Kurdistan being under Turkish supremacy, the PKK initiated a guerrilla war against the Turkish government. Today, a substantial number of Kurdish youths have joined the PKK's national struggle, with the resolve to gain increased scope for representation and greater opportunities for the Kurdish people. With its bases and training camps in the mountains, the PKK, as a political force and social movement based on a particular agenda, creates space for subversion that includes radical changes in culture and transformative ways of looking at identity and gender in pursuit of a new collective Kurdish identity (Topal, 2020b: 241).

In terms of gender roles, the PKK focuses on both biological sex and socio-cultural gender, in which the relationship between the body, sexuality and love challenges and redefines the relationship between culture and nature. The PKK does not however always operate in a consistent manner; while endorsing gender as a cultural construct, there are times it falls back on biological essentialism. In the PKK, women and men are perceived as two different, natural genders, where gender is thought of in binaristic terms. Although gender is conceived of as a social construct, women and men are believed to have their own naturality. While the women I interviewed baulked at describing this naturality as biological, they believed, however, that gender was something inherent in 'their character', referring to natural properties that go to define femininity and masculinity (Topal, 2020b: 233). Based on this belief, a woman's natural gender contains the potential for an especially strong and attractive attachment to nature, including the mountains in and from which the PKK conducts its campaign. Because the PKK believes that women and men have 'their own naturality', Kurdish women's arrival in the mountains is associated with a perception that they, in contrast to men, are especially attached to nature and that this attachment carries obligations (Topal 2020a: 345).

The physical separation from men in the mountains, including the perception that they are living far from patriarchal social norms, gives women fighters in the PKK the opportunity to collectively form new perceptions of their body. For these women fighters, the point is to recognise and maintain bodily difference between the sexes

to serve the militant goals of the party, a move that recalls the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray writes that without sexual difference, there can be no life as we know it. Sexual difference is the engine of life and the impetus for the eruption of all other human variations. Irigaray thus considers sexual difference to be foundational for difference in other social categories:

Between man and woman, there really is otherness: biological, morphological, relational. To be able to have a child constitutes a difference, but also being born a girl or a boy of a woman, who is of the same or the other gender as oneself, as well as to be or to appear corporeally with differing properties and qualities. Some of our prosperous or naive contemporaries, women and men, would like to wipe out this difference by resorting to monosexuality, to the unisex and to what is called identification: even if I am bodily a man or woman, I can identify with, and so be, the other sex. This new opium of the people annihilates the other in the illusion of a reduction to identity, equality and sameness, especially between man and woman, the ultimate anchorage of real alterity. The dream of dissolving material, corporeal or social identity leads to a whole set of delusions, to endless and unresolvable conflicts, to a war of images or reflections and to powers being accredited to somebody or other more for imaginary or narcissistic reasons than for their actual abilities. (Irigaray, 1996: 61-62)

The physiological bodily difference between men and women is thereby not conceived as something oppositional, but as a form of differentiation; in the Kurdish context, this differentiation encompasses variations within, as well as connectedness to the PKK, Kurdish nature, Kurdish history, all Kurds and the national struggle (Topal, 2020a: 345-346). The assertion of gender difference has also led the women fighters to establish their own party, their own military units and female quotas in the leadership, and even to develop their own ideology, *'jineoloji'* (Kurdish: woman's science) in which they draw up ideals for the future on the basis of notions of matriarchal societies in Neolithic times. However mythical and romanticised the women fighters' description of the Neolithic period and Kurdish history may sound, this sort of female configuration seems to have helped the women fighters reinterpret, redefine and recreate a new understanding of themselves and their bodies, while also being a part of the national struggle (Topal, 2020a).

In the PKK, new members undergo a powerful ideological and gender-specific course of instruction in which they are re-socialised. Instruction and training are combined with methods of self-criticism and an almost ascetic self-discipline to curb individual needs and desires, as a means of preparing oneself to become a '*'cadre'*'.¹ In this way, members' life processes can be controlled, and the assimilation into a new culture secured (Topal, 2020b: 219-261). For example, cadres in the PKK may not marry for the rest of their lives, be anyone's boyfriend or girlfriend, declare romantic feelings towards each other or have sex with anyone. The PKK believes that sexual energy cannot be repressed and must therefore be tamed and transformed into consciousness and a form of ideological energy to strengthen the fighting spirit. Men and women in the movement must repudiate heteronormative love, to focus on their warrior identity and engage in the PKK's struggle. Instead, relationships must be comradely, because cadres must have no other lifestyle or agenda than to liberate the country (Öcalan, 2012: 277). Öcalan writes that love in modern society is viewed by the cadres as being detached from accepted standards of morality, having been reduced to erotic love and underscored by capitalist ideology (Öcalan, 2012: 161). As an alternative to capitalist and patriarchal understandings of gender and love, Öcalan therefore attempts to create a new collective identity based on 'authentic' Kurdish values. Öcalan takes inspiration for these values, gender roles and alternative interpretations of love from cultural narratives of the past, such as the love story *Mem and Zin*, to create 'new and free roles' for women and men. History and culture are appropriated to recreate the cadre, which Öcalan considers to be 'the new human'. This new human, as the complete human, is the revolutionist, who among other things, believes in ideals such as 'ultimate truth', 'ultimate love' and 'ultimate fighter' (Öcalan, 2001).

THE STORY OF MEM AND ZIN

Mem and Zin is a classic of Kurdish literature written in 1692 by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707). The narrative concerns the pauper Mem of the Alan clan and Princess Zin from Botan Province, who fall in love on Newroz Day, which marks the start of the Kurdish new year. In the story, Zin's father refuses to allow Mem and Zin to have a relationship, and he imprisons Mem. Mem dies in Zin's father's prison, and Zin subsequently commits suicide out of grief at losing Mem, but also to punish her father. The story of Mem and Zin has been interpreted politically, and called 'the national epic of the Kurds' (Kurdo, 2010), especially as, in a story written long before the phenomenon of nationalism, Xanî urges the Kurds to independence:

¹ '*Cadre*' refers to a full member of the PKK who has dedicated his or her life to the struggle for shared humanity, to his or her people and to the leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

I am puzzled by the wisdom of God
The Kurds among [all] the countries of the world
Why have they all been subjected? (Xanî in Mirawdeli, 2012: 99).

Here, Xanî is puzzled by and questions God's will, asking why he has given a state to everybody but left the Kurdish people without a state and abandoned them to their fate. Because of such references to nation, the story is treated by Kurdish literary figures and political representatives as a national origin story on par with a saga (Bilici, 2021). In these interpretations, Zin represents the country of Kurdistan, while Mem stands for its people, the Kurds. Like the two lovers in *Mem and Zin*, however, the country and its people cannot be united with each other, as observed by historian and literary scholar Izeddin Mustafa Resul in his book *Ehmedê Xanî as a Poet, Thinker, Philosopher and Mystic* (Resul, 2007/1979). Resul maintains that *Mem and Zin* was written with the sole purpose of bringing to light the reality of the Kurds, and Xanî was trying to show that the Kurds, like people of other nations, deserve to be a nation, and that they should extricate themselves from Persian and Ottoman domination (Resul, 2007: 8-9). Resul also argues that Xanî was attempting to show the world that the great and famous love stories that figure prominently in the philosophy of the East are also to be found among the Kurds, and that Kurds too are capable of telling these stories in their own language (Resul, 2007: 54). *Mem and Zin* is thus not merely a love story, but a narrative that suggests how Kurdish nationalism and social cohesion can be achieved, and what life in an independent Kurdistan could look like.

PKK AND ÖCALAN'S UNDERSTANDING OF XANÎ AND *MEM AND ZIN*

According to Cemşid Bender, a Kurdish historian who is also often cited by the PKK, the celebration of national festivals, recorded accounts of historical events and retelling of stories such as *Mem and Zin*, are tangible indicators that a population qualifies to call itself a nation (Bender, 1991: 134-136). This is probably why retellings of other Kurdish ancient stories such as *Kawa the Blacksmith*, *Meme Alan* and *Derwese Erdi û Edule*, aimed at strengthening Kurds' national consciousness, are common in the PKK. Kurdish academic Handan Çağlayan notes that the PKK moderated its aims in the early 1990s in the light of global changes, particularly the collapse of the Soviet Union and its system of government. Instead of Marxist-Leninist ideological and political symbols, the PKK began to make use of more ethno-cultural norms aiming at a more nationally oriented movement in order to unite the Kurds under its roof (Çağlayan, 2007: 114-117; 2012). In a similar development, the significance of 'Newroz Day' has changed character since the PKK's uprising, as has the way Kurds celebrate it. Traditionally, Newroz was a day when Kurds celebrated the arrival of the new year with a vernacular festival that was apolitical. After the PKK's uprising, though, it became increasingly political and turned into a national festival during which Kurds were urged to join in solidarity and rise up against the power holders who had colonised their lands (Bulut, 2003: 31; Güneş, 2012: 180; 2013: 254). On a similar note, the story of Mem and Zin seems to serve a dual function for the PKK, both contributing to the Kurds' ethno-cultural value base and serving as inspiration for the ongoing national struggle, and as legitimization for the PKK's rebellion. PKK leader Öcalan attaches great significance to Xanî's story of Mem and Zin and mentions it frequently in his written works, to bolster his belief that the Kurds must think of themselves as a nation, having been very divided throughout most of its history. This, among other things, has prevented them from extricating themselves from the dominance of other power holders. Regarding the story of Mem and Zin as a national saga enables Öcalan to use it to create a kind of Kurdish insurrectionary culture and transmute it into the PKK's current struggle.

In her book, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, Elizabeth Grosz maintains that human beings need concepts in order to think their way around a world of forces that they do not control (Grosz, 2011: 80). One can say that Öcalan and the PKK create and re-create concepts, narratives and ideas with regard to concrete events, precisely in order to produce solidarity, motivation, a kind of desire or a particular agenda, where concepts, narratives, sagas and artworks, are used to protect against chaos – concepts, like art, being relatively open to re-creation and reformulation (Grosz, 2011: 34-39). National affinity requires not only a community based on a common language or religion, but also a belief in narratives as sagas (Smith, 1981: 65). What results is 'an imagined community' as described by Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1991: 6), being one in which communion and a sense of national belonging is fostered in the minds of the people, precisely through shared narratives. The above-mentioned Kurdish sagas go toward enabling the PKK and Öcalan to unite the divided Kurds around a common possible history and hence to help demonstrate that the Kurds are a nation deserving of their own country. In this context, Öcalan considers the narrative of Mem and Zin to be the national manifesto that the Kurds currently lack:

You should see this love [in the Mem and Zin story, ed.] as a national love; this is the theme. Although the story finds expression in the personalities of Mem and Zin, there is a unifying element, a love element. But feudal filth will never make this [a unified nation, ed.] possible. It [the nation, ed.] is in great pain.

Regard the non-development of this love [between Mem and Zin, ed.] as the non-development of Kurdish unity and Kurdish love [...] The consequence is that nor was Kurdish love [unity, ed.] created 300 years ago. Take note that nor was colonialism as brutal as it is now. [...] It [feudalism, ed.] is an obstacle to Kurdish unity and Kurdish love. This is perfectly expressed in Mem and Zin. There was literature then. People's pain and betrayal are perfectly described. (Öcalan, 1997: 159) [Translation: Author]

Following on from this, Öcalan adds that, if there were no pen, there would be no sword. That is, without Xanî's manifesto, neither the PKK nor its armed revolution would exist (Öcalan, 1997: 242). Öcalan draws attention to Xanî's detailed account in *Mem and Zin* of how the Kurds can take up arms and use their strength, to fight for an independent Kurdish state. He who takes up the sword founds a state, writes Xanî (Xanî in Resul, 2007: 20-21), as, according to Resul, Xanî fears that if the Kurds do not take up arms, their history will come to an end like the sad death of Mem (Resul, 2007: 102). Öcalan uses Xanî's nationalism and his call to arms as justification for the PKK's armed struggle, which has had particularly major consequences for the Kurdish people. Öcalan asserts that as 'New Mems and Zins', the members of the PKK are together fighting against patriarchal Kurdish society and the colonial power in Kurdistan. What is needed is the creation of new Kurds who will love, fight and die for the national struggle. Above all, their great love must be love of the land, not love between individuals (Öcalan, 1997: 240). To truly appreciate Öcalan's re-configuration of love in the service of the national struggle, it is important to understand the role played by the female fighter Zilan, regarded by the PKK as their first 'woman suicide bomber', and her conception as a modern 'Zin', the lover and war figure.

FROM 'DESPERATE ZIN' TO BECOMING-GODDESS ZILAN

Öcalan sees the PKK's first female suicide bomber, Zilan (Zeynep Kinaci, 1972-1996) as 'the PKK's most successful female fighter' and compares her to Zin from Xanî's story. In 1996, Zilan killed numerous Turkish soldiers in the Kurdish city of Dersim in Turkey by blowing herself up with a bomb. In her farewell letter to Öcalan, left behind at the time of the attack, she wrote that her act was an attempt to make her life meaningful:

I see myself as a candidate for a voluntary death. I willingly concede that to give our lives is, from the standpoint of your unending and tireless work for our liberation, not enough. I hope to be able to contribute much more than my life. [...] By exploding a bomb against my body, I want to protest against the policies of imperialism which enslaves women and express my rage and become a symbol of resistance of Kurdish women. (Letter excerpt, Zilan 1996) [Translation: Author]

Zilan has in fact subsequently achieved this symbolic position as the woman of the uprising, as she is without doubt seen as the greatest heroine in the history of the PKK and a role model not only for female, but also for male fighters in the PKK. All the female and male fighters I interviewed idolise Zilan and desire to live a strong-willed, militant and meaningful life like hers. By a 'meaningful life', they mean living a valuable life in the PKK, fully devoting themselves to the struggle and being willing to die if necessary. In the time since Zilan's attack, Öcalan has held her up as an example to all PKK fighters:

We call it realising the love. You have the will. But how? It cannot be done by dying. Mem and Zin tried that 300 years ago. You must put it into effect. Among us, Zeynep has done it. If you can manage it, you must put it into effect. How did Zeynep manage to eliminate 50 enemy officers and soldiers in a place like Dersim, where there were always massacres? What she did in military-technical terms was good and error-free. It is of great importance politically. [...] Zilan is my goddess. (Öcalan, 1997: 90-91) [Translation: Author]

Öcalan insists that PKK women fighters should be like Zin in the way they understand love as sacrifice, but like Zilan in the way they act. The new female fighters must be an amalgamation of Zin and Zilan. At this point, Zilan's act transforms her into Öcalan's goddess, because she is the first woman fighter to have turned into a modern-day Zin. However, new Zins like Zilan will no longer die a desperate death as the lovers did in the narrative, but will die in an attack that eliminates the enemy. Unlike Zin's death, Zilan's act is not thought of as a suicide, but rather as a heroic deed or personal sacrifice on behalf of the Kurds. Moreover, Öcalan writes that Zilan was not a weak individual but, on the contrary, a strong-willed and complete human being, making her act a 'fedai-attack', being an act of conviction (Kurdish: *çalakiya fedai*), rather than a suicide. Here, *fedai* means that the person sacrifices his or her life to attain a higher end or to achieve a better outcome for the struggle and the ideology. To a *fedai*, there is a higher purpose to the act than merely using their body to kill the enemy out of desperation (Hasso, 2005). Zilan's unexpected attack – unexpected because the PKK leadership knew nothing of

it – is viewed by Öcalan as the answer: that the right way for the new Kurds to live is both through struggle and through love. This is why Öcalan describes Zilan as a warrior of love – because her love was directed toward her country, and because that love helped her to wage her struggle in a new way (Öcalan, 1997: 90). Zilan endorses this view of her act taken by Öcalan, writing in a letter that her act is not to be seen as a suicide, but as a quest for the infinite and true love in which she wishes to take love and the struggle for the land to a higher level. In this view, love, rooted in the significance of Zilan's attack, is not heterosexual intimacy, nor does it involve a close, direct relationship between women and men. It is instead ideological, emancipatory and unconditional, and this love is therefore without embodiment and incorporeal.

INSPIRATION FROM MEM AND ZIN FOR PURE LOVE AND NATURAL GENDER ROLES

To gain an understanding of the appropriation of Zin's love for Mem into a symbol of 'pure' love of the people for the nation, it is important to analyse the PKK's radical new account of gender roles and love as derived from the story of Mem and Zin. Çağlayan points out that Öcalan's praise of Zilan and the PKK's other female martyrs should also be understood as exemplifying the PKK's new gender perspective. Earlier works by Öcalan and the PKK highlight the saga of Kawa the Blacksmith as a national epic about a male hero, but from the 1990s onward it is evident that the PKK begins to mention Ishtar, as the goddess of war and love from Babylonian/Syrian mythology, more often than Kawa the Blacksmith. This was due partly to the growing numbers of women joining the movement and partly to women fighters beginning to gain a strong voice in the movement on the strength of their contribution to the national struggle. Women fighters' potential in the PKK thus entailed fresh ideological and strategic changes to come up with, for example, new symbols and narratives able to help mobilise more women and value their contribution (Çağlayan, 2007: 114–115). It would therefore not be mistaken to assume that Zilan's attack and Öcalan's endorsement of it heralded a new period in the PKK in which the old masculinity, which had not brought the Kurds their liberation, was side-lined to make way for women as the nation's new saviours, setting the scene for them to become goddesses. As Öcalan himself puts it: 'When Zilan's identity was revealed, old manhood was entirely dead' (Öcalan, 2009: 117).

In Xani's fictional work, the story of Mem and Zin takes place in Botan in central Kurdistan. The nostalgic narrative of the story exhibits many similarities with the period – the Neolithic – that is often mentioned by the PKK in connection with the re-creation of the above-mentioned new gender roles that the PKK calls 'natural gender roles', where sexual difference is emphasised. Öcalan sees Zilan as a modern rendition of the woman Zin of the Neolithic period, about 12,000 years ago, when the first developments of farming appeared in the Epipalaeolithic Near East. Öcalan claims that women were not oppressed at that time and had a central role in the organisation of society due to their reproductive ability. The cultural and historical references in *Mem and Zin* to the time before Islam, for instance to Zarathustrianism, and to partly rebellious, anti-Islamic ideas (Bulut, 2003: 32–36), contribute to the creation of a role model for 'true and original Kurdish women'. Öcalan describes the Kurds throughout history, not as a modern society or as a great empire of power, but as nomadic and peaceful tribes living away from the big cities, in villages and mountain areas, in harmony with nature (Öcalan 2004). In his nostalgic description of the Neolithic period, Öcalan romanticises Kurdish women and calls them *sterk*, the Kurdish word for star, associated with the goddess Ishtar:

Production developed with the unity of land and woman. In the history of humanity, Mesopotamia is the best known and proven example of the realization of primitive communal society. That is, it is revealed that this society was shaped between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Animals were domesticated, seeded plants were cultivated, and women did the majority of these jobs. Ishtar was the goddess of this culture. [...] For me, Ishtar is *Star*. In fact, *Star* in Kurdish is *Sterk*. *Star* means star in the European languages. The origins of the word are Kurdish, from Mesopotamia. (Öcalan 2009: 147) [Translation: Author]

The interviews with women fighters also demonstrated that they too take inspiration from history in an attempt to re-establish the status and identity that women 'once' had:

First, we looked at history. Where are we in these sciences? We asked, how was science developed in the course of history, and where were women? Where has the woman lost? How and why did she lose? How can women become free? [...] This precept of the Leader [Abdullah Öcalan] is very important: 'The history of women's slavery was not written down, but the history of women's liberation will be'. (Interview with Delal, 15 June 2017)

Female fighter Delal speaking here stresses the importance of history for women, which must be written anew and reinterpreted. The Kurdish women's movement therefore took inspiration from mythological and oral narratives instead of adhering to the known, official written history. In this context, the myth of Ishtar, the goddess of war and love in Babylonian/Syrian mythology, helps in this regard to create a gendered solidarity, not only among Kurdish women, but also among all women in the region, as authentic women of Mesopotamia. PKK frames Ishtar as the woman/goddess of a time when women were not yet oppressed and when they played a central role in society.

In Zarathustrianism, too, the woman – like the sun – was regarded as sacred because of her reproductive capacity. This characterisation of women is present in *Mem and Zin*, where Mem's best friend Tacdin's sexual overture to Zin's sister Siti is described as a religious adoration of Siti. Kurdish historian and scholar Bulut points out that the emergence of Islam as a religion helped to hasten the formation of patriarchal society and hence of female oppression (Bulut, 2003: 34). Regarding gender roles in pre-Islamic times, Bulut points out that in *Mem and Zin*, when Xani describes popular festivals and activities, he draws no great gender-based distinction between women and men. For example, when Mem and Zin meet each other for the first time in the story, they are dressed contrary to their biological sex (Bulut, 2003: 145). Mem falls for Zin's masculinity while Zin falls for Mem's femininity (Bulut, 2003: 51). The narrative focuses more on the Platonic love and affection between them, and less on the body, its sexuality or its gender. Such love can thus equally be felt for the people, for nature, or for a utopian ideology. In Xani's narrative, Zin does not get to experience love in the form of unity with Mem, but rather dies for it, separated from Mem. The same can be of Zilan's love for the nation, although it can be assumed from Öcalan's interpretation of Zilan's act and from Zilan's own letter, that Zilan died with zeal as her underlying emotion, not sorrow as was the case for Zin. That things worked out as they did for Mem and Zin was in Öcalan's view, as previously mentioned, due to their inability to fight in the 'right way', which means here to maximise one's fighting ability and to die out of love for the country rather than out of love for a romantic partner. With this in mind, seemingly, Öcalan's objective was to create optimal conditions for the development of new Kurdish fighters who would love, fight and die in the right way. Here, their great love must be directed towards the 'homeland'. Without liberation of the land and its nature, without improving the cultural living conditions of the nation, it will be impossible for young Kurds to experience love. Öcalan writes:

Love is homeland. Love means freedom in the homeland, definite success in the organisation. Love is struggle. Love means victory in struggle. (Öcalan 2009: 195) [Translation: Author]

In Öcalan's understanding of love, love is unable to exist or be experienced between Kurdish women and men without the land. Therefore, Kurdistan must first be liberated. Love as Öcalan understands it is directed first and foremost toward the land, its nature and its population, and this is also something that fighters articulated in their interviews with me. They experience love for the land as an act of anti-colonisation and anti-occupation, and hence something that will benefit the nation. Love is now radically linked to an obligation to liberate the land, and is experienced as an act of resistance, while at the same time allowing the person in the process of realising him- or herself in the struggle against oppression. In her work on love, Irigaray argues that love has the potential for creating a new society, where difference, especially sexual difference, will have a crucial role in building a democratic society, in which everyone respects each other's rights (Irigaray 1999). Philosopher Alain Badiou shares a similar sentiment regarding the potential of love to create a world based on difference and respect for the other:

Starting out from something that is simply an encounter, a trifle, you learn that you can experience the world on the basis of difference and not only in terms of identity. And you can even be tested and suffer in the process. In today's world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest. Love is an antidote to that. Provided it isn't conceived only as an exchange of mutual favours, or isn't calculated way in advance as a profitable investment, love really is a unique trust placed in chance. It takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference. (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 16)

Love in this context is no longer irrational, random, sentimental, romantic, sexual, and gender- and eros-related, but about developing a common horizon of understanding and an orientation to the boundaries of the self. That is among other things, the reason why women fighters have the perception that love is the driving force and passion of their struggle that can bring them a new society with better conditions for women. As Grosz perhaps would say, women's love for the land, as a feeling, helps them in the struggle to utilise their resources in processes of self-overcoming and by self-realising that explains individual impulses against prevailing norms (Grosz, 2008: 40-41). Female fighter Zelal expressed a similar sentiment regarding love:

What the PKK is doing is actually to create the free life via love. Love therefore can't be confined to a relationship between a man and a woman. It's falling in love with your own soil. It's not about falling in

love with your partner, but about falling in love with the struggle. Being in love is therefore a passion. It is a quest for ultimate truth. (Interview with Zelal, 17 September 2017)

Phenomena such as ‘the ultimate love’, in common with others such as ‘the ultimate truth’ or ‘the ultimate fighter’ are often framed by the women fighters as the final, greatest goal that they must achieve in order to experience revolution, sacred love and total liberation. In this connection, fighters define love – including intimate love between members of the movement – as an experience with transcendent potential that enables them to transcend themselves and endure anything, including the confrontation with death, in a radical manner as a *fedai*. Female fighters Zeri and Bese spoke about such a love, emphasising its transcendent potential:

I fulfil my need for love through togetherness with my comrades [...] There is no need to say much: a look, a smile, doing something together. It’s lovely to feel that you’re together, in sorrow, in joy... Believe me, it is higher than a mother’s or a father’s love. We become soul twins [both men and women]. We become a whole. It [love] affects me a lot. You become complete. It [love] doesn’t own you. However, it is always with you. (Interview with Zeri, 26 March 2018)

If a man is strong or brave in war, he will also attract your attention and your emotions. Your love turns toward him. The same is true of a man who is highly respected by those around him. So you think, ‘I must go to war together with him. I must have the honour of waging war together with him’. You also want to be in his unit. (Interview with Bese, 22 March 2018)

Women fighters experience their love towards each other as something that strengthens their vital energy. Love is therefore described in the PKK as being free of the body and of sexuality. This love is found in the collective. It is therefore everywhere and becomes in intra-action, but never in connection with just one particular body and specific personality. On this point, Bese explained:

Among us, love is something collective. We don’t practise individual love. Of course, it may happen to someone. We don’t say it never happens. There are some people who have different inner forms of searching that don’t mean anything to us. For us, love is a shared goal. A shared life. A shared perspective. A collectivity. Something that makes us more alive, puts us in a better mood, makes us happy. We have no other recipe for love. (Interview with Bese, 22 March 2018)

The interviewees call the love they have for each other pure love, as opposed to that which is called eros love, where physical bodily attraction between couples is present.

ZILAN AS THE FIGURATION OF NEW WAYS OF FIGHTING AND LOVING

There is no doubt that, according to Öcalan and all PKK members, Zilan is a modern female fighter of love and the ideal, complete PKK fighter. To Öcalan, Zilan can serve as a feminist figuration to create alternative identifications for the PKK’s female fighters. Like Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ (Haraway, 1992: 297) – a metaphorised description of a blend of human and non-human elements including discourse and technology that go together to make a subject – Zilan becomes, for the PKK, a metaphorised description of nature, history, nationalism, war and love. Haraway’s cyborg is especially suggested as an allied partner for feminists to fight against systems of hegemonic power that thrive on class, gender, and racial segregation. The configuration is developed to avoid the dualism between nature and culture, subject and object, that helps to maintain universal, essentialist assumptions. According to Haraway the human body today can change in an interaction with technology, so that we can adapt to new surroundings and terms. Body, gender, and nature are not immutable concepts (Haraway, 1992: 297). By creating chaos, disorder, rebellions and new self-consciousness, a cyborg moves us towards a world that signifies new potentials. The role of the new figuration is not to set boundaries, but to inspire, guide and usher subjects towards a new self-conception and an alternative identification leading to what one might call the re-creation of a feminine self, writes Haraway (Haraway, 1997: 52-70).

Extending Haraway’s feminist figuration, Braidotti maintains that the key point about feminist figurations is that it is embodied, that is, not just a fiction springing simply from fantasy or imagination. Figuration, in other words, contains on the one hand a tangible and substantive positioning, but at the same time an embodied notion that it is on the way to becoming, arriving at its own sovereignty, where states such as emotions, fantasies or the body are experienced as unique. Braidotti calls this ‘political fiction’ (Braidotti, 2002: 7), and Haraway calls being on the way to ‘an imagined elsewhere’ (Haraway, 1992: 295). This state gives the subject the possibility of thinking of an alternative to its present existence (Braidotti, 1994: 169). Braidotti thus claims that figurations can help in creating a female feminist subject and breaking down existing subject positions so that the subject is nomadically

on the way to alternative places and is seeking alternative identifications (Braidotti, 1994: 200). Braidotti's own figuration is 'a nomadic subject':

In my reading, the feminist subject is nomadic because it is intensive, multiple, embodied, and therefore perfectly cultural. I think that this new figuration can be taken as an attempt to come to terms with what I have chosen to call the new nomadism of our historical condition. I have argued that the task of redefining female subjectivity requires as a preliminary method the working through of the stock of cumulated images, concepts, and representations of women, of female identity, such as they have been codified by the culture in which we live. (Braidotti, 1994: 169)

Like Irigaray (1985/1974) and Grosz (1994), Braidotti's purpose is a non-deterministic theorisation of the differentness of the female body, which seeks to break the indifference of gender constructionism, towards gender difference and how it matters. Like Haraway, Braidotti tries to involve positive visions of alternative ways to regard gender, and create new and dynamic horizons to understand gender, without falling back on a form of universalisation or determinism:

The term figuration refers to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallocentric vision of the subject. A figuration is a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity. I feel a real urgency to elaborate alternative accounts, to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought. This entails a move beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely monological mental habits of phallocentrism. (Braidotti, 1994: 1-2)

In a similar vein to this point of Braidotti's, where the nomadic subject becomes a critical and energetic movement, Zin, the 'natural' woman of Neolithic times, is appropriated by the PKK to create new embodied subject positions - as Zilan - to enable women to overcome the patriarchal and colonial discourses constraining women's self-realisation. Juxtaposing the thoughts of Darwin and Deleuze, Grosz points out that people have a tendency to use their spare energy and creativity for self-realisation, a process not necessarily subject to the laws of natural selection and evolutionary purpose (Grosz, 2011: 2). Self-realisation is about the potential for facilitating and maximising action. Here, self-realisation is to be understood not as a linear evolution, but as an involution aimed at the establishment of connections and transubstantiation, as an exertion of complexity (Grosz, 2011: 53). Self-realisation thus acquires a double meaning in Grosz's work: to develop, and to regulate differently. Grosz claims that the prospect of self-realising in an infinite process gives us options (Grosz, 2011: 60). From this theoretical understanding then, as a new feminist figuration, the metaphorisation of Zilan – with inspiration from Zin – offers all women PKK fighters a new, alternative world in the present and in the future.

In light of Haraway, Braidotti and Grosz, the amalgamation of Zin and Zilan, as the cyborg figure, guides and inspires transformation within the PKK. Female fighters are encouraged to experience a new womanhood – in line with 'the nature of women' – to create a subject-identity, that is free from male dominance. For instance, by feminising all *fedai* acts and to motivate women fighters to sacrifice themselves in the anti-colonial struggle in the name of love, the PKK gives women fighters the opportunity to show that they are superior fighters than their male fighters, being 'ready' to sacrifice themselves for love of the land. Moreover, this aim appears to have been achieved: since Zilan's first action, most *fedai* actions in the PKK have been carried out by women. Femininity is being re-defined in the figuration of the female fighter while women's gender creates advantages for them compared to men. According to another female fighter Zelal:

Woman has proved herself. Beritan² did that with her personality. Zilan did it, too. They drew a line for us regarding how the free woman should be. They didn't only influence us, but men, too. The men have since changed and evolved a lot. They [Zilan and Beritan] created a new ideological and military warrior spirit for us. A 'fedai spirit'. Zilan and Beritan woke everybody from death. Woman is no longer just a mother. Or someone who cooks food. Or a sister. Woman is the colour of life. Woman's will is strong now. Woman is now a 'guide'. [...] They each contributed to a new transition. (Interview with Zelal, 17 September 2017)

The women fighters thus have a perception that *fedai* actions make a gendered statement. The point of *fedai* actions is therefore not simple killing or self-destruction, but to bring about a feminine transformation in the formation of a new type of fighter and a new type of woman. These actions are therefore more of a quest for a becoming at

² Beritan (Gülnaz Karataş) as the member of the PKK died when she threw herself from the cliffs during fighting to avoid being captured by 'the enemies' in 1992.

the cost of violence, in which death is politically grounded (Ransirini, 2017: 24). This form of self-realisation is also evident in Zilan's letter in which she expresses her commitment through sacrifice:

To show my commitment to our party the PKK, our Leader APO, our great resistance fighters, our prison resistance fighters, to our comrades who are fighting for freedom in the mountains, my country and my people I will carry out this 'sacrificial action'. With this action, I will attack the enemy with the spirit and strength that I take from my people. This shouldn't be the fate of our people anymore. We are the ones with the most love for peace, brotherhood, love itself, humanity, nature and life. Its [sic] this love that forces us to fight [...] My will to live is very strong. My desire is to have a fulfilled life through a strong action. The reason for my actions is my love for human beings and for life! (Letter excerpt, Zilan 1996) [Translation: Author]

With this love, Zilan presents that she no longer fears to sacrifice herself in death. The fedai-love has now overtaken her identity, which makes her able to love. Using Deleuze's ontology here, the conditions of love have now changed for Zilan. Experiencing the transcendental potential of the fedai-love causes Zilan to experience that she is no longer the same person and has begun to differentiate herself from herself (Deleuze, 2001: 69). Zilan is now in the process of generating change, re-realising herself and putting her potential to use. Grosz, in extension of her new feminist project³, adds that the desire is about people willingly forging connections and wanting to re-realise themselves. Desire is no longer defined as a lack, but as a creative relation and production. It is about utilising one's energy and creativity for self-realisation, being about the potential in facilitating and maximising action (Grosz, 1993: 171). In this instance, the body is not a static, essential entity, but a dynamic process regarded as a theoretical explanatory model (Grosz, 1993: 170-171). Grosz's interpretation of the body should be understood in relation to her definition of life, which she describes as the ongoing tendency to realise the virtual, in order to make tendencies and potentials real, to explore organs and activities in order to ease and maximise the acts they make possible (Grosz, 2011: 20). Turning her gaze to iterative actions, she emphasises: 'I am not the same subject in each repetition [...]' (Grosz, 2011: 32). Differentiations and repetitions thus become the concept of life, according to Grosz. From this understanding, the world thus acquires a new order of meaning for Zilan after she makes a choice, when she comes to see herself and others in a way that opens the world to one in a new way.

In this context, love is regarded, not as an individual emotion felt by one person for another, but as sense-making, transcendent and anticolonial. Love makes it possible for the individual to transcend her- or himself and the constraints of duality in relation to the opposite sex and thereby to produce creativity in the realisation of one's potential. This type of love, conceived as having the autonomous capacity to create a new world, is encapsulated in Alain Badiou's philosophy of love:

If we, on the contrary, want to open ourselves up to difference and its implications, so the collective can become the whole world, then the defence of love becomes one point individuals have to practise. The identity cult of repetition must be challenged by love of what is different, is unique, is unrepeatable, unstable and foreign. (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 98)

Sacrifice-ready love is not experienced voluntary, but mandatory and imposed. This love is something that happens to us, and we must submit to it. Zilan too, like Zin, must sacrifice herself by using her positive potential for self-realisation or capacity for action, as she wishes to achieve an alternative way of understanding herself and doing agency. Love, in the form of sacrifice, in the story of Mem and Zin therefore here plays a special part, demonstrating a close and profound link between love and death, where the lover sacrifices him- /herself for his/her love (Badiou and Truong, 2012: 32). In this context, Zilan therefore no longer sees her female body as a constraint as per sociocultural norms, but as a tool or implement of the anti-colonial struggle, to be sacrificed when necessary. She is on a journey of experiment, exploring something new. Death is therefore not a simple act of suicide but a new way of fighting, of loving the land and nation. Öcalan sees the love in Zilan's action (being driven

³ According to Grosz, the dominant constructivist feminism and the dualistic gender divisions thinking, understood in terms of historically and socially specific constructions and connected by categories such as race, class, gender and ethnicity, will ultimately lead to an individuality in which subjectivity is reduced to identity. Women from different parts of the world who are in similarly unequal positions will thereby lose their connection with each other, so that they will be unable to share experiences and support each other's struggles. Grosz stresses that it will also lead to the abolition of feminist struggle if feminism concerns itself only with the constraints imposed on women and their identities by patriarchal power relations. The solution, says Grosz, is that feminist theory produces new interpretations of identity in order to help oppressed women (Grosz, 2011: 92-93). For Grosz, it is not about creating and producing a universal expression – e.g., union of two genders, if we are talking about women and men – that can be levelled until neutralised, but about difference, variation and differentiation. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Grosz maintains that differentiation produces more difference: 'Difference is internal determination' [...] 'Difference produces its own differentiations from undifferentiated' (Grosz, 2011: 93).

by love for the land) as being stronger than Zin's (being driven by love for another person), yet this is not solely because of its great purpose, but also because it is free of being gender-romantic, and because it is infinite and not dependent on anybody or anything. As Braidotti says of death, and Badiou of love, love takes on a new shape but does not become an 'experience' separate from all else. Death is one of the many becomings in which the subject weaves together the world and its many forces, where everything, human and non-human, affects everything else, but the effects are different. The wish to die can therefore be understood, not within traditional morality as a rejection of life, but as a [radical] statement made about life, which encourages us to strive beyond the satiation of short-term desires (Braidotti, 2006: 153) to achieve a political subjectivity (Ransirini, 2017: 24). This form of subjectivity is what Stark (2012: 100) with reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), calls to create the extremely abstract and virtual subject. Zin and Zilan are now not the corporeal women-subjects of love, but virtual female subjects, that alone through their *fedai*-actions have become abstract women-subjects. Zin as a myth and Zilan as a political identity contributes to deconstructing the lines between the cultural and the natural, where reality then becomes a virtual reality, informed by potential, possibility and an elsewhere (Haraway: 1991; 149-182). Being 'women fighters' can thereby be understood as a cyborg identity. As the new woman, Zilan becomes a sort of nostalgic feminist figuration that can guide, inspire and direct women fighters toward a new subject position leading to self-decolonisation.

CONCLUSION

The empirical material gained through this research shows that PKK members have an idea that, having participated in the PKK, they have gained a new view of the world. It appears to them in this regard that the world has changed and that they now have the opportunity to re-realise their will and their desire. They acquire, in this context, a new understanding of love as an emotion with transcendent potential that enables them to transcend themselves, endure anything and finally merge with the unknown. Here, love is experienced as an inner creative act or as a tool in the anti-colonial struggle. It is therefore generative of possibilities, while they renounce their individuality to achieve a higher end. Love is not only an individuated feeling in the dominant paradigm of romantic heterosexual coupledom, but a special sense-making capacity that joins humans, nature, animals, ideology together, rather than being dependent on the existence of the other person or the only one.

Such love becomes a striving for wholeness and infinity, presenting as an attraction to a union and a completeness, and not detached from sociopolitical, sociohistorical and sociogeographic conditions. In the Kurdish context, inspiration for this form of love comes from authentic Kurdish cultural sources, appropriated towards the production of cadres in the anti-colonial struggle. This also enables the PKK to create a new discourse against the dominant discourse, thereby distancing itself from the capitalist and colonialist conception of gender and love. In this way, the PKK produces its own original, national concept of gender and love, including the figure of woman. One of the female fighters, Delal, referred to this woman figure in the PKK as 'the natural woman of the Neolithic times'. The woman of the Neolithic, whose roots go back into Kurdish culture (whether it is patriarchal or matriarchal), seems to be mythical, and may not at first glance offer new individual opportunities for action from a feminist perspective. But together with the re-configuration of love from romantic love to love for the land and nation, a new feminist figuration might emerge, able to mobilise women and generate new horizons for them while they also fight to secure the freedom of the community and the land.

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The Masculinist Construction of the National Woman and Her Gendered Practice of Love in the Colonial Bengali Fairy Tale Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This article will concentrate on the discourses that circulated around the literary genre of the Bengali fairy tale as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, especially regarding its ownership and genesis, and the interaction of this with the political/social debates/discourses surrounding the position and role of women. The discourses generated through the various prefaces and commentaries that accompanied the story collections, constructed a certain idea of the national woman as the bearer of tradition. They posit a theory of the sustenance of indigenous cultural traditions (which included story telling traditions) in her tremendous capacity for all-consuming love. At the same time, the story texts presented and focused on self-sacrificing heroines who fit into the model of indigenous womanhood that was being constructed during this period. This article will argue that these discourses were built on a series of erasures of women's voices, life stages and emotional spectrums but were serving the purpose of proving the superiority of indigenous traditions over that of the British imperialists. This project of defending Indian tradition, a central aspect of the cultural resistance to British imperialism, was a masculinist project. It reduced women to being mere sites and objects of knowledge.

Keywords: gender and love, feminist standpoint, colonial literature, Bengali fairy tale, nineteenth century women's question in India

INTRODUCTION

This article will study the classic literary genre of the Bengali fairy tale as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. The fairy tale collections that appeared during this period in Bengal¹, while purporting to be written transcriptions of an oral tradition, were effectively creating a new literary tradition distinct from the oral storytelling traditions that pre-existed in the region. This article will concentrate on the popular discourses that circulated around this emerging literary tradition especially regarding its ownership and genesis, and the interaction of this with the political/social debates/discourses surrounding the position and role of women. The Bengali fairy tale tradition was linked to the unlettered Indian woman who was untouched and thereby untainted by the colonial encounter, by indigenous Bengali collectors and their fellow intellectuals who commented on the texts. The discourses generated through the various prefaces, commentaries and introductory prose pieces that accompanied the story collections, constructed a certain idea of the national woman as the bearer of tradition and posited a theory of the sustenance of indigenous cultural traditions (which included story telling traditions) in her tremendous capacity for all-consuming love. At the same time the story texts presented and focused on self-sacrificing heroines who fit into the model of indigenous womanhood that was being constructed during this period. This article will argue that these discourses were built on a series of erasures of women's voices, life stages and emotional spectrums but were serving the purpose of proving the superiority of indigenous traditions over that of the British imperialists. This project of defending Indian traditions, a central aspect of the cultural resistance

¹ Bengal, historically a region within Eastern India, became the centre of the colonial British administration and housed the capital of Colonial India, Calcutta. The region was divided twice during the course of the early twentieth century, in 1905, by Lord Curzon but the partition was revoked in 1911. However, it was carved up a second time during the partition of India in 1947 and divided into two separate regions, the state of West Bengal in India and the region of East Pakistan in Pakistan. East Pakistan later became an independent nation Bangladesh in 1971 after separating from West Pakistan, which remained as the nation of Pakistan.

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to British imperialism, was a masculinist project (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001). It reduced women to being mere sites and objects of knowledge on the one hand, and on the other, in a much more problematic situation, sought to defend the indefensible aspects of indigenous patriarchal social organisation that itself had colonised, often fatally, women's bodies.

The discourses generated around the Bengali fairy tale were created by men, both British and Indian. In the nationalist period, which is the focus of this article, it was male members of the indigenous intelligentsia belonging entirely to the *bhadrolok* (refined class), a hybrid class which was grounded in both indigenous Bengali culture as well as in Western thought induced by the colonial education system, who were generating much of the published texts as well as the discourses around them. These print productions marked the entry of a pre-colonial oral narrative tradition into postcolonial modern print circulation. The narrative tradition on which these texts were based, called *rupkatha*, was a Bengali folk tradition of fantasy and romance narratives that had roots in social reality. However, the idea of the *rupkatha* as the Bengali equivalent of the European fairy tale came into existence in the colonial period under the influence of British literary genres as native scholars searched indigenous storytelling traditions for forms that were equivalent to English literary genres. The nineteenth century print market of the city of Calcutta was filled with translations of English books especially those that were aimed at children. This hegemonic dominance of British/European books was sought to be countered during the nationalist awakening that followed the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905. The ensuing political movement produced a massive cultural resistance that sought a nationalist awakening through the revival of indigenous cultural forms. However, by purporting to transcribe and record cultural traditions belonging to women, these men were speaking *for women*. There were attempts at sanitising anything uncomfortable. The sexual, the bawdy and counter-cultural voices were all censored out of the texts by the collector-writers and the commentators who, being members of the *bhadrolok*, had hegemonic control over indigenous knowledge production (Banerjee, 1989). At the same time, in the public debates that raged about indigenous women, as the historian Tanika Sarkar extensively discusses, women were reduced to being mere sites of debate, where men from various camps, the indigenous reformist, the nationalist-conservationist and the British administrative all sought to represent their voices without ever taking women's voices directly into consideration (Sarkar, 2001). This erasure of women's voices from public policy and social discourses is of course the general trend of history as Sandra Harding comments:

Women, like members of other oppressed groups, had long been the object of the inquiries of their actual or would-be rulers. Yet the research disciplines and the public policy institutions that depended upon them permitted no conceptual frameworks in which women as a group—or, rather, as groups located in different class, racial, ethnic, and sexual locations in local, national, and global social relations—became the subjects—the authors—of knowledge. Could women (in various diverse collectivities) become subjects of knowledge? (Harding, 2004: 4)

Bengali women in the late nineteenth and twentieth century thus occupied an intersectional social position where their lives were circumscribed both through indigenous patriarchy as well as the racially discriminatory social structures of British colonialism. This article will locate its standpoint in the perspective of their lived material lives, which I propose allows for a better view of the social picture of the time and provides ground for a necessary critique of the problematic aspects of gender myths that were generated by the early nationalist discourses and which have pervaded the life of the post-colonial nation since. In the words of Nancy Hartsock, the standpoint 'carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible' (Hartsock, 2004: 37). The native Bengali intelligentsia were male members of the *bhadrolok* classes who in terms of social structures occupied privileged positions, being male, upper-middle class and upper caste. They had benefitted from the colonial education system which had allowed them to rise to positions of privilege under the class structures created by the colonial administration. Under the circumstances that their perspectives excluded the material conditions of the oppressed groups both in terms of gender, caste and class was a very real possibility. The following political and epistemological claims made by Nancy Hartsock forms the basis of my argument:

- (1) Material life (...) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations.
- (2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse.
- (3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false.
- (4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations.
- (5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the

adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role. (Hartsock, 2004: 37)

Since the discourses generated around the Bengali fairy tale was exclusively of *bhadrolok* origin, they necessarily represented a partial view, a view from above which could not and did not take into account the material life conditions of those below and yet at the same time purported to present a totality and an objective view of things as they were. To take a standpoint then, in the sense of a vision that seeks to engage with the material reality of the lives of women, as an oppressed group, is to take a political position that is not a given but requires struggle and engaged striving. This article will do so through critical readings of *bhadrolok* texts, both the fairy tale texts as well as the commentaries, for gaps and ruptures which allow glimpses into the erasures of material lives. The attempt will be to read the texts with deliberate suspicion and detailed attention to reading in between the lines. I will also take into consideration late nineteenth and early twentieth political and social commentaries to present a clearer picture of the continuity of *bhadrolok* discourses across the social order and the gaps and problems in them.

The various prefaces, commentaries, introductions as Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's author's introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909), Dinesh Chandra Sen's influential discussion in *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920), Rabindranath Tagore's invited preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and Rev. Lal Behari Day's Preface to his *Folktales of Bengal* (1883) that served as paratexts, imposed certain meanings on the story collections, enforced a layer of rich symbolism on the loose collection of stories, and enmeshed works of folkloric/literary scholarship into the bouquet of nationalist productions and discursive practises. Jack Zipes, drawing from Gérard Genette (1997), who theorised paratexts as being gateway to texts, suggested that paratexts 'create texts, they manage them (these texts) and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them...a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text' (Zipes, 2014: 209). The paratexts to Bengali fairy tale texts, integrally connected the stories to women's love by claiming that not only were these stories drawn from popular women's tradition but that they were particularly the product of maternal love. In the Preface that accompanied Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), the landmark text of the nationalist phase of fairy tale collection, Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, claimed that the stories collected in the volume belonged to the loving Bengali mother and compared the stories to mother's milk. He placed this body of stories in opposition to the colonial English education which he claimed came from the industrialised Manchester cotton mills and was just as mechanical. However, just as British heavy industry had destroyed Indian cottage industries, the British education system and its culture emphasising English literacy and the written word was also destroying indigenous oral story traditions. The substitution of mother for women ensured the subsuming of the entire spectrum of womanhood with its diversity under the category of mother. The biggest victim of this was the figure of the girl child who was in general a marginalised figure among the dominant cultural and political discourses of the period. The girl child who should have been the primary reader/listener of such tales, considering the fact that the purported progenitors of the storytelling tradition that was under serious threat were women, which in turn made her the future bearer of the storytelling tradition and thereby the key figure within the material practise of storytelling, was glaringly left out from the discussion forwarded by these paratexts. This discourse instead appeared to be centrally focused on the mother and the male child.

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, the most well-known among the contemporary writers, often colloquially referred to as the 'Grimm of Bengal', opened his introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli* with a statement that the work of telling stories really belonged to Bengali mothers, a work that he had been forced to take up because Bengali mothers had allegedly forgotten this task. His purpose in publishing this volume was to become of use to these mothers and revive the forgotten tradition among them. In a poem which followed this piece and served as a verse introduction to the volume, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar called out to the *bou*, the daughters-in-law/wives, and dedicated the work to them. The poem additionally marked out children as the recipients of the stories, suggesting that these were that were told by mothers to their children during bedtime. However, this poem remains significant as the only instance where the girl child (*khuk*) was mentioned by category along with the boy child. With the exception proving the rule, in all other poems that followed (which were included before the main stories in an attempt to preserve folkloric elements) all of them referred to the boy child (*khokon*) exclusively. Lines like 'My little boy giggles', 'my little boy is in the lord's image' and 'my little boy's smile is precious, who has blest the grandmother's lap?' remain prominent. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet and one of the finest of early twentieth century cultural critics, in the celebrated Preface that he wrote for the same volume himself, marks out the Martin and Burke reading of boy child or *chele* as the intended reader for the volume. Lal Behari Day, the first native collector/author to publish a volume of fairy stories, who was writing on the request of the British collector R. C. Temple and was addressing the Anglophone world under the British Empire, simply mentioned his own boyhood and the fact of his hearing these stories from a woman called Shambhu's mother. In each of these texts the girl child seems lost between the twin figures of the mother and the boy child and remains conspicuous through her absence.

When one looks at the various nineteenth century debates and discourses that surrounded the issues affecting girl children, such as the passing of the Act banning *sati* in 1829², and the initiatives taken by Vidyasagar for women's education and for widow remarriage, leading to the passing of the widow remarriage act of 1853³, the arguments never feature the idea of these social practises being harmful for the girl as a *child*. Although the official British discourse against the practice of *sati* described the widow as a 'tender child', both the Hindu orthodoxy and the reformers deployed the *Shastras*⁴ to their benefits in their arguments and debated over the wellbeing of the social order in the context of these practices. Jasodhara Bagchi points out that 'Vidyasagar shared with the Hindu orthodoxy the conviction that the purity of the social order is closely tied up with the right channelling of female sexuality through marriage' (Bagchi, 1993: 2215). This elision of the girl child becomes all the more shocking when one looks at the contemporary public debates on child marriage, a practice which directly affected girl children in equal measure if not in larger numbers than boys. The focus of the arguments however remained on boys and on the health of the society in general. Monmayee Basu in her monograph *Hindu Women and Marriage Law: From Sacrament to Contract* (2004) discusses how Vidyasagar in his treatise against child marriage, talked about conjugal immaturity that resulted from immature spouses entering into a marriage and the detrimental effect of that on the subsequent health of children that resulted from such a union. Articles published in contemporary regional periodicals and newspapers, *Samvad Pravakar*, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Somprakash* during the middle of the nineteenth century denounced child marriage as detrimental to the education of young boys and instrumental in the creation of the horrors of poverty and ill health and the cause of decay of the human race (Basu, 2004: 40). The girl child is never directly addressed in these arguments; instead, she is conceptualised only as a future wife or mother of the community and the country. She could not be imagined outside of her sexual function even at the stage where sexual awakening had not taken place.

In the process of the gender socialisation of the girl child, what she should be and should do was determined by the need for preparing her for her future domestic role as the good wife and the good mother. Jasodhara Bagchi in her seminal essay on Bengali women's lives in the nineteenth century states that 'her upbringing was that of a good, well protected, *proto-bhadramahila* (emphasis added), encouraged to play feminine games of doll's house, read books "suitable" for girls, discouraged from physical activity' (Bagchi, 1993: 2218). The doll's house games usually mimicked adult domestic life and hence as such served a purpose in initiating the girl child into her domestic roles. The existence of the precocious child, who had more knowledge of worldly affairs than she should, often endearingly referred to as '*ginni*' a word which was otherwise used for the wife or the homemaker appeared abundantly in Bengali literature. What emerges from here is the hyphenated figure of the child-woman. In most discussions of the period, she appeared as the child-bride, as the child-wife and as the child-widow but somehow never as only a child. The 'suitable' books that were popular reading material for girl children traced the ideal relationship between men and women, praised domestic efficiency and provided examples from the life of heroines such as Sita, Savitri and others (Bandopadhyay, 1991: 163). Among these, *Sushilar Upakhyan*, which documented the life of Sushila, the ideal child-woman, was one book that was widely popular. Shibaji Bandopadhyay observes that just as the children's primers, Madanmohan Tarkalankar's *Shishushikhya* and Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichay* had constructed the idea of the good boy Gopal and the bad boy Rakhal, *Shishilar Upakhyan* had constructed the idea of their wives and mothers (Bandopadhyay, 1991: 213). To say 'children's' primers is then misleading because it was only boys who found representation as children in these books. The dialectics was between the *Gopals* who were the obedient and social boys and *Rakhals* who were troublesome. The girl child stood outside this dialectic and was thus never seen in their pages. There was no need for a good girl who did her lessons on time and did not fight with her friends, even in educational primers where she would have been represented prior to her role as wife

² The Sati Regulation of 1829 was the first major legislation passed by the British in India which introduced social reform by declaring the practise of *sati* or burning of widows alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands illegal and punishable by criminal courts. The legislation was passed by the Governor-General William Bentinck and marked the culmination of a sustained campaign to end the practise of *sati* by Bengali reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and European Christian missionaries like William Carey. The act was unsuccessfully opposed by conservative sections of Hindu community lead by Dharma Sabha and scholars like Radhakanta Deb who had founded the organisation (Dharma Sabha) to counter the ongoing social reform movement.

³ The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed by Lord Canning in 1856 was the second major social reform legislation that legalised the remarriage of widows in all jurisdictions of India under East India Company rule. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagr, the main campaigner supported by other prominent men, petitioned the Legislative Council but was again opposed by Radhakanta Deb and the Dharma Sabha. Lord Dalhousie finalised the bill despite the opposition. However, a point to be noted is that both *sati* and the issue of young widows were Hindu upper caste problems. The issues gained attention of the British because it was this section of the population who formed the social elite and interacted with the British administrators. The majority of Hindu middle and lower castes, and Bengali muslims (also mainly descended from lower and middle castes) neither prohibited remarriage of widows nor practised *sati*.

⁴ The *Shastras* were religious treatises that had come down from ancient India and served as law books that regulated social conduct and especially governed practices surrounding birth, marriage and death.

and mother. She was rarely, if ever, seen detached from those roles. Thus, the books which specifically targeted the girl child were interested in presenting role models like *Shushila* who was the ideal, self-sacrificing, loving, righteous, and efficient wife to her (also idealised) husband. The girl child as a category was subsumed within the general conception of womanhood, as attached to her reproductive function. This, however, is not a cultural fact that was peculiar to Bengal. Mary Jane Kehily notes in her introductory discussion of childhood that ‘the concept of childhood remains imbued with significance that encode what children mean to adults’ (Kehily, 2009: 45). As the girl child in colonial Bengali households was burdened with the responsibility of ‘keeping the patriarchal structure of the...family in place’ she was from her infancy seen as a proto-woman (Bagchi, 1993: 2214). Boys, on the other hand were the ‘first specialised children’. Kehily writes that from sixteenth century onwards, Western Europe saw an increasing differentiation in the way adults and children were represented. As childhood came to be seen as a new concept in the nineteenth century west, ‘boys were singled out as a distinct and different category. The historical development of childhood in Western Europe was articulated through boyhood’ and very importantly through white, middle class boyhood (Kehily, 2009: 44). The development of the concept of childhood was also marked by a simultaneous growth in specialised literature aimed exclusively at children. Nineteenth century colonial Bengal too had seen the growth of the publishing market under the category of children’s literature. Some of the Bengali fairy tale collections were also part of that growing corpus of literature. This had developed under the influence of the cultural exchange that marked the heyday of British colonialist rule over the region. In Bengali children’s literature too, the signifiers ‘chele’ and ‘chelebela’ (boy and boyhood) came to be the universalised markers of child and childhood which seeped into and stayed in Bengali linguistic usage. The representation of this childhood was very much that of the class that had benefited from colonial education and business opportunities, and had grown under the colonial rule, that is, the *bhadrolok* classes.

It is only with the debates surrounding the Age of Consent Bill⁵ (which was passed in 1891) that the recognition of a time when the female body is not yet a sexual body or a maternal body entered into public discourse. In the aftermath of the much publicised death of the 11-year-old Phulmoni due to marital rape and the acquittal of her thirty year old husband Hari Maity⁶, the ‘woman question’ which had temporarily disappeared from public discourse, re-entered it. The emerging nationalist movement had ‘resolved’ the women’s question, as Partha Chatterjee argues in his 1989 essay ‘The nationalist resolution of the women’s question’, by placing it in the domain of home where interference on part of the colonial masters was not to be tolerated (Chatterjee, 1989). To quote from Tanika Sarkar’s ‘A prehistory of rights: the age of consent debate in colonial Bengal’: ‘cultural nationalists used a contrast between the loving heart of the Hindu home with the loveless, coercive nature of colonial rule. They saw all domestic arrangements (no matter how hurtful to the woman) as a matter of willed love and surrender on part of the woman, in contrast to the forced submission of the Indian man to the colonial order’ (Sarkar, 2000: 613). However, this violent death and the ensuing figures revealed by investigations by colonial administrators over the large number of deaths of pubescent wives, forced both the reformist and the revivalist-nationalists to cast an anxious gaze onto the body of the child-woman. ‘A new possibility also forced itself, adding to the discomfort’, writes Sarkar, ‘Were they talking of the woman or about a mere child yoked to untimely marriage? Was there a separate stage in the woman’s life as childhood, and if so, was it compatible with marriage?’ In the reformist discourse particularly, ‘they read her wan face, her premature aging, and her fatigue and early death as something induced by premature sexual contact and childbearing’ (Sarkar, 2000: 612). One can see that an idea of maturity was slowly being conceived which was trying to conceptualise a notion of girlhood that is to be seen as coming before and predating her existence as a sexual being, as a wife/mother/woman. The conservative position articulated through newspapers opposing the bill argued ‘that the Hindu girl’s biological development should be differently assessed: “According to the Hindu law the childhood of a girl is to be determined by reference to her first menses and not to her age.”’ (Sarkar, 2000: 613) It was this ‘Hindu law’ that was used to argue that if the Hindu girl did not come into sexual contact with her husband immediately after the onset of menarche, this would ensure the pollution of her womb and by extension that of the entire Hindu community. Reformers on the other

⁵ The issue of child marriage was heavily debated within Bengali intellectual circles for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a sensitive issue as it was tied to religion and notions of tradition. The Age of Consent Act was finally passed 1891 that raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for girls both within and outside of marriage to twelve from th earlier age of ten. The Governor-General and Viceroy, Lord Lansdowne supported the passing of the act in the Legislative Council and this amended the Indian Penal Code as any violation of the provisions of the act would lead to charges of rape.

⁶ The case of Empress v. Hari Mohan Maity colloquially referred to the Phulmoni Dasi rape case, triggered the outpouring of public sentiment as it resulted in the death of Phulmoni from marital rape. However, as she was over the legal age her husband was acquitted on charges of rape despite the witness account provided by Phulmoni’s mother and aunt. Hari Mohan Maity was however charged under the Indian Penal Code for causing grievous hurt and endangering a person’s safety and sentenced to twelve months of hard labour. The trial and the evidence produced during the trail, helped consolidate the cause of the social reformists like Keshab Chandra Sen and others who were arguing for raising the age of consent.

hand, 'linked childhood to a stage anterior to the full maturation of all the sexual, procreative organs. A minimum age, they said, would be a safer index' (Sarkar, 2000: 613). The gravity of the issue is evident from the fact that the two sections were warring over raising the minimum age for sexual intercourse in marriage by only two years, from the statutory age of ten to twelve. The Hindu orthodoxy's claiming of the right to continue with the tradition of '*garradan*' (or giving of the womb immediately after the onset of menarche) was supported by the revivalist-nationalists because they were resisting the colonial legislative intervention into what they claimed was a private religious issue. However, the passing of the bill did mark a moment of recognition for the physical state of girlhood, when the female body was neither a sexual body nor a maternal body. Still, the idea of 'consent' that was being debated was only restricted to her body and the physical readiness of her body for sexual relations. Consent was defined as the capability of the physical body to bear sexual penetration without serious harm or injury. Phulmoni Dasi, the child-wife, whose death had started the debate was aged eleven and therefore above the age of ten at the time. Her death after thirteen hours of pain and profuse bleeding, however, proved that her battered body was not ready for a sexual relationship. It was the unpreparedness of the body that would gain the woman the right to a semblance of a childhood and a certain amount of legal immunity. There was still no discussion of the emotional and mental immaturity or ideas of innocence associated with girlhood. On the whole, although the number of issues that were classified under the 'women's question' were debates that also affected girl children (for example: education, marriage and widowhood), they were nonetheless regarded as *women's* questions that affected Indian womanhood in general. Ruby Lal notes this when she says, 'Most of the literary and reformist discourses of the nineteenth century deluge us with a liminal figure, which I shall call girl-child/woman' (Lal, 2013: 33). The universalised notion of *chelebela* (boyhood) as childhood held ground, and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Rabindranath Tagore, writing in the decade immediately following the passage of the 1891 Age of Consent bill continued to use such signifiers. The emphasis still remained on the girl-woman as mother and as wife. She appeared variably as '*snehomoyee*' (the affectionate one), '*deshlakshmi*' (the blessed women of the nation), as '*boro bou*' (elder wife) and '*choto bou*' (younger wife) but only once as '*khuki*' (girl child). Tagore and Mitra Majumdar by specifically placing the tradition of storytelling on the mother's shoulders and in the grandmother's repertoire, and by identifying the colonial educated male child as the receiver (as Tagore and Mitra Majumdar themselves had been) erased the girl child as either listener or teller. This omission highlighted the other female presence in the discourse: that of the mother. Furthermore, conflating the figure of the tradition-bearing, care-giving, loving, storytelling mother with the figure of the tradition-preserving, loving self-sacrificing Hindu/indigenous/national⁷ woman was inevitable.

The emphasis on woman as mother within the prose and verse pieces that accompanied the *rupkatha* stories can thus be located within the discourses of the early nationalist period when motherhood was constructed as a metaphor for the nation. The icon of the mother and the mother goddess became the rallying point around which nationalist ideology sought to construct itself. The nation, an abstract idea, simultaneously went through the process of being visually represented as a cartographic space and at the same time began to find emotional expression in the idea of the motherland where the nation was embodied as the body of a woman, the mother. The brand of nationalism that became dominant in India at this time was distinctly Hindu in character. This iconography found its most complete expression in the idea of Bharat Mata, painted in 1922 by Abanindranath Thakur, as a four-armed goddess in ascetic robes. The transformation from woman to nation to goddess was completed within the public psyche. Temples dedicated to Bharat Mata opened in Benaras and elsewhere. The deities worshipped in some of these temples were represented by the map of undivided India (Davis, 2007). It was the prevalence of goddess worship, Jashodhara Bagchi points out in her essay 'Representing nationalism' that facilitated the empowering of the mother image paving way for nationalist uses of the image (Bagchi, 1990: 69). Additionally, in Bengal, the mother and child relationship was central to worship in both the dominant religious traditions: the *Shakta* and the *Vaishnavite*. Bengali culture was permeated by the psychology of '*vatshalya sneha*', that is, the affection for one's offspring, that was also at the heart of the framing of both the Shakta and the Vaishnavite tradition (Bagchi, 1993: 2215). Representations of Yashoda's loving indulgence, of Krishna's escapades and the devotee's (be it Ramaprasad, *Bamakhya* or Ramakrishna) loving appeals to Mother Kali, were an intrinsic part of these devotional cults. It is to be noted that it was once again a relationship between that mother and her male child which is highlighted in these devotional cults. Since religious imagination has been central to Indian culture, religious iconography was extensively used by the nationalists for raising support for their political causes. The mother-child relationship found within devotional cults was framed within the emerging nationalist discourses as the relationship between the nation as mother and the citizen as child. The claim for sovereignty was framed as the child's quest to win honour for the battered mother. The *Shakta* tradition in particular, became a rallying point for the nationalist imagination. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the celebrated novelist and political thinker,

⁷ The nationalist discourses of the late nineteenth century were predominantly Hindu as there was a disproportionate representation of Hindus among the *bhadrolok* classes. Historically this was the result of greater willingness of Hindus in participating in the colonial institutions and structures as opposed to Muslims.

presented the country as a mother when he published his song '*Vande Mataram*' as part of the novel *Anandamath* in the *Bangadarshan Patrika* in 1882. This song became widely influential within the nationalist cause and '*Vande Mataram*' became the expression of devotion to the nation as the 'worshipped motherland'. In this novel *Anandamath* that was published serially between 1880 and 1882, he also took the next step of placing the figure of the mother as the mother goddess in the distinctly political context of the nation. He used a series of mother images in the novel to present the condition of India throughout the succeeding ages and thereby referring to the past, the present and the future states of the Indian society: Annapurna, the goddess of fertility and plenitude, Kali, the dark and angry goddess wandering in graveyards, and Durga, the ten-armed goddess of power presented at the moment when she has vanquished the enemy. Bagchi points out how nationalists read deep political messages in Bankim's crisis-ridden images of Durga and Kali. The distinction that he made between the symbolism of the two deities, however, was not found in later nationalist uses of the goddesses, where both Kali and Durga were of synonymous usage, both representing power as it were along with a certain kind of maternal tenderness. This was evident in the ascetic-philosopher-social worker Vivekananda's 1898 work 'Kali the Mother' where he combined both the conceptions of the nurturing and the avenging mother in the image of Kali and vocalized through it a call for nationalism. He linked goddess with the motherland, where the need of the hour was for the son (citizen) to bear the destructive force represented by the mother goddess (Bagchi, 1990: 69).

When placed in this context, the *snehomoyee* or affectionate woman and the *deshlakshmi* or the blessed national woman who Rabindranath Tagore referred to in his 1907 preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* attain special significance. The affectionate mother, that is, the *snehomoyee*, was the nurturer of the nation as she was also the *deshlakshmi*, the blessed woman of the nation. Lakshmi originally the goddess of wealth and prosperity was also an ideal for women to emulate in everyday life and *lakshmi* in popular parlance was widely used as an adjective for the good wife/woman/girl. The *deshlakshmi*, then, was the woman who like the goddess protected the wealth and prosperity of the land. The wealth being the repertoire of indigenous culture and traditions. Woman, nation and goddess were inextricably linked within the Indian imagination of the time. Both nationalist as well as religious cultural markers were thus being referred to in the Bengali fairy tale discourse as it traced the genesis of the tradition in the love of the affectionate mother, and identified the national child, being male and middle class, as the recipient.

The texts of the fairy tale stories also engage with the nationalist construction of the ideal woman. The specific conception of the Indian woman within the nationalist discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was built upon the idea of the Indian woman's willed surrender to the harsh demands of indigenous patriarchy. Such an idea was central to the nationalist distinction between the nature of Indian tradition and nature of British colonialism. The Indian woman, 'the other' within the self, the nation, became the central site for emphasis of this distinction. She, nationalists were forced to admit during the very public debates surrounding the raising of the age of consent, was subject to social laws and cultural dictums that were detrimental towards her. The conservative sections of the nationalists (most notably Bal Gangadhar Tilak) however argued that no matter how ruthless the socio-religious laws, the Indian woman followed them voluntarily, unlike the relationship between the Indian man and the British colonial master where humiliating laws were forcefully imposed by the colonial master upon the Indian man. However, it was colonialist discourse itself early in the nineteenth century that established woman as the site and object of debate, when it identified the condition of Indian women as the marker of the inferiority of Indian tradition. By contrast, Indian nationalist discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, projected the Indian woman, who embodied Indian tradition and culture, as a marker of the superiority of Indian tradition because of her ability to sacrifice her own interests, her body and even her life for the well-being of her people. In the nationalist discourse, East was identified with spiritualism as opposed to western materialism and women were burdened with representing the spiritual core of the nation. This discourse also stressed the essential difference in the social space occupied by women between the East and the West. The wife in the West was the companion whereas in the East within Indian tradition the wife was goddess. The spiritual superiority of the East was established by the Eastern woman's moral triumph through her ability for self-sacrifice. Such linkages ultimately lead to women embodying qualities of self-renunciation or *tyag*. The concept of *tyag* as renunciation was also central to both Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. Woman, tradition and religion were linked to form a co-ordinated concept of nationhood. Self-abnegation became the hallmark of the national woman. This general perception of Indian womanhood led to the valorisation of the goddess like self-sacrificing heroic women in the literature produced during this time. The character of the ideal child-wife Sushila in girls' primers like *Sushilar Upakhyan* (published in multiple volumes through the 1880s) fitted this model of Indian womanhood, and the same figure can be found among the women characters of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's books *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909).

Both of these Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's books, written during the phase of the Bengali nationalist cultural awakening, focus on conflicts which have the self-sacrificing good women on the moral side, and the desiring self-serving evil woman on the other side. His *Thakurdadar Jhuli* also paraded a series of heroic good women who displayed remarkable agency but nonetheless submitted to the hierarchies of the indigenous

patriarchal social structure unquestioningly. These narrative characters remained loyal to their husbands even when they were treated outrageously by them, as in the case of Kanchanmala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 113–238). They obeyed social laws despite the fact that these laws caused them suffering as in the case of Pushpamala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 89–138), and remained deferential to villainous elders as in the case of Malanchamala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 135–192). Malanchamala was the epitome of the *tyagi*, the self-sacrificing woman, who willingly married a babe who had only twelve days to live, and then even after being assaulted and abandoned by her in-laws, she remained in the cremation ground with her dead baby husband protecting his corpse from the spirits who came to feed on him. The story traces her struggles as she raised him and finally married him off to another princess. After enduring tremendous hardships when she was finally accepted by her father-in-law, she delayed her return to court, choosing to remain in the forest. Dinesh Chandra Sen, one of the foremost literary critics in the early twentieth century, praised her as symbolising ‘all the virtues of Indian womanhood, whose ideals were still alive in India’ in his 1920 book *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Flora, 2002: 44). Furthermore, since all of the stories were centred on romantic love, self-sacrifice was also presented as central to the ideal woman’s practice of love. *Tyag* was at the very foundation of femininity and female love. The story of ‘Pushpamala’, which was a retelling of an earlier romance *Sakhi Sona*, (written by the 16th century poets Fakir Ram Kabibhushan and Mohammad Korban Ali)⁸ clearly shows instances where Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar intervened into an older story to tweak the character of his heroine. The heroine, Pushpamala, in Dakshinaranjan’s story eloped with the hero, not because they were in love but out of a sense of duty, because she felt that she must honour the promise her father made to the hero’s father that he would give her in marriage to him, especially as her father had previously gone back on his word. This episode was presented in a manner which suggested that Pushpamala was actually sacrificing herself at the altar of truth. Moreover, just before the elopement, Dakshinaranjan’s heroine prepared a meal to serve to her parents and relatives thinking that this would be the last time that she would be able to serve them, whereas in both Kabibhushan and Korban Ali’s versions the heroine kept regretting having to leave her luxurious life as a princess as she was used to the comforts of the palace. As expected, the difficulty she faced in adjusting to the new life with her young husband also made its way into the story. In contrast, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s heroine was the idealised portrait of the woman as dutiful daughter and wife. Her childhood was essentially erased.

The antithesis of the qualities that constituted this rigidly constructed ideal of the Indian woman, was found embodied in the figure of the evil woman. All the *rakshasis* (monsters) who appeared in the section ‘*Rup Taras*’ of *Thakurmar Jhuli* were desirous instead of self-effacing and had a voracious appetite (both real and metaphorical). This section derived its name from the terrifying visage of the *rakshasi*. The other evil women, the various *shotins* (co-wives) and the evil sisters are represented as always jealous of the good women. Their jealousy resulted from their inability to sacrifice self-interest and thus marked the absence of qualities which constituted the ideal Indian woman. This also marked them as unnatural women and as monstrous. The valorisation of self-abnegation led to the vilification of desire in women. When self-abnegation was constructed as central to womanhood itself, it rendered female desire itself as monstrous. Hence, every woman who acted from motives of self-aggrandisement in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s stories were represented as villains and metaphorical monsters. This distinction between the good women and the bad women is maintained neatly across the entire body of Mitra Majumdar’s works. However, through deft craftsmanship their actions were also rendered problematic within the logic of the fairy tale as these were presented as going against the moral order. All of their acts of self-aggrandisement came at the cost of the innocents. These evil women usurped power at an early point in the story either through villainy or through cunning manipulation/displacement of male authority figures, however, the story could end only with the re-establishment of the patriarch and their deaths, a cliché of fate for many subversive women in literature.

CONCLUSION

Since ‘the position of women is structurally different from that of men, and that the lived realities of women’s lives are profoundly different from those of men’ (Hartsock, 2004: 36), this should have epistemological and discursive consequences. However, the social and literary discourses of colonial Bengal, while focused on women, refused to take into account women’s lives. They originated from the privileged sections of Indian society, the intelligentsia who contributed to and sustained the discourses were predominantly male, upper class and upper caste. These discourses claimed objective knowledge of whole of society but as view from above left invisible the most vulnerable lives. Feminist historians’ recovery of female voices from the time shows that they directly

⁸ Both of these stories are described in detail in Dinesh Chandra Sen’s *Folktales of Bengal* (1920). See Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 116–124.

contested such an argument. For example, Monmayee Basu notes letters written by 'a few Bengali women from Chinsurah' in 1835 (well before the nationalist-reformist debates emerged) to the newspaper *Samachar Darpan* that decried child marriage and the lack of educational opportunities for women. They accused men of treating women poorly and stated that Indian men deserved the rough treatment they were receiving from the British because of the way they had treated their women (Basu, 2004: 39). Such letters were merely instances where individual women managed to 'speak' in public, with little or no effect on larger public discourses. Counter-voices can also be read within the fairy tale texts written by women collectors in the following decades of the twentieth century, such as in Sovana Sundari Devi's *The Orient Pearls* (1915) and Suniti Devi's *Indian Fairy Tales* (1923) which presented more rounded female perspectives and ascribe greater agency to women characters. Instances of counter-cultural voices can also be found in the stories published in volumes like Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, which throw up moments that rupture the dominant discursive organisation of the texts. However, such moments exist because the texts themselves were a complex product of interactions between the oral stories as collected from rural women, and the classic literary narration as written by members of the male intelligentsia.

In the discourses that have been studied in this article, men speak for women, and men discursively organise women's lives. The neat reduction of women's lives to their bodies, which included an overt focus on the reproductive function of women, women as mothers, and defining consent around the physical readiness of the female body for sexual intercourse, is symptomatic of the work of abstract masculinity (as Hartsock conceptualises it) that adopts dualisms of mind/body, abstract/concrete, culture/nature, and statis/change, and aligns men with the former and women with the later. These dualisms, the product of European Enlightenment, can also be traced within the Bengali fairy tale discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as in the larger nationalist, revivalist-nationalist discourses of the period from which the Bengali fairy tale discourse was drawing from. The idealisation of an unchanging social order marked by continuity of tradition, with woman as the body that bore the yoke of tradition with loving sacrifice, and the body that birthed and preserved the community as the mother, was the result of an abstract masculinist discourse that had escaped 'from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of public life' (Hartsock, 2004: 45). This discourse also showed the same problematic tendency towards social synthesis identified by Hartsock, where it resolved these dualisms through metaphorically killing the other, that is through silencing and erasing women's voices. This was true both for the fairy tale discourse which erased the girl child and life stages of women, fossilising them as mothers and the nationalist discourse which glorified female sacrifice and death.

A standpoint rooted in material realities of women's lives exposes both the realities of power hierarchy at work, as well as the perversity of the 'objective' masculinist social and literary discourses. As dominant discourses have the power to shape social realities, such an intervention is necessary to critique and redefine the terms of existence ascribed to the community. However, a standpoint, to quote Hartsock, 'is an achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding' (Hartsock, 2004: 39), and it has been the aim of this article to identify and mediate these problems and ruptures in the discourses created around the literary fairy tale and the nationalist discourses from which it drew. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali fairy tale and fairy tale discourses' monolithic construction of the indigenous woman, their concentrated focus on woman as attached solely to her reproductive function, their marginalisation of the life stages of women that existed beyond that function, and their construction of the gendered practises of love, and their overwhelming emphasis laid on women's self-abnegation as the basis of romantic love, was a damaging masculinist fantasy serving political ends.

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Using Haraway's Split Researcher in the Context of Theatre: A Case Study of Subject/Object in Romantic Love

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ABSTRACT

Donna Haraway's 1988 article 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' attempts to outline a loose methodology for objective feminist research. One of the key concepts in Haraway's argument is the 'split' researcher; through the process of 'splitting', a researcher can see from a multitude of perspectives and shift away from centring their own subjective experiences. Lauren Gunderson's 2010 play *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* likewise 'splits' the character of Emilie du Châtelet, which involves two actresses playing different versions of Emilie. This means that one version of Emilie, the leading Emilie, can observe the events of her life from a distance and can therefore move into a more objective sphere to come to her own conclusions. Leading Emilie must observe and sometimes enact memories from her life that lean into subjective and emotional experiences of romantic love. This article argues that despite the relative subjectivity and emotionality associated with romantic love, leading Emilie is able to make astute and helpful deductions about her romantic relationships. This suggests that the feminist researcher need not fully push aside their subjective experiences in order to come to beneficial conclusions.

Keywords: splitting, feminist perspectives, dual-role playing, perspectives of love, Lauren Gunderson

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Donna Haraway's foundational text 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988), feminist scholars have grappled with the plausibility of objective feminist research. From Sandra Harding's 1991 suggestion that the definition of objectivity has been too closely aligned with impartiality to Kathy Davis's 2007 claim that women's lived experiences are essential to understanding how systems of oppression operate, the debates surrounding Haraway's concept of situated knowledge as feminist methodology range from reconsideration to outright dismissal. In this article, I examine how Lauren Gunderson's play *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* (2010) uses fragmented shifts in perspective to offer a methodology for balancing objective perspective and women's lived experiences. This article argues that Gunderson demonstrates an opportunity for unity between Haraway's objective methodology of 'splitting' oneself and subjective experiences of romantic love, blurring the binary between objectivity and subjectivity and suggesting that the relationship between the two is a continuum rather than a direct opposition.

Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight (2010) is a historiographic metadramatic play by American playwright Lauren Gunderson, first performed by the South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California on 24 April 2009 and first published as a play-text by New York City-based publisher Samuel French in 2010. The play centres around eighteenth-century French natural philosopher, Emilie du Châtelet, who is best known for her translation of Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) and for being one of Voltaire's most prominent lovers; Gunderson's play sees du Châtelet reliving and rewatching the moments of her life play out in front of her, after her death.

Whilst the character of Emilie is able to relive some of the conversations she had during life, she is not able to touch other actors and cannot re-enact intimate scenes. For Emilie's life to be replayed, another character, named Soubrette, must play her in scenes where physical touch is necessary. This article explores the contrast between the fragmented expressions of romantic love shown by the different versions of Emilie du Châtelet performed by Emilie and Soubrette and the sexually driven expression of romantic love exhibited by Emilie's lover, Voltaire. I

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contend that Gunderson's fragmented representation of Emilie du Châtelet's experiences allows for the character Emilie to both display and problematise Haraway's concept of 'splitting' and thus enables her to consider romantic love from different perspectives, whereas Voltaire's perspective is singular and subjective. This means that Emilie can demonstrate a more malleable and complete impression of romantic love, whereas Voltaire's linear and physical expression of romantic love exposes the issue with prioritising personal sexual desire and pleasure over aspects such as compassion, respect and communication.

Haraway encourages the concept of splitting oneself to disengage from the process of being. She argues that 'one cannot "be" either a cell or molecule – or a woman, colonised person, laborer, and so on – if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. 'Being' is much more problematic and contingent' (1988: 585), thus suggesting that the process of self-identification obscures the ability to examine situations through an objective lens due to the imposition of the self on the situation. The first section of this article explores the process through which Emilie du Châtelet is 'split'; she is able to 'be' and 'be split' simultaneously, offering a bridge between Haraway's objective methodology and the ostensibly opposing subjective perspective. By splitting Emilie into different characters with disparate perspectives based on their positionality and relative distance from the location of 'being', Gunderson demonstrates how Haraway's process of splitting can function whilst the self and its subjectivity remains intact. In her play, Gunderson literalises the process of splitting that Haraway recommends and explores how splitting can function through visualising split perspectives on the contemporary stage.

This process of splitting within the play allows for different Emilies to gain disparate perspectives on their engagement with romantic love. Whilst romantic love could be seen as a subjective experience that rejects objectivity, this article argues that the splitting of the character of Emilie enables objectivity to be somewhat maintained despite the appearance of subjective experience. bell hooks defines love as 'an action' (2000: 13), rather than an emotion or a collection of feelings. hooks notes that, in order to love, 'we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication' (2000: 5). Combining hooks' suggestion that love is an action that requires dedication and Ellen Berscheid's 2010 definition of romantic love in opposition to companionate love, compassionate love and adult attachment love, the second section of this article considers how the split Emilies respond to romantic love and how the most objective of these Emilies is able to use her skills of deduction to come to beneficial conclusions, despite the appearance of subjective experience. In this section, I analyse how the different Emilies' disparate perspectives on romantic love stem from their splitting and allow for a more holistic experience of romantic love than Voltaire, who is unable to tap into an objective viewpoint. Together, the two sections of my argument consider how Gunderson's splitting of the Emilies provides a methodology for the splitting of the self that Haraway suggests and how feminist objectivity can be somewhat maintained when researching a topic steeped in subjective experiences.

EMILIE SQUARED: FRAGMENTATION AND SITUATEDNESS

Donna Haraway's 1988 article 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' attempts to offer an objective feminist methodology. Haraway argues for 'a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing' (1988: 585); the onus is on communities and connections rather than the single perspective of the subjective self. In her definition of feminist objectivity, Haraway complicates this relationship between the subjective and objective by suggesting that 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see' (1988: 583). Here, Haraway argues that a methodology of feminist objectivity cannot and should not fully subjugate the feminist subject but can adopt a politics of situatedness to expand the breadth and depth of feminist thought. One cannot fully split from their subjective self but one can use their location to objectively analyse 'where we are or are not' (Haraway, 1988: 583) in relation to other locations. Rather than claiming that there is a way to transcend the subject, Haraway suggests that one need not dismiss one's own subjectivity but simply destabilise it in order to consider the world from different perspectives.

Elaborating on the need for feminist objectivity to develop a multiplicity of perspectives and interconnected relationships, Haraway suggests that one cannot understand all perspectives but must endeavour to see from at least more than one point of view. Haraway argues that:

All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine. (1988: 583)

By noting the impossibility of ‘infinite mobility and interchangeability’, Haraway contends that there is no way to produce an all-seeing objective viewpoint and suggests that objectivity arises from the effort and attempt to see the world from another’s perspective.

This is where Haraway’s notion of ‘splitting’ arises. Haraway argues that ‘splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge’ (1988: 586) and claims that this is because both the subjective self and the notion of vision are ‘multidimensional’ (1988: 586). Since one cannot simultaneously ‘be’ all things and see from all perspectives, Haraway suggests that being is incompatible with objective methodology. For one to see objectively, one must understand the self as split in order to make partial connections. Identity, Haraway claims, ‘does not produce science; critical positioning does’ (1988: 586) and, therefore, the self, understood as split and fragmentary, is able to apply a more critical lens to analysis than the self that prioritises identity and ‘being’. Fragmentation is necessary for one to see objectively whilst also acknowledging one’s own subjectivity.

Despite being published in 1988, Haraway’s article continues to provoke reactions in contemporary scholarship. More recently, Sandra Harding has built upon Haraway’s notion of the objective in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (1991). Harding states:

Neither knowers nor the knowledge they produce are or could be impartial, disinterested, value-neutral, Archimedean. The challenge is to articulate how it is that knowledge has a socially situated character denied to it by the conventional view, and to work through the transformations that this conception of knowledge requires of conventional notions such as objectivity, relativism, rationality, and reflexivity. (1991: 11-12)

Here, Harding rejects the suggestion that objectivity when being attempted by a subjective self can never be impartial and therefore claims that the synonymous connection between the words objective and impartial should be deconstructed and problematised. Both Harding and Haraway refuse to place subjectivity as an opposition to objectivity, acknowledging that the pursuit of the objective by a subjective self is not only possible but necessary.

In the last decade, several scholars have engaged with Haraway’s ‘Situated Knowledges’ and questioned the problematic connection between the subjective and objective in the article. Peta Hinton argues that:

[Haraway’s] contradictory suggestions for embodied locatability indicate something of the dilemma of a politics of location that I would like to put in question here – namely that although subjectivity has been reconfigured, its classical coordinates may be quietly, and inadvertently, reinstated. Insisting that we account for ‘who’ it is that speaks or organizes collectivity, as an *enunciative* politics would require, demands a self-presence of that speaking subject and its identity – the same claim for self-presence which informs the rational subject’s capacity to stand back from the world in order to take measure of it. (2014: 104-105)

Hinton suggests that the self-presence of the subject is ever-present and argues that identity cannot be as easily dispossessed in search of the split self as Haraway suggests. Hinton agrees with Haraway’s argument that a multiplicity of positions and perspectives is essential to feminist politics but suggests that the subject ‘is always in a process of becoming (within) a web of political productions’ (2014: 109). Hinton is not explicitly disagreeing with Haraway but complicates some of the more ambiguous definitions and connections within Haraway’s work.

While Hinton complicates and problematises Haraway’s argument without dismissing the general basis of her conclusion, Kathy Davis argues that Haraway’s scepticism of individual experiences is disputable. Davis suggests that the dismissal of women’s experiences:

Leaves feminist theorists empty-handed when it comes to understanding how individual women give meaning to their lived experiences and, in particular, how they negotiate the tensions between these experiences and the cultural and institutionalized discourses in which they are embedded. (2007: 132)

Davis’s suggestion that the lived experiences of women are integral to understanding how culturally and politically-imbued meanings are inscribed upon women seems to suggest that the pursuit of feminist objectivity should be secondary to the understanding of subjective experience. This thread is picked up by Sara Ahmed, who claims that feminism ‘often begins with intensity’ and sensation (2017: 22) and therefore suggests that experience is integral to the call to feminism and feminist research. Ahmed also considers emotionality, as a claim about a subject, to be ‘a characteristic of bodies’ (2014: 4), emphasising the impact of subjective experience and emotional reaction on embodiment and questioning whether one can be disentangled from these connections when one is embodied. Haraway insists on ‘the embodied nature of all vision’ (1988: 581) and therefore suggests that to have vision and attempt to see from different perspectives is to be embodied. If embodiment is intrinsically connected to subjectivity and emotionality as Ahmed suggests, then the plausibility of objective feminist research seems dubious.

Whilst these opposing methodological approaches in feminist research may seem conflicting and rather oppositional, Lauren Gunderson's *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* (2010) offers an interpretation as to how objective feminist perspectives can be achieved whilst subjectivity remains not only intact but also integral to the main character. *Emilie* allows for two characters to play Emilie du Châtelet and therefore demonstrates a split perspective from one subject. The main character, noted as 'EMILIE' (Gunderson, 2010: 7) in the play text, is on stage for the entire duration of the play and the actress who plays her does not play any other characters. In this article, I will refer to this Emilie as the leading Emilie. The only other actor in the play who only performs one character role is the actor who portrays Voltaire. There are three other characters noted in the play text: Madam, Gentleman and Soubrette. These three characters in the play text play several roles throughout the play; Madam plays Emilie's mother and a few snobbish courtiers; Gentleman plays Emilie's tutor: Maupertuis, Emilie's husband: Marquis Florent-Claude du Chastellet and Emilie's later lover: Jean-François; Soubrette plays the second version of Emilie, Emilie's daughter: Gabrielle-Pauline, and Voltaire's later lover and niece: Mary-Louise. For the purpose of this article, I am interested in the character of Soubrette whose main role in the play is to be the second version of Emilie aside from the leading Emilie.

The conceit of actors playing more than one character is not novel in theatre. A popular example is that of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015) where the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, John Laurens and Philip Hamilton, Hercules Mulligan and James Madison and Peggy Schuyler and Maria Reynolds are pairs of characters played by one actor rather than two. A more transgressive example is British dramatist Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) in which the actors switch characters in the second act and both acts' casting choices cause gendered subversion. The character switches and disconnects have been described by Joanne Klein as 'an insidious critique of the Victorian role models and the arbitrary nature of role playing' (1987: 65). In *Emilie*, the role-switching emphasises the importance of the two characters who do not switch roles: leading Emilie and Voltaire. The characters played by Soubrette, Madam and Gentlemen can be seen as various stock characters: Soubrette plays young, sexual and flirtatious women, Madam plays older, pompous and arrogant women and Gentlemen plays any man who is not Voltaire. The only transgression comes in Soubrette's performance as a younger Emilie which duplicates the presence of du Châtelet on the stage.

This duplicated presence is apparent to the audience from the outset of the play. The leading Emilie opens the play by stating that she will set the stage and declares 'my name is Emilie' (Gunderson, 2010: 11) before pointing to Soubrette and saying, 'I think that one's me, too' (Gunderson, 2010: 11); leading Emilie then confirms that Soubrette Emilie is 'definitely' her too, once she 'voraciously' kisses Voltaire (Gunderson, 2010: 11). Here, at the very beginning of the play, leading Emilie explicitly tells the audience that there are two versions of herself present on the stage, speaking and acting from two different perspectives, which makes the audience aware that they are watching a performance where the leading Emilie will be able to comment on her actions from a distanced perspective by watching them being performed by Soubrette Emilie. Returning to Haraway's suggestion that splitting allows one to see where one is and one is not, leading Emilie's distanced examination of the image of herself played by Soubrette allows leading Emilie to realise that they are not viewing the events from the same perspective. This means that leading Emilie is in the privileged position to observe her past actions from a perspective that will allow her to reconsider and recontextualise her choices. Like her professional position as a natural philosopher and mathematician, this perspective grants Emilie the opportunity to observe, consider and present her findings to the audience once she comes to a conclusion.

Soubrette Emilie, however, does not re-enact all of leading Emilie's memories, complicating the binary of performer and observer. Leading Emilie is able to re-enact conversations and, therefore, also plays herself at a younger age. The first instance where leading Emilie plays herself, rather than appearing as a distanced observer and narrator is when she re-lives the conversation she had with Voltaire on the night they met. The two tease each other with vigorous wordplay, with Voltaire calling Emilie 'my dear' (Gunderson, 2010: 16), Emilie counteracting with 'a dear perhaps, but not yours yet' (Gunderson, 2010: 16), Voltaire replying with 'I hear a "yet"' (Gunderson, 2010: 16) and Emilie wittily concluding with 'and missed the "not"' (Gunderson, 2010: 16). Here, the two pick apart each other's syntax and construe their own meanings, giving the audience an insight into their wit and compatibility. Leading Emilie can, therefore, engage in the type of witty back-and-forth dialogue she engaged in with Voltaire in her youth and is able to move between being the objective observer and the subjective participant.

Leading Emilie's position as a fluid member of the cast of the play could undermine Soubrette Emilie's role. However, aside from the fact that Soubrette Emilie is necessary for leading Emilie to have moments of contemplation, Soubrette Emilie is also a necessity because she is able to touch the other actors when leading Emilie cannot. When leading Emilie touches another actor, the lights go off and, when they return, she is breathless (Gunderson, 2010: 18). Leading Emilie rationalises this by stating 'I understand now. No touch. Touching life is like having it. And I realise that I don't. This time, my life is not *really* life or mine' (Gunderson, 2010: 18). Here, leading Emilie acknowledges her position in relation to the play; she is present, but she does not 'have' life and, therefore, cannot perform life in the same way the living actors can. Leading Emilie then beckons Soubrette over,

who is able to touch Voltaire ‘successfully’ (Gunderson, 2010: 18). If leading Emilie does not have life, her perceptions and experiences are disparate from that of someone who is alive and this means that the different versions of Emilie observe the events of the play from different perspectives and viewpoints.

The multiplicity of perspectives allows leading Emilie to engage in the play as a subjective participant and an objective observer, moving between the two roles throughout the duration of the narrative. Through the process of splitting, leading Emilie retains her selfhood and subjectivity and achieves an objective viewpoint that considers alternative perspectives and interpretations, whilst rejecting the omniscient and universal perspective Haraway warns feminist researchers about. However, this binarised position between the subjective and objective position is problematised when the objective observer, leading Emilie, must observe events from her life associated with romantic love, prompting the conclusions she relays back to the audience to become emotional and instinctive rather than contemplative and systematic.

FRAGMENTED PERSPECTIVES OF ROMANTIC LOVE

When the leading Emilie steps back from the action of the play and becomes the objective observer version of herself, she is able to view her experiences of romantic love from a distanced perspective. However, this distanced perspective does not prevent her from reflecting on her subjective experience and emotional response. The scenes in which leading Emilie interacts with her lover, Voltaire, as a subjective participant and then steps back to become an objective observer demonstrate the conflict arising when the subjective self pursues objective observation when what is being observed is something deeply personal. I argue that, despite the subjectivity associated with experiences of romantic love, the split Emilie’s different perspectives on love are still able to provide a more holistic and objective view of romantic love than that of Voltaire, someone entirely driven by his subjective and self-oriented desires. The conflicting perspectives on romantic love from leading Emilie and Voltaire arise from a disconnect in the definition and exploration of their own romantic love. To determine how this disconnect manifests itself, I turn to bell hooks and Ellen Berscheid’s definitions of love and romantic love.

As I noted in the introduction, in *All About Love*, bell hooks refers to love as an action rather than simply a feeling or a combination of emotions. The reason hooks does so is because ‘to think of actions shaping feelings is one way we rid ourselves of conventionally accepted assumptions such as that parents love their children’ (2000: 13) and, therefore, to view love as an action is to acknowledge that it is neither guaranteed nor expected and is instead a process based on our connections and relationships. hooks continues to claim that ‘when we are loving we openly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust’ (2000: 14), highlighting that the act of love requires effort from all parties and, without authentic effort, relationships between people that are prompted by desire and/or utility are not loving relationships; ‘affection,’ hooks says, ‘is only one ingredient of love’ (2000: 5) and cannot be fulfilling without the other ingredients. Here, hooks is not referring solely to romantic love, but all forms of love including what Berscheid refers to as companionate love, adult-attachment love and compassionate love. I am focusing on romantic love specifically as this is the type of love exhibited by the split Emilie and Voltaire.

Berscheid’s definition of romantic love links companionate love with sexual desire (2010: 12). She notes that ‘virtually all theories of Romantic Love do link it to the sensual feelings, specifically, the experience of sexual desire, and most laypersons believe that an individual cannot be “in love” with another unless sexual desire for that person is experienced’ (2010: 14). This argument is problematised by the existence of romantic love between people who identify as asexual and therefore do not experience sexual attraction. However, in the context of *Emilie*, both the split Emilie and Voltaire within the play are evidently heterosexual, meaning that they do experience sexual attraction, and, therefore, sexual desire is necessary for their romantic love to form. Companionate love, or friendship love, has been described by Nancy Kropp Grote and Irene Hanson Frieze as ‘a comfortable, affectionate, trusting love’ (1994: 275). Here, some of hooks’ ingredients of love are carried over: affection and trust. With this in mind, romantic love can be seen as an act of care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust that is either sparked by or linked to sexual desire.

Other definitions of romantic love highlight its opposition to sexual desire, rather than acknowledging sexual desire as an aspect of romantic love. Berit Brogaard states that ‘while romantic love and sexual desire are felt as different emotions, they lie on a continuum’ (2015: 46) and Lisa Diamond takes this difference between the two further by claiming that ‘sexual desire typically denotes a need or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities, whereas romantic love typically denotes the powerful feelings of emotional infatuation and attachment between intimate partners’ (2004: 116). Diamond refers again to one of hooks’ ingredients of love, by highlighting attachment as a key aspect of romantic love, however, if emotional infatuation and attachment are aspects that can also be found in companionate love then discerning between companionate and romantic love becomes difficult. Conversely, Wendy Langford’s definition of romantic love centres sexual attraction; Langford claims that romantic love is ‘one in which cultural legitimisation is given to the desire to seek completion through

attachment to a sexual object' (1999: 62). Here, Langford suggests that sexual desire is the spark for romantic love and claims that romantic love is neither an action nor a feeling, but a process of legitimation.

These contrasting definitions do not delegitimise romantic love, but they do suggest that romantic love is not neatly defined due to its presence and appearance being markedly different when considering the experiences of individual romantic couples. hooks' definition of love attempts to distinguish between societal expectations of love and practically and ethically viable; this means that her definition refers to an ideal form of love that many people will aspire towards. hooks' definition of love rejects the idea that feelings are enough to sustain love and acknowledges the effort required for love to be a positive action and for it to last. For this reason, hooks' definition focuses on accountability and therefore offers a positive framework for the possibilities of love. With hooks' definition of love, Berscheid's definition of romantic love and contradictions from Brogaard, Diamond and Langford in mind, a holistic and positive definition of romantic love could be the action of care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust, that is sparked by emotional connection, and often involves sexual desire but may not if the two lovers do not experience sexual desire.

Since romantic love requires some form of emotional, and perhaps physical, connection, experiences of romantic love are always somewhat subjective. Marilyn Friedman claims that the meeting of two lovers and embarkment on a journey of romantic love requires a merger of two selves. She states that 'human lovers cannot merge so thoroughly as to obliterate their separate individual embodiments. Aspects of personal identity that were important to each before the romantic relationship brought them together as a couple still persist in their lives' (2003: 118). This means that one's selfhood does not dissipate when enacting romantic love; the subjective desire towards one another is sparked by an attraction to and/or affection for aspects of their own personal identity that the other may find alluring. In the case of leading Emilie and Voltaire in Gunderson's play, their romantic love is sparked by mutual sexual attraction and appreciation of each other's intellectual ability. Leading Emilie has the luxury of both performing past scenes where she expresses romantic love without touching the other actors and moving back to observe her loving scenes from a distanced perspective. Despite romantic love requiring subjective attraction and affection, leading Emilie is still able to reflect and consider her past events with some objectivity due to her distanced perspective.

Each split version of Emilie du Châtelet exhibits a different aspect of romantic love within the play. Soubrette Emilie is able to touch other actors and can, therefore, perform scenes of sexual passion that involve physical interaction. Leading Emilie, unable to touch the other actors, must express and experience love from a distance. She exhibits care, respect and trust within her loving relationships; romantic love arises when she re-enacts past conversations with her lovers, Voltaire and later, Jean-François, revealing her attraction to both on an intellectual and spiritual level. When she moves back to comment on the play from her more objective viewpoint, her expression of romantic love shifts to a reflective form, where she can watch, observe and interpret her own emotions, rather than reliving them.

Soubrette Emilie's displays of romantic love are rooted in sexual desire and mirror Voltaire's focus on the erotic. One of the earliest examples of this in the play is when Soubrette replaces leading Emilie in an embrace with Voltaire, described in the stage directions as having '*much fewer clothes on, grinning, grinning, grinning*' (Gunderson, 2010: 20). The repetition of the direction 'grinning' emphasises the necessity for the actress playing Soubrette to lean into an expression of post-coital bliss. George Bataille has described eroticism and the expression of sexual desire as the 'breaking down of established patterns' (1986: 18), rendering the moment of sexual euphoria as a heightened, embodied experience, separate from normality. Leading Emilie, unable to physically touch the other actors, cannot relive and represent these moments, whilst Soubrette Emilie can use her physicality to visualise sexual pleasure to the audience. Soubrette Emilie and Voltaire are described as '*the picture of affection*' (Gunderson, 2010: 20) in the stage directions when they dress each other post-sex. As hooks notes, affection is only one aspect of love; this scene between Soubrette Emilie and Voltaire works to exhibit that mutual affection but does not demonstrate the actions of care, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust required in a healthy loving relationship.

In a direct comparison to Soubrette Emilie, when leading Emilie is able to relive her memories, she shows signs of the care required in a loving relationship. When leading Emilie relives the moment in which she confesses her love for Voltaire, she uses her confession to settle Voltaire's erratic feelings towards her. Voltaire bemoans 'I don't care about the universe if you don't love me!' (Gunderson, 2010: 25), to which leading Emilie calls over Soubrette Emilie and they both say, 'I love you!' (Gunderson, 2010: 25). In this moment, leading Emilie does not need Soubrette Emilie's involvement, nor does she ask for her to fully take over. Instead, they utter the phrase together and in sync giving leading Emilie a way to emphasise her love for Voltaire and, therefore, demonstrating her actions of care towards her lover by using her confession to reassure him. Soubrette Emilie's involvement in this utterance is not to act as leading Emilie, but to act as a part of leading Emilie, once again, demonstrating the split perspectives of the Emilies. The two split perspectives from within Emilie work in unison to momentarily exhibit a more holistic experience of love and Emilie speaks across time and space to confess her romantic love for Voltaire.

When Voltaire is avoiding arrest by the King of France, leading Emilie and Voltaire engage in another passionate conversation without Soubrette Emilie's presence and the audience sees the leading Emilie's caring actions in addition to her respect and responsibility towards her lover. Leading Emilie offers Voltaire the opportunity to stay at her home in Cirey, to which he begs 'say you'll come!' (Gunderson, 2010: 28) and she replies, 'I won't say anything to you EVER AGAIN – which is what happens when you go to the Bastille!' (Gunderson, 2010: 28). The emphasis the actress playing leading Emilie must put on 'ever again' highlights the severity of the situation and the worry she is reliving at the thought of Voltaire being imprisoned. This intense exchange shows that the centre of leading Emilie's love for Voltaire is not wit or cleverness, but deep-rooted, emotionally charged care, respect for his ability and responsibility for his well-being and, in this specific case, survival. In a matter of Voltaire's life and death, leading Emilie's sole focus is making sure that her lover lives.

Later in the same scene, leading Emilie fully comes to terms with her feelings for Voltaire. Leading Emilie says, 'it seems I love you desperately' (Gunderson, 2010: 29) to which Voltaire replies, 'desperation can be quite enjoyable. Be my muse' (Gunderson, 2010: 29). Throughout the play, Emilie has prioritised scientific pursuit, often at the expense of her own emotions; indeed, her relationship with Voltaire began because of their shared wit. In this moment, leading Emilie relives her past grappling with the romantic love she has for Voltaire due to her attempts to keep her thoughts rational and orientated around her studies. Leading Emilie attempts to distance herself from her own feelings with the phrase 'it seems', suggesting that this is another of her deductions. Whereas the earlier expression of love, with Soubrette Emilie in tow, seems to be an attempt at settling Voltaire and therefore appears as an act of care towards him, this confession is almost a resignation. Leading Emilie is resigned to her feelings; she is aware that she loves Voltaire and perhaps she is slightly aware that she loves him more than he loves her. Indeed, he does not repeat the three-word phrase back to leading Emilie¹ and yet his assertion that she be his muse distracts her from his reluctance to return the phrase.

Leading Emilie's reliving of the revelatory moment where she confesses to Voltaire is epiphanic because she is able to revisit the moment in her life where she finally held the balance between her experience of subjective romantic love and her objective scientific pursuits. Sara Ahmed notes that 'the association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how "emotion" has been viewed as "beneath" the faculties of thought and reason' (2014: 3). Emilie's reluctance to fully express her romantic love for Voltaire before this moment suggests that she once held a belief that her subjective experience of romantic love should be seen as secondary to her objective involvement in her scientific work. As teased out by Ahmed, the association between passivity and passion implies that passionate love is at odds with an active pursuit of scientific discovery. Leading Emilie tells the audience that this is the scene where she switches 'from eccentric to rebel over night' (Gunderson, 2010: 30). In this scene, leading Emilie relives the part of her life where she is not just rebelling against the crown by housing Voltaire, she is also rebelling against her past reluctance to embrace her own experiences of romantic love. By the time leading Emilie relives the moment where she admits to being desperately in love, she can no longer hold back her emotional response to Voltaire and she seems to understand that her philosophical relationship with Voltaire does not come at the cost of her romantic love for him.

Whilst the moments where Soubrette Emilie and leading Emilie relive du Châtelet's experiences of romantic love are steeped in emotional subjectivity, leading Emilie is still able to retain some objectivity when she steps back and observes the relived scenes despite their romantic content. Leading Emilie reflects on these moments of romantic love, performed by Soubrette Emilie and herself, and draws conclusions about each of her romantic relationships. Leading Emilie has two boards on stage with her: one titled '**LOVE**' and one titled '**PHILOSOPHY**' (Gunderson, 2010: 5). As she watches her life play out in front of her and joins in reliving her experiences, she adds tally marks to each of these boards and often offers commentary as to why she has placed a tally mark there.

After Soubrette Emilie and Voltaire redress themselves following their implied sexual interaction, leading Emilie makes a mark under the word '**LOVE**' (Gunderson, 2010: 20), explicitly sharing with the audience her distanced interpretation of the event. Leading Emilie from her comparatively objective viewpoint sees this display of sexual desire as a characteristic of romantic love, echoing Berscheid's claim that sexual desire is a foundation of romantic love. Following a scene with her husband, the Marquis Florent-Claude, leading Emilie also makes a few tallies under '**LOVE**' and explains 'this is where it gets confusing because *that's* Love too. [...] Not the fire kind, but the *bread* kind' (Gunderson, 2010: 27). Here, leading Emilie, employing objective investigation and reflection, begins to understand the different dimensions of the multiple romantic loves within her life. Here, in her relationship with her husband, sexual desire is not foundational and warmth and comfort, akin to bread, are the defining characteristics. It is in her final lover, Jean-François, that these two dimensions of romantic love combine. Whilst watching Soubrette Emilie dance with Jean-François, leading Emilie makes the distanced observation 'this

¹ In fact, the only time Voltaire ever says the words 'I love you' (Gunderson, 2010: 12) to leading Emilie is at the beginning of the play where he attempts to upstage leading Emilie and take over the telling of her story. This moment is played for comic effect and the words are performed as if Voltaire is reading off a script.

is it. Happy mind. Happy heart' (Gunderson, 2010: 66), emphasising that she has reached the balance between her desire for scientific discovery and her desire for reciprocated romantic love: the objective and the subjective can finally co-exist in her life. From this distance, leading Emilie is able to see what aspects of romantic love were missing from each of her previous relationships.

The distance afforded to leading Emilie by her ability to react to her memories is maintained even in particularly emotional scenes. Leading Emilie comes to terms with the romantic incompatibility between herself and Voltaire when she observes the moment that Voltaire begins a sexual relationship with his niece, Marie-Louise, despite having previously told Emilie that he is impotent. After the ensuing argument, in which leading Emilie tells Voltaire to 'get the hell out of my house' (Gunderson, 2010: 56), she moves back into the objective sphere and '*wipes through all the marks under LOVE*' (Gunderson, 2010: 56). Here, the emotional and subjective scene bleeds into the objective observation space but does not stop leading Emilie from using reasoning to come to a judgement; the scenes with Voltaire prior to this moment have appeared to represent romantic love from her deductions, but this scene provides more context and reminds leading Emilie that Voltaire not only broke her trust but also rejected any form of commitment between the two.

The relationship between Emilie and Voltaire is an example of a romantic relationship sparked by sexual desire where one party is more invested in the action of love than the other. It is only when leading Emilie's subjective emotional response bleeds into her objective sphere in this scene that she is able to come to this conclusion through her observations. Marilyn Friedman notes that in romantic mergers 'the needs or interests of one lover may come to take precedence over those of her partner' (2003: 124) and claims that 'women tend to give more care and nurturance to their male lovers than they receive in return' (2003: 129). This is true in the case of Emilie and Voltaire's relationship in the play; his needs are prioritised and leading Emilie is the only one to perform actions of care. It is through the splitting of Emilie, allowing leading Emilie to consider Voltaire's inadequacies in relation to her own performance of the action of romantic love, that reveals the imbalance in their relationship.

This does not mean that Voltaire has never loved Emilie, but it does suggest that he was only able to perform some of the actions of romantic love. During their relationship, Voltaire is driven by sexual desire and it is not until the end of the play, when they decide to be friends rather than lovers, that he is able to provide Emilie with the support she requires. Moving once again into her objective sphere, leading Emilie notices this and claims that they are 'old friends made new' (Gunderson, 2010: 60), emphasising the shift in their relationship away from the sexual and towards the companionate. Despite Berscheid's claim that romantic love is a combination of sexual desire and companionate love, Voltaire is only able to exhibit companionate love towards Emilie when the sexual desire is diminished. This suggests that whilst Voltaire exhibits affection and sexual desire towards Emilie during their relationship, he does not exhibit enough ingredients of love for their relationship to be mutually beneficial and positive for both parties. Leading Emilie's move into the objective sphere while retaining some of her subjective perspective allows her to come to terms with the disparity between her criteria for a healthy loving relationship and Voltaire's.

CONCLUSION

Lauren Gunderson's *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight* (2010) demonstrates a way to interpret Donna Haraway's concept of 'splitting' in objective feminist research. Gunderson's splitting of the character of Emilie into Soubrette Emilie and the subjective and objective leading Emilies allows the leading Emilie to interpret her own life from a multitude of perspectives, astutely deducing where she is and where she is not and using her deliberations to come to conclusions about her life choices and the behaviours enacted by the people in her life, the society in which she lived and her own decisions. This enables her to gain a more objective perspective when she is split from her subjective experiences and observes them from a distance, like the scientific researcher she is in her professional field. This objective perspective is problematised when she observes moments from her life linked to her experiences of romantic love. However, she is able to use the subjectivity that seeps into her objective position to come to terms with the deficiencies in her romantic relationship with Voltaire.

Although leading Emilie is unable to entirely maintain a distance between her subjective experiences and her objective deductions, she is able to utilise her split self in order to see her life's events from disparate perspectives, giving her a more holistic view of those around her and her relationships. She is not only able to re-experience the emotional and subjective moments of romantic love within her life, but also to see these moments through new eyes and, therefore, from new perspectives. It is this ability to see from split perspectives that allows her to come to a rewarding and positive conclusion regarding her love life. Leading Emilie revels in the performance of the action of love, bestowing acts of care, respect and responsibility on her lovers, however Voltaire does not reciprocate these acts, rendering their relationship uneven. Once leading Emilie carries her subjective experience into her objective sphere, she sees this imbalance and pursues future relationships where balance is assured. Ultimately, in Gunderson's play, Voltaire is not only rendered incompatible by leading Emilie's mostly objective

deductions, but he is also a secondary character in Emilie's story. The results of the split Emilies in Gunderson's play may suggest that there are certain themes and topics, such as romantic love, where objectivity is difficult for the feminist researcher to maintain, but that does not stop Gunderson's feminist researcher, leading Emilie, from coming to useful, constructive conclusions.

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Intersecting Geographies/Intertextual Traces: Queered Desire and Imperilled Love in Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Michael Cunningham's 2010 novel, *By Nightfall* along with its suggestive fragments of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912). In an examination of two beautiful young men, Tadzio in *Death in Venice* and Mizzy in *By Nightfall*, the article investigates the dialectic between (queered) desire and death/self-dissolution. Through a deployment of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the article will interrogate the permeable boundaries between homoerotic love, beauty and death. Derrida's concept of the trace is used as indicative of the paradoxical relationship between absence and presence to investigate the imbrication of the constitutive and yet also destructive and unstable relationship between Eros and Thanatos, beauty and lack, ideality and actuality. In both texts, art and the quest for ideal beauty become fatally caught up with self-deception and sexual ambiguity, played out against the respective backdrops of early twentieth-century Venice and contemporary Manhattan. In the figures of Gustav Aschenbach and Peter Harris, the article demonstrates how they embody a threatened heterosexuality and a precarious selfhood involving, not only a courting of death, but, furthermore, an exposure of the fissures within seemingly hegemonic gendered subjectivity.

Keywords: *By Nightfall*, *Death in Venice*, intertextuality, homoeroticism, beauty, love, death, Lacan, Freud, Derrida

BACKGROUND

It might seem somewhat strange to investigate the intertextual resonances between Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, published in 1912, and Michael Cunningham's novel, *By Nightfall*, published virtually a century later in 2010. The former deals with an ascetic, putatively heterosexual and famous scholar, Gustav Aschenbach, who, on a trip to Venice, becomes infatuated with a young boy, Tadzio, staying at the same hotel with his family. Cunningham's novel's main character is Peter Harris, a fairly successful art dealer living in Manhattan with his wife, Rebecca. It is only when Rebecca's brother, Ethan, comes for a visit that Peter's seemingly assured heterosexuality and secure, if mundane, marriage are called into question. Peter, like Gustav Aschenbach, becomes increasingly obsessed with a handsome young man, to the point that both men are drawn to the conflation of ecstasy with their own self-annihilation. This recalls the work of the French philosopher, George Bataille who, in his book, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1962), explores the nexus between ecstasy and self-annihilation. Commenting on this contiguity, Thomas Minguy points out that, for Bataille, 'Eros is not to be understood according to the logic of selfish desire, but under the loss of selfhood – which is akin to the experience of death' (Minguy, 2017: 34). Aschenbach, aware of the dire threat of cholera sweeping through Venice, chooses to remain in the city while Tadzio and his family remain, and this brings about his death from the disease. For Peter Harris, his compulsive infatuation with Ethan is conflated with a desire to risk the destruction of his marriage and everything that has hitherto contributed to his settled, safe existence. Disease is also present in *By Nightfall*: Peter's older brother succumbed to AIDS, and the memory of his fascination with his brother's corpse while preparing it for burial becomes an introjected memory that connects with Peter's self-destructive fascination with his brother-in-law.

Cunningham's novel represents both an homage to, and a reclaiming/reconstitution of Mann's *Death in Venice* in ways which reimagine the urtext within a twenty-first-century context. Through a repetition of some of the novella's central tropes, *By Nightfall* enacts a partial reimagining of its predecessor, recognising the contiguity of

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past and present and showing how the past, whilst it can never be fully recovered, still persists to inform and expand the present. Quoting Paul Valéry, Edward Casey, in his article, ‘Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment’, makes the following point:

Paul Valéry, setting forth the general character of mental images, spoke of their ‘indefinitely repeated regeneration,’ their ‘curious cyclical substitutions.’ If Valéry is correct, imagination and repetition are linked intrinsically, and it would be wrong to suppose that the two phenomena are disjunctive Far from being mutually exclusive, imagination and repetition are capable of conjoint action, combining in projects in which the activity of either one alone would be insufficient. (Casey, 1975: 249)

Intertextuality, a term first coined by Julia Kristeva, establishes a productive dialogue between Mann’s text and Cunningham’s, one which not only constitutes a recapitulation, but an imaginative reworking, demonstrating the continuum which the literary canon represents, as well as its perpetual re-enactments and reconfigurations.

INTRODUCTION

‘Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror’. Significantly, this famous line from the first of Rainer Maria Rilke’s ‘Duino Elegies’ is used by Michael Cunningham as the epigraph to his 2010 novel, *By Nightfall*. It points to the complex imbrication of love, beauty, art and death that is apparent in both Cunningham’s text and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*¹, published for the first time in book form in 1913. The brief quotation from Rilke presents an arresting paradox, one which functions like a metaphysical conceit. In this novel and novella respectively, Rilke’s words are perfectly apposite. In their very brevity, they capture the horror and abjection that represent beauty’s dark understudies. They gesture, too, towards the precariousness and lack that, ironically yet inevitably, inspire, underpin and threaten the experience of love, love with its vertiginous combination of *jouissance* and impending loss, the dangerous lure of its seeming perfection.

And art is seen to be as duplicitous as love. For the artist, whether the literary wordsmith, sculptor, painter or performer, is always at one remove from the artefacts or music that they create, seeking perfection, and yet riven by a sense of impending failure, of loss, and its accompanying terror, fear of the artistic abyss, by which they are both compelled to create and yet which also haemorrhages their capacity for creation. In this regard, Peter Harris, an art dealer and the central male character in *By Nightfall*, remembers the belief expressed by one of the artists he supports that ‘the art we anticipate is always superior to the art we can create’ (Cunningham, 2011: 70). Furthermore, Rilke’s poem epitomises the elegiac notes which constitute both Mann’s and Cunningham’s creations, the strange and profoundly unsettling contiguity between love and death. This link is reflected both in the actual landscapes of Venice and New York, but also in the cartography of desire, whereby Peter Harris and Gustav Aschenbach’s attraction to much younger men — Mizzy (Ethan) and Tadzio respectively — is replete with a combination of ecstasy and a pull towards self-annihilation. Aschenbach’s reaction to arriving in Venice is telling, as it prefigures his ultimate fate as well as establishing the paradoxical correspondence between beauty and death. Aschenbach is, at first, struck by the magnificence of the city:

Thus it was that he saw it once more, that most astonishing of all landing places, that dazzling composition of fantastic architecture which the Republic presented to the admiring gaze of approaching seafarers (...) As he contemplated it all he reflected that to arrive in Venice by land, at the station, was like entering a palace by a back door: that only as he was doing, only by ship, over the high sea, should one come to this most extraordinary of cities. (Mann, 1988 [1912]: 272-273)

Less than a page further on, however, Aschenbach experiences a very different reaction:

Can there be anyone who has not had to overcome a fleeting sense of dread, a secret shudder of uneasiness, on stepping for the first time or after a long interval of years into a Venetian gondola? How strange a vehicle it is, coming down unchanged from times of old romance, and so characteristically black, the way no other thing is black except a coffin — a vehicle evoking lawless adventures in the

¹ Whilst it would have been interesting to have extended the discussion in this article to an exploration of Luchino Visconti’s 1971 film of *Death in Venice* and Benjamin Britten’s opera, also based on Mann’s novella and first performed two years after Visconti’s film, such a discussion lies outside the scope of my analysis. The same holds true for Colm Tóibín’s novel, *The Magician* (2021) based on the life of Thomas Mann. For an analysis of Visconti’s film adaptation of *Death in Venice*, see Hans Rudolf Vaget’s article, ‘Film and Literature: The Case of “Death in Venice”: Luchino Visconti and Thomas Mann’ (Vaget, 1980: 159–175), as well as George B. von der Lippe’s ‘*Death in Venice* in Literature and Film: Six 20th-Century Versions’ (1999: 35–54).

plashing stillness of night, and still more strongly evoking death itself, the bier, the dark obsequies, the last silent journey. (273-274)

Venice, with its ambiguous beauty², mirrors Aschenbach's responses to Tadzio, whom he sees, at first, as being 'beautiful as a young god' (290) but then, moments later, he notices

that Tadzio's teeth were not as attractive as they might have been: rather jagged and pale, lacking the lustre of health and having that peculiar brittle transparency that is sometimes found in cases of anaemia. 'He's very delicate, he's sickly,' thought Aschenbach, 'he'll probably not live to grow old.' And he made no attempt to explain to himself *a certain feeling of satisfaction or relief that accompanied this thought.* (291; my italics)

In Michael Cunningham's *By Nightfall*, art dealer Peter Harris and his wife are in a taxi in New York on their way to a party. A horse has been struck by a car and killed:

Peter is mesmerized by the ruined car and the horse's body. Isn't this the bitter pleasure of New York City? It's a mess, like Courbet's Paris was. It's squalid and smelly; it's harmful. It stinks of mortality. (Cunningham, 2011: 8)

As he thinks this, Peter's thoughts turn to a memory of his elder brother, Matthew, and Matthew's lover, Dan, Matthew having died of AIDS, with Dan's death from the same disease following later:

Don't we always want to see the body? While he and Dan washed Matthew's corpse (my God, it was almost twenty-five years ago), hadn't he felt a certain exhilaration he didn't mention afterward to Dan or, for that matter, to anyone, ever? (8)

Later on in the novel, once he has become infatuated with Mizzy, his brother-in-law, Peter remembers Matthew again, dying in hospital. Now Peter wonders how he managed to suss

out the fact that he was getting his first true vision of mortality, and that it was the most moving and fabulous thing he had ever seen? Hasn't he been looking for another moment ever since? (192)

The link between human corporeality and its fragility and the strange lure and beauty of death becomes a defining trope for both Cunningham's and Mann's texts and also informs the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, Peter and Mizzy. Both *By Nightfall* and *Death in Venice* may be seen as works of mourning, elegies for an always-already lost love. In terms of the hegemonic cultural mandate, gay desire cannot exist and therefore cannot be mourned. As Judith Butler (1995: 168) comments, such desire represents 'unlivable passion and ungrievable loss'.

Commenting on the nexus between love, the desire for possession and death, Albert Camus, in his seminal 1951 book-length essay, *L'Homme Révolté*, writes:

The desire for possession is only another form of the desire to endure; it is this that comprises the impotent delirium of love (...) On the pitiless earth where lovers are often separated in death and are always born divided, the total possession of another human being and absolute communion throughout an entire lifetime are impossible dreams (...) In the final analysis, every man (sic) devoured by the overpowering desire to endure and possess wishes that the people whom he has loved were either sterile or dead. This is real rebellion. Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible (...) cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravenous desire for destruction. But the lives of others always escape us and we escape them too; they are without firm contours. Life, from this point of view, is without style. It is only an impulse which endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. (Camus, 1951: 227-228)

Camus' words recall those from Plato's *The Symposium* dealing with the myth of androgyny, a myth which, in psychoanalytic terms, is also utilised, first by Freud and then by Jung and Lacan. In Plato's work, Aristophanes explains to the assembled company that originally there were three sexes, not only two, in the form of circular beings comprising man/man, woman/woman and man/woman. Zeus then decided that these primal beings had to be punished for their pride, and this led to his decision to

² Michael O'Neill, et al. refer to 'the alluring, often treacherous attraction that Venice has held for the imagination since the Renaissance' (O'Neill et al. 2012: 3).

cut the members of the human race in half (...) It is from this distant epoch, then, that we may date the innate love which human beings feel for one another, the love which restores us to our ancient state by attempting to weld two beings into one and to heal the wounds which humanity suffered. Each of us (...) is the mere broken tally of a man, the result of a bisection which has reduced us to a condition like that of a flat fish, and each of us is perpetually in search of his (sic) corresponding tally. (Plato, 1951: 60-62; Walter Hamilton translation)

In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud seems to be seduced by the suggestiveness which the myth of androgyny holds, to the extent that he almost suspends the objectivity of scientific observation in favour of a vision of sentimentalised heterosexual desire. That he also normalises such desire is reinforced by the fact that his reference to Plato's *Symposium* occurs under the sub-heading 'Deviations in Respect of the Sexual Object'. Freud writes:

The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells us how the original human beings were cut up into two halves – man and woman – and how these are always striving to unite again in love. It comes as a great surprise therefore to learn that there are men whose sexual object is a man and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man. (Freud, 1953: 136)

Sexual orthodoxy and the psychic wholeness which it purportedly serves is figured within the idealised complementarity of the male/female binary, where the two terms are combined into a totalising and totalitarian rubric of normalisation. The male/male or female/female pairings are conveniently edited out of Freud's account of Plato's myth, persisting only in the form of silenced traces within the space of abjection associated with the so-called sexual deviations.

In terms of Lacan's use of the Platonic myth, Kari Weil comments that, for Lacan, the myth of androgyny 'is misleading because it marks desire for the lost totality of the self in a desire for the other' (Weil, 1992: 5). In his *Écrits: A Selection*, Lacan comments:

Aristophanes's myth pictures the pursuit of the complement for us in a moving, and misleading, way, by articulating that it is the other, one's sexual other half, that the living being seeks in love. To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal. (Lacan, 1977: 205)

It is both interesting and revealing that Lacan repeatedly uses the masculine generic in his discussion of the myth, and that he refers to the fact that 'analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, *not of the sexual complement*, but of the part of *himself*, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that *he* is no longer immortal' (my italics). This would seem to betray a nostalgic longing for a time when the monolithic, explicitly male subject was complete and autonomous as the origin, the self-contained repository of sexuality – in other words, before the fall into heterosexual dividedness split the idyll of a totalisable masculinity. In terms of this valorisation of a masculine seamlessness, a transcendent, all-encompassing maleness is commensurate with immortality, a state of 'perfection' where man does not require the feminine for completion. His subsequent fall into sexual division, according to Lacan, initiates a search, not for the feminine Other as the 'sexual complement' to complete his no longer cohesive maleness, but a narcissistic movement to reclaim the transcendental male element that marked his magical self-sufficiency as a self-grounding subject. Within the paradigm of the prelapsarian sexual state sketched by Lacan, full self-presence is co-extensive with a homoerotics of the same. This is shown as a realm of ideality which predates the intervention of normative desire, where the feminine is then inserted as the means by which the loss of all-male primacy is assuaged. The female Other is now relied upon as offering a completion which is only illusory, but which is the only way in which the masculine subject can gesture towards his lost completeness. As Trevor Hope puts it, taking his cue from the work of Luce Irigaray:

the feminine becomes the occluded point of the materialization and reproduction of a symbolic regime within which women are permitted to figure, to 'count', only insofar as they are insistently appropriated back into a paternal genealogy – 'homologated' once again into the discourse of the Same. (Hope, 1994: 170)

Earlier on, in his article entitled 'Sexual Indifference and the Homosexual Male Imaginary', Hope comments:

in an interpretive move clearly intended to dereify the workings of the profoundly phallocentric logic at the heart of Western culture, theorists [such as Craig Owens, Mandy Merck and Luce Irigaray] have often gestured toward the male homoeroticism that lies deeply repressed within the workings of an ostensibly heterosexual symbolic. The operations of erasure, foreclosure, disavowal, metaphorization,

and specularization that have grounded the ‘sexual contract’ of Western society in the refusal of positive admittance to the feminine have been read as signs of an archaic male pact, a solidarity and primal bond that underlies and underpins the fraudulent pretense of heterosexual relations. This logically, mythologically, and prehistorically prior male solidarity that apparently violently seized and monopolized the symbolic at the site of its very origin (...) has been understood as necessarily charged with homosexual desire. (Hope, 169)

When viewed against Hope’s insights, Lacan’s contention that ‘it is through the lure that the sexed living being is induced into his sexual realization’ (Lacan, 1977: 205) gains added significance. The word ‘lure’ refers to ‘[a]n apparatus used by falconers to recall their hawks’ and, by extension, may be applied to ‘[s]omething which allures, entices, or tempts’ (OED). The feminine Other is the lure by which the male subject is recalled from his false dream of recovering the all-inclusiveness of his archaic homoerotic past. The fact that he has to be *‘induced’* into his sexual realization’ (my italics) points to the innate precariousness of heterosexual subject formation and to the ultimate tenuousness of the Lacanian Symbolic order. Far from attaining any sort of autonomy within this order, the feminine is merely co-opted as a secondary, retroactive defensive formation by which the male subject is prevailed upon to relinquish the phantasm of a primal homosexual (man)tra.

DOUBLE TAKES

In light of this context, I should now like to examine a central scene in Cunningham’s *By Nightfall*, which acts as an interesting re-imagining of the Lacanian psychoanalytic script. Peter Harris, seemingly happily married to his wife, Rebecca, by whom he has a daughter who is away in Boston, has been informed by his wife that her brother, Mizzy (Ethan), who has a long history with drug addiction, is coming to stay with them for a while, the exact date of his arrival unknown. Returning home from his art gallery one afternoon, Peter enters the New York loft where he and his wife live:

Peter walks through the bedroom to the bathroom. There she is, the pink blur of her behind the frosted glass shower door. There’s mortality in the air (...) but there’s this, too. Rebecca taking a shower, the vanity mirror fogged by steam, the bathroom smelling of soap and that other undersmell Peter can only call *clean*.

He opens the shower door.

Rebecca is young again. She stands in the stall facing away from Peter, her hair short, her back strong and straight from swimming; she is half hidden by steam and for an instant it all makes impossible sense (...) Rebecca in the shower sluicing away the last twenty years, a girl again.

She turns, surprised.

It isn’t Rebecca. It’s Mizzy. It’s the Mistake.

(...)

‘Hey’, [Mizzy] says cordially to Peter. Being seen naked by Peter does not, apparently, render Mizzy even remotely uncomfortable.

‘Hey’, Peter answers. ‘Sorry’.

He steps back, closes the shower door (...) With the shower door closed Peter can only see the fleshy pink silhouette, and although Peter knows it’s Mizzy (Ethan) he finds himself pausing, thinking of the young Rebecca (striding into the surf, slipping out of a white cotton dress, standing on the balcony of that cheap hotel in Zurich), until he realizes he’s lingered there a second or two longer than he should – Mizzy, don’t get the wrong idea – and he turns to leave. As he does he catches sight of his own ghostly image, the blur of him, skating across the steam-fogged mirror. (Cunningham, 2011: 40-41)

The incident described here provides a subversive take on Lacan’s psychosexual triad of the Real, the Imaginary (Mirror stage) and the Symbolic. The scopophilia of the Imaginary, where the mirror provides an illusion of a subject’s fullness of being is, of course, as Lacan makes clear, based on a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The frosted glass of the shower door, as a metonymic replacement for the mirror, literalises this moment of flawed cognition in its blurring of the figure beyond it. Not only this, once Peter actually enters the shower, the image he views is a

palimpsest of gender – Rebecca superimposed upon Mizzy. Significantly, later on in the novel, Peter thinks of Mizzy as '[Rebecca] in boy-drag' (Cunningham, 2011: 117). The event accomplishes a scrambling of gender: Peter's actual double-take once he realises that the figure in the shower is his brother-in-law, is paralleled by a gendered double-cross, a chiastic criss-crossing of gender lines. The description also recalls Roland Barthes' concept in *Camera Lucida*, his study of photography and work of mourning for his late mother, of the punctum which, as Andy Grundberg (1999: 34) elucidates, 'breaks through [a] complacency of response, provoking a more intense and personal reaction in the viewer'. As Barthes puts it, it is this 'accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'. Returning to the extract from the novel quoted earlier, as Peter withdraws from the bathroom, he 'catches sight of his own ghostly image, the blur of him, skating across the steam-fogged mirror'. The ghost, the blurring, in their conjuring up of insubstantiality and death, foreshadow what comes later in the novel, as the complacency of Peter's seemingly assured heterosexual identity is put in question. Significantly, near the end of the novel, Peter's wife, Rebecca, suddenly questions their marriage and its ongoing viability, as well as her success as a mother:

I'm a rotten mother. To everybody. I couldn't help Bea, I couldn't help Mizzy. I'm just a child who's learned how to impersonate an adult'. (Cunningham, 2011: 234)

The word 'impersonate' is significant as it points to Rebecca's sense that her roles as mother, sister and adult are simply failed performances, mere approximations of a reality that has passed as authentic. This recalls Judith Butler's work on drag, where she shows how transvestism reinforces the fact that both hegemonic femininity and masculinity are fundamentally dependent upon role-playing, where the notion of playing suggests an underlying artifice at the very heart of the seeming inviolability of sex roles, and where the concept of roles hints at the expendability of one role and the possibility of appropriating another. As Butler puts it in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993: 231), drag is able to serve

a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure.

Taking this idea further, Peter's attraction to his brother-in-law exposes his seemingly unassailable heterosexuality as an impersonation. Far from being monolithic and impermeable, his role as a straight man is just that, an act that has shown its innate precariousness, its susceptibility to a queering that threatens to undo his assured accession to the validating social codes of the Lacanian Symbolic.

His growing obsession with Mizzy, like Aschenbach's with Tadzio in *Death in Venice*, leads Peter to blur the boundaries between feeling an overwhelming need to embrace a new intensity of being which desire for his brother-in-law represents, and a wilful, dangerous courting of his own self-destruction.³ In this way, love is finally performed in the gap of its own undoing, where both love and beauty can only truly be realised through death.

In a scene from *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach, after realising that the threat of cholera in the city is very real, has a terrible dream, one which also envisages the dark dialectic between desire, abjection and self-dissolution:

Was it not also enticing him, the dreamer who experienced all this while struggling not to, enticing him with shameless insistence to the feast and frenzy of the uttermost surrender? Great was his loathing, great his fear, honorable his effort of will to defend to the last what was his and protect it against the Stranger, against the enemy of the composed and dignified intellect. But the noise, the howling grew louder, with the echoing cliffs reiterating it: it increased beyond measure, swelled up to an enrapturing madness (...) With foaming mouths they raged, they roused each other with lewd gestures and licentious hands, laughing and moaning they thrust the prods into each other's flesh and licked the blood from each other's limbs. But the dreamer now was with them and in them, he belonged to the Stranger-God. Yes, they were himself as they flung themselves, tearing and slaying, on the animals and devoured steaming gobbets of flesh, they were himself as an orgy of limitless coupling, in homage to the god, began on the trampled, mossy ground. And his very soul savored the lascivious delirium of annihilation.⁴ (Mann, 1912: 334-335)

³ Significantly, in an essay, Mann's own pull towards death is reflected in his description of himself as 'a chronicler and analyst of decadence, a lover of the pathological, a lover of death, an aesthete with a proclivity toward the abyss' (Mann in Luke, 1988: xvii).

⁴ As Tom Hayes and Lee Quinby (1989: 171) point out, 'the spiritualized male homoerotic desire of the *Phaedrus* is parodied in the primitive physicality of Aschenbach's Dionysian vision'.

For all his former asceticism and intellectual rigour, Aschenbach's orgiastic, bacchanalian dream reflects a complete unmaking of and alienation from his former self, whereby the purity of love and the intense rationality which characterizes his previously defining role as artist/author become radically abject, coterminous with what he sees as a deathly moral decay. The pornographic depiction of sexual frenzy contrasts starkly with his etherealisation of Tadzio. In the very gap between these different impulses lies his impossible love for the object of his obsession, who compels desire and yet remains always beyond its consummation.

In her article entitled 'Approaching Abjection', under a sub-heading 'Neither Subject nor Object', Julia Kristeva writes:

There is, in abjection, one of those violent and obscure revolts of being against that which threatens it and which seems to it to come from an outside or an exorbitant inside; something which is thrown next to the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, very close, but unassimilable. It solicits, disturbs, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Fearful, it turns away. Sickened, it rejects. It is protected from the vileness by an absolute of which it is proud, to which it is attached. But at the same time, even so, the *élan*, this spasm, this leap, is attracted towards an elsewhere as much tempting as it is condemned. Tirelessly, like a wild boomerang, a pole of attraction and repulsion draws the one inhabited literally out of himself. (Kristeva, 1982: 125)

Like Aschenbach, Peter is drawn to an almost self-negating abjection. The latter's safely predictable, if unremarkable marriage to his wife, Rebecca, represents 'the possible, (...) the thinkable', something which protects rather than disturbs the familiar contours of his life before his attraction to Mizzy. For both Peter and Aschenbach, desire, although illusory, existing dangerously beyond its consummation and fulfilment, is nevertheless persistent, threatening to unravel the self, ceaselessly torn between 'attraction and repulsion'.

At a stage in *By Nightfall*, Peter is suddenly struck by the fact that:

He wants, he needs, to do the immoral, irresponsible thing. He wants to let this boy court his own destruction. He wants to commit that cruelty. Or (kinder, gentler version) he doesn't want to reconfirm his allegiance to the realm of the sensible, all the good people who take responsibility (...) He wants, for at least a little while, to live in that other, darker world — Blake's London, Courbet's Paris; raucous, unsanitary places where good behavior was the province of decent, ordinary people (...) Here, practically cupped in Peter's hands, is youth, wanton and self-immolating and scared to death; here is Matthew fucking half the men in New York; here is the Rebecca who no longer exists. Here is the terrible, cleansing fire. Peter has been too long in mourning, for the people who've disappeared, for the sense of dangerous inspiration his life refuses to provide. So, yes, he'll do it, yes. He and Mizzy will not, cannot, lock lips again, but he'll see where this takes him, this dreadful fascination, this chance (if 'chance' is the word for it) to upend his own life. (Cunningham, 202)

In a reminder of the earlier quotation from Camus, Peter's first perverse wish is for Mizzy to be destroyed: in death, both Mizzy's beauty and Peter's attraction to him will be preserved, captured forever like a work of art. At one point in the novel, Peter muses that 'Youth is the only sexy tragedy. It's James Dean jumping into his Porsche Spyder, it's Marilyn heading off to bed' (120). Just after this, Peter is aware of 'the glamour of self-destruction' (125). Allowing himself to act on his impulses, his growing obsession with his wife's brother would be tantamount to an act of suicide, resulting in the destruction of his marriage and professional reputation. In an attempt to displace his feelings for Mizzy, Peter indulges in a fantasy:

he and Mizzy in a house somewhere, maybe it's Greece (...) reading together, just that, no sex, they'd manage sex with whomever, they'd be platonic lovers, faux father and son, without the rancor of lovers or the fury of family. (206)

The reference to Greece and Plato, with its ancient roots in an older man educating a much younger one in the ways of life and sex⁵ recalls Plato's *Symposium* mentioned earlier. Peter's fantasy is just that, an imagined and illusory etherealisation of reality, a mental 'snapshot' by which he can confine and contain his desire. And yet, like all fantasy, his is illusory, impossible, a self-created myth. Like the Platonic and Lacanian script based on a perpetual desire for the other which, although endlessly repeated, can never be attained, Peter's projected future is one which is hopelessly contingent. Interestingly, David Luke, in his introduction to the Bantam Classic edition of *Death in Venice* used in this article, makes the following observation:

⁵ For an excellent discussion of gay male sex in ancient Greece, see David Halperin's seminal 1990 study *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*. London: Routledge.

in treating a homosexual theme, it was natural that Mann should seek to associate it strongly with a pre-Christian world which looked upon homosexuality as normal; and his notebooks attest that while working on *Death in Venice* he not only refreshed his memories of Homer but, above all, immersed himself in the Platonic theory of love. He read especially the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* and Plutarch's *Erotikus* (...) His understanding of the theory (for purposes of the Aschenbach project and as transmitted through Aschenbach) has a strongly monistic and paganizing, aesthetic and sensuous tendency; in fact it has been shown that Mann's use of the material seems to aim at a synthesis of Platonic doctrine and pagan mythological elements. He evidently understood Plato's perception of the profound continuity between 'Eros' and the 'higher' intellectual or spiritual faculties — a perception which of course amounts to a transfiguration of sexual love (...) (Luke, 1988: xlvi)

The notion of 'transfiguration' is important: Mann's own homosexual leanings⁶, which are transferred onto Aschenbach, his fictional protagonist, are, in this way, transfigured through the prism of classical history, and thus safely intellectualised⁷, although always shadowed by a sublimated eroticism. The role of Aschenbach as a type of stand-in for his author, is paradoxically both fictional and autobiographical⁸, predicated upon the open/closed secret of Mann's own lived experience, enjoying the normative filiations of heterosexual marriage and fatherhood, whilst hiding in plain sight.⁹

Peter's infatuation with Mizzy eventually results in a spontaneous kiss on the beach overlooked by Peter's client, Carole Potter's home. Their kiss recalls that between Sally Seton and Mrs Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel, which forms the template for Cunningham's 1998 text, *The Hours*. Commenting on the significance of the kiss in *Mrs Dalloway* and those in *The Hours*, Kate Haffey writes:

These moments hold so much power not because they are same-sex kisses (...) but because they exist outside an imaginable, scripted future. The queer moment disrupts not only hetero-normative time but also homo-normative time. It complicates those temporalities that naturalize the development through conventional life stages. (Haffey, 2010: 152)

Peter and Mizzy's first and only kiss represents a sexual and temporal crisis for Peter who has, in his marriage to his wife, Rebecca, which resulted in the birth of their daughter, Bea, attained what Lee Edelman (2004: 2) refers to as the 'reproductive futurism' which typifies the future-oriented, linear goal of heterosexuality. The reality of the kiss takes Peter's present, seemingly impossible erotic fantasy of a relationship with Mizzy into the realm of the possible. It also represents a moment of temporal rupture which causes a hiatus where present and future become confused. As Neville Hoad points out:

The language of the *telos* of evolution is rife in the writings by, for and about homosexuals: in the manifestos of people so self-identified, in the sexological, psychoanalytic and anthropological documents about them, and in artistic and literary representations. At every turn, one encounters terms of 'arrest', 'retardation', 'decadence' and 'degeneration'. (Hoad, 2010: 135-136)

Hoad goes on to quote Freud's (in)famous letter to the American mother of a gay son, where Freud writes of homosexuality that:

we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain *arrest* of sexual development. (Freud, in Hoad, 2010: 141)

Peter's sexuality embodies a veering off, a queering and implicit querying of the normative path of his previously unquestioned heterosexuality. Continuing the position (or relative lack thereof) of the figure of the homosexual in Freudian psychoanalysis, Diana Fuss comments:

⁶ Mann acknowledges his homosexual impulses in his diary entries. For an investigation of these, see Anthony Heilbut (1996), *Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁷ As James M. Saslow points out in his 1988 article "A Veil of Ice between My Heart and the Fire": Michelangelo's Sexual Identity and Early Modern Constructs of Homosexuality' (*Genders* 2: 135–148), idealised male-male love in the Renaissance, before the term 'homosexual' was first coined, was 'still officially modeled on such classical exemplars as Socrates' chaste love for Alcibiades. In this taxonomy, male-male love is understood in terms of classical *amicitia*. Its goal is fundamentally spiritual (...) it is anagogic to the higher love of the (male) godhead' (Saslow 1988: 82).

⁸ As Philip Kitcher (2013: 19) puts it: in his novella, Mann 'placed himself on trial' and his text reveals 'his painful self-exposure'.

⁹ As David Luke explains in his introduction to the novel, Mann, his wife and brother spent time in Venice in May 1911. Here, Mann became infatuated by a Polish boy, Wladyslaw, Baron Moes, upon whom the fictional Tadzio is modelled. Wladyslaw 'was on holiday at the Lido in May 1911 with his mother and three sisters and (...) was in those years by all accounts exceptionally beautiful (...) Mann's widow confirmed that her husband had been "fascinated" by him' (Luke, 1988: xliv).

In Freud's reading of identification and desire, homosexual desire is not even, properly speaking, desire. Rather homosexuality represents an instance of identification gone awry — identification in overdrive (or, one might say, oral drive). This overdrive is also implicitly a death drive: *cadere* (Latin for 'to fall') etymologically conjures cadavers. For Freud every fall into homosexuality is *inherently suicidal* since the 'retreat' from oedipality entails not only the loss of desire but the loss of a fundamental relation to the world into which desire permits entry — the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity. (Fuss, 1993: 19)

The earlier reference in this article to Peter deriving a 'certain exhilaration' when washing his dead brother, Matthew's, corpse can be seen, in Freudian terms, as indicating Peter's 'regression' and, in a Lacanian sense, as existing in a liminal area between the Symbolic and the Real. Drawing again on Judith Butler's work, this demonstrates that, even for heterosexual men, their accession to the culturally mandated realm of the Symbolic, what Fuss refers to above as 'the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity' can be precarious and is a position that no one can ever fully inhabit. The fact that Peter's gay brother died from AIDS, which, for many years, was profoundly pathologised as 'the gay disease', further underscores Peter's attraction to the abject and the world of non-being, the void. For Aschenbach, too, there is a pull towards death: despite the threat posed by the cholera epidemic, he refuses to surrender Tadzio as love object. As Jonathan Dollimore (1998: 276) notes, for both Mann and, by extension, Aschenbach, 'genius in the grip of disease nurtures an energy at once creative and lethal, and generates the paradox that disease and death are only life manifested in its most vigorous form. Disease — and in this sense love, or at least infatuation is a disease — effects an unbinding which energizes even as it destroys'.

There is another important scene in *By Nightfall*, which again intersects with Cunningham's novel, *The Hours*. This scene is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's attraction to 'moments of being', which became the title of her posthumously published collection of essays that first appeared in 1972. Shuli Barzilai writes that:

Like Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and [James] Joyce's 'epiphanies', the Woolfian revelation or 'moment of being' creates a pocket of stability in the midst of (...) vicissitudes (...) Mutable and fugitive impressions are momentarily arrested, fixed and grasped. Further, it is noteworthy that, in Woolf's writings, these epiphanic moments (...) are most frequently granted during and through ordinary, even banal experience. (Barzilai, 1988: 204-205)

The 'moment of being' in *By Nightfall* occurs on an 'ordinary' Sunday afternoon when Peter, his brother, Matthew, their parents and Joanna (the latter a friend of Matthew's and Peter's putative girlfriend) are on the annual family vacation on Mackinac Island in Michigan. Peter remembers watching Matthew and Joanna standing in the lake:

The two of them stand in the blue-black water with their backs to Peter, looking out at the milky haze of the horizon, and as Peter watches from the sand he is taken by a sea-swell of feeling, utterly unexpected, a sensation that starts in his bowels and fluoresces through his body, dizzying, giddying. It's not lust, not precisely lust, though it has lust in it. It's a pure, thrilling, and slightly terrifying apprehension of what he will later call beauty, though the word is insufficient. It's a tingling sense of divine presence, of the unspeakable perfection of everything that exists now and will exist in the future, embodied by Joanna and his brother (...) Time fails (...) (Cunningham, 2011: 110)

That Peter is 'taken by a sea-swell of feeling' suggests an overwhelming *jouissance*, a sexual surrender, one which is in excess of naming and even of beauty itself. The suspension of time ('Time fails') carries another reminder of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. The memory of the episode at the lake, where time is almost divinely stilled, is like a photograph. Barthes comments on the photograph that it

represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (...) this death in which his gesture will embalm me. (Barthes, 1981: 4-5)

The photograph, like the memory of the scene at the lake, is both embodied and disembodied: the person 'captured' in the photograph 'neither subject nor object', both absent and present, an about-to-be objectified subject. At the heart of memory and the photograph is a void, an absence, a death, and yet this very void is nevertheless also an informing lack, a paradoxical and indefinable presence. The photograph is like a Derridean trace, bearing within

itself the instability between absence and presence, an instability which still conveys meaning¹⁰. As Derrida puts it in *Writing and Difference*:

The trace is the erasure of selfhood and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. (Derrida, 2003: 289)

And yet the very threat of disappearance has a strangely powerful agency: the reference to ‘the disappearance of its disappearance’ sets up a chain of repetition by which the irremediability of disappearance is, paradoxically, to use Derrida’s concept of *differance* (to differ and to defer), both riven by a difference (an absence) from itself and yet also present *sous rature* (under erasure), both deleted and yet still visible, its crossing out perpetually deferred. As Alexandra Fanghanel comments:

The erasure does not only mark that which is beyond the realm of articulation … it marks, quite simply, the absence of any originary presence at all. (Fanghanel, 2014: 347)

CONCLUSION

Founded on Lacanian lack, the need for completion by anOther which is perpetually elusive and yet perpetually compelling, the desire experienced by Peter Harris and Aschenbach for beautiful boys is placed under erasure – there but not there, present but absent, always beyond the realm of adequate articulation or fulfilment.

As Michael Downs notes in relation to the Lacanian *objet petit a*:

Strictly speaking, *objet petit a* is not some positive reality, but, instead, is a void, an empty spot, a position of lack. Yet it’s a void that, for the subject, is like a thing or a missing part that has its own substantial reality. As paradoxical as it sounds, *objet petit a* is a positive negativity, a ‘substantial’ void, a reified emptiness. (Downs, 2019: n. p.)

By Nightfall finally shows how Peter has consistently objectified Mizzy: as Peter’s fantasy, a product of Peter’s own lack, Mizzy has been denied full subjecthood, deprived of a self. And Mizzy’s own manipulativeness and innate narcissism mean that Peter is not able fully to trust Mizzy’s eventual declaration of love for him. When Peter tells Uta, his assistant at the gallery he owns, about his relationship with Mizzy, he says: ‘He was just fucking with me’, and goes on to think that:

he, Peter, is a comic character. How had it happened that he’d imagined, even briefly, otherwise? He’s the capering fool on whom others play tricks. He’s an easy mark, all vanity and pomade. (Cunningham, 2011: 224)

It is after this, before he has confessed what happened between him and Mizzy to Rebecca, that it is revealed that he has been doubly duped. At the end of the novel, Peter discovers that his marriage to Rebecca has been yet another illusion, an insubstantial travesty sustained only by the thin underpinnings of domestic rituals and their repetition. It carries a reminder of Lacan’s famous comment in his Seminar XII that ‘Love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it’ (Lacan, 1965: 191). Despite the seeming riddling (il)logic of this statement, it actually makes a profound comment on love: one is, according to the Lacanian psychoanalytic script and Plato’s *Symposium*, never fully in possession of either the love one feels for another or of love itself. And the love one gives is not what one’s love object wants in the sense that their innate lack, like one’s own, makes love an illusion, perpetually sought but always deferred, never completely realised. It is this insubstantiality and evanescence of love that informs Peter’s final thoughts in the novel:

Here is Peter’s art, then. Here is his life (though his wife may leave him, though he’s faltered in so many ways). Here is a woman who keeps changing and changing, impossible to cast in metal because she’s already not who she was when he walked through the door, nor who she’ll be in ten minutes from now. (237-238)

For both Peter Harris and Gustav Aschenbach, their love for the beautiful Mizzy and Tadzio has pointed to an irrevocable truth — that love is based on a perpetual quest and also on perpetual failure, demonstrating the final incommensurability between love and a seductive, ultimately elusive grace.

¹⁰ As Marianne Hirsch (2012: 84) puts it, photographs ‘enable us in the present, not only to see and to touch that past (...) but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’. The retrospective irony of every photograph (...) consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility’.

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I Show Her My Feelings: Young Black Men and the Doing of Love in a South African Township

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ABSTRACT

Love in the lives of young black men in South Africa has received particularly limited attention in literature. Although there has been a steady increase in love scholarship in Africa, these studies have mostly focused on the love experiences of young women. In that context, studies on love often focus on the disproportionate vulnerabilities experienced by young women, such as intimate partner violence. However, this characterisation of love in South African literature has, perhaps inadvertently, promoted a narrow understanding of young black men as being violent and emotionally inept. The article moves beyond these limited conceptualisations of young black men and explores love as a productive force in their lives. Drawing on empirical findings generated from interviews with 34 young men between the ages of 16 and 21, the article shows how love and the young men's emerging masculinities were experienced as mutually constitutive. Their negotiations of love were experienced as opportunities to resist normative masculinities, demonstrated through *ukushela* and emotional reflexivity. These young black men's investment in their relationships suggests the progressive possibilities of love in their lives.

Keywords: love, young men, black masculinities, masculinities, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, there is growing consensus among researchers about the significance of love in the lives of young people (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Bhana, 2018; Willan *et al.*, 2019). Yet, much of this research has almost exclusively conceptualised love against the backdrop of gendered and endemic epidemics: HIV, poverty, and gender-based violence (Mgwaba and Maharaj, 2018; Manyaapelo *et al.*, 2019). This has served to identify love primarily as a site of vulnerability, especially for young women. The love experiences of young people (Bhana, 2015, 2017) outside of the violence and continued marginalisation suffered by young women (Wood and Jewkes, 1997; Ngabaza *et al.*, 2013; Zembe *et al.*, 2015), have received limited attention. Although focusing on the vulnerabilities of young women is a result of the difficulties and silences that surround female sexuality in the South African context (Shefer and Foster, 2001), an adverse effect of this is that the subjective realities and possible vulnerabilities experienced by young men in relation to love have not been sufficiently explored (Shefer *et al.*, 2015). Research has made a case for the ways in which young women negotiate and resist men's power in heterosexual love relationships (Bhana, 2008; Bhana and Anderson, 2013; Firmin, 2013; Willan *et al.*, 2019), yet instances in which young black men resist hegemonic love practices in their relationships remain relatively muted. The consequence of this is that mainly pathologised masculinities are documented and emphasised in research. Even though scholars have demonstrated how contemporary love relationships reveal the complex processes that shape the love experiences of young people (Hunter, 2007, 2015), there remains a paucity of literature that explores the generative and transformational possibilities of love in the lives of young people. This limitation is even more pronounced in relation to young black men in South Africa (Malinga and Ratele, 2012, 2016).

In that vein, Malinga and Ratele (2012, 2016, 2018) have called for a more considered focus on young black men's experiences of love and happiness, namely, how these are implicated in their daily, lived experiences. They further demonstrated that young black men not only value love, but their experiences of love also often prompt profound personal shifts (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). Despite this, there remains a relative silence on the other-than-violent experiences and expressions of love in the lives of young black men in South Africa. Writing on happiness, Malinga and Ratele (2018) highlighted the urgent need for holistic conceptualisations that acknowledge

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young black men's capacities for love, care, and nurturing. Similar calls have been made in scholarship on care by young fathers in South Africa, which challenges negative characterisations of young men as detached and absent from their children's lives (Morrell *et al.*, 2016; Mvune and Bhana, 2022). The significance and productive potential of love in the lives of young black people in South Africa has been routinely diminished as a concern secondary to more pressing public health matters. In this article I argue that young black men¹ are more than deployments of force, violence, and coercion; they too, have capacity for love and progressive enactments of love. Thus, there is an urgent need for studies that focus on the positive possibilities of love in relation to black masculinities.

To address the relative silence on young black men's love experiences in South Africa (Langa, 2010; Malinga and Ratele, 2012), this article explores their negotiations of love in an urban township context. It focuses on their embodied practices or enactments of love in the context of heterosexual relationships and considers the ways that love could produce progressive moments or practices for young men (de Boise, 2018). Importantly, it acknowledges that young black masculinities are not a monolith and that they do not enjoy equal power status in South Africa, noting that proximity to this power is determined by age, class, race and sexuality, among other factors (Morrell, 2001; Ratele, 2013). This is particularly important if we are to reverse damaging stereotypes and explore black masculinities beyond the 'crisis' discourse (Dube, 2016; Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). In response to escalating calls for progressive conceptualisations of emotions in young black men's lives (Malinga and Ratele, 2016, 2018), this article explores young black men's negotiations of love in their daily lives. Beyond the pathologising public health concerns, there is need for research that meaningfully explores the kinds of romantic partners young black men are, what they value, and what they feel within their love relationships (Korobov and Thorne, 2006). A recent study based in KwaZulu-Natal, by Manyaapelo and colleagues (2019), demonstrated that love had a central role in the lives of young black men and that it profoundly impacted their gender performances, namely, how they negotiated intimate and sexual connections. Focusing on the love experiences and enactments of young black men living in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, this study adds to a growing body of work that explores the productive possibilities of love.

LOCATING LOVE AND YOUNG BLACK MEN

Globally, there is a small but burgeoning body of work that has begun to provide insights into how love intermingles with young masculinities (Redman, 2001; Allen, 2003, 2007; Korobov and Thorne, 2009; Forrest, 2010). These studies demonstrate the significance of love in the lives of their respective participants. They also demonstrate that love shapes how young men navigate their entry into adulthood and becomes a resource through which they adjust to new social worlds (Redman, 2001). Although it may, in some instances, embolden hegemonic masculinities and facilitate young men's complicity, love can disrupt these masculinities and enable young men to reflexively rethink their subjectivities (Korobov and Thorne, 2006; Allen, 2007; Korobov, 2009). Similarly, Forrest (2010: 216) advocates for a more nuanced understanding of young men's love experiences through explorations that unpick the 'nexus of "big" cultural ideas about gender, emotions, and relationships and the specifics' of their social worlds. It is also significant that in some of these studies, young men describe their relationships in terms that indicate 'seriousness' about their partners, which further denotes their emotional investment and affective experiences (Korobov and Thorne, 2006, 2007, 2009; Forrest, 2010). Research on youth (hetero)sexualities demonstrates that young men's investment in their relationships can increase their capacity to resist enacting hegemonic masculinities (Allen, 2003, 2007). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that young men place increasing value on love and relationships, especially as they come of age and experience a number of individual and social shifts. However, these studies are generally located in the Global North and explore the lives of white, middle-class young men whose subjectivities present realities far removed from a South African township. In addition to revealing the limitations of South African studies, they further demonstrate the potential value of engaging with South African young men's experiences of love.

Lorentzen (2007) critiqued the limited research on love and (hetero)masculinities, and argued that exploring love might reveal its significance beyond the performance of heterosexual masculinities. For Lorentzen (2007), love is a transformative force and the emergent capacities should be explored (see also Holmes, 2015). He noted aspects of men's love experiences and capacities that remain underexplored in research on men and masculinities, namely, brotherly love, fatherly love and transgressive love. Lorentzen further contended that, for men, love means transgressing the social and material boundaries that frame masculinities and 'creating new forms of masculinities' (2007: 197). When approached from this perspective, we may come to see the ways in which young black men challenge heteronormative stereotypes, and the progressive possibilities that doing love presents for them.

¹ In this study I focus on cisgender heterosexual young men; however, I acknowledge that within the township context, and among black men, masculinities are diverse (see Msibi, 2013; Ngidi *et al.*, 2021).

Scholarship on love in Africa suggests that the experiences and expressions of love vary according to the intersecting conditions of gender, sexuality, class, politics, race, culture and geospatial location (Cole and Thomas, 2009). Similarly, South African scholarship on love has demonstrated how love is entangled in the overlapping legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which continue to mark the social and material conditions of daily life (Ngabaza *et al.*, 2013; Willan *et al.*, 2019). These conditions not only produce particular configurations of love, they also produce the subjectivities that experience and express these configurations. The concepts of ‘provider love’ and ‘provider masculinities’ (Hunter, 2010) demonstrate how love, in response to colonial conditions in South Africa, relationally produced subjectivities that emphasised a man’s material capacity to provide. Similarly, Swartz and Bhana (2009) found that young men enacted new forms of care and intimacy as they negotiated their emergent roles as fathers. Although fatherhood and care are not direct explorations of love (Ferguson and Toye, 2017), lessons can be gleaned from this body of work about the role of emotion in young black men’s lives.

In South Africa, young black men are simultaneously dominant and marginalised, and such ambivalences necessitate explorations of their experiences that meaningfully engage the emotional and embodied performances of young black masculinities (Ratele, 2013, 2016). Yet, much of the research outside of Queer Studies continues to suggest that young black men are universally compliant with dominant masculinities – with minimal focus on instances where young men resist dominant behaviours. Thus, I heed Motimele’s (2021: 61) call for ‘new modes of reading black male vulnerability that can hold a number of ambivalences.’ In this vein, love enables us to apprehend the ambivalences of being young black men who live and love in the township: of being violent yet vulnerable, of being complicit yet oppressed, of being antisocial yet intimate and of being ‘young men’ – no longer boys, but not yet men. Furthermore, a focus on love avoids an overly deterministic reading of young black men as dangerous, without denying the violences that young black men do either experience or enact upon others (Motimele, 2021).

ON YOUNG MEN DOING LOVE, AND THEIR LOVE DOINGS

Critical scholars have demonstrated convincingly that love is not a universal and naturally occurring feeling or emotion (Jackson, 1993; Morrison *et al.*, 2012; Ferguson and Jónasdóttir, 2014; Lanas and Zembylas, 2015). Furthermore, these scholars have demonstrated that it is not a unitary, transhistorical phenomenon untouched by social, cultural, spatial, and temporal shifts (Illouz, 1997, 2012). Rather, love is embedded in the ‘historically situated words, cultural practices, and material conditions that constitute certain kinds of subjects and enable particular kinds of relationships’ (Cole and Thomas, 2009: 3). We can therefore think of love as relational and rendered materially, discursively, politically and spatially – which then determines who feels it, how, when, where, for whom and to what end (Berlant, 1998; Ahmed, 2004; Morrison *et al.*, 2012). Love shapes, and is relationally shaped, by the lived experiences of those who enter into relationships.

Although critical masculinities studies have explored men’s emotions, their focus has mainly been on the extremes: of men as either emotionally inept, or their embodied expressions of rage and anger (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018). These extremes are far from universal, and relations between masculinities and emotions are ambivalent and complex and require that we further account for situated and embodied experiences of other subjectivities (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018; de Boise and Hearn, 2017). Importantly, young South African black men are living (and loving) in social worlds that are removed from the cultures of the Global North, which is overrepresented in current studies on masculinities, emotions and love. Seidler (2007) argues that explorations of young men’s emotional lives should give due consideration to the diverse discursive and material fields that comprise subjectivities in order to critically account for lived experiences. And, relatedly, de Boise and Hearn (2017) contend that understanding men’s emotional lives is central to challenging and transforming gender inequalities. As de Boise and Hearn (2017: 791) further suggest, in exploring men’s emotional lives, we have to ‘evaluate the ends to which emotions are put, what they are directed toward, how intensely and how these circulate between bodies and sustain as well as challenge men’s privileges’ (2017: 791).

Therefore, exploring young black men’s negotiations of love requires that critical attention be paid to their discursive positionings and embodied practices. I thus approach love as an embodied practice that is relationally situated, and not only experienced as a feeling, but as a doing too.

METHODOLOGY

Analysis for this study was grounded in a critical feminist approach, which rejects essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, emotions and embodiment (Holmes, 2015; Jackson, 2018). From this perspective, love cannot be conceptualised as a universal concept, and young black men cannot be approached as a homogenous group. This article approaches love as a creative and productive force, thus opening up different ways of exploring the

possibilities and capacities that emerge through it (Jónasdóttir, 2014). An important aspect of this approach lies in its emphasis on social justice and paying attention to conditions that produce or reproduce power inequalities in the context of love (hooks, 2000; Ferguson and Jónasdóttir, 2014; Ferguson and Toye, 2017). This also enabled me to give due consideration to the young men's love experiences and to avoid limiting discourses of danger and crisis. Moreover, this perspective problematises attempts to group gender, sexuality and love into static categories and, instead, foregrounds the fluid and contingent nature of subjectivities in line with social and material conditions in South Africa. The approach thus frames love as central in the lives of the young men in this study, with the aim of broadening our understanding of their lives as having capacity for positive experiences and expressions of love. An important aspect of this approach lies in highlighting the mutual entanglement of love and masculinities as fluid, relational and contingent on social phenomena.

Data for this research are drawn from a larger doctoral study that explored the lived experiences of young men and their love relationships in the INK (Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu) precinct of townships, located in the north of Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. Collectively, these fall under the eThekwini municipality, which is the country's second most populous municipality (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This study sought to understand how young men experienced love, and how they negotiated love in their daily lives as they navigated township landscapes. In understanding that the repertoire of masculinities in townships are not defined only by violence, the study sought to explore how love might challenge and complicate stereotypical readings of young men's lives. Thus, the study made use of in-depth individual interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD). Thirty-four young men, aged between 16 and 21 years, were purposively sampled from local youth clubs and youth networks in the area. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and written consent was obtained from the parents and guardians of participants for them to participate in the study. Further consent was secured from participants for the IDIs and FGDs to be recorded. Participation was voluntary and participants' anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. All participants and the researcher are first language isiZulu speakers, so all IDIs and FGDs were conducted in isiZulu and recordings transcribed and translated into English. Using qualitative data software (NVivo), the transcripts were coded and analysed, from which broad themes were generated in line with the research questions of the broader study.

GROWING UP AND DOING LOVE (DIFFERENTLY)

The 34 participants frequently discussed love in the context of growing up and linked it to the factors that shaped their daily lives. For most of them, the discourses of love as an embodied practice emerged alongside those of enacting forms of masculinities; being in a love relationship meant embodying and enacting masculinity differently. As one participant said of love, 'love is a verb, a doing word, you see . . . it's hard to explain what it is.' Thus, the young men's experiences and expressions of love were conceptualised as relational and complex doings. In this study, the young men suggested that love is experienced as a force that produces new understandings of self and thus different doings of love (Jónasdóttir, 2014). Most of the participants reflexively linked the development of their love doings with their 'becoming men.' But, these young men were choosing to do love differently:

When you [are a boy], you take [love] as something to have fun with.... As you become a man, you think differently about love. (Thabang, 16 years, IDI)

Thabang linked love and the related doings of love to maturing and becoming a man. His response suggests that 'growing up' and shifting towards a more mature masculinity opens up new avenues for doing love; that the doing of love shifts him from 'having fun' to being 'better.' By linking the idea of having fun with love, he suggested that not all relationships are love relationships – some are about a doing that does not require emotional engagement as part of the doing. During the interview, an example of having fun was described as being *isoka*² and having multiple girlfriends (Hunter, 2004). He contrasted this with growing up and performing a different form of matured masculinity that was more invested in relationships, and in developing a connection with someone. The suggestion here is that as young men mature and become men, they also perceive and do love differently. However, love is not a simple experience for young men, as another participant suggested:

How do you show her you love her? (Researcher)

² *Isoka* (singular) is an isiZulu term which typically describes a young man who has multiple girlfriends or multiple sexual partners.

I show her my feelings.... The challenge is that there is a lot of things happening there. (Vusi, 18 years, IDI)

Vusi struggled to define love and, like many other participants, reverted to his lived experience of love. He and his girlfriend had been together since primary school and all through high school. He explained earlier in the interview that, ‘she is the one person I have imagined myself with’ – signalling a deep sense of attachment and commitment to his girlfriend. Vusi’s experience reflected the notion of thinking and doing things differently over time, as described by Thabang. As a young man, being in a love relationship also meant imagining a future and showing his feelings. This suggested that his relationship was not only an individual and internal experience of emotions, but was also a set of varied embodied practices of love. However, as he further clarified, the context of doing love is complicated by the many ‘things happening there,’ suggesting that the experience of love is constantly being negotiated. As love came to matter differently for Vusi, it cultivated a deepening reflexivity making him more self-aware and reflective on his future with his girlfriend. Although young black men may come to value and embrace love, enacting or embracing these emerging masculinities can also be challenging to navigate personally and socially (Langa, 2020). This is evident in Wandile’s reflection below:

Sometimes you approach someone only with the intention of *ukuggema* [just getting sex], then next thing *usugaxele* [you’re entangled]... It goes both ways, it’s a risk, if I can put it that way ... I love her now, standard. (Wandile, 19 years, FGD)

Wandile’s reflection referred to his current girlfriend of eight months. His assertion supports the findings of studies that have articulated an ambivalence between sex and love for young men when it comes to their relationships (Bhana, 2017, 2018). This is also suggested by his use of the terms *ukuggema* and *ukugaxeka* that index local discourses about intimate relationships among young men. *Ukuggema* (literally: to hit) was described as a ‘hit and run’ among the young men, where there was little to no emotional attachment to the woman. The main aim of *ukuggema* is to have sex. On the other hand, *ukugaxeka* (becoming entangled) refers to how, while navigating *ukuggema*, a young man can develop feelings and become invested and attached to a particular young woman. Thus, *ukugaxeka* is described mainly in relation to *ukuggema* and describes a shifting subjectivity that further shifts the nature of the relationship from mainly sexual to a love relationship. In the context of *ukugaxeka*, the young men undertake a different doing that entails emotional attachment and the ‘showing of feelings’. This is the risk that Wandile referred to. Using himself as an example, he described how his current relationship had become a love relationship, which prompted different love doings on his part. As he spoke, Banzi (16 years) interjected ‘*Udlisive!*’ at which the other participants laughed. He was suggesting that Wandile had been given a love potion and was spellbound. The *ukugaxeka* discourse was often used by some young men to ridicule others who had seemingly become ‘duped’ by love. However, Wandile maintained:

Sometimes you have [compromise] in order for you to get what you want, right? So, in my case, there are things I am willing to sacrifice for her.

By describing himself as a young man who has succumbed to *ukugaxeka*, Wandile actively resisted the discourse of *ukuggema*, which emphasises emotional detachment and a (hetero)sexual prowess. Wandile demonstrates how love can prompt a shift in masculine performance, thus producing a different enactment of love that is invested in emotional connection beyond ‘just sex.’ He also provides insight into the reactions that young men have to navigate in the process of resisting dominant notions that are widely accepted by their peers. Banzi’s response is a clear demonstration of how young men’s gendered subjectivities come under scrutiny when they seem to diverge from the heteronormative gender script. Within the group encounter, Wandile’s performance of a ‘duped’ masculinity was being challenged and a heteronormative masculinity, which accommodates *ukuggema*, was being reasserted. The discourses of *ukuggema* and *ukugaxeka* are indicative of the confused messaging that young men negotiate in their daily lives (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). On one hand, they are expected to demonstrate their masculinities through having girlfriends yet, on the other, they should not like them too much. The excerpts in this section suggest that for some of the participants in the study love is experienced as relational and as mutually constitutive with their masculine performances; thus, doing love differently also produced the capacity to do their masculinity differently. Their narratives point to how love is imbricated in the complexities of young men’s growing up, and demonstrate how it also becomes an important consideration for young men; they not only do love as part of their performance, but they also want to be loved. The narratives the young men offer in this section paint a more complex picture of the ways they negotiate doing love in their respective lives.

UKUSHELA: PLAYING WITH WORDS AND SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Ukushela was a constant feature of the interactions I had with the young men throughout the fieldwork. It is a gendered and culturally laden process through which young men propose and initiate a love relationship; a young woman's acceptance of this proposal is termed *ukugoma* (Hunter, 2004, 2010; Zibane, 2021). Despite researchers noting that the translation of the term *ukushela* denotes a burning for one's love or to burn with desire, little research has explored how young men navigate the intensities that are part of the experience of *ukushela*. In this section, I explore the ways in which the young men's doings of love were negotiated in and through the practice of *ukushela*. The participants' experiences reveal that this practice – which is also implicated in relations of power and gender – produces particular love doings. The narratives of the young men in the study suggest that they often drew on a repertoire of love doings through *ukushela*, depending on the intended nature of the relationship or the intensity of the love:

[It's] how you present yourself to a girl, your words, how you speak [to her], the way you are and your actions add to that. It's how you play with your words. (Lubabalo, 17 years, FGD)

The above quote is Lubabalo's interjection during a group discussion as the young men debated how a young man could go about charming a young woman in the process of proposing love. *Ukushela* for young men takes place in different contexts, especially in the township. He suggested that the way a young man might go about presenting himself when charming a young woman is in itself a complex interplay of the bodies, words, talk, tone, and actions. Although studies have mainly highlighted enactments of *ukushela* as constraining young women's agency and even coercive (Hampshire *et al.*, 2011; Ngidi, 2022), the enactment that Lubabalo referred to resists this and presents an alternative love doing that is invested in passion and persuasion (Mvune *et al.*, 2019). This resonates with the notion of *ukudlala ngenkotha* (literally: to play with tongue), which is a form of sweet-talking undertaken by young men as part of *ukushela* (Zibane, 2021). From this perspective, Lubabalo suggested that, among young men, one possible capacity is a particular kind of love doing that 'plays with words.' The play with words is an embodied doing that ultimately informs 'how you present yourself to a girl.' Thus, the negotiation of *ukushela* for Lubabalo involves the complex arrangement of bodies, words, talk, tone and actions that produce his form of love doing. Other young men also offered more insight into the complexities of *ukushela*:

There is an isiZulu proverb that goes 'Induku enhle igawulwa ezizwen' – that is what I was taught. I was told that if I want a girlfriend, I must go out [of our community]. (Simba, 18 years, IDI)

The proverb Simba refers to can be translated as 'a beautiful stick is cut from country afar' (Mabaso and Liebhamer, 1998: 32). His reference to this proverb demonstrates his attempt to contextualise his own doing of *ukushela*. He elaborated that, during his childhood, his older brothers and uncles had always referenced the proverb and, as he came of age, it came to inform his own negotiation of love. Importantly, the proverb reinforces particular gender and cultural scripts that necessitate particular performances from young men. In addition to being the active proposer of love (Hunter, 2010), a young man also has to, discursively and materially, cultivate love (Mvune *et al.*, 2019; Zibane, 2021). Through the proverb, *ukushela* as the doing of love is thus further coded as an active (re)negotiation of a cultural and gendered terrain, which produces a young woman's favourable response (*ukugoma*), thus becoming a girlfriend. For Simba, this required going to a different section of the township to ensure that he and his girlfriend were from different areas. Having described himself as quiet and introverted, he explained his experience thus:

I am the kind of person who writes poems, I shela [show my love] with poems.... It must be something that comes from the heart.... When the girl is in front of you, you will not be scared to tell her what is in your heart. (Simba, 18 years, IDI)

Here, Simba presents a different doing of love – one that renegotiates the notion of *ukudlala ngenkotha* as described above. As an introvert, Simba found an alternative avenue through which he approached *ukushela*; his version of 'playing with words' and showing his passion leveraged his talent for poetry. However, in contrast to Lubabalo and other young men whose 'presentation to a girl' emphasised outward, embodied practices, through poetry, Simba emphasised speaking 'from the heart.' Once again, this adds another dimension to existing literature, which largely focuses on outward manifestations of love doings. Thus, it becomes evident how love produces different capacities, and expands the practice of *ukushela* in new ways for a young man. The notion of speaking from the heart takes on deeper significance from the way that his poetic creativity enabled him to pull together his words, actions, and feelings to enact masculinity in a particular way that he knew to be novel. Simba's narrative goes beyond limited framings of young black men as dominant, unfeeling, and violent. Another young man, Dingani, articulated his experience of doing love:

I believe that love is something you can't control. Love is a feeling that comes at any time and [it's] something that you can't prevent from coming to you when it comes...it's a feeling which comes from the heart for another person or someone that you love. (Dingani, 18 years, IDI)

South African literature on youth sexualities has consistently highlighted the ways that love functions as a site through which young men exercise control over young women (Wood *et al.*, 2007, 2008). Wood and Jewkes (1997, 1998) have noted how young men unilaterally determine the terms and conditions of the love relationship, and foreground sex as part of the arrangement. Other studies, however, have provided more nuance and complexity to these findings and have demonstrated that, although young men may perform these versions of masculinities, they also value deep emotional connection (Allen, 2003; Bhana and Pattman, 2011). Dingani exposed the strong force of love in his life, how he experienced it as an uncontrollable and intangible force, yet one with very tangible effects in his life and on his performance of masculinity. The characterisation of love as a force that is beyond individual control was common among participants. Interestingly, this challenges the notion of self-control and emotional infallibility that is associated with normative masculinities (Connell, 2005; Seidler, 2007). And this experience of love disrupts notions about masculinity, particularly among young black men. Departing from the narrative of control and dominance, Dingani was admittedly not in control of his feelings in ways that facilitate gender inequitable atmospheres within his relationship. His approach and the process of *ukushela* that he undertook are not necessarily buttressed by notions of violence and control. Rather, he suggested that he is guided by the intense feelings from the heart that drew him to his girlfriend. Overall, the narratives in this section suggest a connection between feelings of love and other-than-violent doings of love. For most of the young men, love enabled them to rework or expand the practice of *ukushela* in progressive ways.

A CLEANER MASCULINITY?

For many of the young men in this study, love was central to the shaping of their subjectivities and increasingly became a part of reimagining new masculinities. When participants described the impact of love in their lives, they suggested that love had changed their lives in profound ways (Malinga and Ratele, 2016). Importantly, while these personal shifts were reflected in their embodied love doings, the participants often suggested a deeper affective significance. As one participant explained:

Yesterday I was a young boy who got dirty, walking around with torn pants, playing soccer ...when I started getting a girlfriend and tried speaking to her I didn't want her to see me looking dirty and then I started looking after myself...she basically made me aware of myself.... It was something that made me have a different perspective and change the way I view things and do things. (Anathi, 19 years, IDI)

In the above excerpt, Anathi described the first time he felt intense feelings, which he later understood to be romantic love. These intense feelings changed how he moved around in his community, how he hung out with his friends, and even determined if or when he would play a game of soccer on the street. In describing the process that led to him declaring his love (*ukushela*), he noted how his feelings led to a change in his actions and perspective. These new feelings and emotions demonstrate a shift from the 'young boy who got dirty' to a young man who 'started looking after' himself and also became 'aware of' himself. Because of this, he began to perform a cleaner, less playful masculinity, one that he felt was required if he were to become a boyfriend. On the surface, it may seem that Anathi's new aversion to being dirty simply indicated a developmental understanding of going through adolescence. However, I argue that his contextualisation of actions in relation to his feelings and his girlfriend signalled a shifting emotional reflexivity in line with the shifting relations (Holmes, 2015). It is this emotional reflexivity that resulted in him having 'a different perspective' and changing the way he did things. Love is not just a concept for Anathi, it is a force that actively produced a different perspective and different actions in his life. This emotional reflexivity was also evident in other participants' narratives:

Love is also something that is very important because it inspires you and it can also change you. [It can] make you a better person...and become a clean person even in your mind. You think positively and also be gentle with people. (Menzi, 18 years, IDI)

For Menzi, love inspired change and, once again, the discourse of becoming clean is referenced in relation to love. He suggested that love is simultaneously a deeply personal and transformative project. Furthermore, it is significant that he suggested love makes one 'a clean person even in your mind.' Studies suggest a causal link between young men's experiences of trauma and their vulnerability to enacting violence and having multiple sexual partners (Gibbs *et al.*, 2019). However, as Menzi suggested, being in a relationship prompted a shift away from the possibilities of violence making him 'think positively and also be gentle with people.' He suggested that his love relationship

produced the capacity to resist enacting negative love doings and masculinities, in general. Throughout the fieldwork, many participants also described how spending time with their girlfriends allowed them some respite from homosocial spaces where violence, alcohol, and drugs were currency. Significantly, the becoming clean discourse provided a useful metaphor for these young men to position themselves in relation to the masculinities from which they sought respite. Another participant said:

There is someone I am in a relationship with.... It has shaped me in good ways. I often see the difference between me and other young men that I grew up with. (Tito, 21 years, IDI)

Tito suggested that being in a relationship had ‘shaped’ him in ways that made him different from ‘other young men.’ As a result of his love relationship, he performed a different masculinity to those of his peers and he credited the affectively engaging space that he and his girlfriend had created for this shift. It is particularly significant he saw it as responsible for a different trajectory.

As the young men established love relationships and became boyfriends, they negotiated new ways of doing love. However, as the narratives in this section suggest, these new ways could have broader implications for how the young men enact other masculinities. The suggestion is that love relationships produce cleaner masculinities, where love does not only prompt the doing of love differently, but further shapes how young men act in relation to normative masculinities. Love is experienced and understood as a disruptive affective experience that shifts their daily lives towards becoming boyfriends and enacting cleaner masculinities. However, it is important to note that these shifts do not suggest a complete transformation of masculinities. What these cleaner masculinities suggest is that love can produce progressive possibilities for young men to do love differently. In continuing with the analogy of becoming cleaner, these narratives further suggest that the shifting and transforming of masculinities is not a once-off process that takes young men from one extreme to another. Rather, it is an ongoing process of transforming and transgressing restrictive heteropatriarchal norms – which is not linear. Thus, when participants describe love as making them cleaner, they are also suggesting their daily enactments and experiences of love are iterative and incremental instances of making them cleaner. To do love is to incrementally undo harmful scripts.

CONCLUSION

In *All About Love*, hooks (2000: 4) muses that the ‘word “love” is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb.’ For her, love has to be understood as more than an internal psychological state. Her thinking in this regard is instructive; love can only be understood as such when it is actioned or practised. Love is about doing. Thus, love is not only about naming feelings, but it is also about the related actions through which one does or enacts love. This article highlights the significance of exploring love in the lives of young men (Allen, 2007; Korobov, 2009; Forrest, 2010) and, specifically, of exploring love as a positive affect among young black men (Malinga and Ratele, 2012, 2016). Love offers young men the opportunity to reimagine their masculinities (particularly in relation to their girlfriends), which might be a useful avenue to further explore in the context of challenging intimate partner violence. Love seems to produce progressive moments that occur in the seemingly mundane moments of young men’s daily lives through prompting reflexive engagement with their own feelings and those of their girlfriends. The notion of love as a form of doing signals that love relationships are intimately tied to the ways young men understand and perform their masculinities. Although doing love does not necessarily mean a complete dismantling of hegemonic masculinities, these young men were able to resist in meaningful ways (Allen, 2007). The doings of love enabled further insight into to complexities of love in the ever-shifting terrains of being a young man in a township, which seemed to require different doings from these young men. Understood thus, we see that love was understood and experienced by the young men as producing the capacities to feel, to act and be in new and different ways than before. To explore love doings thus enables us to trace the other-than-violent possibilities and capacities among young men. Their reflections suggest that love was a central component of their transitions into adulthood; as they became boyfriends, so they also became men. Furthermore, through love they became clean and better young men – demonstrating the progressive possibilities of love.

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'Males and Females the Girl Consumes!': Food, Desire and Unstable Gender Expression in Zinaid Meeran's *Saracen at the Gates*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the ways in which food discourse is employed to destabilise essentialised notions of culture and gender in South African author Zinaid Meeran's début novel, *Saracen at the Gates* (2009). The article explains how Meeran disrupts stratified conceptions of culture through his alimentary cartograph, and how food is used to disrupt religious identification. His depiction of the desiring queer body is interpreted as that which ruptures the limits of control and excess associated with appetite through analysing his representation of desire as simultaneously fluid, culturally specific and material. The article concludes that Meeran's alimentary cartography allows for the creation of alternative constructions of identity that coalesce around the gustatory.

Keywords: food, desire, Zinaid Meeran, queer bodies, South African literature

INTRODUCTION

Few novelists attempt to blur the boundaries between edible bodies and erotic bodies in the same off-handedly sexual way as Zinaid Meeran does in *Saracen at the Gates* (2009). Meeran dedicates his novel to 'those who have no race, gender, country or class. Who desire the freedom to be only themselves' (2009: i). Taking this as my starting point, I explore the ways in which the representation of food in Meeran's novel opens up new analytic lenses for the re-evaluation of rigid conceptions of gendered love in the novel's context. This remarkable South African novel has received a lamentable paucity of scholarly attention. After it won the European Union Literary Award in 2008/09, Cheryl Stobie briefly discussed it in her 'Reading bisexualities from a South African perspective – revisited', arguing that 'the originality and success of the novel lie in the light and humorous touch with which concrete notions of identity, in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality, are dismantled' (2011: 486). The only sustained exploration of the work can be found in Jessica Murray's 'Stereotypes and subversions: Reading queer representations in two contemporary South African novels', in which she analyses how Meeran represents 'homophobic stereotypes in order to expose their inconsistencies and dissonances and to open them up to critique and even to ridicule' (2013: 484). To address this lacuna, in this article I will demonstrate the usefulness of food studies to South African literary criticism in analysing Meeran's employment of an alimentary cartography that allows him to situate love and desire as forces that are in flux rather than fixed.

The protagonist of the novel, Zakira Cachalia, is a self-proclaimed 'curry mafia princess'. With its explicit incorporation of food discourse to denote identification, this term suggests Meeran's commingling of the alimentary with race, class and gender categories. Zakira's parents are money-laundering confectionery establishment proprietors, ostensible pillars of the community who allow their coddled son, Zakir, the indulgence and freedom they deny his female twin. The novel traces Zakira's movement from her self-absorbed entrapment in the structures of privilege associated with her family's wealth to her sexual and romantic relationship with Sofie, the leader of the Saracens, an anarchist girl gang intent on dismantling all systems of power.

The novel's success lies in Meeran's careful problematisation of the rigid social and gender expectations demanded by Zakira's family. As I will elaborate below, these are expressed in the negotiation of the excess and control of appetite that is made material in the queer body through its conflation with food.

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QUEER POSSIBILITIES IN THE CONJOINING OF FOOD STUDIES AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Theorists working on the relationship between food and identity have pointed out that it can be a socially unifying force with the potential to create and re-establish individual and cultural identity. Claude Fischler argues for the fundamental role played by eating in identity formation, claiming that to 'incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat' (1988: 275). To realise the multitudinous ways in which food shapes perceptions and performances of gender, one needs only to think of the uneasy position women have historically occupied in relation to food (in relation to their roles as food providers, and their body images, to name but two examples). Similarly, Chapman and Beagan analyse how food practices inform understandings of culture and assert that the 'eating of ostensibly traditional foods, or the foods of "home," can (...) be a way of insisting on the salience of the local, a form of resistance to globalization' (2013: 368). Roland Barthes relates culinary systems to semiotics, arguing that food is the 'functional unit of a system of communication (...) for all food serves as a sign amongst members of a given society' (1961: 24). Despite the numerous ways in which food acts as a point of commonality in giving cohesion to gender, race and class systems, the alimentary also acts as a powerful marker of difference that simultaneously highlights the divisions and blurs the differences between the categories that it ostensibly serves to coalesce. Even on a physiological level, food connotes difference, as it implies a transgression of the boundaries that separate inside and outside, self and other. As Kayla Tompkins (2005: 245) points out: 'Every food discourse or representation has a relationship to a specific body politic'. Who grows the food we eat, how it finds its way to our kitchens, who prepares our meals, what our diets consist of, and whether we have access to food, are all ways in which the alimentary acts as a marker of racial, sexual, and sociocultural difference.

As the food studies movement has begun to develop and explore other ways of thinking about how humans relate to food, scholars have investigated the potential of food as a privileged site which simultaneously draws together (people and ideas), sets them apart and creates new connections. One area in which this becomes especially apparent is the conjoining of food studies and queer theory, given its focus on dismantling established ways of thinking, doing and being. In an article that attempts to queer the food studies discipline by addressing the relationship between disability and food, Kim Hall argues for a 'queer crip feminist conception of food justice' that 'critically engages the conceptions of community, relationship, bodies and identity that are assumed, made possible by, or foreclosed by food discourse' (2014: 178). She posits a metaphysics of 'compost' as a useful point of access into the space where food studies and queer theory merge. Compost, she argues, 'understands bodies and food as interactively emergent, provisional, and contested sites where boundaries are questioned, negotiated, and open to transformation' (2014: 179). Similarly, Elspeth Probyn (1999: 224) makes use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'rhizomatic lines of flight' to configure 'an ethno-poetics of food and sex' through which 'we may begin to formulate an ethics of living that works against the logics of categorization that now dominate much of the politics of identity'.

More recently, scholars have begun exploring the potential inherent in reading literary texts through the lens of food studies. Arguing that this approach presents possibilities for richer analysis than simply identifying food imagery in literature, Donna Lee Brien and Lorna Piatti-Farnell explain: 'Connected as they are to the ritual structures of both celebration and the everyday, and refusing to be taken as simple supplements to add realism to the narrative, food, cooking, and eating are linked to both cultural anxieties and desires in relation to human experience, from economic and political constructs, to symbolic transmigrations of gender, class, ethnicity, family, race, and, of course, the body' (2018: 2). This burgeoning of research that combines food studies and literary criticism constitutes a diverse body of work that covers various analytical approaches. Brien and Piatti-Farnell (2018: 1) have identified four main trends in this field:

1. Studies that analyse food representation in particular literary nationalities and geographical spaces (see Leiwei Li, 1998; Aoyama, 2008; Brien, 2008; Xu, 2008; and Carruth, 2013);
2. Studies that focus on individual authors (see Houston, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2007, and Lane, 2007);
3. Cultural studies projects that read food in literature in relation to culture, gender, ethnicity and genre (see Daniels, 2006; Keeling and Pollard, 2008, and Carruth and Tigner, 2017); and
4. Studies that situate food and literature in specific historical periods (see Yue and Tang, 2013; Boyce and Fitzpatrick, 2017; and Christou, 2017).

Brien and Piatti-Farnell emphasise the depth of analysis these approaches offer in their statement that '[i]t is (...) essential to address not only the widely spread place occupied by food in literary narratives, but also its ability to convey cultural messages in a variety of literary-related contexts' (2018: 1). This article attempts to expand on the growing body of work by reading food in relation to unfixed gender, sexual and class identities in the context of a South African novel.

TEXTUALITY, DESIRE AND CONSUMPTION: THE GUSTATORY AS UNFIXED EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER

These approaches open an array of lenses through which to read how love and desire manifest textually and have the potential to create connections that stimulate new ways of thinking about gender. Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins have commented on the fact that ‘eating conjoins violent, linguistic, erotic, and gustatory appetites into a lexicon with purpose’ (2014: 392). According to them: ‘the text *is* the body’s alimentary tract, and the work *is*, not to think of inside and outside, but to think of the impossibility of separation between self and other, body and text, tongue and bowel’ (2014: 393, emphasis in original). This nodal intergrowth of desire, food, and language is especially apparent in *Saracen at the Gates*. The innovative way Meeran’s text incorporates food discourse resists what Probyn (1999: 220) criticises as the too-easy commingling of food and sex, where she argues that often ‘the conflation of food/sex may be simply convenient (the use of easy metaphors), or sloppy (the type of inversion that makes meat equal masculinity)’. Instead, Meeran utilises the gustatory in a complex and nuanced manner that partakes of what Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins (2014: 396) call the ‘cathectic and world-making behaviors [that are] already politicized as points of biopolitical, territorial, economic, and cultural intervention’. In *Saracen at the Gates*, this intervention takes the form of dismantling the rigid ideological constraints often associated with gender, and centres on the way the novel foregrounds the narrative representation of food as having the capacity to forge unfamiliar textual connections. In my analysis, I use the term ‘alimentary cartographies’ to describe Meeran’s incorporation of food discourse into his novel. This term addresses his conflation of food, body, race, culture and gender: ‘alimentary’ relates to sustenance and nourishment, but also implies that the body should be read as a politicised site of difference, as it suggests both incorporation and being subsumed. The word ‘cartographies’ alludes to the tessellated topography of interconnection that Meeran creates through his inter-articulation of hunger, desire, and the queered, erotic body.

Meeran’s deployment of food discourse in the novel specifically engages with ideas relating to gender, sexuality, and love. His portrayal of Zakira’s sexuality is one of the most compelling aspects of the text, as he seems purposefully to resist ascribing to her any labels that might delimit the freedom of her desire, and in doing so liberates it from fixed conceptions of gender identification. Zakira’s sexuality is read in divergent ways by Murray and Stobie. Murray argues that Meeran portrays heterosexuality not as ‘some unassailable monolith’ and that he emphasises sexuality as a ‘context-bound construction that is open to challenge’, reading the novel through the lens of ‘lesbian desire’ (2014: 135). Stobie approaches Zakira’s sexuality from the perspective of bisexuality, arguing elsewhere that bisexuality ‘represents a potential for change, a loosening of boundaries, a possibility of multiplicity, all of which signify a fruitful cultural and national pathway beyond the rigid boundaries of the past’ (2007: 71). Stobie does acknowledge that ‘expanding the binary categorisation [of the hetero-/homosexual dichotomy] to contain a third element risks implying that this tripartite scheme of hetero-/bi-/homosexual neatly wraps up all the possibilities’. However, she insists that her deployment of the term ‘bisexuality’ is a ‘strategy not of completion, but of amplification and clarification’ (2007: 21). I contend, though, that the effectiveness of Meeran’s portrayal of Zakira’s sexuality lies in its resistance to all categories of identity politics and in its insistence on a sexuality that is as fluid as it is culturally specific. Meeran clearly neither implies that Zakira’s sexual relationship with Sofie should be seen as her progressing from heterosexual to homosexual desire, nor does he ever pin her down by explicitly labelling her as bisexual. He depicts her negotiation of these desires not as mutually exclusive categories but rather as open-ended sites of play that allow for a multiplicity of engagements and meanings.

One danger of such a reading lies in the possible perpetuation of discourses that promote biphobia and bi-invisibility. As Stobie points out: ‘in theoretics, as well as in academic writing, journalism, films and film criticism, bisexuality tends to become invisible, to be sensationalised or stigmatised’ (2007: 69). A further danger lies in the erasure of the distinctions that define human beings as sexually desiring subjects in a material world, positing sexuality as an amorphous free-floating signifier, so fluid that it ultimately signifies nothing. I contend, however, that Meeran’s use of food discourse in his representation of the sexual is a deliberate strategy that attempts to insist simultaneously on the materiality of desire and on its existence as part of an alimentary cartography that is divorced from the narrow confines of identity politics. In Meeran’s conflation of food and sex, the fluidity of the sexuality he represents is grounded by the concrete viscerality of food. Food thus serves the function of acting as the anchor around which alternative constructions of sexuality can begin to coalesce. It is not my intention to suggest that food should replace sexual practice as a category of identification, but rather that reading Meeran’s novel through this lens opens up alternative ways of imagining textual representations of sexuality. This reflects what Probyn (1999: 422) refers to as ‘more interesting taxonomies of difference within queer identity than the usual reliance on forms of sexual practice’. Below I analyse the ways in which Meeran conflates sexual appetites with alimentary appetites to render desire simultaneously fluid, material and situated in a particular cultural context.

'SO WHOLESOME IT SOUNDS!': FOOD PRACTICES, SUBTERFUGE AND TRANSGRESSION

The baking circle through which Zakira meets Sofie represents one instance in which the comingling of food and sexuality allows for alternate expressions of desire and identity, as it becomes the smokescreen behind which they hide their relationship. Meean's depiction of the baking circle as camouflage reflects Gabeba Boderoo's argument elsewhere on the idea of 'discretion' (2013: 88):

These spaces of *discretion* can also be found in Muslim practices around same-sex desire, through a phenomenon that Kecia Ali calls a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. While this is often in response to the risks and dangers of being openly queer, the term also holds the possibility that silence does not always imply oppression. Rather, it can also be the space of consciously 'not naming' or 'not discussing'—what I am calling discretion — which opens up the possibility of varied forms of sexual expression in contexts where gender and sexual roles are over-determined and where symbolic and social meanings place gender and sexual diversity at risk.

This relates to the way Zakira makes use of that which should confine her to enact her rebellion. Ironically, Zakira's mother is the one who suggests that she join the baking circle, and in doing so becomes Sofie and Zakira's unwitting 'matchmaker' (Meean 2009: 102):

They call themselves *Al Sacareen*, The Sweets, you know in Arabic. So pious using Allah's language! They meet every Sunday at eleven and bake, sit nicely, eat and enjoy each other's company. So wholesome it sounds.

Meean provocatively undermines Zakira's mother's perception of the purpose of such a baking circle as an acceptable and safe pastime for young women. Clearly, to her, the 'wholesome' act of collective baking serves to entrench and reinforce female gender roles as defined by devotion to domesticity. Her use of the word 'pious' suggests that her perception of this role is further informed by religious discourse. The immobility implied by her statement that the young women 'sit nicely and enjoy each other's company' (emphasis added) suggests that, according to her, female self-identification is defined by fixity rather than mobility. However, by participating in conventionally feminine activities and by ostensibly referring to themselves as '*Al Sacareen*' or 'The Sweets', Zakira and Sofie can camouflage their desire for each other with the innocuously saccharine trappings of stereotypical femininity as they enact rebellion as the Saracens.

The camouflaging power of ostensibly feminine activities, such as baking, allows women to engage in more subversive forms of identity creation, such as politically motivated acts of graffiti. Zakira's involvement allows her to forge a sense of self that is not defined by the structures of family, culture and gender. Furthermore, Meean's diction in his description of the baking circle points to food imagery's potential to unmoor the relation of gendered signifiers surrounding food from the usual domesticity and propriety they connote. Zakira's mother's description of how the young women 'sit nicely, eat and enjoy each other's company' (emphasis added) becomes especially ironic and provocative when seen in relation to Meean's use of terms relating to food and appetite in his description of Zakira and Sofie's sexual relationship, as I will discuss later. The irreverent innuendo deriving from the word 'eat' alludes to oral sex and demonstrates food's potential to reveal alternative ways of representing sexuality, drawing together eating, desire and textuality. While my reading suggests that the baking circle should be interpreted as a textual strategy that allows for the subversion of stratified notions of gender identity, this is not its only function in the novel. The Saracens do not only pretend to bake at each gathering, but actually do so, producing a variety of items such as cookies (Meean, 2009: 106), bran muffins (Meean, 2009: 108), pizza dough (Meean, 2009: 109), Yorkshire puddings (Meean 2009: 128), scones (Meean, 2009: 128), Florentines and crumpets (Meean, 2009: 137), and croissants (Meean, 2009: 191). This suggests that, while Zakira and Sofie may use the baking circle to conceal their queer and thus socially unacceptable relationship, food remains an important component in how they relate to each other and should not be relegated to being merely an abstract textual signifier. Baking is represented as something that simultaneously is and is not subterfuge in the context of the novel: these feminised acts have conventional meaning for those who participate in them, but they simultaneously allow for the creation of alternate subversive forms of identity construction. This points to Meean's exploration of how food imagery functions in a more nuanced manner, suggesting that the analysis of gustatory elements in literary criticism requires careful attention to the grey areas in which meaning is deliberately unfixed, despite the materiality of food and its concomitant stereotypical associations.

HER ‘BRACKISH’ TASTE: CONSUMPTION, SUBSUMPTION AND THE DESTABILISATION OF FIXED GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

This fluid interplay of desire as a textual conflation of sexual and alimentary appetites can be seen throughout the novel. As Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins explain, the processes governing food and sexuality ‘produce us as subjects *and* objects simultaneously, and the sites on (and in) our bodies where we negotiate the boundaries between subjecthood and objectification are what constitute the visceral’ (2014: 394, original emphasis). The negotiation to which they refer reflects the way Meeran represents Zakira’s negotiation of her queer desire. Notably, however, Meeran’s insistence on the multifaceted role played by food in this negotiation points to the complexity of food imagery as inherently ambiguous and complex, and manifesting in deliberately contradictory ways. The interplay between consumption and sexual desire has the potential to invert established constructions of gendered desire. In describing her attraction to Os Labuschagne, Zakira explains that he ‘had dry straw hair [she] wanted to *chew* on’ (Meeran, 2009: 25, my emphasis) and she says that she ‘*salivated* at the recent memory of the quality of [his] back muscles’ (Meeran, 2009: 70, my emphasis). In this instance, desire is depicted as a wish for incorporation. Probyn (1999: 220) argues that ‘flesh confuses the limits of what we are and what we eat, what or who we want; flesh encapsulates the quandary of whether the body in question is edible, fuckable, or both’. In ‘*salivating*’ at the ‘quality’ of Os’s body, Zakira’s gustatory appetite becomes sexual, and her discernment in evaluating his male body as fit for consumption increases the power of her position as the female gourmand. As Sarah Cleary argues: ‘In trying to differentiate the self from other and exert control over that other, the act of consumption is, for the most part, based upon power relations’ (2018: 58). This description thus undermines the conventional notion of female desire as the subservient recipient of male attention.

Antje Lindenmeyer argues that writing about food in relation to women and desire has the potential to ‘disrupt (...) gendered stereotypes by portraying [women] as both “eaters” and “feeders” and laying open the power relationships expressed in who feeds whom, and who decides what is eaten’ (2006: 470). This can be seen in Zakira’s interactions with Sofie and their growing desire for each other. At Zakira’s first meeting with Sofie, Sofie’s posture is ‘predatory’ (Meeran 2009: 78) and she stares at Zakira ‘like a carnivore’ (Meeran 2009: 91). While this description might seem to imply Sofie’s power over Zakira as the one who consumes, Zakira too is portrayed as partaking in the consumption, as Meeran later describes that they ‘kissed until [Zakira’s] fangs poked [her] lower lip and just a little blood pooled in [her] mouth’ (Meeran 2009: 237). Meeran’s use of the word ‘fangs’ implies animal carnality and reinforces the image of the sexualised body as consumable. The blood that pools in Zakira’s mouth alludes to the insatiable hunger and desire associated with both vampirism and bisexuality and conflates sexual and alimentary appetites. As Cleary argues:

Significantly: when sex is conflated with food interesting parallels develop between erotic desire [and] consumption. A craving for the assimilation of another through sexual union invites close comparison to the need for incorporation of individual through the act of literal and symbolic consumption. (2018: 55)

This description thus points to the ways in which food imagery is unstable, as it has the potential to connote fluid constructions of subject constitution and self-other relations that destabilise fixed hierachal perceptions of desire.

Significantly, Meeran extrapolates the connection between food imagery, sexual desire and identity even further. Zakira elsewhere explains that Sofie ‘smelled of vanilla beans, nutmeg and a hint of cappuccino’ (Meeran 2009: 179). While the conflation of Sofie’s body with items relating to baked goods might initially appear to entrench the stereotypical association of women with domesticity, it also hints at Sofie’s being the leader of the Saracens. This seems to imply that Zakira’s attraction to Sofie derives from both her conventionally feminine qualities and from the ways in which she manipulates and undermines these attributes. Similarly, she feels that the skin of Sofie’s hands ‘was like cupcake batter, with that same eat-me-now quality’ (Meeran 2009: 181). This description clearly differs from the way in which Os’s body becomes edible, as desire is here expressed in more indirect terms: Zakira wants to consume Os’s hair and back muscles, while her appetite for Sofie’s body is reflected through its conflation with a food item. Furthermore, the silky smoothness of hands that are like cupcake batter demands the sensual interplay of licking, tasting and touching. This description thus simultaneously insists on the actual presence of Zakira’s lover, alluding to the materiality of desire and the physicality of the erotic, but simultaneously renders it fluid and unfixed though the sensuality of the diction, illustrating Meeran’s preoccupation with presenting alternate constructions of sexual desire and identity through food imagery.

This otherness of Zakira’s desire for Sofie can be seen when, after a fight, she turns to the sensory in an attempt to recall her lover’s presence (Meeran 2009: 332):

Her taste, yes it was brackish, yes it reminded me of limes and tomatoes, yes it was nowhere near as slimy as I would have thought, and I knew that I had been surprised by how moreish it was, but again just a shopping list.

The ambivalence of Zakira's description of Sofie's 'brackish' taste as reminding her of 'limes and tomatoes' is disrupted by her finding it 'moreish' and implies that it is something which she wishes to continue sampling. The reference to the sensory catalogue of Sofie's taste being a mere 'shopping list' in her absence points to the salience of the material in the interconnection of the gustatory, the sexual and the textual. Without Sofie's tangible presence to touch, lick and taste, Zakira's desire for her becomes a textual abstraction, a mere 'shopping list' of attributes without coherent meaning. This hints at Holland, Ochoa and Tompkins's insistence that 'the text *is* the body's alimentary tract' (2014: 392, emphasis in original) and reinforces Meeran's emphasis on the materiality of desire while simultaneously rendering it unstable in Zakira's reconceptualisation of what constitutes desire, as seen in the words 'brackish' and 'slimy'.

'MALES AND FEMALES THE GIRL CONSUMES!': ALIMENTARY DECONSTRUCTIONS OF ISLAMIC CULTURAL PRACTICES

While Meeran hints at, teases out and plays with this conflation of sexual desire, food and appetite throughout the novel, he refers to it explicitly after Zakira's mother accidentally stumbles upon her daughter kissing Sofie. In attempting to understand Zakira's deviant sexual desires, her parents discuss the problem with a doctor who is a friend of the family, alluding, of course, to the fact that any alternative form of sexuality is often pathologised into a condition that needs to be corrected. He informs them that Sofie, the Western liberal, is to blame, and that he must 'deduce (...) a conjuncture (...) a joining' in her of 'sexual preferences'. Tellingly, he concludes in dismay, 'Males and females the girl consumes!' (Meeran, 2009: 319). Meeran's use of the word 'consumes' is significant for a number of reasons. As Peg O'Connor explains (1997: 187), a stereotype associated with bisexuality is that bisexuals possess a greedy and insatiable sexual appetite, 'promiscuously having sex with both men and women'. Jo Eadie (1997: 145) reinforces this point, suggesting that bisexuality represents cultural anxieties surrounding 'excess, monogamy, regulation of appetite and instability'. Sofie, the deviant bisexual and 'serial seducer' (Meeran, 2009: 320), is painted as compulsive and esurient in her unregulated consumption of both males and females. According to the doctor, Zakira's involvement with Sofie should be reduced to (Meeran, 2009: 321):

the confusion that envelops our young ones in the face of all these MTVs, these what-you-call music videos, these revealing clothes, the face-paints, all these so-called professions that offer nothing but anguish for the female mind. She is not a (...) man-woman (...) but a good girl trying to hold up the banner dropped by our beloved, slim young martyrs. She is no different to any girl in our beloved *ummah* struggling to keep head above water in the boiling cauldron of sin that is the West.

In this context, queer desire is depicted as a Western construct that elides Zakira's autonomy as a desiring subject and reduces it to a culturally specific pathology. When Zakira discusses her first encounter with Sofie with her twin brother, he too reduces it to a culture-bound construct, reassuring her that the experience does not make her 'lesbian', because white girls 'hang out naked with each other in PE change rooms from when they [are] in primary school (...) They towel each other down after group showers; they go skinny dipping on camping trips where, of course, they sleep naked with each other' (Meeran, 2009: 145). This patently voyeuristic male fantasy of lesbian desire serves the purpose of parodying the idea of homosexuality as a Western construct. The doctor's approach to Zakira's queerness clearly reflects Eadie's suggestion that attitudes towards bisexuality reveal socio-cultural anxieties, in this case taboos surrounding homosexuality in the South African Muslim community. Through his use of the word 'consumes', however, Meeran draws a line between these perceptions of the bisexual as an indiscriminate and rapacious devourer and the ways in which he has conflated the alimentary and the sexual in his depiction of Zakira's desire throughout the novel. Because the word 'consumes' is used in this context in negative contrast to the appropriate gender practices demanded by religious dictates, Meeran alludes to the historical sociocultural connection between food and sexuality in religious discourse. Probyn (1999: 426) argues that '[a]ll religions have operated to include and exclude on the basis of culinary restriction' and that 'alimentary interdictions are based on, and reproduce, the principles of purity, order and hermetic sexuality'. Similarly, Noëlle Châtelet (1997: 12-13) explains that in this discourse 'one will not eat impure animals, any more than one allows for forms of human alteration (such as menstruation or sperm) to contaminate (...) food' and that '[i]n this way, the logic of food taboos uphold in the most elemental way a certain morality about sexuality'. Through alluding to this connection, Meeran not only shows how the sexual and the alimentary overlap in a specific sociocultural setting, but also problematises how each of these categories is ostensibly defined. Untangling the stereotype of the

gluttonous bisexual, he thus inscribes Zakira's desire as mutable and nomadic, and liberates it from being defined by restrictive conceptions of gender identity.

'TINNED VEG AND RELIGION': THE DECADENT WEST, FUNDAMENTALISM AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY

Meeran's use of a gustatory discourse finds resonance with Probyn's argument that 'food has a propensity for hazing the frontiers of categories' (1999a: 216). This continues in the change that Zakir, Zakira's twin, undergoes in the novel. Initially, Zakir is represented as the mollycoddled and doted-upon son and heir, but undergoes a transformation into a paranoid, unkempt recluse who thinks that Osama bin Laden is hiding out in Fordsburg, Johannesburg. Meeran utilises an alimentary discourse to illustrate this change through having Zakir eat increasingly unnatural and bizarre foods, pointing to the crisis of identification that the character undergoes. Significantly, it is his mother who feeds him to the point of excess and who chooses to ignore the very clear evidence of his unhealthy lifestyle and, in doing so, facilitates it (Meeran, 2009: 8):

As for Zakir, he breezes in whenever his lordship pleases, complete with a new dent on his car, freshly fucked and hungry. He pulls in at 7:30 am and requests blueberry-kumquat pancakes with Canadian maple syrup and my mommy complies, no questions asked. She even tucks a serviette under his chin, combs the forelock from his eyes, and places a knife and fork in his hands, shaking as they are with the DTs.

His portrayal in the novel is also inherently informed by the expectations demanded of him as the first-born son of a Muslim family, and concurrently his inability to live up to these demands and cultural expectations. This indicates the ways in which the dictates of gender roles shape the lives of both twins. Zakira is expected to deny and camouflage the ambiguity of her sexual desire while performing the role of dutiful daughter; Zakir is expected to embody certain aspects of conservative religion and Islamic nationalism, while being infantilised and indulged in his excesses by his mother. Zakir's father, however, becomes frustrated with his son's directionless and lavish lifestyle, and sends him to Palestine to drive ambulances in support of the war effort. Significantly, this is something Zakira desperately desires to do but is denied because of her gender. However, instead of heroically and triumphantly proving his masculinity, Zakir, in a drunken haze, crashes an ambulance and is sent home in disgrace. It is important to note that alcohol is prohibited by Islamic lifestyle principles and that drinking it relates to consumption. While Zakir's mother's over-indulgence of his excessive appetite might serve to entrench his privilege as the first-born son at home, this same excess is what leads to his disgrace in Palestine. This seems to suggest that the power and gender advantages of his position simultaneously function as limitations that deny him agency. This is similar to his twin's experiences of gender discrimination, despite her material wealth. I will explore below how this simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity finds expression through Meeran's use of food imagery.

Zakir's reaction to his failure to live up to his father's expectations is to resume his old lifestyle of excess upon his return to South Africa. However, the over-indulgence of his lifestyle no longer manifests in lavish parties, women and rich foods. Instead, he closets himself in his room and scrutinises obscure and seemingly ridiculous documents which suggest that Osama bin Laden is a fugitive in South Africa. He is described as eating 'Oreo-soup – an intriguing gruel of crushed cookies and buttermilk' (Meeran, 2009: 124), reflecting his breakdown which is already underway. Soon, he grows a 'scraggly' (Meeran, 2009: 205) beard, wears only a 'threadbare lime-green kurtha' (Meeran, 2009: 206) and 'develop[s] an insatiable hunger for (...) All Gold tinned beans' (Meeran, 2009: 205). His rejection of his mother's diet of sweet treats to eat the food of a fugitive could be read as an attempt on his part to distance himself from his failure in Palestine and to embrace a new lifestyle of religion and austerity, thereby striving to prove both his masculinity and his patriotism. Zakira's disgusted description of her brother's diet highlights its unnaturalness (Meeran, 2009: 205):

Nothing was more satisfying to him than a can of All Gold tinned beans, the sort that comes soaked in a tomato sauce and resembles strawberry jam. He would assemble the empty tins into pyramids and skyscrapers, taking up all the floor space of his bedroom. When the buttery tang of tinned beans became cloying he would turn to other tinned veggies: limp asparagus, sugary sweetcorn, even the nightmare that is Brussel sprouts preserved in sodium benzoate.

Eventually the towers of cans collapse in a bizarre parody of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. This allusion is reinforced by the fact that the title of this chapter is 'We Built This City with Tinned Bean Cans' (Meeran, 2009: 205), a reference to the 1985 hit song 'We Built This City' by Starship, which is partly about New York. The song is deliberately ambiguous, though, referring to New York, San Francisco and Cleveland, so that it becomes, in its bland, synthetic pop rock way, about the spirit of 1960s counterculture and how it has shaped America. This

could be seen as a manifestation, an appropriately corporate, deceptively thornless anthem, of the ‘decadent West’ so hated by Islamist fundamentalists. The combination of Zakir’s beard, his diet and his reclusive habits serve to identify him on an aesthetic level with the fugitive he seeks, and reflects the social anxiety surrounding an extreme Islamist upsurge in the post-9/11 culture. While in 2004 the ‘CIA named South Africa as one of the countries where a new tier of al-Qaeda leaders were hiding’ (Firsing, 2012: 10), Meeran’s portrayal of Zakir is so patently ridiculous that the association of him with the al-Qaeda movement becomes farcical. Zakira explains, ‘Now that [Zakir] was in self-imposed house arrest, cut off from his fast cars, fast drugs and fast women, he had turned to a gluttonous diet of tinned veg and religion’ (Meeran, 2009: 209). Her conflation of ‘tinned veg’ and ‘religion’ undermines the sincerity of Zakir’s attempts at reinvention and highlights the performative nature of his newfound fervour. This is reinforced by her description of how ‘[h]is farts hung over the house in a rich pall, much like the smog that shrouds Joburg in winter’ (Meeran, 2009: 205). While she initially refers to him as a ‘wild-eyed Islamist child soldier’ (Meeran, 2009: 205), his extreme behaviour ironically soon transforms him into ‘an Amazonian tree sloth’, whose ‘body turned into nothing but a binbag of tinned veggies’ (Meeran, 2009: 205). The references to his ‘farts’ and the description of his body as a ‘binbag’ imply disgust and regression, and serve to undermine the validity of his superficial attempts at transformation. The depiction of Zakir’s relationship to food can thus be read as undermining the categories of identification that the character attempts to assume. Much as Zakira is caught between the ambiguity of her sexual desires and the expectations imposed on her by her parents, Zakir too is caught between the different kinds of masculinity expected from Western modernity and the watered-down version of Islamic fundamentalism in South Africa. The depiction of Zakir’s changed relationship to food (significantly prompted by the alcohol he drinks before crashing the ambulance) signifies how food imagery can highlight the instability of constructions of culture and gender.

CONCLUSION: THE MOUTH AS MARKER OF UNSETTLED EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER AND CULTURAL FORMULATIONS

The interplay between expressions of food and desire finds further expression in the richly suggestive allusions evoked by the title of the novel, a paratextual element that warrants examination in relation to Meeran’s employment of the gustatory. The word ‘Saracen’, a European medieval designation that referred to a person of Muslim descent, was usually used pejoratively in connection to a male warrior. Meeran’s use of the word rewrites it in multiple ways. The fact that Sofie and her friends self-reflexively refer to themselves as the ‘Saracens’ wrests the term from colonial discourse and repositions it within their own sociocultural context, allowing them to reinscribe it with subversive meaning. Their incendiary appropriation of the word becomes even more provocative when seen in relation to their guerrilla activities: instead of being a pejorative reference to male warriors, it positions the Saracens as young women who enact their rebellion through camouflage and subterfuge. Meeran’s use of the word thus acts against both colonial discourse and traditional perceptions of Muslim gender roles. The word ‘Gates’ in the title of the novel is appropriate in more than one way. The gate, like the mouth, functions as a liminal space, a barrier between inside and outside. Like the mouth, a gate constitutes the border at which the self is confronted with that which is other, and subsequently through which both the self and the other are defined. Ambiguously, the gate serves to enclose and protect, but also to exclude and defend. It functions to represent the ambivalent ways in which Meeran’s characters negotiate the construction of their identities, and alludes to the alimentary cartography that shapes the topographic relief of his novel.

Clare Hemmings (1993: 137) calls for ‘a metaphor for bisexual bodies that signifies both the specific cultural interpretation of bisexuality and its potential for political and theoretical subversion’. Employing Judith Butler’s notion of identity formation as being ‘the mode by which Others become shit’, she proposes that this metaphor is found in the idea of the bisexual as ‘the double agent metaphorically covered in filth’. I suggest that this metaphor could centre on the queer body as constituted by an alimentary cartography that emphasises the blurring of appetite, consumption and subsumption. Like the gate and the mouth, this identity hinges on the liminal and playfully invites an incursion of the self. It is simultaneously informed by the concrete viscerality of food and the possibility for that fixity to become unmoored by presenting food as an alternate textual marker that liberates the sexual from being defined by conventional understandings of gender and subject-creation. Meeran’s novel demonstrates food’s potential to fracture queer formations of identity into swirling nuclei defined both by the materiality of the limits of gender and culture, and the ways in which these limits are always demanding transgression.

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'What? You Don't Want the Baby Anymore? Well, I'm Not Sure if I Do Either': A Kind of Decolonial Love in Shaida Kazie Ali's *Not a Fairy Tale*

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ABSTRACT

What do fairy tale representations that trouble normative configurations of identities offer feminist imaginings of love *about and for people of colour*? How does the re-writing of conventional fairy tales, framed within decolonial epistemologies that open up space for marginalised knowledges, allow us to think differently about selfhood and our relations to others? This article considers these questions through paying attention to what love looks like in Shaida Kazie Ali's reworked fairy tales in *Not a Fairy Tale*, published in 2010, where the characters are of colour, are Muslim, the women transgressive, and some men questioning of patriarchal masculinities. This article argues that Kazie Ali's tales take seriously a feminist re-thinking of gender, and is unique in destabilising myths about women and men of colour. This article asks: What does it look like when normative gender binaries written into Islam are unsettled? What does love look like when the desire to possess is absent? In other words, what could a decolonial form of love look like?

Keywords: Shaida Kazie Ali, *Not a Fairy Tale*, decolonial love, feminist re-writing

INTRODUCTION

Although love can be defined and enacted in multiple ways, in this article, I define love as care of the self and an/other where social ideas of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on, do not determine how one is able to love. Under conditions where humans are thriving, they are able to care for themselves and others optimally, but love takes on a different appearance when it is mediated by the harsh realities of dehumanisation, trauma, and of racial, gender and class oppression. In the Fanonian (1967, 1986) sense, black racism and its consequences of violence between racially subjugated people, means that the expression of care between human subjects may take on a different cloak: it is difficult under conditions of deprivation for love to be the force that might act to destabilise such subjugation. In similar ways, the heteronormative gender system works to constrain our abilities to care for one another in ways that are fully human; in other words, care that is not based on what Maria Lugones (2010) would call the coloniality of gender. Lugones explains the coloniality of gender as constituted in oppressive 'categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic' central to 'modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality' (Lugones, 2010: 742). Her critique moves from the ways in which colonised people have been subjected to adopting and internalising the male/female dichotomy as 'a normative construction of the social – a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society' (2010: 748). She asks feminists to avoid a 'colonising reading' that draws hierarchical and essentialist dichotomies onto colonised societies, erasing how gender as a binary system has been created by the coloniser. A decolonial feminist analysis, then, entails 'the possibility of overcoming' the coloniality of gender; the 'analysis of racialised, capitalist, gender oppression' (2010: 747) through an openness to the ways in which coloniality has been, and continues to be, resisted by those who inhabit a 'fractured locus' (754) on the borderlands, as subalterns. This resistance is about affirming 'life over profit, communalism over individualism... beings in relation, rather than dichotomously split over and over in hierarchically and violently ordered fragments' (Lugones, 2010: 754).

Nuraan Davids, similarly, makes an important case for 'a decoloniality of love, as a form of rupturing subjugated forms of knowledge, and hence, forms of being' (2019: 112). Carolyn Ureña posits that decolonial love 'promotes loving as an active, intersubjective process, and in so doing articulates an anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist affect and attitude that can guide the actions that work to dismantle oppressive regimes' (2017: 86). This kind of love

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works against coloniality, which, Cornelia Gräßner argues, constitutes ‘the desire to possess’ (2014: 66). This article looks at the ways in which Shaida Kazie Ali’s re-written fairy tales present forms of decolonial love.

WHAT ALREADY IS

Fairy tales matter – they are important learning resources in the life of a child. As early as 1976, Bruno Bettelheim’s book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, articulated the importance of fairy tales in the life of a child. Anthony Arthur, in an article discussing the book two years later, summarised Bettelheim’s position as follows:

[F]airy tales provide a world for children that reflects their impressions of what life should be like; they provide necessary assurance that the world has meaning and purpose, and that children can succeed despite their own limitations and in spite of imposed hardship. (Arthur, 1978: 456)

As a child of colour, of mixed ancestry and identifying as black growing up in South Africa, I was inundated with European fairy tales read to me by my parents. I loved them, even though none of the characters looked like me, with social realities quite foreign to my own. Still, the narratives were exciting, beautiful and interesting, and I came to know these tales by heart, even though, by the time I had a child of my own, I found it difficult to tell these stories without shifting aspects of the narrative, and the descriptions of the characters. In ‘Whose Truth? A Conversation with Maria Tatar’ (2012), Tatar, well known for her feminist critiques of fairy tales, similarly narrates how she often relayed variants of the popular Grimm fairy tales to make the tales more relevant, or more empowering, for her own children (Neile, 2012). Nay Saysourinho, in a podcast titled ‘Decolonising fairy tales and object-oriented pedagogy’ (2020), discusses the work necessary in rupturing the erasure of colonised cultures through conventional fairy tales. Saysourinho talks about ‘reconstellating [their] worlds’, when she reads to, or plays with, her daughter (2020: no page), through identifying where the objects referred to in the fairy tale come from – the tea, the material of a dress, the spices. Similar to Saysourinho, I would essentially decolonise the story, either through reading the stories as they appear in the text and then constantly intervening with my own questions, re-interpretations, and additions, or I would change the characters altogether so that my child could relate, so that he could engage these stories from the perspective as a child of colour growing up in South Africa.

Angela Carter’s work, particularly her retelling of popular European fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), has been central to my own feminist thinking about the possibilities of fairy tales to narrate gender otherwise. Ethel Johnston Phelps’ *Tatterhood and Other Tales* (1978), and Virginia Hamilton’s *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* (1995), offer new stories that are not retellings, but ones that imagine black and/or female characters differently – these stories begin from the premise that female humans and people of colour can define their own storylines and the directions these take.

In the broader African context, it is folktales and folklore that are unique: there are almost no feminist rewritings that unsettle and speak back to canonical and exclusionary European and American, and at times, racist and sexist fairy tales. While folktales and folklore create new tales, specific to space and place on the African continent, writing back to the centre is equally necessary in unsettling norms around what constitutes human subjects and their respective embodiment. Adri Marias’ *Ever Other: Unsettling Subjects in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales* (2017) is the only work I have been able to find that refers briefly to Shaida Kazie Ali’s rewritings. Marias’ focus is slightly different from my own, even though she is also interested in how the writer speaks back to Eurocentric notions of gender.

In her article, ‘Rediscovery of the magical: On fairy tales, feminism, and the new South Africa’ (2000), Emily Zinn talks about how, during the apartheid era in South Africa, there was no place for fantasy and fairy tales in literary studies. Over the last twenty years, however, ‘editors and critics of fairy tales have demonstrated the immense diversity of non-canonical tales and variations on canonical ones, while contemporary feminist writers have turned the genre of the fairy tale to a wide variety of new uses’ (2000: 251). Zinn quotes Marina Warner in her articulation of fairy tales’ ability to ‘upend ossified hierarchies and offer visions of transformation [that] could be enormously valuable’ in the South African context (2000: 251). In her analysis of Marita van der Vyver’s novel, *Entertaining Angels*, Zinn discusses how ‘moralistic, alternative fairy tales represent a challengingly wide range of perspectives and ideas, able to offer more transgressive and multifaceted stories’ (2000: 251). Zinn’s discussion of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s analysis of the popular Grimm tale, *Little Snow White*, reveals how Snow White, as

childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that has no story is in opposition to the Queen, who is ‘adult and demonic, [and] plainly wants a life of ‘significant action’, by definition an ‘unfeminine’ life of stories and storytelling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself,

she wants to kill the Snow White in herself, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house. (in Zinn, 2000: 251)

Zinn's research in the South African context reveals the significance of feminist readings that recast sexist representations of traditional fairy tales: they offer us alternatives in presenting women and men in ways that undermine damaging gender constructions which restrict the possibilities for a healthier human existence for both women and men. When race, class and religion comprise such an analysis in the South African context, the re-writing is one which interrupts colonial thinking; a decolonial opportunity. *Not a Fairy Tale*, told from a South African perspective, is therefore significant: Kazie Ali's recasting of women and men of colour (and Muslim in religious belief and practice) reflects a different imagination; one that presents a fracturing of colonial ways of loving and caring. As Davids explains, this re-imagining of love can be understood 'as a form of rupturing not only of the matrices of colonial power, but also rupturing human ways that insist upon binary ways of thinking and being' (2019: 117). If literature theorises, as Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* (2008), then Kazie Ali's satirical writing of people of colour, gender, and its mediations with religion, positions *Not a Fairy Tale* as a productive decolonial imaginary of feminist theorisation.

ABOUT THE NOVEL

Not a Fairy Tale is a novel essentially split into two parts, comprising re-written fairy tales as well as Indian-South African food recipes. The two parts reflect the tales of two Muslim sisters, Zuhra and Selena, growing up in a racially divisive apartheid South Africa. The first part constitutes Zuhra's tale, and it is she who is the narrator of her story. The second part of the novel is Selena's story, narrated in the third person. Who narrates is important in this novel: Zuhra, wilful and defiant, is spared patriarchal and possessive love through parental neglect due to their internalised racism. They are ashamed of being read as black and regard white people as intellectually superior. Zuhra is dark-skinned and curly-haired, and as she narrates, had 'grown up knowing [she] was therefore ugly' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 66). In her parents' view, Zuhra could not, therefore, be easily married off to a man in line with traditional Muslim practice. It is precisely her 'undesirability' in the racist and heteronormative gender market, however, which allows Zuhra the freedom to pursue her own life path. Selena, however, is not spared an arranged Muslim marriage: she is fair-skinned and regarded as conventionally beautiful – able to pass for white during the apartheid years in South Africa – and essentially bullied by her parents into performing both whiteness and demure Muslim femininity. Selena finds herself in a very unhappy, brutal marriage to a man who attempts to control her, mostly successfully. She cannot tell her own story; her story is told *for* her, her life path determined for her. The fairy tale reworkings that accompany each sister's tale are presented in nuanced ways in the novel and are specific to each sister's story. In this article, I focus particularly on the fairy tales accompanying Zuhra's story, as this is where we see the most acute examples of feminist decolonial imagination. The themes which constitute the analysis below are: other kinds of mothers; irreverent women; women who desire outside of heteronormativity; alternative constructions of masculinity, and finally, women choosing to love differently.

OTHER KINDS OF MOTHERS

Some of Kazie Ali's tales reveal the dark and gloomy underside of motherhood, the often-unspeakable experiences of mothers which they are expected to silence, particularly within social contexts. There is no shortage of research on what is classically termed as postpartum depression, although the term *matrescence*, coined in the 1970s by anthropologist, Dana Raphael (2011), is a lot more nuanced and less pathologically informed, taking into account the specific and unique psychological and development shifts women undergo through conception, pregnancy, and birthing, all similar to the adolescent experience. In Kazie Ali's narratives, this feminist perspective of mothering and motherhood is expressed in a refreshingly honest and humorous way. In what follows in this section, I engage the stories 'Dreams of Sleep', 'Fatherhood', and 'Different Tastes' in order to reflect on alternative enactments of motherhood.

In 'Dreams of Sleep', Zuhra has just given birth to baby Nazma. At the start of the chapter, Zuhra laments:

I fantasise about sleep the way men are supposed to think about sex all the time. I crave a night of uninterrupted sleep the way I craved chocolate before my period when I was a teenager. I long for my body to be mine, not to wake up ten times a night to feel little demanding hands clawing at my breasts for sustenance. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 83)

This lack of uninterrupted sleep has an understandable psychological effect on Zuhra's brain; in fact, it is why sleep deprivation has been used as a method of psychological torture in certain forms of interrogation (Cakal, 2019). Zuhra continues:

Sometimes I dance with her, sometimes I coo lullabies. Sometimes I fantasise about placing a soft feathery pillow over her dewy skin, her eyes like open flowers, and just holding it there until she sleeps for a hundred years. (2010: 83)

This almost-taboo discourse about mothering is continued in the rewritten fairy tale which follows 'Dreams of Sleep'. Titled paradoxically as 'Fatherhood', the tale is a reworking of the classic *Rumpelstiltskin*:

She promised me her firstborn; I'd come to collect. I was happy, I was delighted, I was thrilled. I would have a child of my own to love and nurture, and protect. Some little being who would look up to me even if he outgrew me. I pictured us in front of the fire, him asleep in his crib, me smoking my little pipe, both of us content. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 85)

This masculine fantasy is very quickly dissolved, in Mother's response to Father (or Rumpelstiltskin):

'Ah, it's you. At last you've come for the child. Took your time, didn't you?' She glanced irritably at her wristwatch. 'Yes, it's a girl. You said firstborn. You didn't specify gender ... Now, I've drawn up a schedule for each day of the week. Let's begin with Monday. That's your bowling night? Don't be ridiculous. No, there'll be none of that. You've got a child now: you need to be responsible. There'll be no more movie nights, no book club, no AA meetings, no full moon spell nights. Listen, you wanted the child, now you've got to live with your decision. You made me promise. A verbal contract. What? You don't want the baby anymore? Well, I'm not sure if I do either.' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 87)

In 'Fatherhood', Kazie Ali humorously presents us with a dispelling of the fantasy of parenting, revealing that one, women are not necessarily pre-destined for mothering; two, fathering is a choice that men can, at times, make *even when they have children*, and three, given the choice in a society not bent on defining motherhood in specific and sometimes unrealistic ways, women, too, would make different choices about how to mother their children if they choose to have them. The reference to gender by Mother – 'Yes, it's a girl. You said firstborn. You didn't specify gender' (2010: 87) – reveals the patriarchal inclination of Rumpelstiltskin's preference for male babies, which Mother simply dismisses as insignificant and moves on to more important matters around the child's needs and Rumpelstiltskin's responsibilities as a parent. In orthodox Islamic culture, as in other patriarchal systems, male babies are preferred. In this story, Mother (Zuhra) is willing and eager to *give* her child to Rumpelstiltskin, which distorts the age-old construction of mothers in the original Rumpelstiltskin story, while simultaneously upending particular expectations of Muslim mothers as maternalistic and nurturing. Here is a moment of rupturing of gender binary thinking that Davids (2019) insinuates in her engagement with decoloniality: Mother (Zuhra) unsettles gender normative expectations written into religion that ground ideas of both motherhood and fatherhood, offering us alternative representations of mothers, in particular, in this story.

While some of Kazie Ali's stories are critical of the stereotype of mothers and stepmothers as evil and dangerous, others are not. In the story 'Different Tastes', there is both a critique of the stereotype of the evil stepmother as well as an unapologetic taking on of a villainous role as the witch in the popular *Hansel and Gretel* tale. After Hansel and Gretel kill the witch who would have killed Hansel by placing him in the oven to cook and eventually eat, the two children settle into life with their father. Gretel wonders:

At home there was much rejoicing, and we three settled into a comfortable life, no one mentioning our stepmother. It's strange, now that I think about it after all these years: we never asked father how she died. Simply celebrated her absence. Had he killed her in a fit of guilt over dumping us in the forest? Did she run away with a man who could feed her? Did she die of hunger? What's even odder is that we never blamed him for our abandonment. It was always her fault; she was the villain in our story. (2010: 102)

Here, through Gretel's voice, Kazie Ali comments on the ironic ways in which the stepmother is erased by her father; her disappearance not even questioned. Instead, she is, through omission, and unproblematically, relegated to the role of wrongdoer in the tale. Interestingly, it is Gretel who, after her father dies and her brother marries, moves into the ill-fated gingerbread house and becomes the witch. Gretel becomes the new malefactor whose childhood and adolescence we, as readers, are familiar with: in other words, the reworked story offers readers insight into Gretel's history and *how she becomes the witch*. Gretel's tone is unapologetic and expectant:

We wait, the always-warm oven and me. To hear some stray, small person's juicy-pink lips, someone's lickable white milk teeth nibbling at my chocolate windows. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 103)

Phyllis Chesler's chapter entitled 'The mother-daughter relationship in fairy tale, myth, and Greek tragedy', reveals how fairy tales historically function as 'a secret history of embattled female relationships – a history that we repress only at our own peril' (2009: 167). According to Chesler, some fairy tale themes still resonate today, in real-life relationships between mothers or mothers-in-law, and daughters or stepdaughters. Ideas of being 'replaced' by younger, fertile women, either through marriage (in the past) or in the workplace (currently), do exist, and Chesler offers evidenced accounts of these kinds of stories in her chapter. In fact, she argues that,

harsh fairy-tale-like female rivalries still exist in countries where husband-based extended families, child marriage, child-prostitution, arranged marriages, polygamy, concubinage, and intractable poverty once existed or still do. (Chesler, 2009: 176)

'Mad' mothers, Chesler argues, sometimes do serious psychological harm to their biological daughters, and there are examples of this in Greek mythology (Queen Clytemnestra and her daughter, Elektra, is one example). Clytemnestra, eventually murdered by her daughter for murdering her father, Agamemnon, competed with Elektra to remain the only sexually desirable woman: 'Clytemnestra refuses to yield to her daughter's inevitable sexual ascent' (Chesler, 2009: 200).

There are also cases of complicated, passionate, 'difficult' feminist women whose mothers were described as abusive or psychotic: Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, Signe Hammer and Linda Gray Sexton are examples. Sylvia Plath's tumultuous relationship with her own mother, some argue, resulted in her suicide, a reflection of her competition with her mother. Through suicide, Chesler argues, Plath 'beat' her mother through absenting 'herself entirely from the lives of her two children' (2009: 191). In addition, Plath's relationship to her husband, Ted Hughes, also tumultuous, has been argued by some to have been unfairly represented: Plath, according to Chesler, was also 'cold, secretive, asocial' and 'intensely jealous' (2009: 190).

Think about the evil stepmothers in *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* or *Hansel and Gretel*. We are never offered any context to why they are considered evil and unloving of their stepchildren; instead, they are overwhelmingly presented as searching for ways to rid themselves of these children, apparently in order to have a more wholesome relationship with their father, uninterrupted by the responsibilities of parenting. The Disney film, *Maleficent* (2014), is one narrative that shifts the original *Sleeping Beauty* tale by Giambattista Basile, taking seriously the misogynist violence perpetrated against Maleficent by the man she loves (the king), resulting in a stepmother character who is understandably cautious of love and of other human beings, including children. Interesting, too, is that Maleficent and Princess Aurora (the king's daughter) fall in love – Maleficent *learns to love* the girl in a relationship that resembles one between a mother and daughter. Perhaps the film wishes to reflect that it is the violence of patriarchy that interrupts the potential for love and care between these two female characters, although this is not made clear. Nonetheless, the narrative is successful in marginalising the centrality of powerful men in the film: it is the love connection between Maleficent and Aurora that is set up as central in unsettling the conventionality of the *Sleeping Beauty* story.

Motherhood, as a state of being *in service to*, has a long recorded written history. In 1995, Adrienne Rich wrote about women's struggle to draw together parenting as a woman, with what she called 'the subversive function of the imagination' (Rich, 1995: 174). Historically, conventional mothering has meant taking care of others (husbands or other kinds of male partners, and children) without centralising the self. Andrea O'Reilly's work (2004) adds yet another layer to the experience of mothering, centralising race and class and raising questions about what it means to be a black mother with black children in our world: the anxiety of keeping children of colour safe in structurally racist societies are added realities for mothers of colour. Although this has changed to different extents over the last few decades – much of it due to feminist activism and struggle – mothering and fathering are generally not held to the same standard. Normative gendered discourse constitutes the belief that mothers must feel a natural urge to parent – to be in service to multiple others. Guilt for not wanting to measure up to these unreachable standards for women as mothers, has been discussed by writers across the globe, including, but not limited to, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels' *Mommy Myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined all women* (2005) and Rosemary Agonito's *The Last Taboo: Saying No to Motherhood* (2014), as well as Lou-Marié Kruger in her recent book, *Motherhood and Melancholia* (2020). Kruger's work focuses particularly on how class and race in the South African context impact on women's circumstances and abilities to make choices around motherhood. In the re-written fairy tales above, Kazie Ali represents some of these discourses, offering us a disturbance of – a break – in gender normative thinking about motherhood. We are presented with reworked tales that imagine what a mother's love looks like when she is exhausted due to sleep deprivation in 'Dreams of Sleep'; how the distance between fathers and children allow the former to make different parenting choices which essentially free them of parental responsibility in 'Fatherhood', and how we need to think critically about the evil stepmother trope in fairy tales in 'Different Tastes'. It is noteworthy that the reworked tales discussed above accompany Zuhra's story in Kazie Ali's novel: her own experiences into new motherhood are tied to the religious and cultural worlds – mediated by race and gender – she inhabits. It is Zuhra's acceptance of her own mother's struggle to love her

(discussed later), which is inadvertently based on her traumas related to South African racial histories, that allows for a decolonial reading of Kazie Ali's re-written fairy tales.

ACCEPTABLY IRREVERENT WOMEN: RAPUNZEL AND SLEEPING BEAUTY

The stories 'The Ties That Bind' and 'After the Awakening' are another two of Kazie Ali's feminist reworkings which re-imagine the respective protagonists, Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty, as subversive women. In 'The Ties That Bind', Rapunzel questions the 'spiteful bitch-witch' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 59) whose magical spell led to the 'ludicrously long hair', spun-gold in colour, that hadn't been washed in years:

'How do the Grimms describe it? "Spun-gold". Spun-gold my arse', laments Rapunzel. 'She gave me this length, this colour, but she never thought of the maintenance! And now she's so old, she's forgotten her own spells. Bitch. Witch'. (2010: 59)

Rapunzel is quite unforgiving of the witch, although her aggressive language does not appear to be that of a victim held captive. Instead, this re-writing of the story satirically casts the witch as unapologetically evil and spiteful and does not offer reasons for what would be regarded conventionally as these 'unfeminine' characteristics. This revising ties into Zuhra's own complicated relationship with her mother, Hafsa, who in many ways – along with her father before he passed away – did not parent her with the kind of love that is critical of racial subjugation, inequalities, and power in the South African context. Instead, it is precisely Zuhra and Selena's parents' internalised racism – and self-hatred, consequently – which they unintentionally and carelessly pass on to their children, although this is less successful with Zuhra, as I reveal in the section above on 'Other kinds of mothers'. In other words, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes, the parents could be described as examples of '*damné*', subjects 'who cannot give because what he or she has, has been taken from him or her' (2007: 258). Zuhra and Selena's parents mirror the figure of the *damné*, produced through coloniality, with little to no energy to be generous in the world: this lack of 'gift-giving' energy (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 258), in some ways, could limit parenting that allows children, and later adults, to encounter the world generously. However, both Zuhra and Selena, in different ways and at disparate moments in their journeys into and through adulthood, resist their parents' enactments of caregiving, generating new ways of being in the world that are premised on love for oneself and others.

For example, it is precisely that Zuhra was left on her own – ignored, in some ways – which allowed her the freedom to choose a life path that gives her more joy. In fact, in a chapter titled 'Family Lice' in Kazie Ali's novel, Zuhra's mother cuts her hair in order to rid her scalp of lice, which was spreading at Zuhra's school. Hafsa refuses to take Zuhra to the hair salon, claiming that her daughter's hair is too '*kroes*',¹ another racially denigrating term that Hafsa uses to disparage her daughter for not being fairer-skinned and straighter-haired. Similar to the re-written Rapunzel in 'The Ties that Bind' above, Zuhra, however, relishes in the freedom of a naked neck after her hair cut, musing: 'I hear the crunch as the scissor snip snips through my hair, munching, swallowing long threads of me, leaving my neck naked and cold and light. Free' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 33). Selena, on the other hand, for large chunks of her childhood, suffers abuse at the hands of her mother and father in multiple ways, and then later, her husband, because of her parents' desire to possess her – to choose a path for their daughter that would grant the family respectability in a racially and economically divisive and cruel apartheid South Africa.

The critique in Kazie Ali's story, 'After the Awakening', also suggests female irreverence with the object of unsettling gender norms, including arranged Muslim marriages. Reworked from the classic *Sleeping Beauty* tale, the girl states that it was 'simple coincidence' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 136) that the prince – smug and who thinks he is special – arrived at the same time as she awoke, when the spell splintered. She spends her time sleeping in order to avoid him, including 'when he practices his lovemaking act on [her]' (2010: 136). The prince, who is Muslim and married to Snow White, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, dismisses her dislike of him 'with a wave of his manicured nails' (2010: 137). She drugs him, and he falls to the floor 'in a poignant display of femininity before he collapses in a swoon' (2010: 136). The tale ends with the narrator stating, 'The idiot. He never understood that he was a mere boy, while I am a woman who's lived for a hundred and sixty years' (2010: 137). The critique, here, is of arranged marriages in Islam, which in Zuhra and Selena's family, are considered a normative means to secure 'good' husbands for daughters. Kazie Ali ruptures what is presented as traditional patriarchal practice, in the form of arranged marriages to three women who are also sisters, through re-characterising the prince as 'idiotic' and inexperienced: it is the princess who presents wisdom and experience in the tale; it is she who decides how she wants to live, unsettling gender binaries that make arranged heterosexual marriages a possibility in the first instance.

¹ The term is a racially offensive one meant to ridicule hair that is curly or bushy and not straight. It is usually tied, in the South African context, to the hair of people of colour.

DESIRING GIRLS AND WOMEN IN *CINDERELLA AND FROG PRINCE*

Throughout Kazi Ali's stories, we are presented with girls and women who desire that which they have been denied. In this section, I focus specifically on the re-imagined protagonists in two well-known stories: *Cinderella* and *Frog Prince*. 'Cinderella's Wish' casts a young girl child in atypical terms, mirroring Zuhra's own sense of self. When Cinderella grows tired of cleaning for her stepmother and wishes for a 'different life' (2010: 31), her cat transforms into a spiritual being resembling a jinn², rather than a fairy godmother, as is the case in the original fairy tale. The jinn says:

I'm here to grant you a new life. You'll have new clothes, jewels, and of course a prince for a husband, and you'll bear him many fine sons. Let's begin. First, you'll need – What's wrong? Why the sad face? (2010: 32)

In response, Cinderella states that she does not want to marry at all, and particularly not to a man she's never met. Instead, her wish is to learn about the world through study. Surprised at this rather strange and unusual wish, the jinn magically creates a 'gigantic library filled with books' (32), leaving Cinderella overjoyed.

Similarly, Kazie Ali's 'Promises Promises', as a re-imagined *Frog Prince* story, presents the female narrator as pressurised by her father to marry Mr. Froggy, whom she describes as a revolting 'slimy green creature' whose tadpoles she did not 'want swimming in [her] clean body every night' (Kazie Ali, 2010: 54). This story, meant to mirror that of Selena's in the novel, where she imagines taking revenge on her deceitful husband (the marriage arranged by her parents), is one of retribution and revenge, an important destabilisation of gender binaries. The protagonist arranges the murder of Mr. Froggy through leaving out her cat's (Fluffy) golden food pellets, seemingly poisonous for frogs. After successfully getting rid of her potential frog husband, the narrator claims in relief:

Next week Fluffy and I are off on a world tour. I've always dreamt of travelling – perhaps I'll even look up Mother, now that I'm of legal age and Daddy can't keep us apart any longer (Kazie Ali, 2010: 55).

It is clear, from both 'Cinderella's Wish' and 'Promises Promises', that there is an unsettling of dominant ideas of gender; the narrators do not wish to be married in heteronormative unions, enforced by their fathers. Within the context of *Not a Fairy Tale*, the critique is aimed at Islamic arranged marriages. Using satire, Kazie Ali reveals in 'Cinderella's Wish' how what would ordinarily be regarded as a wish-come-true in restrictive gender discourse, and in the conventional fairy tale, is not a wish for the protagonist at all: she desires to pursue more interesting endeavours, her adventures including education and travel. This re-writing by Kazie Ali places Muslim women of colour as drivers of their own destinies, not curtailed by religious value systems that marginalise and erase their interests. Of course, in the context of *Not a Fairy Tale*, this is not the situation for all women – Selena's journey is one which is incredibly brutal and relentless: her forced submission to her parents and then her husband had, for a long time into adulthood, left her unable to imagine life outside of domestication and service to others. The death of her son had left her traumatised. Her tale is therefore a lot more troubled and complicated, her process of defining her own life, a lot harder. For a long time, she is stuck within a system that leaves her violated and subjugated, not at all different from the life of her mother.

WOLFIE UNLEASHED, OR PREDATORY MASCULINITY RE-VISITED IN *LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD*

The popular phrase, 'men are dogs', is rooted in ideas of masculinities as dog- or wolf-like: men are believed to be inherently sexually rapacious, animalistic and predatory, and uncontrollable around women they desire. These gender myths infiltrate 'real life' as well as fairy tales. Think, for example, of Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* – the girl in her red cape carries a basket of foodstuff through the woods on her travels to her grandmother. She is unknowingly followed by the big bad wolf, who desires to eat both the innocent grandmother and the little girl. The classical tale ends with the wolf disguised as the little girl in order to gain access to the grandmother, and the latter's horrible death through consumption by the wolf. There have, of course, been multiple renditions of this tale over time – the one I refer to above is the most well-known. There have also been many feminist critiques

² In her book, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (2009), Amira el-Zein discusses the complexity of the jinn as 'intermediary beings within Islam', who 'could at anytime shift toward goodness or toward evil' (2009: xi). Contrary to Western conceptualisations, jinn in Islam are 'not demons opposed to angels. They are a third category of beings different from both angels and demons' (el-Zein, 2009: xi).

of this tale in terms of the ways in which heteronormative gender and sexual roles have been naturalised, with Angela Carter's "The Werewolf" (1995) rendition being one such early example.

Kazie Ali's re-writing of the tale, entitled 'Yours Faithfully', also works to unsettle normative gender and sexual roles, but ties these to religion, love, desire and masculinity in disruptive ways. Wolfie writes:

Dear Ms Hood

You don't know me, but I've been watching you for years, since you were a little girl... Yes, I have loved you from afar all these years, from the shadows of the woods. I first saw you one day when you were a little girl, taking a basket of goodies to your sick grandmother. My mouth watered at the sight of you. It was all I could do not to gobble you up right there and then, but I thought, Why not follow you and have your granny, too?

But by the time you got to your grandmother's house, something in my consciousness had shifted. I knew I loved you, but that I did not have to consume you and your relations. I started therapy. I stopped chasing the three little pigs (that was part of my self-destructive youth). I became vegetarian. I noticed you always had your hair covered, and I wondered if you were Muslim. I spent years studying Islam in the hope that this would impress you. (Kazie Ali, 2010: 95)

In this rendition, Wolfie is Muslim, and is thoughtful, incisive and sensitive, spending time learning how to control his 'animalistic' impulses (as all human beings need to do in order to live amongst others in the world). Wolfie, rather than using brute force and control, attempts to woo Ms Hood (as she is called in Kazie Ali's narrative) through romantic letter writing. Connecting 'Yours Faithfully' to 'The Ties That Bind', Kazie Ali introduces us to politically leftist and gender-progressive male subjects who cannot in simple terms be labelled as Muslim patriarchs. In 'The Ties That Bind', the prince, while saving Rapunzel from the bitch-witch, says:

'Your hair just gets in our way, let's chop it off.'

I say, 'bitch-witch says men find long hair sexy.'

He says, 'Maybe, but not me, and not this long.'

I ask him if he thinks I'm beautiful.

'Yeah, you're gorgeous, but I didn't fall in love with you because of your face. I couldn't see your face where you stood, way up in the clouds, your features obscured by your blonde tresses. It was your voice, it was your maudlin song; you vocalised my sorrows, my despair at being a prince in this dark land of hard-working heroines, wicked wolves, abusive parents, gold-grabbing kings and murderous tots'. (2010: 59)

This prince obviously desires Rapunzel because of her talent, not her looks, and his general politics are what influences his views on gender and sexuality. When Rapunzel says, 'Listen, I know it's traditional for the heroine to marry her rescuer, but I can't marry you. You're the first man I've seen. I need to do some sexual experimenting first' (2010: 60), the prince logically responds, 'Okay, I'll wait. And if you don't choose me, at least we'll make music together' (2010: 60). This unsettling of the popular fairy tale offers a feminist reworking that turns on its head ideas of desperate maidens waiting to be saved by handsome, brave princes. Instead, Kazie Ali presents us with a young woman who prefers short hair because it is practical for her, desires to be free to explore sexually, and a man who finds talent more attractive than looks in a woman and is not threatened by her need to be sexually explorative with other men. It is an important rewriting, proposing an alternative view on romance, attraction and love, and shifting damaging heteronormative values that perpetuate outdated gender and Islamic norms that restrict, rather than invite, freedom.

WOMEN CHOOSING TO LOVE DIFFERENTLY, OR I DON'T HAVE TO ASK HIM TO DO THE COOKING

Similar to the discourse that 'men are dogs', is the feminist discourse (see Sanger, 2019) that situates men as a problem, and in heteronormative relationships, women are always in struggle with them: the relationships are always unequal. Further, women do not *choose* men; men choose them, and women then spend the rest of their lives – unwillingly and reluctantly – begging men to take care of themselves and do household chores. This is obviously an unhealthy and damaging perpetuation of gender roles in heteronormative relationships; it assumes a

binary relationship where women are always good and virtuous, and men are always bad and self-centred. It does little for eradicating damaging ideas of gender and presents love as unequal: onerous on both women and men. In a few of the stories in *Not a Fairy Tale*, Kazie Ali upsets such understandings of gender and love, reminding readers that any kind of dogmatic, inflexible conceptualisations of identity, including religious ones, are unrealistic. Re-storying the tropes that naturalise deterministic notions of gender allows us to take heed of the multiple ways in which women and men can exist in the world and could possibly love each other. This is a re-imagining of conservative ideas of heterosexuality. Kazie Ali's 'A Mother's Love' is one such feminist tale about a woman choosing whom to love. Reminiscent of the Grimm story *Changeling*, the story revolves around a mother's search for her ethereal, rosebud-like daughter, conceived from the mother's magic spell. The child had been snatched multiple times, by different animals – including a toad, a mole, and a mouse – for the purpose of arranged marriages with various male creatures (arranged marriages are clearly a motif in the novel!). After many failed attempts at finding her daughter, she appears at her mother's door relating her adventures and announcing that she'd found her prince 'of the Blossoms. My choice; my own kind. I met him in a flower, and we've spent a lot of time getting to know each other... I am small, but no longer locked' (2010: 151). Again, Kazie Ali critiques dogmatic Islamic convention and the normative gender system where women should consider themselves as privileged to be desired by an always handsome and dashing prince: they are fortunate to be considered for marriage and procreation. In 'A Mother's Love', it is the girl who chooses how and whom to love, similar to 'The Ties That Bind' where Rapunzel does not automatically have to marry the man who rescued her. Muslim women of colour, Kazie Ali seems to be posing, have choices.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We need more writing that unsettles that which is taken for granted knowledge about how humans are supposed to engage themselves and others in the world. This knowledge is often based on the worlds of privileged, white subjects and communities. Disturbing colonial thinking is one way in which we can begin presenting the world in fairer, more just ways: there are many stories that have been hidden and untold – there is an archive to build. It is a large project in which engagement with reworked European fairy tales are only a small part. Paying attention to what has been left out or erased is a significant part of decolonial work. Shaida Kazie Ali's storytelling, not well-known either in South Africa or globally, offers feminist theorisation that imagines a decolonial kind of love. Her work upsets ways of being that are inflexible and unmoving. She presents gender binaries, gender relations and gender roles for people of colour, who are also Muslim, differently, and by extension, ruptures colonial thinking. Consequently, decolonial forms of love – and of being – become possible.

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‘Queer Villainy’: Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* as Testimony to Lesbian Abuse and Love

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) are popularly believed to be the exclusive preserve of the heterosexual population. This assumption underpins the fact that policy and interventions aimed at reducing DVA often focus on remediating men’s behaviour so that they become less violent towards women. Such views exclude the fact that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) people also experience DVA. This lack of knowledge is partly due to the lack of legitimacy afforded to non-heterosexual relationships. This extends to literary-cultural representations, and there is a particular dearth of texts representing lesbian partnerships. Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir, *In the Dream House* (2019), fills a gap in literary representations of lesbian relationships, as well as in representations of DVA between same-sex partners. In this article, we read the work as literary scholars, but we do not interpret it as a hermetically sealed work of art with no reference to the world. Instead, we argue that it makes an important contribution, in literary form, to the emerging scholarship on DVA amongst LGBTQ people. We explore how its literary strategies create rich connections with popular culture and give it a place in the queer archive.

Keywords: Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*, lesbian interpersonal abuse, lesbian writing, DVA

INTRODUCTION

While DVA amongst cisgendered heterosexual people has long been studied, their occurrence amongst LGBTQ people has only been recognised comparatively recently. Hester, Donovan and Fahmy trace the emergence of this body of scholarship, noting that DVA amongst lesbians first became visible in the 1980s, before DVA amongst gay, bisexual and/or transgender people. At the same time, there was a counter-move among feminists to deny and/or suppress the knowledge that lesbians were engaged in DVA since this would counter the long-held belief that lesbian intimate partner relationships are egalitarian and utopian, as well as the idea that women are naturally less violent than men. Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes’s article, ‘Help-seeking among lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender victims/survivors of domestic violence and abuse’, lists a number of factors that militate against LGBTQ people seeking help when they have experienced DVA.¹ One notable factor is the heteronormative ‘story’. Donovan and Barnes write that ‘[the] emphasis on female victims/survivors and male perpetrators in government strategies to address DVA confirms the binaried public story that DVA is a heterosexual problem’ (2020: 557). As they assert, this unfortunately ‘invisibilises women as perpetrators and men as victims, and fuels myths that DVA between women will not be as harmful or risky as that from a man towards a woman’ (2020: 561). This notion feeds into patriarchal media images of men as violent aggressors and women as passive victims, reinforcing heteronormative concepts of gender and sexuality as binary. All these mistaken ideas clearly need to be exploded: research on DVA among LGBTQ people, while it challenges some cherished feminist ideas about lesbian existence, also challenges the binary of the strong man/weak woman. Luca Rollè, Giulia Giardina, Angela Calderara, Eva Gerino, and Piera Brustia (among other authors) confirm that the prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among LGBTQ people is similar to that among heterosexual people:

¹ In keeping with Donovan and Barnes’s usage, this article uses ‘DVA’ to refer to acts of intimate partner violence (IPV), whether this is physical, emotional, financial or social (and we recognise the intersections of these different types of abuse).

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61.1% of bisexual women, 43.8% of lesbian women, 37.3% of bisexual men, and 26.0% of homosexual men experienced IPV during their life, while 35.0% of heterosexual women and 29.0% of heterosexual men experienced IPV.

When episodes of severe violence were considered, prevalence was similar or higher for LGB adults (bisexual women: 49.3%; lesbian women: 29.4%; homosexual men: 16.4%) compared to heterosexual adults (heterosexual women: 23.6%; heterosexual men: 13.9%). (2018: 2)

As these figures attest, DVA in the United States is, regrettably, common among LGBTQ people.

As lesbians who have both experienced psychological and emotional abuse over long periods from our same-sex partners, we have a personal interest in bringing DVA among LGBTQ people to light. *In the Dream House* has helped both of us to understand that we are not alone in having been abused by women we once loved.

In the discussion that follows, we argue that *In the Dream House* occupies a unique position in the emerging scholarship on DVA among LGBTQ people precisely because it is a *literary* account of real, historical experiences. Its portrayal of a love gone dangerously wrong draws on the affordances of literary representation such as irony, metaphor and focalisation in order to build up a work of art that holds great significance for the study of gender and love.

DREAM HOUSE AS NOT (A) METAPHOR

Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House: A Memoir* was published in 2019. It tells the story, set in the United States, of a lesbian couple. The partners rent a house in Bloomington, Indiana, which they call 'the Dream House' in recognition of the fact that their relationship appears initially to fulfil all their dreams. One partner is studying creative writing in Bloomington, while the other lives in Iowa and visits on occasions. The memoir narrates the gradual decay of the relationship into DVA, with the narrator's girlfriend becoming increasingly irrational and abusive. Finally, the relationship ends and the narrator is left to rebuild her life, which she achieves through a new relationship. The memoir represents a kind of catharsis for the narrator and helps her to develop a language for the growth of an abusive relationship. It also serves as a counter-example for people who might think that lesbian relationships are utopian.

Our first introduction to *In the Dream House* is the cover image of the memoir. The reader is immediately drawn to the image of a deserted and possibly haunted house. In the doorway of the house one can see the outline of a person. Moonlight illuminates the house and textures its concrete status. The house has windows, curtains, a chimney, an outside balcony or terrace and roof, and stairs that lead to its entrance. But the spectral image on the bottom floor and the hole in the top floor, through which we see the brooding face of a young woman, refer to historical and mystical aspects of the house which we do not know. The bottom floor, which lies beneath the woman's face, and its deserted status contrast with the second floor and invite the viewer to a story that has a concrete architecture.

The solid reality of the house's visual representation parallels the fact that *In the Dream House* is not fiction, but memoir, which is an account of a person's experiences in their own words. Machado re-emphasises the fact that the events she recalls really happened to her in a chapter entitled '*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*':

If I cared to, I could give you [the house's] address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of that Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside. (2019: 9)

In keeping with Machado's insistence on the concrete nature of the Dream House, memoir differs from fiction in that it 'presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans' experience' (Couser, 2012: 15). This is complex in *In the Dream House*, where Machado employs numerous literary strategies, including non-chronological narration, the subversion of readers' expectations through irony, the inclusion of footnotes providing references, and intertextual comparisons to a variety of other literary genres. The text explicitly foregrounds its own contrivance, which could lead the reader to assume that it is based on fictional events; yet, as Machado assures us, it depicts real experiences. To this extent, it makes a significant contribution to the corpus of research on DVA among LGBTQ people.

DREAM HOUSE AS METAPHOR

In the Dream House recounts DVA between Machado and her female partner at the time. To understand the text, it is necessary to disentangle the metaphor of the Dream House.

The prologue to the memoir and all the entries that constitute the full account of emotional abuse between two lesbians reinstate the importance of the architecture of the memoir and its constituent parts. The entry ‘*Dream House* as Prologue’ provides concrete reference to Machado’s fascination with the concept of the house and haunted houses, as well as her knowledge and interest in the conceptual architecture of the historical and contemporary queer archive.

In this entry, Machado refers to the creative scholarly work of US scholar, José Esteban Muñoz, in the disciplinary areas of cultural studies, queer studies and queer archives. Drawing from Muñoz’s theorisation of queer evidence and the archive, Machado writes:

The late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz pointed out that ‘queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present.’ What gets left behind? Gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence. (2019: 4-5)

The retelling of queer life by a queer author in *In the Dream House* is vexed by the fact that most life stories are heteronormative. In this context, Muñoz’s theorising about ephemera as evidence (2008) can become a productive lens through which to analyse queer experiences of violence. According to Muñoz:

Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored within the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived. (2008:10-11)

Machado’s memoir relies on the personal, emotional, ephemeral evidence of interaction between herself and her lesbian partner. As Donovan and Barnes have demonstrated, the ‘public story’ tends to erase abuse between women. In addition, there is a belief that emotional abuse is ‘not severe’ because it does not leave marks on the body; a broken bone or a bruise is taken more seriously than sustained gaslighting, even though the bone may knit and the bruise heal before a person who has been gaslighted learns to trust again. Finally, trauma is, by its nature, mostly silent because it is experienced at a level beyond words (Caruth, 1996). Thus, even when Machado is deeply shocked by her partner’s psychological cruelty, she lives it through intense physical sensations rather than naming the emotions that arise within her and does not use the word ‘abuse’ at all until very late in the text.

The image of the ‘Dream House’ calls to mind a couple, deeply in love, moving into their first home and decorating it to their taste. In this light, there is a powerful irony in Machado’s choice of *In the Dream House* as the title of her memoir: it is a location in which more nightmares have been experienced than dreams that have come true. Still, by using the phrase ‘Dream House’, Machado links her experiences to the fantasy of living in a shared home, reminding the reader that her abuse began as a romantic ideal.

The many entries that comprise *In the Dream House* testify to the productive capacity of trauma, which US Queer Studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich also emphasises:

As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion. Sexual acts, butch-femme discourse, queer transnational publics, incest, AIDS and AIDS activism, grassroots archives – these are some of the sites of lesbian public culture where I have not only found the traces of trauma but ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions. (2003: 2-3)

Cvetkovich highlights here that the lens of trauma studies may underscore features of lesbian life that have been erased from legitimate/d historical evidence. We argue that this is precisely what *In the Dream House* accomplishes. By surfacing DVA between lesbian partners, it overturns the trope of male abuser versus female victim, as well as the binary opposition of masculinity as aggressive and femininity as passive.

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

In the Dream House is an unconventional, self-consciously literary memoir. One of its most prominent techniques is intertextuality. Each of its episodic entries is titled ‘*Dream House* as ...’ and these titles compare the Dream House to a wide range of literary and cultural phenomena. These include literary genres such as ‘Picaresque’ (2019: 10-11), ‘Time Travel’ (2019: 18), ‘Lesbian Cult Classic’ (2019: 20), ‘Confession’ (2019: 22), and ‘Romance Novel’ (2019: 28). There are also references to parts of literary texts and literary strategies, such as ‘Exercise in Point of View’ (2019: 14), ‘Inciting Incident’ (2019: 15), ‘Folklore Taxonomy’ (2019: 36-27) and ‘Star-Crossed Lovers’ (2019: 39).

Some of the titles allude to cultural themes, such as 'Man vs. Nature' (2019: 52), 'Lesson Learned' (2019: 70-71) and 'Creature Feature' (2019: 75). Others allude to clichés, such as 'Murder Mystery' (2019: 182), 'The Apocalypse' (2019: 186), 'The Pool of Tears' (2019: 190), 'Sodom' (2019: 195), 'Sex and Death' (2019: 216-217), 'Nightmare on Elm Street' (2019: 221) and finally 'Cliché' (2019: 233). These entries link *In the Dream House* to extreme, life-threatening exaggerated experiences, reminding the reader that abuse between people is commonplace. Also, however, these point to the extremity of the affective experiences of being abused by an intimate partner. As Machado writes in '*Dream House* as Cliché':

Your brain can't engage a cliché, not properly—it skitters right over the phrase or sentence or idea without a second thought. To describe an abusive situation is almost certainly to deploy cliché: 'If I can't have you, no one can.' 'Who will believe you?' 'It was good, then it was bad, then it was good again.' 'If I stayed, I would have died.' (2019: 233)

Clichés are statements that have been used so many times they have lost the power to communicate. Thus, any abusive relationship is difficult to narrate precisely because cultural texts such as the infamous popular film *9½ Weeks* (1986) and the *Fifty Shades* book and film trilogy (2011-2021) have fascinated audiences with their imaginative exaggeration of DVA. The comparison with cliché implies not only that the extreme cruelty of the DVA depicted in *In the Dream House* is unbelievable, but also that it is real.

The entries in *In the Dream House* are brief: one is a single sentence. Cumulatively, they relate Machado's experiences of DVA to the literary archive. Thus the memoir is not only a record of a specific individual's experience, but is linked to many different kinds of literary texts, including those that provide the foundation of a culture ('Folklore Taxonomy' (2019: 36-37); those in other languages ('Déjà Vu' (2019: 29, 98, and 181); 'L'appel du Vide' (2019, 177); and 'L'esprit de L'escalier' (2019: 236-237)); texts in science fiction, fantasy, thriller, and many other genres. In this way Machado creates a network of literary community around her experiences with the woman in the Dream House as part of coming to terms with an accumulation of subtle acts of interpersonal abuse, which have isolated her and made her feel paralysed by her own silence.

The title '*Dream House* as Déjà Vu' appears three times: early in the narrative, when Machado and her partner have just fallen in love; later on, when their relationship has deteriorated into DVA, and finally, when it is nearly over. Each entry consists of a paragraph, and they contain many of the same declarations of love, including 'she loves you', 'she wants to keep you safe' and 'you're sexy' (2019: 29, 98 and 181). There are subtle differences between the entries, though. In the second, the phrase 'she says' prefacing Machado's partner's declarations, thus distancing Machado and the reader from the ostensibly loving content of these utterances. By the time the reader reaches the third entry, we understand that Machado's partner is not only deliberately cruel, but also duplicitous: her saying something does not make it true. The shifts between these three entries signal the sinister collapse of the relationship into a cycle of psychological abuse. In this way Machado exploits the slight, unnerving differences between a loving relationship and one that is infused with subtle cruelty.

Machado uses footnotes to relate motifs in her memoir to Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1960) and Aarne-Thompson-Uther's *Classification of Folk Tales* (MFTD, 2023). The references to these texts connect the experiences in the text with a set of foundational cultural texts. The entry '*Dream House* as Folktale Taxonomy' ends with a riddle:

There is a Quichua riddle: El que me nombra, me rompe. Whatever names me, breaks me. The solution, of course, is 'silence.' But the truth is, anyone who knows your name can break you in two. (Machado, 2019: 37)

Nominalism is a common feature of folktales, as Machado's footnote explains: 'Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him' (2019: 37). It also appears in fantasy, most notably in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Books of Earthsea*, where 'the Rule of Names' dictates: 'Magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing' (2018: 36). As a result of the vacillation between knowing and not-knowing that Caruth identifies as uniting trauma and literature, Machado cannot name DVA while she is experiencing it. An example occurs early in the relationship, when she and her partner are both marking standardised tests for Pearson.² Machado hears another woman sobbing in the toilet cubicle in the bathroom, and expresses compassion; she and the woman talk for two hours. At the end of their conversation, Machado joins her partner and is met with a stream of verbal abuse:

'You are the most inconsiderate fucking person I've ever met and how fucking dare you just walk out of the building with no explanation like that.'

² Pearson is an educational company based in the United States of America (Pearson, 2023).

[...]

She unbuckles her seat belt, and leans very close to your ear. ‘You’re not allowed to write about this,’ she says. ‘Don’t you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me?’ (2019: 44)

Machado’s silence at this incident is an index of her confusion at a response that is so far from loving as to appear impossible. The irony of the lie in her relating, in writing, that she promised not to write about the incident echoes the disjuncture between the role of an intimate partner and the woman’s abusive behaviour.

The entry ‘*Traumhaus* as Lipogram’ is the only one not to be titled ‘*Dream House* as ...’. A lipogram is an orthographic puzzle: a literary work omitting one letter of the alphabet. The most common lipograms omit the letter e—the most commonly used letter in English—challenging the author to find words that do not use the letter, but still convey meaning (Nordquist, 2019). ‘*Traumhaus* as Lipogram’ omits most ‘e’ letters, which explains why the phrase ‘Dream House’ is translated into German. Nevertheless, using ‘*Traumhaus*’ to refer to the Dream House relates the content to Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the uncanny (“*der unheimlich*”) and the intimate relationship between ‘house’ and ‘unhomely’, which resonates deeply with Machado’s experiences. The entry contains only one ‘e’ (in ‘Loss of the function’, 2019: 149). The missing letter becomes a metaphor for trauma victims’ inability to articulate their experiences, especially Machado’s initial inability to categorise her relationship as abusive. By failing to name what is missing in her interaction with her partner, such as love, care, and compassion, Machado broadens the difficulty of articulating DVA. She describes this feeling vividly:

This is what I did not know until now: this constraint taints. It is poison. All day and night, until I ran, I was drinking poison. (2019: 149)

In the Dream House does not use the term ‘abuse’ until late in the narrative. This means the reader has to journey together with Machado towards realising that the relationship is dangerously abusive. As the authors of this article know, an abusive lesbian relationship can indeed feel like drinking poison. The drinker imbibes the venom willingly, but it damages, limits and destroys her emotional and social life. Once the relationship is recognised as damaging and abusive, the words ‘violence’, ‘abuse’ and even ‘evil’ can be used, and a journey towards healing has begun.

A third feature of Machado’s literary technique in *In the Dream House* is its unusual point of view. Teresa de Lauretis’ ‘Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation’ explores the innovative devices used by lesbian authors, especially Monique Wittig’s untranslatable first person pronoun *J/e* and grammatically impudent third-person plural *elles* (1988: 166).³ Wittig’s use of *J/e*, in her own words, testifies to ‘the lived, rendering experience which is *m/y* writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute *m/e* as a subject’ (cited in De Lauretis, 1988: 167). Like Wittig, Machado finds unusual strategies to articulate her experiences. The entry ‘*Dream House* as an Exercise in Point of View’ describes the split in her identity as a result of the emotional abuse that she endured. She names her two sub-personas ‘I’ — ‘that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer’ — and ‘you’, ‘who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog’. The entry ends with the ominous sentence: ‘I thought you died, but writing this, I’m not sure you did’ (2019: 14). This recognises that Machado still possesses the qualities that made her vulnerable to the woman in the Dream House. Writing years after the abuse, when presumably she feels more whole, she is still unable to use ‘I’ for her own narrative because it is too painful to identify with the experiences. In addition, language (as De Lauretis (1988) and others have shown) is male-centred, and does not allow for the insertion of a lesbian subject into its vocabulary. Accordingly, Machado uses ‘you’ as a shorthand for ‘the I that accepted the emotional abuse’ to narrate her experiences. This also interpellates (Althusser, 2014: 190) readers, drawing them into the events that are presented. Machado complements this technique by writing consistently in the present tense, which brings her experiences into immediacy.

At times, Machado displaces emotion onto other phenomena, as when she visits her girlfriend’s parents and has her first experience of cruelty at the hands of a woman who claims to love her. At the end of the entry, she writes: ‘When the storm breaks, the thunder is as loud as a gun’ (2019: 58) and the reader understands that the threat of the gun is present in the relationship, not in the weather. By writing in the second person, in the present tense, and through exceptional detail, Machado shows the reader the powerful sensory and emotional effects of abusive acts.

³ The third person singular pronoun for a male, or masculine, noun is *il* and for a female, or feminine noun, is *elle*. The third person plural, though, is *ils*, or ‘hes’. Wittig’s third-person plural can be translated as ‘shes’.

DVA IN *IN THE DREAM HOUSE*

In the Dream House details numerous kinds of DVA, ranging from physical injury to irrational rage via unexplained, seemingly baseless aggression. Most of these actions are difficult to categorise as DVA because they do not leave physical marks on the victim. In addition, a canny person can also make her partner feel that she has misremembered instances of abuse by denying them, re-narrating incidents in such a way that she appears innocent of cruelty or aggression, or lying about what has happened. This behaviour is particularly pernicious, because the other partner may start to wonder whether her memory or mind is playing tricks on her when she is confronted with outright denial from the abuser. It is known as gaslighting: 'a form of emotional abuse that makes you question your beliefs and perception of reality. Over time, this type of manipulation can wear down your self-esteem and self-confidence, leaving you dependent on the person gaslighting you' (York Morris and Raypole, 2021). Women who have experienced gaslighting often describe it as a surreal and bewildering experience that makes them question their sanity and sense of reality (Sweet, 2019). Like most DVA, gaslighting is popularly believed to be perpetrated by men against women, especially if the women are emotionally, physically, or financially dependent on them. This description of gaslighting and its situatedness in heterosexual relationships reinforces the false belief that women, rather than men, are dependent. It also perpetuates the myth that this particular type of DVA does not occur amongst LGBTQ people.

George Cukor's 1944 American film *Gaslight* (although not the first text to feature gaslighting) gave its name to the behaviour of falsifying reality and making another person believe that they are losing their sanity for the purposes of controlling them. Machado refers at length to the film as a way of providing a correlative for her experiences. First she provides the context:

Before it was a verb, gaslight was a noun. A lamp. Then there was a play called *Angel Street* in 1938, and then a film, *Gaslight*, in 1940, and then a second film in 1944, directed by George Cukor and featuring an iconic, disheveled, unraveling performance from Ingrid Bergman.

A woman's sanity is undercut by her conniving husband, who misplaces objects — a brooch, a painting, a letter — in an attempt to make her believe she is mad so that he ultimately can send her to an asylum. Eventually his plan is revealed: he had murdered her aunt when the woman was a child and orchestrated their whirlwind romance years later in order to return to the house to locate some missing jewels. Nightly, Gregory — played by a silky, charismatic Charles Boyer — ventures into their attic, unbeknownst to her, to search for them. The eponymous gaslights are one of the many reasons the heroine believes herself to be truly going mad — they dim as if the gas has been turned on elsewhere in the house, even when, it would seem, no one has done so. (Machado, 2019: 93)

Cukor's film *Gaslight* (1944) shows how Ingrid Bergman, as Paula, is lured into a web of deceit in an intimate relationship with Gregory, played by Charles Boyer. As Machado mentions, the eponymous lights are one of the reasons the heroine believes herself to be going mad, and are a central motif in the film, whose monochrome palette adds to its mystery as a psychological thriller. Similarly, Machado recalls incidents where her partner confused her by denying her reality or contradicting her values. One of these events is narrated in the entry entitled '*Dream House* as Famous Last Words'. It is a one-liner that signals the first of many terrifying experiences, epitomising the disconnect that occurs in abusive relationships. Machado's partner states, "We can fuck," [...] "but we can't fall in love" (2019: 21). In this confusing statement, Machado's partner forcibly attempts to dictate the emotional boundaries of their relationship. This is similar to an early scene in *Gaslight* where Paula starts to fall in love with Gregory, but wants to think about it before she decides whether to marry him. Although Paula successfully gets away to Thornton Square, London (where her aunt was murdered), her freedom is interrupted on her arrival when Gregory is waiting for her outside the carriage. Gregory does not give Paula any time to think, and disrespects her boundaries by overwhelming her with feigned proclamations of his love and unwavering commitment to her.

Despite popular perceptions that gaslighting is exclusively inflicted by men on women, it is enabled and fuelled by gendered stereotypes and power inequalities. Paige L. Sweet explains:

[g]aslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships. The theory developed here argues that gaslighting is consequential when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes and structural and institutional inequalities against victims to manipulate their realities. (2019: 1)

Sweet's case study is significant for how it identifies the mobilisation of gendered stereotypes in patriarchal institutions to reinforce 'the association of femininity with irrationality' (2019: 1). The idea that women are crazy

regardless of their age, race, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and social location remains prevalent globally, despite the progress made by feminism. In fact, the rise of right-wing politics that we have witnessed since the turn of the century has a heteronormative, and in many cases misogynist foundation. Furthermore, micro-aggressions against women in families, the workplace and almost every other social domain are equally pervasive, with the result that women are regularly called crazy in both the private and public spheres. These micro-aggressions form part of the historical trivialisation of women's concerns, and they are often adopted and reproduced by women against other women. Related to this, Sweet writes:

When abusers successfully make victims feel 'crazy,' victims become especially vulnerable to institutional abuse and less likely to rely on institutional supports. As such, I argue that we need to parse 'gaslighting' as specific type of psychological abuse in order to understand the social dynamics that make gaslighting effective, as well as the consequences it engenders. (2019: 4)

The misogynistic idea that women lose their minds when they fall in love, and that they often fail to make wise choices when choosing a partner, emerges in Machado's memoir when describing her initial attraction to her girlfriend. She describes the perceived inequality and power dynamic between them in an entry entitled '*Dream House* as Confession':

Despite the fact that you were the same age, you felt like she was older than you: wiser, more experienced, worldlier. She'd worked in publishing, she'd lived abroad, she spoke fluent French. She'd lived in New York and been to launch parties for literary magazines. And, it turned out, she had a weakness for curvy-to-fat brunettes in glasses. God herself couldn't have planned it better. (2019: 22)

Machado feels at a class remove from her girlfriend, who is white, well-educated, and has considerable professional experience, while she is 'Latina, more or less white-presenting' (Powell's Books, 2019) and feels like an amateur writer. At the same time, the iconoclastic closing line of the entry foregrounds Machado's idealisation of the woman she perceives as her perfect partner. The title evokes Michel Foucault's philosophical insights in *The History of Sexuality*, which foregrounds the importance of understanding sexuality through the practice of confession.

In addressing society's enduring struggle to understand themselves and their sexuality, French philosopher Michel Foucault sheds light on how the practice of confessing in the Catholic tradition constituted part of restoring men's/women's sanctity and their relationship with God. Foucault carefully analyses the historical valorisation and intensification of discourses about sex and its relationship to power:

There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex [...] But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (1990: 18)

Patriarchal and cisnormative power structures continue to manifest in all relationships, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. These power structures and their intersectional axes of discrimination are even more prevalent in intimate partner relationships that have historically been marginalised and discriminated against. Therefore, the seemingly perfect lesbian coupling in an allegedly queer-friendly North America — 'God herself couldn't have planned it better' (Machado, 2019: 22) — is tainted by power and class differences that are often used to the advantage of the abuser in what was originally imagined as a realisation of the myth of lesbian partnerships as utopian and egalitarian.

People whose sexualities and/or genders do not fit into hegemonic categories are often subject to trauma through social exclusion and marginalisation. The experience of having been traumatised by a society that labels one as anything from deviant to sinful, followed by the trauma of DVA, is not additive but exponential. Thus Machado's wish that her partner should 'stop making us look bad' (2019: 126) testifies to the collective and individual trauma that has been inflicted on lesbians for centuries by social forces that vilify, reject and abandon them. In response, many lesbians long and strive for lifestyles that fit into suburban norms, where the houses they share with their partners, such as the 'Dream House', hold unremarkable lives of exemplary civilian normalcy.

Machado's wish for lesbians (and, by extension, all LGBTQ people) not to look bad reaches into Anglo-American literary and cultural traditions. It has roots in a statement by canonical heterosexual male author, Norman Mailer, that 'The sniffs I get from the ink of women are always (...) too dykily psychotic' (Machado, 2019: 126). By invoking Mailer, Machado conjures the entire history of patriarchal representations of women as psychotic (insane), dating back to ancient Egyptian notions of hysteria as a disease exclusively of women, caused by spontaneous movement of the uterus (Sigerist, 1951). In turn, these play into Western cultural assumptions that women are more 'emotional' than men, alluding to the gendered binary opposition of rationality and emotion. Mailer's

misogynistic accusation that the ‘ink of women’ (their literary production) smells too ‘dykily psychotic’, therefore, resonates across the whole of patriarchal culture, tarring all women with the brush of lesbian insanity. Machado succinctly explains: ‘one woman writing is mad and a woman-who-loves-women writing is mad squared’ (2019: 126). From a patriarchal perspective such as Mailer’s, Machado’s memoir is condemned by its author’s gender and sexual identity before she has even finished writing it. Not only is the protagonist susceptible to exclusion and marginalisation because of her sexual orientation, but she is doubly marginalised for having written about it.

At the other end of the political spectrum from Mailer, there is a considerable body of texts written by second-wave feminist authors which portray lesbian relationships as utopian and perfect: for example, Sarah Scott’s *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762; rpt. 1995) and Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderingground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1985). These representations are premised on an understanding that women’s romantic relationships with men are characterised by male abuse, so (since women are ‘inherently’ more peaceful and more nurturing than men) women’s romantic relationships must be nurturing and mutually supportive. Paradoxically, this idealisation does not help to establish a realistic understanding of lesbian experience.

Machado’s emotional abuse at the hands of her intimate partner leaves scars that remind us of USA literary theorist Cathy Caruth’s ‘speaking wound’:

[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (1996: 4)

Caruth associates the literary representation of trauma with a wound in the psyche that speaks and articulates its pain, even as it cannot cease re-experiencing it. Machado’s memoir of emotional abuse from her intimate partner — the nameless ‘woman in the Dream House’ (Machado, 2019: 6), her namelessness broadening her identity into Everywoman — is a wound that speaks: its having been published and printed gives it a voice.

The first signal of Machado’s emotional abuse appears in one of the shorter entries in *In the Dream House*, entitled ‘Dream House as Time Travel’. Here Machado wonders if she would have listened to an older version of herself if that self had appeared through a ‘milky portal’ that ‘opened up in your bedroom’ (2019: 18) and warned her about the woman in the Dream House. These thoughts evoke a sense of chronological and psychological unravelling. The Machado who is writing is in a time after the intimate partner abuse, and imagines travelling back in time to warn her younger self of the dangers of the relationship. She signals the psychological splitting that the abuse has caused when she writes:

I was whole—a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts—and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved: a neat lop that took first person—that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer—away from second, who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog. (2019: 14)

The psychological splitting of Machado into an ‘I’ who is confident and adventurous and a ‘you’ who is timid and anxious is a typical response to trauma, which, Caruth attests, is a ‘breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world’ (1996: 4).

A second characteristic of trauma, for Caruth, is that, like literature, it exists at the troubled interface between knowing and not knowing (1996: 4). The self who has lived through a traumatic experience may suppress or deny knowledge of their memories; at the same time, they seem unable to avoid repeating or re-experiencing them. This, too, is true of Machado, who writes in ‘Dream House as Spy Thriller’ of a litany of everyday actions that are ‘heightened with what you know and they — all those ordinary citizens — do not know’ (2019: 91). Machado wishes to be one of the ‘ordinary citizens’ instead of being abused; there is a part of her (the ‘I’ that was not involved in the abusive relationship) that does not want to know either. In this way, traumatic abuse ruptures, not only the self, but its relationship to its context and community.

The trauma that Machado suffers in her relationship with the woman in the Dream House is primarily caused by disjunctions between her partner’s behaviour and her words. When the two take a drive from Connecticut to Bloomington (a distance of nearly 1,400 km or 870 miles), Machado is in the driver’s seat when something changes in their interaction:

‘Why won’t you let me drive?’ she asks. Her voice is controlled, measured, like a dog whose tail has gone rigid; nothing is happening, but something is wrong. Dread gathers between your shoulder blades. (2019: 87)

The threat of the woman's anger, which is certain to be more out of control than the car, persuades Machado to surrender the driver's seat to her partner. The woman is a reckless driver, as Machado has learned previously. The drive through the night is fictionally glossed as 'Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, type C752.1, Taboo: doing thing after sunset (nightfall)', as though Machado is at fault for having broken an ancient taboo. It is a metonymy of the relationship, filled with vertiginous, terrifying swerves and near-accidents: Machado's fear is palpable. But:

In the morning, the woman who made you ill with fear brews a pot of coffee and jokes with you and kisses you and sweetly scratches your scalp like nothing has happened. (2019: 90)

The implicit denial that anything out of the ordinary has happened is tantamount to the woman's denying the reality of Machado's feelings or the fact that she has caused them. As these kinds of incidents recur, Machado slowly realises that she cannot rely on her partner to be either emotionally consistent or rational.

In another early incident, Machado is introduced to her girlfriend's parents. The girlfriend's mother is making lunch and Machado is reading. For no reason, Machado's girlfriend grips her arm so hard that she hurts her and even causes a bruise. Time stands still as Machado struggles to come to terms with this almost invisible abuse:

Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don't know what to do. This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal. Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response. (2019: 57)

As feminist author, Margaret Atwood, shows in *Cat's Eye* (1988), the emotional abuse that occurs between girls and women is subtle, almost imperceptible. *Cat's Eye* details how Cordelia, under the guise of being Elaine's friend, slowly begins to ruin her self-esteem with a combination of pointed criticisms and surveillance while professing her loyalty to the friendship. Although *Cat's Eye* does not describe an intimate relationship between women, there are definite similarities between the two situations of emotional abuse. In response to Cordelia's cruelty, Elaine begins to peel the skin off her feet because 'The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to' (1988: 128). In a similar way, Machado accepts the injury that her partner is inflicting on her in the name of love, and in this way becomes complicit in her own abuse.

In the Dream House is full of incidents like this, where Machado's expectations of gentleness and rationality are met with irrational interpersonal aggression. These accumulate into a primal, intimate trauma, which lingers for years, as she notes in a section of the book entitled 'Dream House as Choose your own Adventure'. The title alludes to a genre of popular culture and online gaming that became popular in the late twentieth century. These texts, largely aimed at children and young adults, are written in the second person and invite the reader to make choices at key points in the narrative. The choices the reader makes determine the plot development. The 'Choose your own Adventure' section of *In the Dream House* (Machado, 2019: 162-176) does not make sense in the same way as children's and young adult books that allow readers to create their own narratives. Instead, it cycles around at least twice, reaching false endings where the reader is told 'You shouldn't be here' (2019: 165, 167, 170). It is as confusing as DVA incited by Machado's partner raging at her for having moved her arm at night so that it touched her face. Every choice Machado makes in this situation deepens her partner's fury and abusive behaviour.

In the Dream House is metatextually structured by Machado's naming riddle (2019: 37). Caruth's 'speaking wound' is its own healing: as Machado writes of what happened in the Dream House, the memoir becomes an act of naming her experiences as DVA. Machado's partner denies her the use of these words by denying that she has been aggressive or violent, effectively gaslighting her. In a late entry, Machado discusses the difficulty of finding words for her experience:

Evil is a powerful word. You use it once, and it tastes bad: metallic, false. But what other word can you use for a person who makes you feel so powerless? [...]

Sick seems more appropriate, but it too tastes bad. It feels too close to *disordered* [...]. (2019: 157, original emphasis)

Machado's naming riddle is important for trauma sufferers, who often find that using the correct name for their experiences is liberating.

In 'Dream House as Plot Twist', Machado narrates meeting 'Val', the ex-girlfriend of the woman in the Dream House, and how she comes to fall in love with Val and eventually marries her. The entry is only a page long, but

contains three mentions of 'talking' as Machado and Val discuss their traumatic relationships with the woman in the Dream House. The entry ends with a significant paragraph:

Eventually, you and Val will come to love each other outside this context. You will move in together, get engaged, get married. But in the beginning, this is what holds you together: the knowledge that the two of you are not alone. (2019: 218)

DVA alienates people from all support systems, making them feel completely alone and psychologically weak. Creating a community through sharing stories of abuse is an important method of healing. Similarly, telling the story — to Val and to the reader of the memoir — is a curative process for Machado. The healing power of storytelling is well-known:

Through storytelling we can come to know who we are in new and unforeseen ways. We can also reveal to others what is deepest in our hearts, in the process, building bridges. The very act of sharing a story with another human being contradicts the extreme isolation that characterizes so many of our lives. As such, storytelling carries within it the seeds of community. (Stone, 2004: 3)

In different contexts, Bagele Chilisa and Gabo Ntseane (2010: 621, 624) in Botswana; Gabriele Rosenthal (2003) in Germany; and Carl Lindahl (2012) in Louisiana, USA have all affirmed the curative power of storytelling among people who have survived trauma.

In order to come to terms with her experiences in the Dream House, Machado deliberately sought out existing narratives of DVA in lesbian relationships. The entry '*Dream House* as Fantasy' contains several footnotes referring to lesbian abuse as documented by Lisa Shapiro and Amy Edgington (2019: 109). Many of the texts she mentions here appear in *Off Our Backs*, a long-running USA-based 'women's newsjournal' (JSTOR, 2023). In that publication, Amy Edgington writes about a ground-breaking conference about lesbian battering (1988: 8). Both Shapiro and Edgington struggle palpably to reach an understanding of DVA in lesbian relationships that encompasses psycho-emotional violence, and fall back, unsatisfactorily, on 'battering' as a description of DVA.

In a later chapter, Machado resumes the quest for narratives of DVA in lesbian relationships: 'I have spent years struggling to find examples of my own experience in history's queer women. [...] Did any of them wonder if what had happened to them had any name at all?' (2019: 227) When Machado wrote *In the Dream House*, there was an emerging body of scholarship on DVA amongst LGBTQ people. She does not seem to have been aware of this research, possibly because of the 'silo' effect where scholars in one discipline, such as creative writing, are not aware of the work of scholars in another, such as social sciences. The answer to Machado's question is that *In the Dream House* itself stands, metatextually, as a key text in naming DVA among LGBTQ people. Authors who have written about DVA among lesbians, together with Machado, form a significant sub-archive in Cvetkovich's 'archive of feeling'. They contribute to helping readers see that LGBTQ existence encompasses all kinds of love, including its self-destructive forms.

CONCLUSION

Machado's *In the Dream House*, as we have shown, records experiences of profound interpersonal trauma within an intimate lesbian relationship. By suffusing the narrative with intertextual references to many kinds of cultural phenomena, it creates important connections with public discourse, highlighting the need for DVA among LGBTQ people to be recognised. The second-person narration draws the reader into the narrative, taking us with her as she slowly realises that the person she loves is abusing her emotionally; and the highly textured descriptions of emotional states situate the memoir precisely in a particular context. The text gives visibility to an aspect of public life that is doubly invisibilised: as Donovan, Barnes, Ovesen and others have shown, popular discourse deliberately underemphasises DVA in LGBTQ relationships. The entry entitled '*Dream House* as Equivocation' ends with the prognosis:

Women could abuse other women. Women *have* abused other women. And queers needed to take this issue seriously, because no one else would. (2019: 200, original emphasis)

Likewise, Machado's '*Afterword*', like many of the footnotes in the text, invokes the emerging body of literature dealing with DVA between lesbian partners. *In the Dream House* takes the issue of lesbian intimate partner abuse very seriously, and the counter-narrative that it provides to mainstream accounts of heterosexual love and abuse make it an important addition to the lesbian archive.

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Fragile Spaces: Situated Knowledges in Orion's Academia

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ABSTRACT

Through the element of estrangement often present in science fiction, Australian author Marianne de Pierres presents a world, which, while very different from our world, highlights issues very relevant to it. Close reading and literary analysis of *The Sentients of Orion* reveal an impoverished planetary world where most characters are stripped of, or crippled in terms of displaying and accepting love, affection and emotional intimacy. With reference to the recently published dialogue between Rosi Braidotti and Nina Lykke 'The Long March Through the Patriarchal Institutions' (2021), this paper will demonstrate how the negative experiences of love and intimacy of female academics and scientists in *The Sentients of Orion* are contributed to by the academic system in which they are situated. The analysis will show how patriarchal academic institutions alienate female characters, thus impacting negatively on their choices in terms of sexuality and gender performance. While gender performance and the results of the presence or absence of intimacy in the novels are situated and bound by specificity, the paper aims to show how the lack of tolerance for individuality allowed by the patriarchal systems of knowledge making on Orion impacts negatively on female agency.

Keywords: academia, gender equality, situated knowledges, *The Sentients of Orion*

INTRODUCTION

When Donna Haraway put forward her argument for situated knowledges, it was a call for change to the way meaning is made, in particular in research and in the formation of knowledge. She argued for a move away from 'objectivity', which had long been touted as the cornerstone of research and meaning making, but, according to Haraway, only served as code for '[m]an' and '[w]hite' (1988: 581). She pleads for a 'doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*' (1988: 581). Traditional objectivity, as male-infused approach to research, should, according to Haraway, be discarded in favour of 'feminist embodiment' which 'resists fixation' (1988: 581). What situated knowledges would attain is 'better accounts of the world, that is, "science"' (Haraway, 1988: 590).

Traditional research writing requires '[d]etachment, objectivity, rationality, and the convention of taking on authority without placing one's subjectivity in the discussion' (McNenny, 1994: 10). McNenny, however, believes like Haraway that such an approach can only contribute to 'the alienation that students, especially women and minorities, often experience' (1994: 10). Very importantly, McNenny (1994: 11) says that '[a]lienated knowledge separates feeling from thinking and reason from emotion in ways that deny the validity of our subjectivity'. The most important disadvantage of traditional research writing is that 'it separates knowledge from ethical considerations, thus removing a sense of accountability in knowledge assertions' (McNenny, 1994: 11). Monica Rogowska-Sangret also summarises Haraway's theory to mean that in male-centred research 'objectivity was compromised as only seemingly neutral and in fact overburdened by power relations' and that 'objectivity understood as impartiality ... is a perspective that under the guise of neutrality... hides a very specific position (male, white, heterosexual, human) and thus makes this position universal', rendering all other positions 'invalid and subjective' (2018: 1).

Haraway's theory and the debates around it have brought about an increased awareness of the diversity of women, leading in turn to 'an increased acknowledgement that the identities and experiences of women are expressed in many different ways' (Brandth, 2002: 113). In order to be truly objective, knowledge has to be situated; 'not universal and totalizing but partial and incomplete' (Brandth, 2002: 114). Brandth (2002: 114–115) further

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interprets objectivity to require ‘to be situated, and to disclose one’s position of race, class, and gender’. She is in agreement with Longino that it is ‘the subjection of hypothesis and theories to multivocal criticism’ which makes objectivity possible (Longino, 1990: 212-213).

Haraway herself (1991) argues that it is a fact that situated, incomplete knowledges are connected to theoretical frameworks that ‘counter the possibility of relativism’. Situated knowledges do therefore allow for commonality. Brandth says ‘whatever is unique about the local can also be theorized in relation to more global trends’ (2002: 115).

Haraway’s understanding of science is the traditional view of it as natural science, usually considered to be the primary maker of knowledge about the world we live in. Science is pursued both in academia and outside it, while academia embraces the natural sciences, the social sciences and the human sciences, all concerned with creating knowledge. Although they are not synonymous, the realms of science and academia do overlap in their pursuit of knowledge. As such, scientists and researchers often interact with or function within the sphere of academia, where universities serve as places of knowledge making. Universities have, traditionally, been male-centred and it is in the hallowed halls that the credo of objectivity has been much touted – to the detriment of women in the field. While situated knowledges require a different way of creating knowledge, a different way of doing research and an acknowledgement of diversity and the particular in the stead of objectivity, it also requires closer scrutiny of the institutions of knowledge making. Where is the research done, and by whom? Has the concept of situated knowledges contributed toward making universities as centres of science and research into safe areas for women where a ‘feminist objectivity’ is accepted and nurtured?

Much of the debate around situated knowledges deals with the individuality and subjectivity of the research subjects, and at the same time there is a call for women in science and research to situate themselves. My main question in this article is not so much whether research takes into account individual subjectivity of research subjects in the place of the traditional, male inflected objectivity. Instead I want to investigate how the institutions of knowledge making, the research centres and the universities, advantage or disadvantage the women involved in the process of knowledge making: the female scientists, researchers, professors, and students. Does the fact that they find themselves situated in the academic sphere afford them agency and individuality (not only in how they create knowledge, but in their own situated lives), or are they, based on their gender, negatively impacted in terms of their chosen profession, their personal lives, their gender performances, their sexuality and, pertinent to this discussion, their intimacies and who/how they love?¹

GENDER STUDIES AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE HALLOWED HALLS

Much work has been done in universities toward the attainment of equality for women and also for feminist research. Lea Skewes and Stine Willum Adrian (2021) recently documented a conversation with the founding mothers of feminist studies departments in many European universities, Professors Rosi Braidotti and Nina Lykke. The main aim of the conversation was to examine the history of the feminist studies movement in academia, but also to explore the effect of new political and ideological conditions on the future of feminist research at universities. The biographies of Braidotti and Lykke showcase their ‘passionate desire to establish a solid basis for feminist researchers’ and their dedication ‘to the struggle to expand the fragile spaces of academia’s interdisciplinary feminist borderlands’ (Skewes and Adrian, 2021: 1). My interest in the conversation is not so much in what had been achieved by Braidotti, Lykke and their peers, massive as the impact thereof has been. Rather, I am interested in their attitudes to academia as it currently stands. Lykke finds herself ‘worried about the precarious conditions of people in academia today’ and describes it as ‘getting increasingly worse – especially for academics who are pursuing careers in critical studies such as feminist studies’ (Skewes and Adrian, 2021: 10). Braidotti, while saying that the establishment of feminist studies departments in universities ‘has changed the world’, adds that ‘a lot of feminist scholars today are not located in gender, feminist or queer studies programmes’ (Skewes and Adrian, 2021: 10). Crucial to my argument and the close reading that follows, both these eminent scholars seem to be disillusioned with the state of academia, and specifically the current state of feminist studies in universities.

Both Braidotti and Lykke bemoan the increasing focus of universities on funding and generating an income. Lykke lists under the advantages of being a post-retirement independent researcher that she ‘can do, write and say’ whatever she likes. She no longer has a need to apply for funding from ‘neoliberal funding agencies’ or ‘subscribe to the *cruel optimism* about topics’ she has no real affinity for, ‘but which may attract funding’. She no longer needs to ‘spin applications in order to get money out of funding agencies’ (Skewes and Adrian, 2021: 5). Very illuminating are the answers provided by both Braidotti and Lykke to Braidotti’s question: ‘But would you still apply for a

¹ This is reminiscent of Arundhati Roy’s ‘love laws’ in *The God of Small Things* which determine ‘who should be loved, how much and how’ (1997: 31).

university job today if you were 30...?'. Braidotti admits that she 'would truly hesitate to enter the university today' while Lykke 'would rather once more commit [herself] to activism' (Skewes and Adrian, 2021: 11).

It is not that our society resists women in science – it resists women as makers of knowledge, validating my earlier argument claiming parallels between women in science and women in academia. Taking into account the views of eminent scholars such as Braidotti and Lykke, can it then be argued that academia is not truly conducive to situated knowledges? I am interested in whether a line can be drawn further to say that for women to be situated in such institutions of traditionally male-centred knowledge production can be detrimental to more than simply their contribution to knowledge, but particularly to their gender choices and personal freedoms.

Current research supports the concerns raised by Braidotti and Lykke. Pamela Eddy and Kelly Ward, for example, acknowledge that much has changed in universities in the last generation, but maintain that 'hierarchical and bureaucratic structures in higher education remain'. Regardless of any changes for the better, they believe that higher education is still formed around 'the division of work along gender lines and the reinforcement of existing power structures that reify gendered roles' (2015: 8). Focusing on the employment aspect of gender inequality in academics, their research shows that 'the academic pipeline begins to leak at the associate-professor level' where only 42% of associate professors and only 29% of full professors are women (Eddy and Ward, 2015: 8).

Mark Joseph Stern *et al.* (2018: 160) confirm that while there has been an increase in the visibility of gender-nonconforming and trans people in all spheres of society, 'the issue of their civil rights has stirred widespread debate, perhaps most visibly in the context of education'. There is positive development, as their findings show that 'Generation Z ... are quietly rejecting rigid gender identity norms and the male-female gender binary, defining gender classification on their own terms, and offering support for judicial defense of inclusion and human dignity' (Stern *et al.*, 2018: 160).

When discussing existing gender discrimination in higher education, however, Stern *et al.* (2018: 160) point out that it includes so much more than the usual sexual harassment or unequal pay. Laws have been drawn up to counter 'sex stereotyping' and 'mistreating a worker for failing to comply with gender norms', implying that those remain issues in places of learning. This is supported by Annie Schultz, who claims that women in academia are still subjected to 'expectations informed by dated gender norms' in particular the expectation for them to act as mothers and home makers, even if only on an emotional level (2019: 141). She refers to the 'gendered precariousness of academia', claiming that the 'academe continues to be a precarious space for women as working professionals and as scholars'.²

Schultz identifies two aspects of gender inequality specific to academia. Firstly, she argues that higher education employment is still rife with 'gender-related inequities' (2019: 144). More pertinently (as it relates to situated knowledges), she criticizes the 'institutional ethos of university campuses and the expectations that women remain in the role of meaning maintainer rather than meaning constructor' (2019: 144).³

While the 'dated gendered expectations of role fulfillment' endemic in institutions of higher education may be 'subtle and ambiguous' they are undeniably part of academia (Schultz, 2019: 144). Eddy and Ward explicitly claim that women 'are often assigned "mom" work on campus' (2015: 9) while Schultz refers to an expectation at universities for 'women academics to be motherly, nurturing, and to perform homemaking work' (2019: 145). Schultz further argues that 'there may still be a tendency on university campuses to view the male academic as the challenger, the provoker of higher-level thinking, and the female academic as the one assigned to care for and nurture' the students (2019: 145).

This disproportionate allocation of 'service and care work roles' to women on university campuses means that women academics' ability to make meaning is undermined, or at least put secondary to that of their male colleagues (Schultz, 2019: 147). Women are charged with 'making the university homelike', while their male counterparts 'are presumed to disrupt the temporality of the burgeoning identity by intellectual rigor and knowledge production' (Schultz, 2019: 147). Inadvertently then, the university replicates the traditional home, casting the women who work there as mothers, and the men as fathers. This leads to a reinforcement of historical gender roles on campus: 'mother stays home and maintains meanings; father comes home in the evening ... and generates new meaning in the minds of the children' (Schultz, 2019: 145). Schultz (2019: 148) disturbingly finds de Beauvoir's argument that 'transcendence' or then 'meaning creation' is reserved for men still relevant to modern day academia (de Beauvoir, 2011: 74). Instead of having moved on, she argues that placing women academics in service roles where they are tasked with caretaking and nurturing of students puts them in a similar position to de Beauvoir's 'imminent incubator' (Schultz, 2019: 148).

² See the full conversation between Rosi Braidotti and Nina Lykke (Skewes and Adrian, 2021).

³ See also de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

SITUATING THE RESEARCHER AS MUCH AS THE RESEARCH

It becomes apparent that the field of science, the practice of research and universities as centres of knowledge making are lacking as spaces where women can express themselves in terms of their careers. I would, however, like to further investigate whether women in those spheres are allowed agency in terms of their personal lives. Situated knowledges, as discussed earlier in this article, refer to the role of the researcher/scholar in her research. Does it also apply to her life outside of the centres of knowledge making, to her person? Does it affect the very way she portrays gender, how she loves, who she has sex with, how she chooses to be intimate?

Universities in the Stars

Existing literature presents a picture of universities being neither conducive to situated research, nor considerate of the women physically situated there. To take one step away from the ‘real world’, I would like to investigate how this scenario is presented in *The Sentients of Orion*, a space opera series by Australian author Marianne de Pierres (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). Science fiction is a genre very well suited to further investigate whether science and universities (as centres of knowledge making) are conducive to the wellbeing of female academics. While Kingsley Amis and Darko Suvin already provided a working definition for science fiction, they also illuminated its singular use of ‘cognitive estrangement’ (Amis, 1960: 99; Suvin, 1988: 99). In *New Maps of Hell*, Amis defines science fiction as ‘that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin’ (1960: 18). Placing familiar situations in unfamiliar contexts thus allows for deeper examination and new perspectives. It was only in the 1970s that women authors started making use of science fiction’s particular quality of ‘estrangement’ and, with authors such as Le Guin and Joanna Russ at the forefront, women began to manipulate the genre to ‘challenge and expand prevailing notions of gender roles’ (Bowers, 2009: 27). This aspect of the genre makes it highly suitable to my investigation.

Further ground for the suitability of science fiction to investigate situated knowledges lies in the commonalities between feminist science fiction and feminist science studies, as pointed out by Christy Tidwell (2011: vi) even as she bemoans the continued disconnect between the two fields. Important questions asked by Tidwell are:

Would scientific practice and experimentation—would the world—look different if women were in charge? Would women do things differently? ... Feminist science fiction is one place where these questions can be addressed and where storytelling, specifically storytelling about science, can occur, helping to give women control over, if not the world, at least the stories that are told about them. (2011: 5)

Tidwell (2011: vi) claims that science fiction ‘stimulates thought about the social construction of science and creates the ideal space for discussing who does science, what counts as science, and how science is represented’. Importantly, she points out how these findings ‘can have a direct impact on the real-life production of science’.

When it comes to using science fiction as a vehicle for examining a real-life issue, Merrick claims that literary analyses of feminist science fiction often ‘imply that the genre is merely a convenient vehicle for certain devices and locales (aliens, alternate worlds or futures) that better enable an examination of gender from an estranged perspective’ (2007: 214). She admits that that might actually be so in some instances, ‘but for many others a feminist revisioning or critique of scientific discourses and cultures is an integral function of the text’ (2007: 214).

Science fiction would thus seem a suitable vehicle through which to investigate situated knowledges in science and academia. Feminist science fiction in particular could be expected to allow for a thorough examination of this real world issue from the relative neutrality of a different galaxy.

Love and Gender

Gender issues in particular have long been a focus in science fiction written by women, and numerous studies on gender roles in feminist science fiction already exist (Merrick, 2009:1). *Queer Universes: Sexualities in science fiction*, for example, demonstrates the diversity in the field (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon, 2008). An established tradition of investigation of gender and sexuality in science fiction bodes well for my examination of situated knowledges in universities through a literary analysis of *The Sentients of Orion*, as the series is very deliberately set against an academic backdrop. De Pierres’ Orion is a universe grounded in academia with science and research integral to the plot in which many characters are scholars, scientists, researchers and students.

Against the backdrop of questions this discussion has so far raised regarding career and professional implications to women situated in science and academics, I hope to provide a more nuanced angle from which to approach the investigation, moving from the professional to the personal by focusing on intimacy, closeness and love as indicators of agency in gender performance and attitudes of women in academia. By analysing instances of intimacy and expressions of love and closeness of three female academics in *The Sentients of Orion* I aim to show if

and how they might be compromised by the academic milieu they find themselves in. Using the sexual and emotional intimacies of these women to examine their gender performances, stereotypes and portrayals might reveal whether de Pierres, as woman author of current science fiction, poses a challenge to the patriarchal oppression revealed in the aforementioned review of the literature.⁴

The element of estrangement, the well-documented function of feminist science fiction to challenge the patriarchal status quo, and the pertinently academic setting makes *The Sentients of Orion* uniquely suited to this analysis. The series, which has been referred to as a ‘blockbuster space opera’ (Suciu, 2008: no pagination), provides Amis’s ‘hypothesized’ world; allowing for a detailed analysis (Amis, 1960: 99). Rather than the clichéd space operas of old, the series is more aligned to ‘new space opera’, which is deemed a much more respected sub-genre of science fiction (Levy, 2008: 132; McAuley, 2003: 24). New space opera often incorporates principles of cyberpunk such as hard science and ‘fine writing’ (Levy, 2008: 132). There is a focus on ‘character development’ and ‘literary standards’ infused with political commentary, but it often retains the wider planetary backdrop associated with original space opera (Levy, 2008: 132).⁵ *The Sentients of Orion* conforms to ‘new’ space opera not only in its cyberpunk element, but also in its detailed characterisation and its move away from the ‘chauvinism’ present in original space opera (Wolfe, 2014: 67). The series consists of four novels, namely, *Dark Space* (2007), *Chaos Space* (2008), *Mirror Space* (2009) and *Transformation Space* (2010). The novels are available as e-books in the Kindle Store (Amazon, 2016), but for this article I use the 2007-2010 Orbit editions for page numbering and ease of reference. To expedite reading, in-text citations of the novels are abbreviated as follows: *Dark Space* is referred to as *DS*, *Chaos Space* as *CS*, *Mirror Space* as *MS* and *Transformation Space* as *TS*.

Before continuing with the close reading, some terms need to be clarified. I do not imply in any way that gender can be indicated by different kinds of intimacy or that intimacy is a defining attribute of gender. Gender performativity, however, most certainly intersects in complex ways with desire and with behaviour in situations of sexual intimacy. Depictions of intimacy can therefore be used as a tool to portray specific gender qualities in order to comment on existing gender roles, gender performances and societal stereotypes. How an author chooses to portray different gendered characters or characters with different sexualities approaching, taking part in and being affected by intimacy (with the inclusion of agency and embodiment) will show whether or not that author is instigating an investigation into gender, and will most likely reveal the depth of such an investigation. I aim to further use the expressions of intimacy and love the characters engage in to ascertain whether de Pierres is questioning the effect that being situated in science and academia (whether positive or negative) has on the agency of female academics in their personal lives. Could love and intimacy be used to present an imperative of dissent in a patriarchal academia?

I do include sexual intercourse as a subset of intimate behaviour in spite of the expected ‘resistances, ambivalences, and concords that inevitably arise when someone speaks with passion and authority about sex and identity’ (Berlant, 1995: 379). How people act in sexually intimate situations is deeply nuanced. The same nuances that inflect general intimacy are pronounced in sexual intimacy.⁶ While focusing on intimate acts and thoughts related to sexual intercourse, the study thus also includes acts or thoughts in references or allusions to sexual intercourse are symbolic in nature. This includes, for example, pleasing, emotional warmth, violence, emotional blackmail, enabling, suppression or fulfilment (Ricci, 1994: no pagination). Cognisance is therefore taken of the impact of emotional intimacy (not only during sexual intercourse, but also on its own). Intimacy, as addressed in this paper, also touches on negative intimacy, inclusive of ‘negative affect in relationships, negative dialogue, rejection of commitment or concern for others, interpersonal disharmony, nonreciprocated friendliness, and escape from or avoidance of intimacy’ (Suedfeld, Wilk and Cassel, 2013: 195).⁷

Like intimacy, love is a nebulous concept. Love can take many forms, ranging from platonic to romantic love. This paper will address various kinds of love; from the love of a mother for her child, to the kind of love that culminates in sexual intimacy. Siksha Deepak *et al.* (2019: 513) claim that love is inclusive of ‘diverse feelings and emotions, thoughts and corresponding behaviour patterns ‘respective to a relationship which is intimate in both

⁴ Amis claims that sex in science fiction is ‘almost oppressively normal’ and often glossed over (1960: 64-66, 84). In contrast, more recent science fiction such as *The Sentients of Orion* gives sex (sexual intimacy) a prominent role.

⁵ *Locus* published a 2003 issue (Issue 522, Volume 51(2)) entitled ‘New Space Opera’ which contains contributions by some influential authors in the subgenre, such as Gwyneth Jones and Stephen Baxter. Also see Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan’s (2007) edition of *New Space Opera*.

⁶ Masters *et al.* also refer to people being ‘discouraged from conversations or questions about sex’ (1986: 28). Their seminal work contributed greatly to demystify the topic by dedicating their second chapter to a detailed discussion of sexual biology (Masters *et al.*, 1986: 27-54).

⁷ Isolina Ricci includes anger, hate, victimisation, emotional abuse, humiliation, violence, bullying and fear in her definition of negative intimacy (1994: no pagination).

the physical and the psychological aspect'. According to them, being able to love 'is considered as a valuable and a core component of the institutions of which the individuals are a unit' (2019: 513).

A 'strong feeling of deep rooted love leads to expansion of the self' (Deepak *et al.*, 2019: 513). If, as I am arguing, women situated in academia are deprived of love and intimacy or compromised in their choices because of the very institutions in which they find themselves, they will not be 'considered a valuable and core component' of those institutions (Deepak *et al.*, 2019: 513). A circle of deprivation is created – the institution (academic in this case) deprives the women situated there of love and intimacy, and that in turns limits the women's ability to contribute to the institution.

Deepak *et al.* (2019: 514–515) refer to health benefits, actual chemical changes to the body; 'enhanced social support'; and 'subjective wellbeing' such as improved self-esteem as some of the benefits of love. Susan T. Fiske (2014: 13) goes so far as to say that people's very lives are affected by their social ties. She says (2014: 18) that 'belonging to a group helps individuals to survive psychologically and physically, whether on a college campus, the Burkina Faso savanna, or the Kansas prairie'.

'The spectrum of the positive effects of love are [sic] quite varied and profound' according to Deepak *et al.* (2019: 515) They summarise by saying the presence of love can lead to people perceiving themselves 'in a more favourable light as it is rightly said that until you love the self you cannot the other' (2019: 515). Clearly being deprived of, or being unable to express and experience love and intimacy will be seriously detrimental to an individual.

Conducting an investigation into intimacy and love of actual women scientists and academics will hold all manner of ethical concerns and practical obstacles. Using characters from *The Sentients of Orion* as source for a close reading applies science fiction's element of estrangement discussed earlier to allow an investigation of a situation very similar, yet suitably removed from present day reality. I will focus on instances of intimacy in the lives of three female academics in *The Sentients of Orion* in order to ascertain how de Pierres uses her work, and these intimacies in particular, as a tool to not only address, but also challenge the manner in which traditional centres of knowledge may be toxic to women. To facilitate my discussion, I will provide an outline of key elements of the plot.

Mira Fedor, a student at a military-type university or 'Studium', is a pilot who inherits from her father an innate gene, which enables her to pilot the royal biozoon – a sentient, biological spaceship. The male-centred academic institution threatens to strip Mira of this gene. She has to flee both her antagonistic university and a war when the Saqr, a water-based alien species, unexpectedly invade the planet Araldis. During Mira's flight, she is raped by a fellow student, Trinder 'Trin' Pellegrini.

Mira flees in *Insignia*, the sentient 'biozoon' space vessel, on a mission to find help for Araldis elsewhere in the Orion galaxy. She travels in the company of a space pilot, Jo-Jo Rasterovich, Rast Randall (a female mercenary), and two scientists, Bethany Ionil and Thales. They stop at Scolar, a planet of scholars and philosophers, where Mira's child (conceived by rape) is born.

Belle Monde is another planet of elite scientists and academics, also known as 'Godheads' who study and serve Sole, a godlike entity discovered at the edge of the universe. Sole is instrumental in the Saqr attack, something he uses the Godheads to further. Two Godheads, Tekton and Dicter Miranda Seward are in competition for academic funding and recognition and their ruthless efforts to further their careers lead first to the drug-induced dumbing down, and ultimately the destruction of the academic planet, Scolar.

Mira's daughter de-escalates the war and destruction by reaching an agreement with Sole, while Trin is overthrown as leader of the survivors upon Mira's return to Araldis. The underlying setting of science and academia, and the direct and indirect influences of those centers of knowledge making on especially female characters in the series is a recurring theme.⁸

WOMEN IN ORION'S ACADEMIA

The academics in *The Sentients of Orion* are not portrayed as a homogenous group. In line with situated knowledges, and the stance Butler (1990: xxxi) takes, they are diverse in terms of background and expectations, as well as their cultural understanding and performance of gender. In spite of this diversity, there are common bonds and a sense of solidarity in the face of inequality in their chosen field.

⁸ An as yet unpublished short story by de Pierres called 'The Echo of Love' details how senior academics at a space university manipulate a junior academic's yearning for love and belonging, destroying his career and his life for the sake of an experiment.

Mira the Student

The protagonist of *The Sentients of Orion*, Mira Fedor, is neither an academic nor a scientist, but a student at Studium, which seems to be Orion's equivalent of a university. While degrees are conferred, there is a military element to it in that at graduation, some students would emerge pilots.⁹

The Studium graduation ceremony reveals Araldis society, and by virtue of where it is situated, Orion academia, as a sycophantic patriarchal hierarchy full of hidden agendas and gender inequality. As a top graduate, Mira has certain expectations of acceptance and recognition during the ceremony. The public moment, however, becomes an intimate one when Mira is openly shunned. She is humiliated by a fellow student speaking 'loudly enough for all to hear': 'You *are* different, ...[s]o somber, Baronessa. So *thin'* (DS 8, emphasis in original). It is telling that this humiliation comes not from a man but from another female student. Patriarchy in general, and as shown here patriarchy in academia, has led women to turn on each other instead of uniting against male oppression. bell hooks points out that even within the feminist movement, those who think differently are seen as 'a dangerous threat' (2000: 12). Similarly, Mira's failure to fit in is as much a threat to her female peers at the university as it is to the male establishment.¹⁰

Mira is being snubbed by her fellow students at the Studium based on her being in possession of the 'Innate gene', something that is considered abnormal in a woman. Her possession of a special ability (usually reserved for men only) makes her 'Other' in her academic sphere. Mira's belief that she will receive the award of 'Pilot First' at the end of the graduation ceremony allows her to ignore the slights. She believes that '*[t]hen* she would be properly honoured ... and Cochetta Silvio and her brittle friends would dare not speak aloud their demeaning thoughts of her again' (DS 11). It is, however, doubtful that those who resent her for being different would suddenly come to accept her once it is officially acknowledged that she possesses the special ability. More likely, it will only confirm her otherness, and increase the scorn and animosity that she has been experiencing.

While Mira seemingly remains 'self-possessed', able to remain immune to the taunts and deaf to the 'perfunctory applause' (DS 9), she is completely aware of the rejection. This is not only a rejection of her as person, but of the recognition due to her after years of academic effort. According to Taylor (2013: 97), denying recognition is a form of interpersonal violence and, as such, an act of intimacy. Actions such as 'disrespect', 'disregard', 'mean spiritedness', 'humiliation', 'violence' and 'bullying' are all manifestations of 'negative intimacy' (Ricci, 1994: no pagination; 1997: no pagination).

Mira, as a woman, is allowed to attend an academic institution, and even graduate with top honours, but the degree she completes, and for which she receives scant acknowledgement from her peers, is considered a 'feminine degree' (DS 11). This is similar to present day reality where Martin (2012: 3) claims that women are largely 'underrepresented in both education and careers involving science, technology, engineering and mathematics' (Martin, 2012: 3). Research further shows that even when confronted with successful women mathematicians, 'women and men held consistent implicit stereotypes that men are associated with math' (Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger and McManus, 2011: 256). De Pierres here further implies the extent of sexism in the Studium, using the estranged galaxy of Orion to comment on and raise questions around hegemony in academia. Reminiscent of current trends in Western higher education, where women are often still considered more suitable for 'easy' degrees in Humanities than in the 'rational' Sciences, girls like Mira are only deemed able to study easy or 'soft' degrees – Mira is not offered the same 'neural fact-augmentations' as the male students, 'being a woman who would never truly hold a position of importance' (DS 284). Instead, she has to study at night and 'secretly' to master the arts of piloting, in spite of her possessing the Inborn right and ability to pilot biozoons. Academia is not allowing Mira, as a woman, the right to be herself.

While society tends to be more concerned with a physical variety of interpersonal violence (Cvancara and Kinney, 2009: 329), verbal violence has been shown to be more pernicious (Gortner, Gollan and Jacobson, 1997: 337) and also more harmful in the long term (Ney, 1987: 371). Verbal violence, such as that which Mira is subjected to, often results in victims experiencing their social environs as antagonistic (Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander and Clark, 2007: 360–365), and can result in problems with commitment and closeness (Vangelisti, 2002: 656–657). The manner in which Mira is rejected and deprived of recognition by her academic peers plays a role in the formation of her character and may be instrumental in her very guarded and sombre demeanour, her thinness and the lack of intimate social relationships in her life.

The academic environment literally turns hostile when Franco Pellegrini announces on the graduation stage that the 'Fedor birthright has come to an end with the Inborn gene falling to a woman' (DS 12). Mira is deprived of official recognition of her abilities. Instead, she is publicly shunned and shamed for being a woman and stripped of her birthright by the patriarch, who seems to be fulfilling the role of Chancellor. This open hostility glaringly amplifies any previously implicit gender inequities in academia on Araldis. Mira finds herself a helpless woman in

⁹ See Ender *et al.* (2017) for a very relevant examination of transgender integration into the military.

¹⁰ Also see Alanna Callaway's reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example of women turning against each other (2008: 68).

an environment that is suddenly more than just pettily maleficent; it is actively discriminating against her on the basis of her gender.¹¹

The escalation of violence culminates when Mira is raped by Trin, something that would not have happened had they not met at Studium, or had Studium not perpetuated a culture protective of ‘rapists and societal cannibals’ (*DS* 10). METRAC’s *Campus Safety for Women* edition is only one source pointing to the way that universities fail to be safe places for students, ‘staff and faculty of diverse abilities, sexual and gender identities, races and faiths’ (Komiotis, 2013: no pagination). For Mira, university offers poor protection: what starts out as rejection based on her gender, ends in rape.

Regardless of whether this rape is one of passion, one with power permutations or (in Trin’s mind) one of necessity to procreate, Mira is violated, and rendered powerless with ‘*no choice*’ (*CS* 19, emphasis in original).¹² Anne Cahill points out how, as a woman, ‘[t]he possibility of rape shapes the space I inhabit, designating certain hours and places as dangerous to me while to men they remain open prospects … I was rapable, and therefore I had to be careful’ (2001: 1). Mira’s ‘rapability’, a social vulnerability of her gender, affects her freedom. Academia, where she is situated, actively contributes to her being robbed of her agency.

The series concludes where Mira returns to Araldis, having overcome the many obstacles between her and saving the planet. To say that she triumphs, though, is not completely accurate. She saves the planet, her life is full with love for her children, and she does have close friends, but in a series with many graphic depictions of sexual intimacy, Mira is one of the only characters to never have voluntary sex. She does form close bonds with a number of characters, notably Jo-Jo Rasterovich, but she is never able to love romantically again after Trin, her ‘college sweetheart’ rapes her. For Mira, the protagonist, a brush with patriarchal academia not only limits her agency, it impacts her ability to love romantically and to engage in constructive, consensual sex.

Bethany the Scientist

The female scientist I will focus on is Bethany Ionil, known as Beth. As the sister of warlord Lasper Farr, Bethany embodies the ‘scientist’s daughter’, a stereotypical character often used in early science fiction to depict women (Amis, 1960: 45; Russ, 2007: 209). Bucking the trope, though, there is both depth and complexity to Bethany, whose gender, sexuality and love for her child deeply inflect the novels.

Bethany, a disgraced scientist, first enters the story as a prisoner. As her story unfolds, it becomes clear that her physical circumstances are symbolic of the psychological prison in which she finds herself. She is described as having a ‘sagging thin arse and tiny odd-shaped breasts’. The men imprisoned with her do not find her ‘in the slightest’ attractive in spite of, or perhaps because of, her being ‘permanently naked’ (*CS* 31). Beth’s body, like her physical imprisonment reflect the impoverished state she finds herself in after abandoning her child.

Mostly based on his lack of sexual interest in her, Beth is able to confide in her fellow prisoner, Jo-Jo Rasterovich, about her decade-long relationship with a Mioloquan¹³ man. In order to please her lover, who eventually abandoned her, Beth not only compromises her career as scientist, but abandons the mixed-species child from the union. Interspecies relationships are frowned on, as Jo-Jo makes clear: ‘You were flipping a scaly? How the hell did that happen?’ (*CS* 30–32). By heteronormative standards, the illicit relationship is afforded a certain level of respectability by virtue of its duration and the fact that they union yielded a child, but it is clearly not within the parameters of acceptable behaviour in Orion. Agonito (2014: 38) points out a similar surface respectability granted to gay relationships in modern-day, liberal society where a greater level of mainstream acceptance is afforded to long-term, stable gay relationships, solidified by the presence of children.

Beth fears losing a man, and her efforts to claim love leads her to making the ‘moral mistake’ of sacrificing motherhood and abandoning her child. She is eventually abandoned by her alien lover, but her subsequent regret begs the question of what she would have done if he had not left her. This tale of intimacy gone wrong is used to highlight the double standard and the stereotype of poor parenting by a man not being considered nearly as abhorrent as poor parenting by a woman. Agonito, for example, refers to a mother rejecting a child as the ‘last taboo’ (2014).

In spite of Mira and Beth sharing many instances of semi-intimacy their relationship never develops further than a superficial friendship. Mira chooses not to confide in Beth (*CS* 323), even if she later feels ‘a pang of loss

¹¹ Hate crimes against women (for no other reason than that they are women) are commonly perpetrated. Relevant to this discussion, there has been a notable increase in such crimes on university campuses and (as in the case of recent rape allegations on the University of Cape Town campus) victims of such crimes are not necessarily backed by their academic institutions, not even when the institution is led by a woman (Macupe, 2022: no pagination).

¹² See Anne Cahill’s *Rethinking Rape* (2001).

¹³ An alien species.

for [the] brief friendship' (*TS* 8). Two factors contribute to the two women never truly reaching intimacy.¹⁴ Firstly, they are unable to connect because of the depth of their individual misery. Beth is 'submerged in her guilt' while Mira is ravaged by emotional pain (*CS* 284). Mostly, however, the distrust that Mira feels toward Beth is based on Beth's position as a scientist working for the powerful Lasper Farr (*CS* 281-282).

The depth of enmity between Beth and her brother 'poisoned the air' (*MS* 92). Beth fears 'the casual and complete callousness' with which her brother 'dispensed violence' (*MS* 93). She, however, sets aside her fear and her pride in order to find her daughter, saying 'You were right. And I was wrong, Lasper. And I need your help' (*CS* 257). Even as she asks Lasper for help, Beth deeply resents his attitude toward her gender and her sexuality, something he uses to belittle her in every sense. He ties what he thinks are her moral flaws to her profession and to her ability to make meaning. Lasper despises Beth because she is a woman. He implies that the only reason she can think is because he taught her to do so (*MS* 94). This represents not only a typical male view of women's intellect as inferior to that of men, but also a view often still found in academia today. It fits in with Schultz (2019) and Eddy and Ward's (2015) argument that women in academia are often not considered for their minds, but for their ability to mother.¹⁵

Beth's accusing her brother of '[n]ot seeing the things driven by simple emotion', is key to the debate around situated knowledges. Lasper Farr represents the traditional way of making knowledge while Beth is making a plea for situatedness. Of interest is Laspar's response to Beth's stance. He attacks her morals: 'While you, my dear, have always given in far too readily to simple primitive urges' (*MS* 95). Lasper despises his sister for her 'preferences' and for her 'attraction to alien species' (*MS* 100), but it is difficult to say what he rejects more violently – her different way of approaching science (which he ties into her being a woman), or her choice of whom to love and have sex with. While Beth has undoubtedly made poor choices driven by emotion and sexual need, the manner in which Lasper uses those mistakes to cast doubt on her confidence, her intellectual ability and her competence as a scientist, demonstrates how women in any patriarchal society are both punished for and held back by their sexuality. The double standard, also in academia, remains – '[a] woman's worth and status are diminished if she is perceived as being sexually experienced, whereas a man's social status is enhanced by his sexual promiscuity' (La France, 2010: 299).

It is difficult to ascertain whether Beth's poor choices in love are caused by the lack of confidence in her professional abilities, or whether she lacks confidence because of her poor choices. Is this an example of hegemony in her chosen profession affecting her private life? Even after the Mio man has deserted first their child and then herself, Beth still goes to him when he calls for her. Thales, her human lover, comes across them behind a closed door:

'The front of her nightdress was open, her eyes closed and mouth creased in pain. Beside her was a stranger; a heavily gilled and scaled Mioloquan with modified limbs and primitive facial features. The Mio's sharp teeth and fish mouth were clamped around her nipples and its fins were lashing at her side, whipping against her flesh ... When she saw Thales her expression sharpened. The Mio pulled his teeth roughly from her breast. Thales did not miss the flush spreading across her chest and the quickening of her breath at the pain.' (*MS* 98)

This scene, both in the opening of the door (*MS* 98) and in Beth's plea for acceptance (*MS* 99) symbolises a 'coming out' in a sexual sense. Thales's sense of betrayal, however, is more of relevance to the discussion. He feels an immediate urge to '[r]un to his home, and his wife, and his bed; to the comfort of the things he knew and trusted' (*MS* 99). How insecure he is in his masculinity becomes evident when he asks for reassurance about his own sexual prowess: 'Are you saying that I cannot please you?' Beth turns out not to be 'the simple, sad woman he'd thought her to be' (*MS* 222), but her true transgression is making him doubt his masculinity. This portrayal of intimacy allows de Pierres to succinctly encapsulate patriarchal attitudes toward female exploration of not only alternative sexualities, but any sexuality or sexual desire that is considered 'unwomanly'.

It defies belief that Beth chooses to return to a man who not only deserted her, but coerced her into deserting her own child, and the automatic assumption would be that she is acting like a typical abused woman in her inability to break away from a cycle of abuse.¹⁶ While this may be relevant in Beth's choices, but a closer reading of her

¹⁴ See *Mommy Myth* by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) for a description of how patriarchy keeps women (who could potentially be allies) isolated from each other through convincing individual women of the uniqueness of their perceived failures.

¹⁵ Referring to possible double binds women in leadership may find themselves in, Kathleen Hall Jamieson says 'childbearing is expected to be chosen over intellectual pursuits, silence over shame, and invisibility over acknowledgement of aging' (1995: 14).

¹⁶ Nikki Wedgwood (2009: 336) claims that 'sexual desire is socially constructed (along with gender) through a long and conflict-ridden process'. She states that gender theorists and feminists alike need to do more research on why certain people are sexually attracted to certain other people, but specifically why women are often physically attracted to men who are abusive

subsequent conversation with Thales shows her reasoning to be more closely aligned with traditional masculine attitudes than with traditionally feminine ones: Beth ‘switched on the light’ as she enters the room, strengthening the ‘coming out’ theme by removing any vestiges of shame and secret (MS 99). Her apology to Thales is not for what she just did, but for ‘not [having] been more discreet … She didn’t look guilty. Nor did she seem to want forgiveness’ (MS 99). Beth states her appreciation for their relationship, but is very direct in saying ‘that is not enough. I have sought pain for a long time. It’s part of me, and you are only temporary’. Like a man, she is completely unemotional when she puts the picture in perspective for Thales, exposing his hypocrisy and the ridiculousness of his attitude. Beth reminds Thales that he has no right to expect exclusivity from her while he is still married: ‘I don’t judge you for it, Thales. So please don’t judge me’ (MS 99). She points out that she offered Thales comfort when he needed it from her and exposes his hypocrisy in denying her the same, just because her ‘comfort sometimes takes a different form’ (MS 99). Her insistence on being allowed to be different and to embrace her sexuality, allows her to deny both her lover and her brother ‘the pleasure of guilt or embarrassment’ (MS 100). Beth displays extraordinary clarity and courage, something unexpected in a woman living in such a traditional society.

While Beth’s efforts to reunite with her child are commendable, it is a fact that motherhood, as constructed in a patriarchal society, has an impact on her career as scientist. *The Mommy Myth* (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 1-27), *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1977: xiii-xxii) as well as *The Last Taboo: Saying no to motherhood* (Agonito, 2014) provide numerous examples of how the social structure of modern motherhood disenfranchises women physically (Agonito, 2014: 7-28), mentally, creatively (Agonito, 2014: 55-77) and economically (Agonito, 2014: 91-100).

Overcoming the limitations placed on her among others by general attitudes against women scientists, Beth proves herself to be the exception rather than the rule. She embraces sexual agency and non-normativity, thus coming into her own. As she assumes leadership of Consilience, a large military cooperation, her new role manifests certain physical changes. She starts to look ‘older, more worn, but there was a tautness to her body, a resolution that comes with assuming responsibility’ (TS 378). Beth’s altered appearance reminds Thales of both the warlord Lasper Farr, and the mercenary Rast Randall. This observation echoes what de Pierres has already established through her portrayal of two female soldiers, Rast and Faris – for a woman in Latino society, whether a soldier or a scientist, to seize freedom and operate independently, she has to eschew femininity to a certain degree and embrace a performance of masculinity.¹⁷

By the end of the novel, Beth loves whom she wants to and has sex with whom she chooses. She is reunited with the daughter she truly loves and she takes up a leadership position. Her road to self-discovery entails her constantly fighting men like her alien lover, her brother and Thales for her right to choice. In her professional capacity as a woman in a field based on male-inflected objectivity, she is not allowed agency nor individuality. While she does claim her right so agency eventually, it seems that being a scientist and a woman in a hegemonic community has a damaging effect on her self-image, which in turn has an impact on her agency and the choices she makes regarding love and intimacy.

Miranda Seward the Academic

Miranda Seward is a ‘Dicter’, a title seemingly equivalent to a PhD in our world. Most of the women in *The Sentients of Orion* are involved in desperate struggles for survival, contributing in various ways to the war against the Saqr, which raises questions about how Miranda, as uninvolved, self-serving academic, is characterised. Dicter Seward is a woman of excesses, and this aspect of her nature is reflected in her ‘bosoms quivering in hyperbeat with her chins’ (DS 210). According to Tekton, it seems ‘almost as if her chins acted as repositories for the food, freeing her tongue to do what it did best – complain’ (DS 242). She has ‘more than her fair share of chins and equally shivery thighs’ (DS 114). Miranda’s appetite for food is only matched by her appetite for sex (CS 224), but while such appetites in other women characters speak of health, strength and agency, in Miranda, they somehow bespeak inadequate control and a lack of morals. Janet Tomiyama and Traci Mann point out how obesity is ‘stigmatized’ and there is much social pressure on overweight people to conform to the slimness ideal (2013: 4). While de Pierres could thus merely be commenting on the fat shaming prevalent in modern-day Westernised society, she could be depicting Miranda as a weak, indulgent woman whose body reflects her excesses.

A selection of top academics and scientists, carrying the title ‘Godhead’, are selected to move to Belle-Monde to study ‘God’ (DS 21). Miranda uses the fact that she is the only female Godhead in her favour. For her, seduction is a tool as she has sex with Jo-Jo ‘in return for an introduction to God’ (DS 114). She further uses ‘artful timing’ to expose her thighs to Tekton in order to elicit information from him (DS 79). She lacks emotional involvement in her sexual encounters, and treats the men she has sex with like ‘priced meat’ (DS 211), attitudes which do not

toward them.

¹⁷ This raises the question of whether Orion society expects a degree of masculinity in a leader, or whether masculinity is an inherent quality of leadership, something which falls beyond the scope of this article.

conform to the stereotypical feminine image. She is not beyond playing into the stereotype, however. When she is caught snooping through a fellow academic's materials, she is able to slide smoothly into portraying a girlish side as she produces a 'single tear' and 'lifted her skirt to display the full undulation of her thighs' (*DS* 244).

Miranda's pride in her 'repertoire' of 'erotic' techniques (*DS* 114), are more often than not applied for functional purposes and not for her own sexual pleasure. She is only once depicted to have sexual intercourse without any gainful motive, namely when Tekton finds her 'quaffing champagne and eating oysters out of parts of Doris' that not even Doris's lover, Tekton, has accessed before (*DS* 243). Miranda's choice of Doris as partner in this motive-free sexual encounter allows for the possibility that she might be lesbian, and not bisexual, only having sex with men when it serves a purpose. De Pierres shows how 'abusing' and performing gender in a specific manner in order to attain her academic aims seems to have compromised Miranda's choices with regard to sexuality. It can be argued that Miranda's potentially damaging choices in how she performs gender are a direct result of the toxic academic sphere in which she finds herself.

Miranda's driving ambition means there is very little she would not do to further her academic career. She accepts money to create a biological weapon used to suppress the mental capacity of the people of Scolar in order to fund her academic research (*TS* 259). While it might be coincidental, de Pierres chooses one academic's scholarly ambitions to pave the way for the destruction of a whole planet of other academics. This is open criticism of the manipulative and ambitious nature of academia in modern-day liberal democratic society, of a lack of research ethics and of questionable academic conduct.¹⁸

To strengthen my argument, Miranda is the only woman in *The Sentients of Orion* who never forms any kind of emotional intimacy with another person. She is very different from all the women on Araldis, for whom survival is a binding factor. Modern feminism is sometimes accused of having turned into a theory-based discipline exercised by academics, far removed from the lives of everyday women (Nussbaum, 1999: 45; Braidotti, 2005: 171). There is the added suggestion in the depiction of Miranda's lack of emotional intimacy, or even love, that women in positions of great power (such as being companion to a god) are forced to lose their 'feminine' ability to forge meaningful relationships.¹⁹ In relation to Lykke and Braidotti's views, de Pierres seems to be using Dicter Miranda Seward to comment not so much on the current state of feminism as the current state of feminist academics.

CONCLUSION

Lorraine Nencel (2004: no pagination) finds that studies on sexuality are 'primarily concerned with how oppositional gender relations are expressed and affect women in their sexual experience and practices', thereby defining women's subjectivity through the paradigm of heteronormative power. She feels that in spite of an increasing emphasis on positive aspects such as 'agency instead of victimization' such studies still serve only to prop up the paradigm of power. Nencel, however, writes within a paradigm of radical feminism, not in line with this more literary study of intimacy, gender performance, love and sexuality. Although the role of power in the gender performance and sexuality of the three academics and scientists discussed here has an impact on their lives, whether through instances of inequality or instances of empowerment, the aim of this article is not to strengthen oppositional gender categories. Rather, it is to see how de Pierres comments on and challenges male hegemony in the spheres of science and academia through her depiction of intimacy and through how these characters find their way in terms of gender performance, intimacy and love.

De Pierres applies science fiction's function of estrangement in *The Sentients of Orion* with its particular academic backdrop and its focus on scientists and meaning makers to challenge the status quo of hegemony in knowledge making, science and in academia. Moving beyond mere surface comment on obvious discrimination in a patriarchal system as addressed in the introduction, this article shows how three female characters; a student, a scientist and an academic researcher, are deeply affected in their love, gender performance and intimacy by virtue of them being situated in the field of science and academia typically characterised by patriarchal dominance. In this, de Pierres uses love and intimacy, or the lack thereof, to question and challenge the manner in which academia does not allow for spaces of individuality and agency in the private lives of women.

The other women on Araldis, the housewives, lovers, daughters and soldiers who have survived the alien attack have negotiated ways in which to come to terms with their sexuality and perform gender in ways that allow them

¹⁸ Some researchers argue that feminism has been 'hijacked' by academics who use it as political correctness platform to suppress freedom of expression on campuses (Hoff Sommers, 2015: no pagination).

¹⁹ All the women who are depicted as 'free', such as Rast, Fariss, Samuelle and to a certain extent Miranda and Beth, conform to Ezzell's signifiers of masculinity, namely, 'control of self and others, resisting being controlled, resisting exploitation' (2016: 192).

to function optimally in a hostile patriarchal society. The same does not seem to apply to the women of science and academia.

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(Re)/(Dis)Embodying Love: The Cyborg in *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*

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ABSTRACT

Fritz Lang's ground-breaking science-fiction film *Metropolis* (1927) has long held a particular fascination with film critics because of its exploration of the exploited proletariat and the dangers of human-machine interaction. While much academic interest in the film has focused on it as capitalist allegory – seen in the separation of the bourgeoisie above-ground from the proletariat underground – less attention has been paid to the film's representation of the cyborg, and, more specifically, the cyborg femme. Drawing on posthuman theory, and in particular cyborg theory as proposed by Donna Haraway, this article investigates to what degree the film denies the true symbolic potency of the cyborg by casting its creation as reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster. It asserts that Lang denies the film an imaginary, visual space within which the cyborg femme, though seeming human, is not afforded any agency—as Derrida asserts about the machine-animal—or her own will towards self-determination. Though interrogating what it means to possess human capacity, the article further asserts that Ridley Scott's characterization of the replicants Rachael, Zohra and Pris in *Blade Runner* (1982) casts these cyborg femmes as expendable or dependent on the human to protect them, thereby denying them love.

Keywords: posthumanism, *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, cyborg, Donna Haraway

INTRODUCTION

The visual space of cinema is dedicated to spectacle and the sensations of pleasure. Enclosed within the margins of the screen, cinematic narratives play themselves out, and modern screen audiences have come to appreciate what Tom Gunning refers to as the 'self-enclosed fictional world' as it is preserved and delineated by the 'realistic illusion of the cinema' (2006: 382). Within the science fiction genre, the most enduring legacy of the fictional, dystopic worlds represented on the cinema screen is the cyborg.

Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' (of 1985, see Haraway, 2016) constitutes probably the most well-known theoretical work dedicated to understanding what it means to be a cyborg, and will theoretically ground my analysis of the two films. Her work is indicative of a twentieth-century *zeitgeist* that celebrated the production of a being disconnected from the historical and mythological past that could destabilise the boundaries between male and female, organic and inorganic, human and machine.

In light of Haraway's cyborg theory, and posthumanist concern with doing away with the 'anthropological universal', as described by Donald Brown (1991),¹ in this article I will scrutinise how Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) embody (and re-embody) the cyborg femme as capable of manifesting human empathy and affect. These films represent benchmarks in the evolution of science fiction film-making. Both films depict technological and industrial progress at the expense of suffering. In Lang's film, it is the suffering of the subterranean human workers; but in Scott's, it is the suffering of the cyborg Replicants themselves. In comparing the two films, I will show how the cyborg femme is a victim of her own design, is devoted to serving a specific purpose, and is ultimately rendered expendable or designated for what Scott's film refers to as 'retirement'. Though, in *Blade Runner* (1982), the expendability of the Replicants is experienced by both male and female versions, the cyborg femmes are rendered particularly expendable by Scott's noir-styled story. In *Metropolis*, the resemblance of

¹ The anthropological or human universal is defined by Brown (2004: 47) as constituting 'those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and mind that, so far as the record has been examined, are found among all peoples known to ethnography and history.'

robot Maria to her human counterpart, and her antagonising quest to sabotage the liberation of the human workers, render her expendable in the end.

The theoretical foundation for my analysis of the films draws on both feminist film theory — in particular, the work of Laura Mulvey — and posthuman theory. En route, I note Haraway's contribution to defining the cyborg, and I orientate this theoretical lens towards the representation of the cyborg femme in both films. I consider the robot Maria who, though *like* the human Maria, is distinctly Other in terms of narrative purpose, as setting the cyborg up as an archetypal villain in *Metropolis*. Thereafter, I scrutinise the narrative purpose of Rachael, Zohra and Pris in *Blade Runner*. They are motivated by self-preservation and the fear of death, thereby feeding into the philosophical debate concerning what it means to be human in the film.

LAURA MULVEY AND THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN (AND THE CYBORG FEMME) IN CINEMA

In her article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey offers a critique of what she terms the cinematic representations of 'sexual imbalance' (1975: 11), which arise from the controlling male gaze. She cites the words of filmmaker, Budd Boetticher, in describing the power that this gaze wields, and for what purpose:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (1975: 11)

When directing this sentiment towards an analysis of *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, the viewer is presented with the spectacle of women — human or cyborg — now rendered in visual archetypes and fantasies. However, the film femme is two-dimensional: she is oversimplified and denied knowledge of all aspects of womanhood because she cannot fully embody what it means to be a woman. In Lang and Scott's films, the emotional capacity of both human and cyborg women to be authentic, as opposed to being objectified or relegated, is restricted. They serve an archetypal purpose within male-directed narratives and are not permitted three-dimensionality.

The complex spectrum of experiences, feelings and thoughts that constitute humanity are reduced to a binary: a woman may be either a madonna or a whore, but she cannot be both simultaneously. When this understanding is applied to Lang's and Scott's films, and to their representation of the cyborg femme, the two cinematic science fiction narratives reduce these characters to the archetype of the seductress, who is not presented as whole. Rather, the cyborg femmes are transformed by the prescripts of an archetypal cinematic rendering; they are relocated and represented within the surreal space of science fiction, and are subservient to the male gaze. Posthuman feminist, Rosi Braidotti, critiques the dominant humanist view of 'Man as the measure of all things' (2013: 2), and, certainly, within both films, this view seems to prevail.

Through this dominating, colonising, capitalist male gaze — including those of the male directors of and male characters from each film — the human woman is, paradoxically, afforded some dignity in her embodiment on the screen, though she is objectified and venerated. In order for her to be protagonist, she must adhere to the prescripts of an archetype. In so doing, she can become an idealised hybrid of a human and a goddess. However, when the cyborg femme is invented and produced, though she is cast as beautiful and ideal in superficial ways, she can never enjoy the same veneration. She is established as that which must be feared, relegated and antagonised as a threat. And, when she demurs, she is, as Emily Dickinson states, 'straightway dangerous and handled with a chain' (1983: 809).

The cyborg femme, therefore, symbolises the complication that arises when looks deceive. Cyborgs are seen by humans as posing a threat to the nature of humanity in their capacity to feel and understand, and must, therefore, be either enslaved or exterminated. This is justified because, though the cyborg femme seems to be *like* a human woman, it is neither of these things: though it is anthropomorphised, it is nonhuman; and although it looks like a woman, it is actually devoid of sex. Yet, there is irony in embodying the cyborg femme on film, which is drawn from a diegetic-extradiegetic tug-of-war. Though characterised as machines, the cyborgs in Lang and Scott's films are portrayed by human actors: the filmic cyborgs dissolve the boundaries between human and technology, and the act of representation offers a means through which the cyborg is disembodied as absolutely existing as machine, and is re-embodied as a hybrid capable of humanness. The cyborg femme that *seems* to be 'she', but *is* actually 'it', aligns to Donna Haraway's observations.

DONNA HARAWAY'S CYBORG

In *Discourse on Method*, René Descartes evaluates the likeness of animal to machine, but also proposes a means through which a machine can be tested and exposed as nonhuman:

Of these the first is that they could never use words or other signs arranged in such a manner as is competent to us in order to declare our thoughts to others (...) [and] that although such machines might execute many things with equal or perhaps greater perfection than any of us, they would, without doubt, fail in certain others from which it could be discovered that they did not act from knowledge, but solely from the disposition of their organs. (1995: n.p.)

According to Descartes, machines lack the capacity to reason and to exhibit morality. Such Enlightenment reasoning persisted in advocating that the machine, like the animal, was without a soul and, therefore, was hierarchically inferior to humans and incapable of reason. The term ‘cyborg’ emerged as the lexical means through which the debate regarding what it means to be human and, by contrast, machine, would be engaged and the distinction between human and nonhuman machine dissolved.

In her seminal ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, Haraway offers the cyborg as a means of understanding the hybridised human-machine form. She identifies the cyborg as

a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (...) This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (2016: 5-6)

Haraway points to the binary that is inherent in the cyborg’s existence: it is simultaneously free but oppressed; real but illusory; and seemingly gendered while also devoid of gender. This is also true of the science that forges the relationship between human and technology. As physicist Heinrich Rohrer (2013:13) observes:

Science means constantly walking a tightrope between blind faith and curiosity; between expertise and creativity; between bias and openness; between experience and epiphany; between ambition and passion; and between arrogance and conviction – in short, between an old today and a new tomorrow.

This empirical dichotomy that Haraway and Rohrer identify in relation to the cyborg and science destabilises patriarchal notions of the material absoluteness of knowledge, causing it to inhabit a suspended state where knowing and not-knowing are simultaneously engaged. This is where fear of the Other arises. Blurring the boundaries between the machine and the human also destabilises other binaries. Haraway points to this hybridised state as constituting a ‘*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction’ (2016: 7, original emphasis). It is an Other state, although it is not inscribed with Otherness from beyond, but developed from within and through transcendence, simultaneously disembodying and re-embodying. Haraway describes the purpose of the cyborg as ‘both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories’ (2016: 67). Though Lang is not comfortable with the blurring of boundaries in the same sense as Haraway proposes, preferring to represent this confusion as breeding dissent and highlighting ignorance of consequences, modern audiences have a stronger and more varied cinematic experience to draw from in finding value in the cyborg state. Scott is more willing than his predecessor to explore this.²

Haraway’s famous declaration at the end of her essay — ‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ (2016: 67) — is challenged by Leman Giresunlu in proposing the cyborg goddess. She regards the cyborg goddess as a universal manifestation across multiple spatiotemporal dimensions which ‘allow for fact and fiction to intertwine’ (2009: 163). The cyborg is a hybrid, liminal being, that functions as a ‘[carrier] of good and evil, beauty and gore all at once’ (2009: 175). Though seeming to align with Haraway’s notion of the cyborg as dissolving boundaries, Giresunlu argues that ‘the cyborg goddess imagery instead purports to achieve the very transformative aspect, by means of compensating for the spiritual side deemed to be missing within the high-tech environment’ (2009: 161). Unlike Haraway, she embraces the feminine image of the goddess, and casts the cyborg goddess as protagonist.

While the image of cyborg goddess is, to some degree, an appropriate description for Lang and Scott’s cyborg femmes, the representation of these characters falls short of Giresunlu’s description. This is because they are not protagonised and, though aspiring towards autonomy, do not fully achieve self-determination within the context of the patriarchal order.

Other thinkers have also challenged Haraway’s ideas. Within the twenty-first century, Julia R. DeCook notes that ‘[in] studying global digital cultures, Haraway’s notion of the cyborg is deeply Western in its theorization, and leaves behind those who do not exist in Western conceptions of personhood’ (2021: 1160). DeCook argues that debates surrounding the cyborg, gender and sexuality draw towards themselves issues of race as well. In positioning Haraway’s theory in relation to the two films that constitute the focus of this study, I must, therefore, acknowledge

² Though Haraway’s essay is considered by some to be outdated, there is an enduring cult fascination with this work, evident in several nuanced homages in visual culture. That *Metropolis* predates Haraway’s work is a profound testament to the enduring legacy of the philosophical intertextual cycle that is created in a ‘text rereading itself as it rewrites itself’ (Kristeva, 1980: 86).

that they are products of and subscribe to a Westernised worldview, and will demonstrate how their representations of the cyborg are imbued with this sociocultural and geopolitical worldview.

FRITZ LANG'S METROPOLIS (1927)

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) presents a world as archetypal as it is audacious in its ability to imagine a future mechanised dystopia. Set in the futuristic city, Metropolis, the film introduces an idyllic and hedonistic utopia, the above-ground domain of the ruling class under the leadership of the ruthless Fredersen.³ Beneath the surface, the working classes are suffering at the mercy of the machines and need a champion to save them. Despite efforts to sabotage meaningful political change—as instigated by Rotwang and his creation, the robot Maria⁴—the working classes do find such a champion in the human Maria,⁵ who, along with Fredersen's son, Freder,⁶ brokers positive change for the working classes. The film incorporates the *gravitas* of the myth narrative by giving the city a generic name rather than offering a specific geographical location, and by drawing on the underground and above-ground locations as analogous to the lower and upper classes respectively. Furthermore, the film shows explicit displays of human-nature-technology compatibility, superficially layered over the levels of human suffering, as the cogs and wheels of industry are animated by weary human hands.

Much critical engagement with the film has centred on its representation of Marxist themes relating to capitalist exploitation of the proletariat.⁷ Its political agenda is reinforced through class stratification. Where gender has been discussed, for example by Jerold J. Abrams (2004) and Gabriela Stoicea (2006), more often than not, it has been tethered to class. In Abrams and Stoicea's work, as in other works, gender has tended to inform readings related to class exploitation, rather than being explored for its own sake. I acknowledge that attempting to centre gender in analysis is problematic because of the intersectional imperative to situate gender concerns within a wider sociocultural and political context: the layers of Self and Other are multi-faceted and, therefore, cannot be read as separate. And yet, Self and Other have also been oversimplified in terms of their ability to encompass social stratification and the complexity of specific relationship dynamics. Certainly, Lang articulates a heterosexual vision in his film, which is established through the visual discourse of gender archetypes and establishes the Metropolis itself as a panoramic space that is as vast as its representation of gender is narrow.

I propose, in offering a predominantly gendered reading of the film, to show how gender not only influences the way the city is structured, but can also be read as the overarching reason other binaries exist, and how love and lust are, consequently, binarised in the film. I will focus on the positioning of two key female characters in relation to fixed points of archetypal masculine characterisation and influence within an overarching mythological hero's journey. I will also show how the film femmes of *Metropolis* function as liminal points that promise a progressive feminist destabilisation and suspension of absolute Self and Other categories, while shifting focus away from the masculine. While the film's conclusion does not necessarily present a catharsis in this regard, I will offer a means of reading how more contemporary views of the human-technology interface achieve a retrospective catharsis, which paves the way for stronger characterisations, in particular of the cyborg film femme. In *Blade Runner*, for example, we see the cyborg as capable of emotions associated with the human, including love. Guiding my analysis of *Metropolis'* two female characters will be three key relational themes: representation and the gaze; mediation and the liminal persona; and the cyborg as the integrated feminine heart that challenges the integral masculine-driven Heart Machine of Metropolis. The latter theme points particularly towards posthumanist concerns, as promoted by Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'.

Much of my analysis relies on the fact that the literal and symbolic meanings of the image or visual projection dominate filmic readings. This is even more significant when analysing films from the silent era, such as *Metropolis*.

³ Fredersen is the leader of Metropolis and the creator of the machine that drives the functioning of the city. Imperious and ruthless, he oppresses the working classes for the benefit of the ruling class, and expresses a desire to replace the workers with robots.

⁴ Created in the human Maria's likeness by the eccentric scientist Rotwang, the robot Maria is designed to cause chaos and sabotage Fredersen's plans. Unlike the idealistic human Maria, she is seductive and uses her sexuality to corrupt. She, along with Rotwang, are regarded as the antagonists of the film.

⁵ The human Maria, as she is often distinguished, is the female protagonist of the film and is the maternal champion of the working classes. She dedicates herself to alleviating the suffering of the workers and may be seen to be a political idealist and a symbol of purity.

⁶ Freder is the son of Fredersen, the leader of Metropolis. Freder falls in love with the human Maria and is strongly influenced by her radical beliefs regarding class equality. As the 'prince' of Metropolis, he possesses the capacity to enable positive political change in reconciling the working and ruling classes.

⁷ In her article, 'The top, the bottom and the middle: Space, class and gender in *Metropolis*', Deirdre Byrne (2003: 2) explores how the spatial organisation of the Metropolis is analogous to class divisions and how such stratification further informs a rather conservative regard for gender identities and roles.

The icon, as derived from the Greek word *eikenai*, meaning ‘to seem or to be like’, reveals that what is seen is not presented to us in terms of what *is*, but is rather represented to us in terms of what *seems*. The film has a specific representational value, and semiology provides a useful means through which the film may be understood. Semiology, the study of signs as co-developed and defined by Ferdinand de Saussure as ‘*science that studies the life of signs within society*’ (1959: 16, original emphasis), offers useful tools for understanding how Lang’s film gains a feminine *gravitas*. If we apply the semiotics model to the image most associated with Lang’s film — the promotional poster — we see that much of the film is derived from the presence of the feminine cyborg and not the masculine human. The city itself is symbolically cast as the mechanised feminine through this; and this association becomes more and more entrenched within the ‘collective unconscious’ (Jung, 1964) as the film becomes more and more incorporated within a new, industrialised mythology.

It is interesting to note how Lang, ironically for a self-declared atheist (Gunning, 2000), invests his film with spiritual *gravitas* through incorporating religious iconography, which requires the audience to make active inferences, draw these into the present, and direct them towards the future: an intertextual gesture of ‘a text rereading itself as it rewrites itself’ (Kristeva, 1980: 86). Such associations are both context- and character-driven, but are all directed towards a sense of stratification represented in the form of a tiered triangular model. This is seen in several frames in the film, such as when human Maria delivers her sermon, or when the robot Maria is elevated above the people as she dances, which draws heavily on the artistic golden ratio and symbolises the city’s rigid power hierarchy.

Lang’s film is regarded by scholars such as Tom Gunning (2000), Deirdre Byrne (2003) and Joe McElhaney (2015) as a modern allegory. This is defined as a narrative that operates at a symbolic level to communicate a truth or reveal a moral and, as J. R. R. Tolkien observes, is strongly informed by the ‘purposed domination of the author’ (2001: xvii): in this case, the director. Allegory subscribes to hierarchy in preferring the author’s (or in this case the filmmaker’s) understanding of truth over the reader’s (or viewer’s). The masculine-derived allegorical imperative is not only promoted in how the film’s Metropolis is structured, but also through Lang’s incorporation of characters like ‘The Creative Man’ and ‘The Machine Man’, ‘Death’ and ‘The Seven Deadly Sins’. These point to a higher moral message promoting Christian virtues, which rely on the acceptance of God as masculine. As an allegorical space, Metropolis serves as a means of stratifying society according to the culturally accepted locations of heaven above and hell below. Even the transition between these spaces is effected through a scrolling title card where words are ordered into a triangular shape stating (translated into English): ‘As deep as lay the workers’ city below the earth, so high above it towered the complex known as the “Club of the Sons,” with its lecture halls and libraries, its theatres and stadiums’ (Lang, 1927). This declaration does achieve a significant class distinction, but it is worth noting that the entire hierarchical arrangement of the Metropolis, as narrated through the title cards, has a dominant masculine presence above and below. This is evident in the title card identifying the complex as ‘The Club of Sons’, excluding the feminine. Furthermore, the masculine Fredersen is positioned as the presiding deity of the whole Metropolis.

The heavenly level above ground is represented as a pastoral paradise infused with images of Greek and Roman civilisation and the cult of pleasure. Hedonism holds sway and nature is its context. This is ironic because Nature is associated more readily with the feminine and the presence of prostitutes in the Eternal Gardens, a source of sexual pleasure for upper-class men, reinforces this association. However, this association is superficial because Nature is only a pawn for the benefit of man. Such a realisation brings to mind Barad’s posthumanist critique of the assumption that nature is inferior to culture:

Posthumanism does not attribute the source of all change to culture, denying nature any sense of agency or historicity. In fact, it refuses the idea of a natural (or, for that matter, a purely cultural) division between nature and culture, calling for an accounting of how this boundary is actively configured and reconfigured. (2006: 136)

The posthumanist lens, which proposes that nature and culture are entangled, offers a means through which the nature-culture binary in *Metropolis* may be critiqued because it corrupts the nonhuman agency of the cyborg femme for patriarchal, bureaucratic advancement. The mastermind, Joh Fredersen, asserts his hierarchy as a dominant masculine will, serving the imperative of culture, and so the paradise above and the wheels of industry below must follow his directive. The audience is encouraged to see the world of *Metropolis* through masculine eyes: a central, regulating, phallocentric gaze governing the enclosed urban system of the Metropolis. More importantly, the masculine gaze of Lang, as director, infuses the eye of the camera lens with a particular masculine imperative to see the world of the Metropolis through *his* eyes, rather than through a woman’s gaze.

Lang’s patriarchal representation of the two Marias is particularly noteworthy in terms of the binary between human and machine. Stoica describes the revelation of the human Maria as a sequence of ‘seeings’ that reveals the above-ground level as being artificial as well as superficial, but destabilises the notion of a dominant male gaze

in that the transition between surveyor and surveyed makes it ‘unclear who watches’ and who is being watched (2006: 33).

Stoicea also shows that the human Maria is presented as a spectacle. She is beheld by Freder and the prostitutes who, though female, have internalised the male gaze. However, the human Maria challenges the male gaze when she asserts herself intrusively within a space, with the film’s frame seeking to objectify her, with the defiant call to ‘Behold’. Her guiding children into a space associated with sexuality and pleasure poses a threat, not only to the upper classes, but also to the innocence of the children, despite her affinity to the divine matriarch archetype; and her caring for the proletariat poses a threat to the authority of Fredersen and to the artificial paradise he has created to placate the upper classes. Her democratisation of the space through using the word ‘brothers’ rather than ‘masters’ casts her, not just as a religious icon, but a revolutionary one: she becomes an embodiment of Liberty, leading the people.

Probably the most cited analysis of the two Marias is offered by Andreas Huyssen, who explores the threat the human Maria poses to Fredersen and the control he exerts from above, as opposed to the robot Maria and the seductive influence she wields from below. He takes a Freudian approach in evaluating the threat each poses, and represents their significance as a triangulation of human, nature and technology. He writes that: ‘Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control’ (Huyssen, 1982: 226).

The robot Maria also receives the scrutiny of the male gaze, which projects its dominance over her in an act of colonisation of the cyborg as sexual spectacle. Huyssen comments on this as follows:

The montage of male eyes staring at the false Maria when she emerges from her cauldron and begins to cast off her clothes, illustrates how the male gaze actually constitutes the female body on the screen. It is as if we were witnessing the second, public creation of the robot, her flesh, skin, and body not only being revealed, but constituted by the desire of male vision. (1982: 230)

As indicated previously, the audience is encouraged to view the world of the Metropolis from a masculine point of view. This is affirmed by Jean-Louis Baudry, who states that ‘[t]he spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera as a sort of relay’ (1985: 540). The robot’s wink is projected at the audience. The wink is seductive, positioning the cyborg as an object of lust rather than love. However, the one eye could perhaps indicate the singular vision (the all-seeing eye) of the controlling panopticon gaze that the robot is subservient to.

Some critics disagree with this reading. Lane Roth contradicts this by stating that the creation of the robot Maria is an act of silencing the masculine. Roth writes that ‘[t]he machine is (...) represented as an agent that corrupts and that robs the image of man, and thereby the image of God, of identity’ (1978: 344). Roth perceives power in the feminine, which Huyssen (1982: 226) also perceives as being a threat to masculine order. However, though the cyborg is created in man’s image, and is fashioned as woman, it is not woman. Rather, it seems to be woman, in the same way as it seems to be human. The robot Maria’s creation is nothing more than an effective illusion, and although she appears to possess agency, she is still serving a man’s will.

The effect of this human, nature and machine ‘mesh of significations’ (Huyssen, 1982: 226), and the reinforcement of the Other on all three levels, ultimately reinforce masculine hierarchy. This is seen in how iconic images of the two women tend to place them at points of convergence or intersection that are centrally located. Indeed, the creation of the robot Maria is derived from Fredersen’s own fear of reconciliation between what is above and below. Huyssen, for example, quotes Maria’s own words in emphasising her liminality: ‘Between the brain that plans and the hands that build, there must be a mediator [and] ‘It is the heart that must bring about an understanding between them’ (1982: 228-229). Though Fredersen’s son, Freder, is called the mediator, who reconciles the worlds above and below through the mediation of the heart, and acts as an intermediary between the wills of two men and of the worlds above and below, he is not the only person in this role. The human Maria initially takes up this mantle as a torchbearer for reconciliation. Fredersen’s fear reveals, according to Huyssen, that master may become slave, capital may become labour, and the will of man may become the will of women. The two Marias are torch-bearers for change, albeit in different ways. Their light promises reconciliation through love, but is either colonised to affirm the phallocentric order of the monomyth, or destroyed, and the tableau of what an alliance between head, heart and hands is fractured, broken and silenced. Freder’s mediation becomes more effective than that of the human Maria. She becomes a religious icon, a symbol of divine love, as when she addresses the workers in the catacombs in a tableau that echoes the biblical sermon on the mount, but she is ultimately reduced to being only a promise of reconciliation. This failure to achieve the reconciliation that Freder later manages is further corrupted by the robot Maria, because of her resemblance to the human Maria.

The robot Maria is animated into life in a process that strongly resembles the creation of Frankenstein’s monster in Mary Shelley’s work. It requires the vision of the ‘Pride and efficiency and modernity’ (Wells, 1927: 186) of the

ambitious patron, and the genius of the stereotypical mad scientist. Fredersen and Rotwang both wield their influence over the robot Maria and, in so doing, turn her into an object of their designs. She is overtly sexual in contrast to the human Maria's chaste virtue, and so robot Maria seems to affirm the polarising 'Madonna'/'Whore' classification of the archetypal feminine. The cyborg uses its likeness to the human Maria to gain acceptance. H. G. Wells writes that the robot Maria should 'look and work like a human being, but it is to have no "soul"' (1927: 185). The process of transformation into the likeness of the human, Wells (1927) asserts, involves trapping the human (in this case the female human) and exploiting her, akin to raping her of her essence. This is ironic in light of the fact that the robot Maria presents herself as cynically sexual, a parody of the prostitutes in the Eternal Gardens. Both she and the prostitutes represent warped versions of love.

The interface between humanity and technology is presented as an abomination in both Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Lang's *Metropolis*, and so the film may be seen as a cautionary tale. However, I wish to propose another interpretation. The two Marias dissolve the boundaries that fix humans and technology on opposite sides of a spectrum. According to this logic, we cannot deny the interdependence between humanity and technology. The human Maria's likeness has been captured through a process of dissolution and re-embodiment, and feeds into Mulvey's assertions that recognition is misrecognition, and that misrecognition envelops what already exists instead of replacing it. Huyssen refers to this in terms of how the machine is 'constructed from the inside out', with human physical qualities 'projected onto the robot' afterwards, and that the 'technical process in which woman is divided and fragmented into inner and outer nature' is undone when the robot Maria is burned at the stake (1982: 230-231). The film does not evoke any empathy for the cyborg. Its purpose is fulfilled, and it has no part in the love between Freder and human Maria, or in the hope of reconciliation.

The robot Maria does enjoy one final extradiegetic victory. The most famous image from the film is the image of the robot Maria: the cyborg femme stripped of her humanity, exposing the naked machinery below. It has become entangled with western visual culture, and has also become increasingly anthropomorphised and idolised. Therein lies the victory of this image: its gaze meets our own as the machine encounters the human. The cyborg is a hybrid, a liminal being. The cyborg femme, now anthropomorphised and rendered a neutral space on which the virtues and vices of humanity are imprinted, possesses the potential to love and be loved. The human Maria thus acts as a mirror reflecting her robot counterpart's unfulfilled potential. The cyborg represents a potential unleashed on humanity, with a limited vision for what it is and what it could be: a nonhuman being that is exploited and denied liberty, despite being self-aware and desiring self-determination. This debate is picked up in Scott's *Blade Runner*.

RIDLEY SCOTT'S *BLADE RUNNER* (1982)

Based on Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Scott's *Blade Runner* brings to life the cinematic spectacle of an imagined, dystopic twenty-first century, where the advancement in cyborg technology has created both immense off-world opportunity and a critical threat to humanity. In this world, cyborgs are termed 'Replicants' and are described in the prologue as '[beings] virtually identical to a human' (Scott, 1982). Six of these Replicants have managed to escape from the off-world colony and have returned to Earth in an act of defiance that is deemed illegal and grounds for termination (euphemistically called 'retirement'). The Replicants pose a real threat to the Tyrell Corporation that created them because they are self-aware, and aware of their limited lifespan. In this sense, time, motivates the urgency of their decisions — what would, in human terms, be akin to fear — and their violent actions to preserve what life and dignity they have left. Rick Deckard, the titular Blade Runner, is hunting them.

Though the film is quintessentially a cat-and-mouse chase, it is also grounded in answering the question, 'What does it mean to be human?', and humanity's capacity to love, hate, and self-determine seem to be at the heart of answering this. J. P. Telotte states that *Blade Runner* explores 'the problematic nature of the human being and the difficult task of being human' (1983: 44). The cyborg's indistinguishability from the human provokes the audience to look within both the nature of the human and the programming of the cyborg to determine the distinction. I return to Wells' words here in terms of a restrictive view of what a robot should be: to 'look and work like a human being, but (...) to have no 'soul'' (1927: 185). This understanding is echoed in the words of Bryant as he briefs Deckard on the need to retire the rogue Replicants:

They were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. Now, the designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their own emotional responses. You know, hate, love, fear, anger, envy. So they built in a failsafe device (...) four-year lifespan. (Scott, 1982)

Based on Bryant's description, the cyborg Replicant's capacity to adopt human qualities and to be unpredictable and uncontrollable is what Deckard must respond to. As he himself states: 'They are either a benefit or a hazard' (Scott, 1982).

As in *Metropolis*, the space of the cyborg Replicants is grounded in an industrialised hierarchical order which represents them as objects of manufacture, subject to patriarchal bureaucratic control at the Tyrell Corporation. In a possibly unconscious echo of the recurring triangular shapes in Lang's film, the company's headquarters is shaped like a tiered pyramid, alluding to an entrenched, phallic, hierarchical system.

Much like the robot Maria, the rogue Replicants are designed to be fit for purpose. Of the six who escaped, only two female Replicants remain on earth: Zohra and Pris. Though Zohra is designed for military purposes, when Deckard manages to track her down, she has re-embodied herself as a temptress, the exotic, snake-charming dancer, Salome. Deckard, in the guise of a member of the Confidential Committee of Moral Abuses, asks Zohra whether she felt exploited or coerced into her current occupation. The irony is patent: Zohra's escape to earth was no doubt motivated by her need to escape her off-world exploitation. She is, for the most part, semi-naked throughout Deckard's questioning, her exposed body revealing how the nonhuman visually embodies humanity. Whether she knew from the beginning of his questioning that he was a Blade Runner is open to speculation, but once she initiates her military programming to full effect in attacking Deckard and flees into the street, the audience witnesses her shedding the Salome persona and re-embodying Zohra once more. However, the chase is short-lived, and Deckard shoots and retires her. Her lifeless body is found among shop window mannequins, her will towards self-determination silenced, relegating her to a lifeless doll. The dichotomy between sexuality and military combat in Zohra's presentation in the film is taken up by the only other female replicant, Pris.

Pris, a military-leisure Replicant, is the closest in design to the robot Maria. However, unlike the robot Maria, who deceives people through her likeness of the human Maria, Pris has no human counterpart. In this sense, she might be free to self-determine because she is 'unique'. Because her design sought to ground her purpose in being desired by others through rendering her beautiful, her self-determination is demonstrated in her remaking the visible traits of her identity in an Other way. Pris re-embodies herself as a harlequin, the black and white colouring of her re-imagined visual form eventually provoking the 'fear she inspires in the hero' (Mulvey, 1975: 11), rather than lust. However, this process of un-becoming and re-embodiment is not demonstrated in a singular event: it is a gradual transition that seems to move from innocence to experience, which initially deceives the audience through its 'confusion of boundaries' (Haraway 2016:7). Pris's words, 'I'm lost' (Scott, 1982) signal the threshold between her mask of innocence and her unmasked experience. The audience sees that this coincides with her meeting J. F. Sebastian, the genetic engineer responsible for her nervous system. This meeting is not accidental and is orchestrated to further the Replicants' goal of extending their lifespan.

Later, as Sebastian is surrounded by his cybernetic creations as he sleeps — the friends that he has 'made', in his terms — Pris unmasks herself. The irony is not lost on the audience, as her 'unmasked' form is represented through her spray-painting her eyes black, like a harlequin. Her skin is also painted white to imply innocence or purity, with clothing that complements the black-and-white scheme. Symbolically, this could be seen to intimate that she is a character of extreme states of being, of innocence and experience, as well as amplifying the *noir*⁸ aspect of the film. All this is grounded in the visual perception of who and what she is. When Sebastian awakes to see her remade, she asks him, 'How do I look?', to which he responds, 'You look beautiful' (Scott, 1982).

The act of looking is constitutive of meaning in film. *Blade Runner* contains several close-ups, in particular of Deckard's and the Replicants' eyes: perhaps a nod to these being popularly described as the 'windows to the soul'. The eyes are the means through which Replicants are typically identified: they have inhuman optical responses. As María del Mar Asension Aróstegui notes: 'through their eyes replicants can be unmasked' (1994: 24). In this way, the importance of the gaze — the one who looks and the one who is being looked at — and its capacity to unmask (revealing the 'truth' of a person's identity) weaves throughout the film. It is a sexualised unmasking for the female Replicants, and shows how Replicant women are subject to the eyes that desire them.

Pris's sexuality and beauty deceive men into desiring her before truly seeing her for who she is, in much the same way as Zohra uses her disguise as Salome to her advantage in keeping hidden and safe, and the robot Maria uses her sexuality in *Metropolis*. David Desser comments on how Pris initially uses her sexuality as defence in her confrontation with Deckard. He notes the movement from perceived innocence to sexualised violence as follows:

[The] image of female sexuality as a weapon wielded by women is made explicit (...) Such blatant sexual symbolism is surely to be noted, even amidst the spectacular gymnastics. Deckard manages to throw her

⁸ J. P. Telotte describes *film noir* in terms of the stark contrasts between light and dark. He states that 'the *noir* films are noteworthy neither for their subtlety of expression nor their muting of our cultural problems; to the contrary, they deploy the darkest imagery to sketch starkly disconcerting assessments of the human and social condition' (1989: 2, original emphasis).

off him and shoots her. (Pris's paroxysms in her death throes is one of the film's most riveting moments.) (1985: 175)

In Desser's description, Pris uses the sexuality that she had been imbued with in her manufacture as her best defence against the threat of retirement. Unlike the robot Maria, who is never truly liberated from her creators, Pris demonstrates her absolute determination to defend her desire for liberation alongside her fellow Replicants, with whom she shares a form of familial love. In this sense though her purpose is sexualised, her heart is devoted to a genderless, non-sexual love.

Described by Haraway 'as the image of a cyborg culture's fear, love, and confusion' (2016: 60), Rachael offers a counterpoint to Pris's violent sexualisation. First introduced to the audience when Deckard meets Tyrell at the Tyrell corporation, 'she is portrayed as an erotic object for the hero's gaze' (del Mar Asension Aróstegui, 1994: 35). However, while Pris moves from being perceived as an innocent to revealing her true nature, Rachael's character arc takes her from being perceived as a *noir femme fatale* to an awakening that she is a cyborg, and the quest to redeem herself through her own vulnerability to Deckard's intentions. Del Mar Asension Aróstegui writes that this is symbolically enacted as follows: 'seeing Deckard asleep, Rachael sits by the piano, takes off her padded-shouldered jacket, undoes her 40s hair-style and starts playing the piano, suggesting that underneath her removable mask of *femme fatale*, she is really a sensitive and scared woman' (1994: 35, original emphasis).

Several scholars have analysed the representation of the femme fatale in *Blade Runner*. Among these are Christian David Zeitz, who comments that 'Rachael first behaves like a strong femme fatale, boldly facing and challenging Deckard, but later submits to him and accepts her place as his passive lover' (2016: 87). Her façade of manufactured sexuality is undone or dis-embodied, and she becomes a re-embodied human who is capable of eliciting love beyond desire, despite (or possibly because of) her passivity. Nigel Wheale comments on Rachael's character arc as directed by empathy and affect:

The first Nexus-6 which (who?) Deckard meets is Rachael Rosen, and she very nearly passes the empathy-test ordeal; more difficult still, she ceases to be an inanimate object for Deckard, because he finds himself attracted to 'her'. Rachael also turns the tables on Deckard, accusing him of being *inhuman* because of the instrumental, cold way in which he tries to deal with her. (1991: 300)

In this extract, Wheale highlights humanity in flux in its encounter with the cyborg Other. Deckard's inhumanity is contrasted with Rachael's ability to reason, and the Cartesian understanding of the distinction between human and machine is unravelled.

Unlike Zohra or Pris, Rachael is afforded dignity and protection because she could be loved by Deckard, who would have otherwise relegated her to retirement. Whether she reciprocates Deckard's love or is motivated by the need for self-preservation is not resolved in the film. But her leaving with Deckard offers the promise of hope in reconciling the human and nonhuman cyborg to each other as an act of love.

While Pris, Zohra and Rachael are denied the opportunity to offer a holistic understanding of the nonhuman cyborg experience, Roy is afforded this agency in the end. The human gaze, which the *Blade Runner* uses to discern optical cues that distinguish humans from Replicants, is inverted and becomes Roy's dying gaze as he relates what he has seen to Deckard:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die. (Scott, 1982)

Through witnessing his experiences, Roy's final words affirm the Replicant's capacity to remember and feel: qualities we would deem essentially human. The relational dynamic between the human and cyborg supplies the catharsis that *Metropolis* lacks, because neither is reconciled to each other in Lang's film: the human exploits the machine and silences the cyborg's agency, autonomy and capacity to inspire love. The cyborg looks like the human, but is not grounded in the sociopolitical systems that bind humans to the importance of their own experiences. *Blade Runner* overrides this by affirming the needs of the nonhuman machine. Lars Schmeink draws on Haraway's insight regarding the cyborg's symbolic value when he writes:

As a cultural metaphor the cyborg thus presents us with the realization that we are embodied in a technoculturally determined body, that our bodily identity is multiple, active, and changing, and that the posthuman 'might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' ('Cyborg Manifesto' 154). (2016: 36-37)

To borrow from Haraway, the body (and, by extension, the heart) of the cyborg reveals the possibility for coexistence because it possesses an awareness of how its presence transcends boundaries between human and machine, through an awareness that ‘their construction and deconstruction’ is perpetually in flux (Haraway, 2016: 66). The exclusively human emotional capacity to love and be loved is also true for the cyborg and, more broadly, the nonhuman. A new relational dynamic emerges as the cyborg symbolically dominates the popular imagination: one that finds no fixed bodily form, but is constantly being dis-embodied and re-embodied.

Schmeink’s understanding of the potency of potential is taken up by the sequel to *Blade Runner*, Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Though bureaucratic conflict and corruption are still evident in Villeneuve’s film, the overarching message in answering the question of what it means to be human lies in the capacity for the cyborg and the human to coexist, collaborate, and to enjoy love and kinship.

CONCLUSION

Lang’s and Scott’s films form part of the enduring debate in speculative fiction around what it means to be human. Though enacted as a mythical narrative, *Metropolis* advocates for the heart and its capacity to achieve reconciliation. These human qualities are denied the robot Maria. Her condemnation and extermination by fire ascribes to her the archetypal qualities of a witch. She is the actor within the mythical play who must be sacrificed in order for the protagonists to live. As Donna Haraway observes, though positioned within this industrial myth-tale, the robot Maria is deprived of an historical and mythological past and is also not given a future within the human world of the Metropolis.

This is also true of the cyborg Replicants in *Blade Runner*. Though they seem to have a limited experience of the past, Scott emphasises memory, the recall of the past in the present, as a means through which humans and nonhuman cyborgs find mutual ground. However, this realisation comes too late for Zohra and Pris, who are the victims of the Blade Runner’s mandate to identify and retire the Replicants as liabilities to the human world. However, the human audience of this film feels empathy for the Replicants in the end. Through our visual experiences, we dismantle the machine as soulless and re-embody it as cyborg; closer to humans, but also more than human. Haraway speaks of the value of encountering cyborg characters in fiction: ‘Cyborg writing [and film] is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other’ (2016: 55). The seeds of debate, sown by Lang and Scott, they have been eloquently taken up by twenty-first-century films such as Alex Garland’s *Ex-Machina* (2014) and Alex Proyas’s *I, Robot* (2004).

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'If Our Love Existed in Chinese Tense': Temporal Tensions in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

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ABSTRACT

This article is a close textual reading of Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). In the novel, the protagonist Z confesses she is not good at tenses. Her uncertain command of temporality transposes from the context of grammatical tense to her love life, where her desire to forever be with her English partner conflicts with his belief that the future is not in the present. As her language learning struggles mirror the widening fissures in her relationship, temporal tensions arise. For one, Z's first language (Chinese) does not have tenses, while her second (English) is dominated by time-sensitive verbs. This article is interested in the temporal tensions (time as linear or as looping) that illuminate the cultural and linguistic factors affecting Z's perception of love, and reveal the gendered power structure (her male partner's dominance over Z's female subservience) that steers the relationship. Her ruminations on love and efforts at making sense of tenses draw together an ideographic scripting of a kind of love that deprioritises temporality to counteract the discipline and development of love in a linear time culture. Love in 'Chinese tense', as Z desires, is one that defies progression, future-proofed and faithful as a picture is unchanging.

Keywords: Xiaolu Guo, intercultural romance, linear time, language tenses, gendered relations

INTRODUCTION

In Chinese British writer and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo's debut novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (hereafter *Dictionary for Lovers*), the protagonist Z confesses she is 'no good at verbs, particularly future tense' (2007a: 299). Her uncertain command of future transposes from the context of grammatical tense to her love life, where her desire to be with her unnamed English partner—'I want future with you'—conflicts with his belief that one 'can't have the future now' (301).¹ As her language learning struggles mirror the widening fissures in her relationship, a few temporal tensions arise: one, Z's first language (Chinese) does not have tenses, while her second (English) is dominated by verbs that are 'time words' (Wang and Liu, 2020: 2); two, her idea of love is bound up with an 'image' of future with her partner who conceives the future as 'promise' that one cannot worry about (Guo, 2007a: 300); three, on a formal level, the novel is both dictionary and diary in which Z's first-person 'diary writing' promises a chronology and narrative sequence that are undermined by the 'dictionary format' where logic is arbitrary and entries need not relate to one another (Møller-Olsen, 2017).² Z's fluid and fragmented use of language, as well as her idea of love as unchanging and non-promissory, may be attributed to the deemphasis of tense or temporality in the Chinese language. Temporal tensions thus bring to light the cultural and linguistic factors that affect how

¹ The novel is written in 'bad English', as Z admits, that improves as the story progresses: Z drops articles like 'the' and 'a', and misuses prepositions like 'of' and 'on' (Guo, 2007a: 61). Scholars like Møller-Olsen have argued that Z's illogical sentences and misspellings 'reveal something about the inner workings of language' (2017: 93). In this example where Z wants 'future' and her partner refers to 'the future', the removal of the article 'the' is central to understanding the couple's different perspectives on time and love. Hereafter, this article will refer to 'future' without the article as Z intends, to reflect her particular view of love.

² The dictionary as genre is a resource or reference that arranges content in alphabetical order to facilitate ease of search. It contains lexical items with explanations, grammatical information such as part-of-speech labels for each entry, and even sentence examples. *Dictionary for Lovers* mixes the dictionary format with diary writing, initiating not only language exchange but also exchanges between formalities and colloquialism, the objective and personal, the grand narrative and the polyphony.

lovers perceive and think about love. In *Dictionary for Lovers*, time difference is a real obstacle to the intercultural lovers even as they live together in London, for love is a time-related construct.

Through a discussion of the dominant orderings of time (instituted by her one-year student visa and grammar rules, for example) and Z's own sense of time, this article will first present the ways in which temporalities do not neatly map onto each other. It then focuses on the relation between love and time, contending that Z's understanding of 'for ever' love (Guo, 2007a: 326), tied to having a home, marriage, and children, is not merely Guo's critique of internalised feminine norms and gendered forms of labour but, rather, a reflection of the Chinese tendency to configure the passing of time, actions, and movements, into scripts and situations that are not beholden to or limited by time. More than an interlanguage and cultural struggle and a dialogue between the formalities of language and Z's limited register and appropriation of English, this article argues that Z's ruminations on love and efforts at making sense of tenses draw together an ideographic scripting of a kind of love that deprioritises temporality in order to counteract the discipline and development of love in a linear time culture. Love, in Guo's novel, is one that shows rather than specifies, in the same way the Chinese language prefers depictions to descriptions—a love in 'Chinese tense' (Guo, 2007a: 301), as Z desires, is one that defies progression, insensitive to the tides of time and faithful as a picture is unchanging.

MAKING SENSE OF TENSES

Dictionary for Lovers is a documentary of Z's one-year course in learning English and of loving her Englishman, wherein her development and struggles as a language learner and lover are disciplined by various temporal frames operating on the level of content and form. To begin with, the novel is a quasi-bildungsroman, as Z undergoes formative education in language and life, 'where learning English and growing into a better self come to coincide' (Sinoimeri, 2021: 743).³ The notion of journeying is emphasised by a before-and-after structure: the novel opens with a header 'Before' where Z is on the plane to London and closes with 'Afterwards' where Z is on the flight back to Beijing, to suggest Z's transformation from a stranger to English and its land, who is unable to conjugate verbs and string a grammatically sound English sentence, to one who reads a poetic meditation on Welsh landscape and pens a melancholic epilogue in reminiscence of her time in Wales. Z's growth follows the rhythms of time: the diary-dictionary is chronologically arranged, dated February to the next February, compelling the plot forwards and ensuring Z's incremental progress, just as time marches on. Every month contains a few episodes that are essentially accounts of the words Z has learned. Structured by these monthly logs of vocabulary and reflections, the novel prescribes an inflexible and linear course of development that disciplines Z's life, portioning her experience into periodic reports that must not only correlate to the framing word but also offer reinterpretations, turning her diary into a personal reflection of life and also language. Z's development as an English language learner and a lover abides by a time-based logic and narrative structure similar to Peter Brooks's exposition on plot as

a dynamic logic at work in the transformations wrought between the start and the finish...a logic which makes sense of succession and time, and which insists that mediation of the problem posed at the outset takes time: that the meaning dealt with by narrative, and thus perhaps narrative's *raison d'être*, is of and in time. (1985: 10)

Arguably, time is the fulcrum around which the narrative revolves. Structurally, the narrative is time-bound in its chronological unfolding and divisions into prologue, interlude, and epilogue, providing a stabilising force to the narrative of turbulent love that results from the many misunderstandings Z has with her English partner. Z's 'problem' is also one of time, for her inability to speak English has to do with the lack of time spent with the language (Brooks, 1985: 10). For this reason, despite Z's basic English education in China, her parents arranged for her to 'get diploma from West' (Guo, 2007a: 4). Later in the novel, when Z is praised by her English teacher for her marked improvement, she attributes her performance to her 'living with an English man every day and night' (166). In both examples, being in the West and being intimate with English are tantamount to spending a year in a language school and spending 'every day and night' with an Englishman. Proximity and space are conceived in temporal terms.

The ordering of time is instituted by the dominant language of English whose hegemonic power lies not only in its global influence as lingua franca, but also in the 'imagined homologies' of language, ideology, culture, nation, citizenship (Gilmour, 2012: 209). An overt symbol of English power in the novel is the Immigration & Nationality

³ Lea Sinoimeri identifies the overlaps between the educational bildungsroman and the ethnic bildungsroman where the latter is a novel of assimilation. She argues that Guo's novel reworks the genres of the bildungsroman and romance 'through the lens of the linguistic question' (2021: 742).

Doctorate of Home Office (Guo, 2007a: 324). When Z arrives at Heathrow airport, she is greeted by Border Control which separates the ‘alien’ from the ‘non alien’; she joins the ‘queue with all aliens’ which is described to be ‘longly’ and ‘slowly’ (Guo, 2007a: 9). This is the first instance of time slowing down for her, as Z viscerally feels the dreariness of the temporal imposition. Her estrangement and anxiety about being alien—which is defined in her notes as ‘foreign; repugnant’ (9)—are exacerbated by the extensive ‘visa checking’: ‘I feel little criminal but I doing nothing wrong so far. My English so bad. How to do?’ (9). Notably, Z’s reason for her inability to do crime is her bad English, suggesting the power and enabling force of the English language. UK Home Office Immigration control checks are likened to interrogation, enacting a polarity of belonging and rightness where those who do not speak the ‘funny looking and strange language’ are ‘criminal’ and ‘alien’ (9). What is implied in Z’s account is the relation between the immigration authority and the English language—both to which she is beholden. Even as Z is allowed to travel to the United Kingdom, her entry is conditional and freedom constricted. She is permitted one year in the country—a duration that frames the narrative and enforces the countdown of months from February to the next February. Later when she applies for an extension, she is given a ‘doom stamp’ that forbids further stay in the country (Guo, 2007a: 336). The immigration stamp of denial signals a temporal dead end that also forecloses her relationship. The UK Home Office is configured as a stalwart of time, prescribing an overarching timeframe that governs Z’s pace of life as well as the narrative unfolding. It is also a gatekeeper, reminding Z that she is a ‘legal foreigner from Communism region’ (Guo, 2007a: 10). In other words, she is apart from the English in terms of language, culture, nationality, and ideology, forever ‘not belonging’ and ‘conditional’ (Spyra, 2016: 458). Such governing force and the concomitant feeling of unbelonging are felt in everyday living as Z struggles to learn the English language.

One of Z’s earliest and lasting struggles with the English language is the use of the progressive or continuous tense. Her confusion is tied to the use of tense that marks the use of verbs and how ‘the present progressive can also be used to talk about the future’ (Guo, 2007a: 40). There are two issues here: the first pertains to grammar and tense marking; relatedly, the second is the concept of time. In Chinese the use of verbs does not require temporal markers, as Z notes the use of ‘two go’ in the sentence ‘I am going to go’ (Guo, 2007a: 40), whereas the English language is verb-dominant, requiring verbs to be marked by tenses in order for sentences to be grammatically correct (Wang and Liu, 2020: 3). In his study on the practical and philosophical uses of tense, Bernard Comrie asserts that tense is a way to grammaticalise locations in time. He posits that time is ‘a straight line, with the past represented conventionally to the left and the future to the right’, and tense is the ‘grammaticalisation’ of any location along the timeline (1985: 2). Even though Comrie recognises that such localisation is purely conceptual, he highlights the precision of the English language:

in English, it is possible to locate a situation before the present moment (by using the past tense), and even to locate a further situation prior to that first situation (by using the pluperfect), but there is no way of quantifying grammatically the time lapse between the first and second situations, or between either of them and the present moment. (1985: 8)

Grammatical time and progression reflect a culture of time-reckoning where there is heightened control over clock time, from digital watches to the calculation of speed (Munn, 1992). The obsession over clock time is a product of Western Industrial Revolution when time was used as disciplinary device to regulate everyday life and its linearity to ensure efficient documentation of activities and production (Thompson, 1967). The rationalisation and linear location of time, then, is in effect and understood in contemporary Western and European societies. No wonder, then, the fine location of time in tense construction and efficient plotting of time are particularly challenging to native Chinese speakers like Z, as corroborated by the English teacher who tells her that ‘verb most difficult thing for oriental people’ (Guo, 2007a: 26). Out of frustration, Z laments the overcomplex and ‘crazy’ nature of verbs:

Verb has verbs, verb-ed and verb-ing. And verbs has three types of mood too: indicative, imperative, subjunctive. Why so moody? (Guo, 2007a: 24)

Her quibble with its complication has to do with temporality, that verbs may be used in reference to the past, present, or future, etc., and they could be used to represent a present command (imperative) and even imagined possibilities (subjunctive). English verbs and nouns are unstable in this regard as ‘they change all the time’ (Guo, 2007a: 98). For Z, the changes are meaningless and ‘just complicated for no reason’ (Guo, 2007a: 326). Grammatical temporality is construed as an imposition, forcing a linearity and structure upon life.

Temporal tension arises in the intercultural exchange of time where Z’s ‘Chinese concept’ of time is juxtaposed against English tense-making (Guo, 2007a, 326). In the episode titled ‘future tense’, Z poses the question: ‘How is “time” so clear in the West?’ (299). She unwittingly refers to the fine locations of time in the English grammar that are foreign to the Chinese language system. The concept of time in Chinese, as Z reflects, has foundation in Buddhist philosophy where reincarnation ‘is not past or future’ (299). Instead of a timeline that clearly demarcates

past, present, future, Chinese time is ‘endless loop’, where the ending and starting points are the same (299). It is thus not only grammatical differences that bring to the fore Z’s incompatible sense of time with her English lover’s perception of time, but also the ‘cultural beliefs’ that have diffused into language (Hwang, 2013: 78). In its circularity, time is unplottable and unclear. For Z who is used to ‘Chinese concept’ of time that ‘continues for ever and for ever’, the English grammatical construction of time is profoundly difficult to grasp because of the epistemological implications of time as linear and progressive (Guo, 2007a: 326). As Comrie explains, time as grammatically conceptualised is linear and relatively causal: of all languages, English has the most ‘grammaticalised expressions of location in time: present, past, future, pluperfect, future perfect’ (1985: 8). Z’s sense of time, however, is not longitudinal where one moment leads in succession to another. Rather, locations in time like past, present, and future constitute different planes of being, related but nonetheless differentiated. This seemingly paradoxical idea of time as continuous but differentiated is evident Z’s conflicted relation with future. While she admits to fearing future, she also lists ‘future’ as one of her favourite words in English (Guo, 2007a: 104). To understand this seeming contradiction, we first turn to workings of the Chinese language. In Ernest Fenollosa’s seminal essay on Chinese written characters, he discusses Chinese as a pictorial language whose method is natural where each character is a modified thought picture of ‘the operations of nature’ (2008: 45).⁴ The centrality of natural suggestion and visual representation in Chinese language may be traced back to the cultural tendency to conceive elements in terms of flow or chi (氣) as opposed to objects or atoms and the emphasis on ‘spatial features of entities shape or size’ (Wenzel, 2007: 296; Wang and Liu, 2020: 4).⁵ Following this, Z’s sense of future is not an anticipation or prospective per se, but is more accurately conceived as ideographic or pictorial.⁶

A PICTURE OF TIMELESS LOVE

Future, for Z, is bound up with an image as opposed to a point in time causally derived from a past situated along a linear timeline. Z’s purpose in the United Kingdom is to study English and what she seeks to achieve—which is also what constitutes her future and would mark the end of her one-year stay—is a mastery of the language. This is confirmed in the final section titled ‘departure’ which opens with the promise written on the leaflet of the language school:

On finishing our course, you will find yourself speaking and thinking in your new language quite effortlessly. You will be able to communicate in a wide variety of situations, empowered by the ability to create your own sentences and use language naturally. (Guo, 2007a: 342)

This strategic insert at the end of her learning journey and just before she leaves London suggests that Z has indeed finished the course and is able to use English naturally. This is the manifestation of that future Z has intuited at the outset. Rather than attributing her fear of future to her inability to speak English, I posit that her fear has to do with her ability to visualise the ‘life in West’ that comes with the acquisition of English (Guo, 2007a: 5). As aforementioned, the Chinese language writing system is heavily pictorial. When reflecting on what a Western life might be, Z envisions the following:

American TV series dubbing into Chinese, showing us big houses in suburb, wife by window cooking and car arriving in front house. Husband back work. Husband say Honey I home, then little children running to him, see if he bringing gift. (Guo, 2007a: 5)

Z reflexively rejects this vision of life, for ‘[she] no speaking English’ (5). With a mastery of English, however, she would have this life even as it is not hers. Put differently, Z’s future (one intimated by the school’s learning goals) comes with an image of Western life. This is an example of the workings of language ideology where the definition and use of language organise the individual, their identities, epistemologies (Woolard, 1998). Accordingly, the

⁴ A much-cited example from Fenollosa’s essay is the phrase 人見馬 (man sees horse) where the Chinese characters denote the scene of the man on his two legs looking at the horse on its four legs (Fenollosa, 2008). Meaning is not arbitrarily wrought but naturally suggested between the thing and sign.

⁵ Wang and Liu refer to the importance of spatiality over temporality in the Chinese language, using the example of the classifier 张 (zhang) which means sheet and 塊 (kuai) which translates to lump—the first is usually used for flat and thin objects such as paper or cloth and the second is used to denote chunky objects. Spatial features of the thing in question are considered, whereas in the English these are translated into the word piece (Wang and Liu, 2020).

⁶ Some scholars claim the Chinese language is more ideographic than pictorial, as pictographs have evolved and their remnants become symbols of images. In his 1838 cultural exposition of the language, the French linguist Du Ponceau observes the ways in which ideas have ‘external shapes’ and when written recall impressions of the object even as the initial images have vanished (25). Chinese characters are ‘no representation to the eye of natural objects; as to moral sensations’ (28).

ability to think and communicate in English naturally would mean Z is living the life and identity that are not hers—a life that is ‘strange’ and would eventually estrange her from her village, its culture and dialect (Guo, 2007a: 5). Truly, by the end of the novel, Z leaves her village for Beijing and quits her hometown job, feeling ‘out of place in China’ (352). Such is the consuming nature and disciplinary power of an English-inflected thinking that enforces the monolingual paradigm which, as Yasemin Yıldız describes, obscures diversity and ‘organizes the entire range of modern social life’, including the ‘construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities’ (2012: 2). This paradigm subsumes the non-native speaker and orientates them towards the dominant language’s way of constructing sentences, scenes, life. Tense-making becomes a way to make sense of reality.

With its dominance and organising prowess, English is configured as a discipline master, at once teacherly and tyrannical. The acquisition of the English language promises cultural capital and global relevance. It is her parents’ ‘wish’ that she would be an English speaker, to possibly ‘increase in Western cultural knowledge and cultural capital’ in the same way they have acquired ‘new wealth’ through their shoe-making business (Guo, 2007a: 4; Poon 2013: 3). Under the nurturance and education of English, Z becomes culturally and globally relevant. This teacherly role is fulfilled by Z’s Englishman who explains words and social mores to her, as though she were a ‘child’ (Guo, 2007a: 199). It should be noted that at first this teacher-student dynamic binds the couple stronger; as time goes on, however, it puts a strain on their relationship as Z is constantly asking for help and he is ‘tired’ of ‘explaining the meaning of words’ to her (Guo, 2007a: 177). He accuses Z of being parasitical, drawing on his energy and cannibalising his words. This turn in the relationship is a glimpse of the violence of language, where the tutelage inadvertently creates a dependent subject who is servile and needing help, whose desperation and inadequacy justify discipline and hostility. The adverse effects of its schooling are further evident in one of Z’s few Chinese scribblings in the novel:

我被它驱使，我被它强暴，我被它消灭。我真想彻底忘记这些单词，拼法，时态。[I am commanded and compelled by it, I am raped by it, I am destroyed by it. I want to thoroughly forget these vocabulary, verbs, tenses.] (Guo, 2007a: 179; translation mine)⁷

The violence of language inflicted upon Z is reminiscent of colonial territorialisation of mind, body, and tongue. English is likened to what Frantz Fanon calls ‘a language of pure force’ that does not ‘hide the domination’, invading the mind of the native or non-English speaker (1963: 38). More than a slave to its commands, Z’s lamentation and tortured state reveal the gendered dynamics at play. In her words, she feels ‘raped’ and diminished by English. The control exerted by the language is viscerally felt by the body. English, as Rachel Gilmour astutely identifies, is ‘a masculine aggressor, out to consume her, out to violate her’ (2012: 220). English as a means to control a world in which only its tongue is spoken is configured as masculine. More overtly, Z describes her teacher-lover to occupy a happy world constructed by ‘the molded male head, male arms, male leg, male attraction’ (Guo, 2007a: 192). This masculine world is doubly inaccessible to Z who is woman and also foreigner. Conversely, her worries are small to her lover and her needs are dismissed as outdated and traditional: he claims that she is always worrying about the future and marriage (Guo, 2007a: 300). Z is unable to defend herself because of her language incompetency but also because of the structured power of gender that exacerbates her interlanguage struggles. At the end of the relationship, she finally admits to herself that the ‘boundary’ between she and him is ‘so broad, so high’—a boundary that is not only built of temporal and linguistic differences but also of gender (Guo, 2007a: 350). Without the possibility of assimilation, Z’s proposed recourse for herself is to be taken out of the masculine world, ‘to thoroughly forget’ English (Guo, 2007a: 179; translation mine). Her desire is to be unschooled, to forget parts of the English language; and most salient is her want to forget tenses. In the Chinese, the characters Z writes are 时态 (shi tai) which mean tense; they can also mean attitude towards time or sense of time. Z’s want to forget 时态 (shi tai) is a desire to dilute the structuring of time that has been drummed into her head in a bid to recover herself from the clutches of English. Z’s greatest fear as she writes in Chinese—我害怕从此变成一个小心翼翼的人—is to become a person who is ‘always aware of talking, speaking...a person without confidence’ (Guo, 2007a: 180). She uses the idiomatic expression 小心翼翼 (xiao xin yi yi) which translates more accurately to being overly meticulous and procedural. This reluctance to be detail-oriented is formative to Z’s idea of love which is more open than prescribed in spite of her talks of future, one that allows wiggle room and ambivalence.

Just as Z’s sense of future *vis-à-vis* her language learning journey is disconnected from the temporal logic of English grammar, her want of future with her lover has less to do with a directedness towards heteronormative end points – noted by Sara Ahmed as, ‘the conventional forms of the good life’ including having a good marriage

⁷ In the editor’s translation, this portion reads: ‘It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it. I wish I could just forget about all this vocabulary, these verbs, these tenses’ (Guo, 2007a: 180). The translation lapses are arguably deliberate, providing a more symbolic than literal reading.

and stable families (2010a: 12). Although critics have discussed Z's financial dependence as 'a reflection of the patriarchal Chinese culture which imposes upon women that they are economically dependent upon men' and her self-discovery as ultimately 'geographically grounded in a masculine and European territory' (Töngür, 2012:170; Sinoimeri, 2021: 743), the analyses often focus on her subservience and limited freedom. Z's sexual discovery, for instance, is initiated by her English lover who teaches her to talk about sex without shame and appreciate her own body: 'I never really know what is sex before. Now I naked everyday in the house, and I can see clearly my desire' (Guo, 2007a: 69). Even her sense of adventure is cultivated upon the request of her English lover to 'see a bit of the world without [him]' (198). Z's self-discovery and sexual awakening are enabled by her deep dive into English culture—be it her relationship with an Englishman or her improvement in speaking the language. This in turn results in a distancing from her Chinese roots, for her 'true self' has been 'suppressed by conditioning, teachings and impositions of her culture (Töngür, 2012:176). While these readings help to make sense of deeply entrenched gender and cultural norms and speak to the symbolic capital of Western cultural knowledge, they are steeped in the intercultural differences in the relationship. For a study on temporal tensions and the relation between love and time, the focus is on the time difference in the relationship—how temporalities are constructed differently because of cultural and linguistic factors –to enflesh Z's language of love that would in turn shed light on her ready and unquestioning subscription to self-limiting expectations of love.

In the same way Z's fear of future is tied to the ideographic nature of the Chinese language where the image of a Western life unfolds simultaneously as the thought of learning English occurs, her favouritism for the word 'future', evident when she lists it as one of her most liked words, is also based in the way in which language constructs her sense of time and so shapes her reality of love. A key and recurring conflict between Z and her English lover is their different views of the future which then affect their views on the progress of the relationship. Their first argument about the matter in question begins with Z's dissatisfaction over her lover's desire to 'come and leave' which, to her, signals that '[he] not care about future (Guo, 2007a: 107). His rebuttal centres on the idea that 'the future is about moving on,' and one must relish uncertainties (107-8). For the English lover, temporality is conceived as movement: even though he embraces non-linearity and the unpredictability of life, his idea of time is very much rooted in a course of progression, where he is 'carried somewhere', ever moving (107). Even though he believes the future to be uncertain, this belief is relative to the present where their relationship is stable; his reticence to 'care about future' is due to his inability to guarantee that their relationship would be as such in the future. His views of life and love, albeit non-conventional, remain faithful to the timeline constructed by grammatical temporality. For example, in an argument with Z about their future, he repeatedly tells her to 'live in the moment'; in response, Z calls him out: 'Live *in* the moment, or life *for* the moment? Maybe you only live for the moment' (Guo, 2007a: 301). The English lover is indifferent to the distinction, shrugging off the difference to say 'that's the same kind of concept' (301). In spite of his apparent carefree disposition, he fails to realise that his unwillingness to conform and desire to live in the moment are aligned with a linear time culture, for a variation is ultimately still a reaction to the existent timeline. Contrary to her lover, Z consciously rejects any linear pattern. Love to her is not a progression but an intensity. In her own words, it is 'a concentrate of love', one that dissolves the boundaries of time and progression (Guo, 2007a: 73). This intensity and oblivion to the norms and rituals of romantic involvement are evident when she moves in with the Englishman after their first date.⁸ Her love is not progressive but more constructively understood as instantaneous, where many instants and images coexist on different planes. Love need not progress from meeting to courtship to marriage, from uncertainty to certainty, or vice versa. Rather, different stages of romance and depths of connection meld together to make a love without temporal distinctions.

That different entities may coexist independently and yet collectively string a meaningful whole is a distinctive feature of the Chinese language formation. Z demonstrates this in the episode titled ‘fertilise’ where she writes down the Chinese names of plants, explaining every character to her lover because each has its own meaning.

Potato 土豆
earth bean

In this example given by Z, potato in Chinese is made up of two characters 土 (tu) which conjures the image of earth or soil and 豆 (dou) which not only means bean but also outlines shape (Guo, 2007a: 63). Put together, the Chinese characters depict a scene of an oval-shaped vegetable grown in soil. A similar example is the fig tree whose

⁸ While the development of romantic love differs according to socio-cultural contexts, in East Asian societies romantic relationships usually progress from informal dating to courtship. For example, dating typically begins privately between the involved parties and subsequently becomes semi-private ‘with incremental increases in the public expression of commitment’, and usually ends in marriage (Karandashev, 2016: 251). In context, while the move is a result of Z misunderstanding the phrase ‘Be my guest’, assuming the man had asked her to move in with him, her readiness to attach herself to him attests to her disregard of the norms and sequence of romantic involvement (Guo, 2007a: 54).

Chinese characters literally means a tree without fruit; yet, in response to Z's Chinese depiction, her English lover proceeds to 'describe' how fertilisation does not occur for the fig tree (64). Where Z's sense-making is reliant on depictions, her lover's is descriptive. One is picture-based, the other is detail-oriented. As a non-alphabetical language, the Chinese language writing system is built on symbols and evolved pictograms to represent written characters. Meaning is simultaneously derived; the writing or speaking process recalls the impression or image. Whereas languages like English require visible signs before speaking and writing, ideas have no shapes in the Chinese language except for 'those that the words [have] given them' (Du Ponceau, 1838: 26). In an interview for *NPR Weekend*, Guo elaborates on the crucial difference between English and Chinese:

when you write a Chinese character you can picturise that object. If you write the word moon, in Chinese it is yue, and then you see the moon, the shape in your writing. When you try to express something in English you need to be very sharp. (2007b)

At the core of Guo's explanation is the way language constructs reality. Derivatively, the Chinese language affords two things. First, it allows for meaning to manifest as the words are written and combined. Specifics and details are not quite determined until the characters are written or spoken in combination and in relation. In sinologist Francois Jullien's important study on Chinese thought, he describes the correlative structure of thought in the Chinese culture that pervades language, ideology and human bonds:

most generally, Chinese thought is relational. Not only are all of its terms paired, each with its counterpart; but from this interdependence, each gains its consistency. And this is true in their view of nature as well as of society. (2000: 376)

In Chinese language two is the smallest plurality: correlative thinking happens in writing, thinking, and also in living. Z affirms this correlative mode of engagement with the world when she recollects how she was taught in school that 'the most admirable person' should 'forget' herself and 'shouldn't satisfy [her] own needs' (2007a: 269). One attends to relatives and others, just as one character requires another to form a 'consistent' picture (Jullien, 2000: 376). The focus is on consistency, that the interaction formed offers a frame or larger picture within which individuals may manoeuvre. In addition to relationality, the second affordance of the Chinese language is ambivalence. Even as an idea comes into formation as one character relates to another, it is not the details that stand out but the larger picture, even as this picture is a mere recall of an impression or a remnant of something pre-established. There is a degree of ambivalence and allowance for interaction, compared to the precision of the English language. When her lover declares that the future is uncertain, he anchors his view in the indisputable fact that Z 'can't have the future *now*' (Guo, 2007a: 300). This is factually correct and absolute, leaving no room for ambivalence. Z's construction of reality as pictorial, however, allows interpretation. In their analysis of photographs, John Berger and Jean Mohr discuss how images can be 'restored to a living context', specifically to the context of the person experiencing the image (1982: 289). In a similar way, images evoked by the written characters of the Chinese language lend themselves to appropriation, allowing 'frozen' worlds and contexts to become 'tractable' (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 289). So when Z speaks of wanting future with her lover, she is not referring to the future as plotted on a timeline *per se*. Instead, she is presenting a picture of togetherness that at once offers some context and invites contribution. It is then understandable that she would fault her lover for his tendency to 'come and leave' (Guo, 2007a: 107), for these are acts that remove him from the picture of togetherness and the opportunities to reinvigorate stock images of love. She thus views his refusal to 'care about future' as a threat to 'break' their lives, effectively breaking the picture and possibilities for creating a living context for their love.

Z's imaging of love that draws on pre-established conventions as well as invites fresh involvement is evident in her conceptualisation of the family. At first glance, her perspective on romantic relationship appears to be all-consuming:

I thought we together, we will spend time together and our lives will never separated.... I thought I will not scared to live in this country alone, because now I having you, and you my family, my home. (Guo, 2007a: 84)

She seems to succumb to the 'risks' of love which include 'fusion between persons' and 'losing her identity in the impersonality of *one*' (Irigaray, 1996: 76). To her, individuality and privacy are reasons why 'Western couples split up so easily' (Guo, 2007a: 175). What is perhaps more frustrating is her continued subscription to this life of oneness despite her awareness of the loss of freedom, 'social position', and 'financial independence' when a woman lives with a man (Guo, 2007a: 174). Almost willingly and helplessly, Z falls into the trappings of gendered labour in which, according to Luce Irigaray, a woman's love is 'familial and civil duty' without her own desires (1996: 22). She is unable to think of love beyond the family structure of 'House, husband and wife, then have some children,

then cooking dinner together, then travel together' (Guo, 2007a: 125). Yet, while it is true that Z's idea of love is undergirded by a familial structure, her appropriation of conventions is far from self-effacing. Consider her reflections on family in the episode titled:

In Chinese, it is the same word ‘家’ (jia) for ‘home’ and ‘family’ and sometimes including ‘house’. To us, family is same thing as house, and this house is their only home too. ‘家’, a roof on top, then some legs and arms inside. When you write this character down, you can feel those legs and arms move around underneath the roof. (125-6)

Because home, house, and family mean the same in Chinese, Z naturally assumes that she and her partner are a family unit comprising the symbolic home when she moves into his house. The physical house ensures proximity which translates to intimacy in Z's configuration of love. She thus cannot understand her partner's anger at her for reading his diaries and is unable to comprehend the idea of privacy which is against her understanding of intimacy. This is Z's 'Chinese love'—a love where physical proximity is emotional proximity is symbolic proximity. Her conflation of proximities affirms what has been established about her construction of reality where different layers of meaning coexist under the same roof. Inhabitants of this house of love live under the same roof; it is the proximities that make them a family, not privacy and individuality. In fact, the individual is 'peripheral' to the places they inhabit (Hwang, 2013: 75). Z too acknowledges that 'We Chinese are not encouraged to use the word "self" so often' (Guo, 2007a: 269). For a Confucius society whose nationalism is rooted in 'a sense of community' and 'common past', the self is deprioritised (Levenson, 1968: 108). Instead sympathetic bonds between oneself and fellow-nationals, a cultural past, history are prized above one's individuality. Notwithstanding their unique identities and personal time and space, what is central to an understanding of being in Chinese is the context to which they belong. Each is entitled to their personhood and, to use the picture of a house, has their separate rooms, but all are subject to the context, i.e., the family, home, and house. Such close proximity and togetherness preclude privacy. Notably in the Chinese, the formation of privacy does not mean individuality. Whereas the English privacy has Latin origin meaning 'single' and 'one's own', the Chinese equivalent comprises two characters 隱 (yin) and 私 (si)—the first character is an evolution of a more complex character that picturises an architectural maze with slopes and obstructions, to paint a scene of a dense covering; the second character means personal. To sum up, then, the Chinese word for privacy implies a deliberate hiding of something personal. And under the same roof, each has wiggle room, though not quite a secret hiding place. This is substantiated by the pictorial formation of the word. The roof 家 is the only constant, functioning as an overhead shelter, while the strokes within are described as legs and arms which are moving parts. The provision of a frame to work around while affording allowance within is a discursive strategy—what is sometimes understood as a strategy of 'obliquity' (Jullien, 2000: 49)⁹—that encourages re-routes and detours in everyday life and familiar grounds that altogether cultivate 'tactics' of living. As de Certeau affirms, 'Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of "making do"' (1998: 29). To return to the context of love, by implication we can say that love is anchored in a broad overview or frame that is unchanging, which then affords space or rooms for experimenting with living and loving, for varied manoeuvrings within, all happening underneath the roof that hangs over the lovers' heads.

FUTURE-PROOFING LOVE

After almost a year of studying grammatical tense, Z concludes that it is needlessly difficult and questions the way tenses arbitrarily mark time:

Does that mean English tense difference is just complicated for no reason? Does that mean tenses are not natural things at all? Does that mean love is a form that continues for ever and for ever, just like my Chinese concept? (Guo, 2007a: 326)

Here, Z reflects on time in language and in love. She unequivocally states that without the unnatural markers of time, love would be 'a form that continues for ever and for ever, just like in my Chinese concept' (Guo, 2007a: 326). Grammatical time has bearing on how one perceives time, as established in this article. For Z, love is unchanging to the extent that time is an 'endless loop' (299). This relatively static view of love is supplemented by

⁹ The notion of 'obliquity' has history in Chinese military strategy where a detour and more cunning tactics are preferred to a frontal attack. Jullien discusses how such oblique strategies allow for surprise attacks, where artful manipulation of the field is misunderstood by the enemy to be defective footwork (2000). A simple effort thus has the ability to effect massive destruction. While my point on ambivalence and obliqueness in the context of love does not refer to manipulation in the sense of conquering the lover as enemy, a brief overview on obliquity illuminates how Z's model of love shares the same principle of remaining within established parameters in order to love constructively.

her tendency to picturise and form scenes out of words, as the Chinese language writing system encourages. Consider the image that forms in Z's mind when she talks about future:

ME: 'I want future with you. A home, a house in beautiful place with you, plant some bamboos, some lotus, some jasmines, some of your favourite snowdrops' (When I describe this, the image is so strong that it must be a will from my Last Life). (Guo, 2007a: 300)

Though vastly different from the first image conjured by her thought of future in the opening episode, this second image confirms Z's mode of thought to be heavily picture-based. In this example, the image is rooted in a place animated by life springing forth, a living context constructed without future or continuous tenses. In fact, she presumes future is gathered from a mould of the past, reiterating the endlessness of time as well as the loose structure of togetherness as demonstrated in the Chinese word 家 (jia) which first erects a frame overhead and then allows ambivalence within. The image is governed by its own temporal logic, given the activity of planting and nurturance in the scene. The act of planting is leisurely and slow, unlike the march of clock time. The activity here stands in stark contrast to the first image associated with her fear of future. In the previous example, the American housewife cooks while waiting for her husband; the life of the house begins with his return home. In the latter image, however, the pace of life is neither dependent on the woman waiting and the man working. The idea of planting and building alludes to a temporal logic that is dependent on nature—each plant has its own vegetal temporality, its growth cycle, and life span—and more crucially the act of planting together. Emphasis is neither on temporal progression nor the development of relationship. It is almost as though love springs forth in the image, *in medias res*, without beginning or end, already concentrated.

Z's illuminating rumination towards the end of the novel posits love as supertemporal and existential.

'Love', this English word: like other English words it has tense. 'Loved' or 'will love' or 'have loved'. All these specific tenses mean Love is time-limited thing. Not infinite. It only exist in particular period of time. In Chinese, Love is '愛' (ai). It has no tense. No past and future. Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future. (Guo, 2007a: 301)

Love is not a verb or noun; it is 'a being, a situation, a circumstance'. The Chinese character for love, 爱 (ai), has evolved from a more ancient form depicting two hands holding a heart 心 (xin), which still remains in the traditional Chinese character 愛. In being held, love is able to hold time. Love's capacious existence is enabled by the hands that hold it. This existence, I argue, is a dual one, comprising two parties. Love as an image, therefore, requires two to frame and hold up. That Z visualises love as an image or a scene that has 'heart' at the centre accounts for her anger towards her lover whenever he leaves her. To him, her actions and demands are possessive: she is a needy woman who is dependent on him. Yet, her charge against him is not entirely about her dependency and subservience as the feminine ideal. When he leaves the home, he exits the frame; without two people, love is unable to hold the image up. This explains Z's articulation of her desire for him: 'I want you are in my view' (Guo, 2007a: 325). To use the vocabulary of image and photography, when her lover leaves, he is no longer in the viewfinder, outside the frame of love. There is no moving of hands and legs but only the roof remains (Guo, 2007a: 106). Z is left alone with the convention of love hanging over her. Like a Barthesian image, Z is 'excluded' and no longer in the scene (Barthes, 2010: 132). The image of love becomes what Barthes calls 'a sad image' in which Z's absence is reflected (133). In the novel, Z, too, is conscious of the autoscopic experience: 'I am seeing myself walk towards the end of the love, the sad end' (Guo, 2007: 340-1).¹⁰ Given Guo's repeated interactions with Barthesian love, this moment of Z reckoning her own departure is a moment where the self becomes object, still in love but nonetheless distant. On a similar sad image the novel concludes: 'The rain was ceaseless, covering the whole forest, the whole mountain, and the whole land' (Guo, 2007a: 353). It is an image of the Welsh scene in which Z and her lover once visited. No person inhabits the scene so, as Barthes predicts, Z 'pictures' him standing on the field against a backdrop of a mountain scape and sea (Guo, 2007a: 353). More poignantly, Z is not in the scene; she is merely witnessing a love that is held by no one. Without the hands holding the heart in place, what remains of love 爱 (ai) is a drifting heart 心 (xin).

Ultimately, Z leaves London proficient in both writing and speaking English. Yet, her proficiency and imbibement of English culture fail to reshape her supertemporal image of love. Even after countless arguments on future and working through the fissures in their relationship, Z holds on to the house of love built on Chinese characters. She concludes that the only salve to their fracturing relationship is to move past the linear time culture

¹⁰ Guo's references to Barthes are indirect though evident in her montage-like arrangement of episodes of love and inquiry on the constructions of love. Her dialogue with Barthes is fleshed out in her most recent book *A Lover's Discourse* (2020). In addition to the title, the novel also opens with a quote from Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* and contains episodes that interact with Barthesian love which according to the narrator has 'no female point of view' (2020: 80).

as practiced by the English and their language. On English terms, their love will never succeed, for a love that embarks on a linear, normative course that promises happiness and fulfilment inevitably faces pressure. A course that has milestones and checkpoints plotted out is embedded by multiple ‘must happens’ that, according to Sara Ahmed, persuade reactions and affects that may not be sincere (2010b: 581). To move away from this course is to first reject the prescriptive grammar rules, to expel herself from the English, masculine world and its happiness (Guo, 2007a: 192). This happiness is inconsistent like ‘English weather’, coming and leaving according to the progression of life and time (192). There is a ‘timing’ for everything, as Z learns: ‘I understand falling in love with the right person in the wrong timing could be the greatest sadness in a person’s entire life’ (Guo, 2007a: 326). Time and timing, however, are of less relevance in the Chinese language. For Z, a love on Chinese terms would be starkly different. It would be constant and forever. As she reflects after an argument on future-planning or the lack thereof with her partner: ‘If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last forever. It will be infinite’ (2007a: 301). A love in Chinese tense is one without temporal tensions and pressures of development, future-proofed and picture-ready.

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Love on the Rocks: Lighthouses in Literature as Gendered Geographies of Love

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ABSTRACT

The lighthouse has long been a familiar setting for stories of love, conflict, and epiphany. That isolated tower on the clifftop brims with symbolic possibility and sometimes cliché, positioning it as a site of gendered love, with popular fiction titles embedding the trope of the contained world revolving, like the lit lamp, around the male authority. But the lighthouse also has an explicit historical situatedness. The nineteenth century British lighthouses, in particular, were seen as outposts of empire. They are immovable inscriptions of the outlines of islands, the edges of continents – the imprint of colonisation on country. And they are often seen as male domains. In the popular imagination, a lighthouse is much more than its function. Does recent historical fiction perpetuate or subvert what we think we know about lighthouses and the people who populated them? How does it portray the officially gendered roles and intense relationships of women characters? How might historical novels set in settler colonies recognise the specific meaning of the lighthouse as a marker of imperial authority? And how do we read the lighthouse and its place in the imagination as a geography of gender and love?

Keywords: gender, storytelling, literature, historical fiction, lighthouses

INTRODUCTION

The lighthouse has long been a favourite setting for fiction, and not just any fiction: there seems to be endless interest in historical novels in which a gendered story of love and conflict plays out in a storm-battered tower on a remote and desolate headland. It is a trope familiar to many readers: stories plotted around a remote and desolate man, usually damaged by war or heartbreak, battling the elements in a remote and desolate place with the women and children revolving around him, the light, and his remote and desolate heart. A more recent feature is the inclusion of the rebellious daughter or wife – an extremely popular gendered character type in historical fiction. In this article, I will examine the enduring fascination with lighthouses and lighthouse-keepers, outline key character types prevalent in historical novels set in lighthouses, and ask what radical possibilities might these fictions hold for considerations of the ways in which gender and love interact in portrayals of confined and isolated environments, particularly in colonised places.

Many commercial titles aimed at women or young readers embed this hierarchy deeply in the narrative, including *The Lightkeeper's Wife* (Viggers, 2011; Johnson, 2014), *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* (Olsen and Wentworth, 1970; Gaynor, 2018) and *The Lightkeeper's Daughters* (Pendziwol, 2018) – even *The Lighthouse Keeper's Cat* (Armitage and Armitage, 2014). Such works feature the familiar lighthouses populated in our imaginations by lonely men thrown together in the service of the maritime industry and pitted against sea and sky and storm, with women and children as their orbiting satellites. The phenomenon is not new. One of my favourite childhood stories is also one of the most poignant: Paul Gallico's novella *The Snow Goose* (1941/1961), in which the artist Philip Rhayader moves into a deserted lighthouse in the Great Marsh of Essex in England and sets about rescuing creatures that have been hurt or lost, like the snow goose, a parallel to his own wayward and wild nature, and that of local girl Fritha. The story does not stand up to adult scrutiny with its depiction of Philip's disabilities as 'grotesque' and 'ugly' (1941/1961: 9) but its depiction of his care for the many damaged wild things and dramatic death during the evacuation of Dunkirk still pulls – the depiction pulls at the heart – indeed, it was derided by a contemporary critic as 'the most sentimental story' (Wins, 1976). In this tale the reader finds all the elements of the classic Gothic-inspired lighthouse narrative, although the Aelder light itself is no longer lit: isolation both

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geographical and metaphorical; transgressive characters and a hint of transgressive possibility between them; a reserved man whose life is tormented by memory and disappointment but regulated by duty; the child-like woman whose world circles the man; and high above it all, the tower, the weather.

So, what might readers see, in that tower? The idea of the lighthouse has an explicit historical situatedness: political, economic and cultural, particularly for readers familiar with British literature and its lighthouses. From the Pharos of Alexandria (built in 300 BCE) onward, the lighthouse's ancient functions are associated with place and with power, marking borders and preserving trade routes (Della Dora, 2022). It is immovable. It is steadfast. But it is also lightness – often a symbol of sanctuary and clarity, with all the Biblical connotations of the light on the hill (Matthew 5:14, 15). In her novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Jeanette Winterson explains:

(...) on the coasts and outcrops of this *treacherous* ocean, a string of lights was built over 300 years.

Look at this one. Made of granite, as hard and unchanging as the sea is fluid and volatile. The sea moves constantly, the lighthouse, never. There is no sway, no rocking, none of the motion of ships and ocean. (2004a: 17)

In the popular imagination, a lighthouse is much more than its function. It holds meaning – or many meanings and possibilities – in cultural knowledge. It is emotive, too, evoking nostalgia in the modern reader's mind which makes it a perfect setting for historical fiction, alongside expectations of hardship and loneliness in those cultures in which solitude is seen as a form of melancholy (Wood, 2018). The lighthouse continues to serve as setting and inspiration for creative works in many media, from photographic calendars to seaside village souvenirs, films such as the recent horror film *The Lighthouse* (Eggars, 2019), and fiction for readers of all ages and in many genres.

The lighthouse is a figure for the art objects itself, emerging in a place mysteriously between the material and the imaginary, a covert category that changes and redefines the relations and perspectives of everything around it. Beginning at sea level with the journey to the lighthouse, the horizon splits the screen, depicting only sea and sky. Air replaces water, and the lighthouse emerges framed against the sky, appearing untethered, floating, more like a space station than a lighthouse. Thus, beyond the abundance of historic representations, lighthouses continue to inspire new creative responses. (Waugh, 2018: 210)

Next, I will explore the richness of those connections in that space between air and water, land and sky, light and dark, safety and fear, life and death, material and imaginary, solid and liquid, solitude and community, freedom and hierarchy, official function and situated knowledges. I describe the ways in which lighthouses are continuously generative foci of imagination and narrative, and examine the ways in which lighthouses in stories, especially historical fictions, become gendered sites of particular narratives of love.

THE LIGHTHOUSE AS BEACON

A lighthouse, by definition, is an impossible place in-between: a structure on an edge, where nothing else can be built. It is an attempt to define a border, or a hazard, where water meets rock or ocean meets land, beyond which is only horizon, and it marks that place by projecting light into night. The lighthouse, says Winterson, 'is a known point in darkness' (2004a: 38), so it is both light and knowledge: it marks the line on a maritime chart between sea and shore, and it is built in recognition that sailors need some solidity in that wild, shifting place. But as Donna Haraway reminds us:

Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects as boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is risky practice.' (Haraway, 1988: 595)

It is even riskier to try to draw boundaries around water – or sand. Philip Rhayader's lighthouse in *The Snow Goose* once 'abutted on the sea and was a beacon on the Essex coast. Time shifted land and water, and its usefulness came to an end' (Gallico, 1941/1961: 9) and the saltmarsh and birds reclaimed the land around it. Fictional and real lighthouses tend to be built in inhospitable places – high headlands, rocky islands, dangerous shallows or windswept cliffs above the ocean, lake or river – where the painted tower and the blinking light demarcate and demand attention, but even then their boundaries are blurred by fog or sea mist, by surging waves, by sunrise and sunset, and particularly by darkness.

It is not surprising, then, that lighthouses should be such popular settings for recent neo-Victorian fictions, influenced as they are by the Gothic tradition and especially in what Katherine Cooper calls 'third wave gothic'

with its preoccupation with the ‘complexities and (...) changes in women’s experiences and in gender politics particular to the twenty-first century’ (2012: 154). While we might now ‘read’ a lighthouse through several different cultural lenses, including the Gothic, and it is possible that these overlap and influence each other, they may not reflect the builders’ original goals. Lauren Christian suggests a useful framework for considering this:

The *function* of a lighthouse, the action for which it is specifically designed, is to serve as a landmark for mariners (...) Its *purpose*, the intention for which the lighthouse exists, is more complex because it acts as an icon to represent the values of the organization that funds and supports it. (Christian, 2017: 2, my italics)

I draw a distinction between the ways in which in western culture lighthouses are viewed as cultural artefacts and sites, and the original intention behind their construction, particularly in the nineteenth century, which was both instrumental and symbolic. As Marguerite Poland writes in her novel, *The Keeper*, ‘The lighthouse was not just a piece of masonry with a lantern housed in it. It was a beacon illuminating the dark, sentinel of shoals, guardian of men, saviour of ships. It was beyond individual significance; it exacted loyalty; it is palpable, beyond its engineering’ (Poland, 2014: 7). A lighthouse, then, is a complex cultural presence in a landscape or seascape, far from neutral in intent, however well-meaning in function. It has long been seen as a structure holding great symbolic power, and has often been viewed as such, too¹. It marks Land’s End, beyond which may be sea monsters or great travail or a ‘New World’, but it also marks homecoming. Further, its very fabric may be a construction of political, social and moral objectives (Della Dora, 2022). As Christian has noted of a very specific example of this duality of function and symbolic purpose:

Lighthouses built after the establishment of the independent United States and, again, after the American Civil War were intended to act as representations of the strength and stability of the federal government (...) It was the long-held belief of the Light-House Board that [n]othing indicate[d] ‘the liberality, prosperity or intelligence of a nation more clearly than the facilities which it affords for the safe approach of the mariner to its shores.’ (U.S. Light-House Board 1868:4). Lighthouses were recognized by all the major powers in the 19th century as symbols of national prosperity and were a way to advertise that fortune to all other nations. (Christian, 2017: 27)

Like a railroad in a desert, or a seemingly impossible bridge span, the sheer presence of a lighthouse and the fact that it exists at all emits a clear signal, literally and metaphorically, of might, authority and intent. As Teresa Costa suggests:

The liminal space materialized by the border is normally a site and symbol of power display (...) the paramount significance of the border relies on the symbolic, invisible, affective and effective complexity that such spaces entail and generate as lines of division or encounter. (2012: 87)

In my country, Australia, and in many other places colonised by settlers from Europe, that ‘string of lights’ is no party decoration. Lighthouses marked the edges of empire – borders seen as immovable although, in truth, they often changed ownership as territories shifted or empires fell. The lighthouses appearing on the sacred places or favoured lookouts of colonised peoples were pale markers of alien invasion, of war and defeat, of loss and grief, of dispossession, of tyranny.

This, I suggest, is a fundamental but often overlooked truth about lighthouses. The nineteenth-century British lighthouses, in particular, were seen as physical and spiritual points of Victorian light in the far-flung ‘darkness’; as outposts of empire. They are inscriptions, in stone and glass, of the outlines of islands, the edges of continents – the imprint of colonisation on country. This makes their treatment in literature as sites of love more complex, and also more problematic. The keepers of the imagined past are not only taciturn and dutiful men: they too are representatives of empire, as are the dependents they bring with them to the light, and the power the keepers embody and wield is often present, but sometimes unrecognised, in the representations of their relationships in fiction.

THE LIGHTHOUSE AS LIMINAL

The lighthouse, write Elisa Magnani and Filippo Pistocchi, ‘is often a metaphor for a security space, in a very insecure environment; it appears stable and firm in a fragile territory, continually threatened by the unknown’

¹ Scholars such as Azevedo (2018) have discussed the Freudian significance of the lighthouse’s phallic shape.

(2017: 124), and that word ‘appears’ is critical here, for the stability of the lighthouse lies in our perception of it from different angles, in its many cultural purposes, as much as in its engineering and construction.

Indeed, often it is our own human perspective that renders the lighthouse in different lights, and projects onto it. ‘The lighthouse is always different, depending on the time and the position from which it’s viewed,’ writes Jazmina Barrera.

There is the lighthouse in the distance, a diminutive life preserver. The lighthouse close at hand, where its size is imposing, revealing its origins as a temple, a tower, and a house of illumination. The lighthouse at different times of day: In the mornings, we see it surrounded by seagulls; at midday the sun dots it like an *i*, but in the evening, as the sun declines, they separate in a form of ritual farewell. At night, the lighthouse is a second, terrestrial moon. There is the lighthouse standing calmly beside the sea, and the lighthouse in a storm, a titan that resists and, in the words of Michelet, returns ‘fire with fire to the lightning bolts of the heavens.’ And, finally, there is the lighthouse swathed in mist. (Barrera, 2020: para. 20)

I suggest that these views depend equally on the knowledge frameworks we bring to the lighthouse, and to the viewing. From the point of view of a ship on that stormy sea, we see hope; as a tourist we may gaze upwards in wonder or even climb the narrow stairs to take photos of the view; the artist, the ghost-hunter, the architect, the historian, the local Indigenous Elder, the park ranger, the angler, and the child on the beach all see the same place differently, and we each bring to it our own cultural knowledge of the lighthouse, as we do to novels set in them. Only the lighthouse keepers are allowed the view that matches the lighthouse’s function: inside, the close, round, mechanised core of light and mirrors; and beyond it, the tense lookout across the water to log the passage of vessels and weather. Who we are matters. So does the way we see, and the way we read.

That granite solidity exists in a liminal and generative space, then, as does the most famous lighthouse in English literature – Virginia Woolf’s. *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1977) does not use the light, on the Isle of Skye off the coast of Scotland, itself as the setting for the novel. Instead, it is a distant promise, a mirage; the journey to it never quite captured in Lily Briscoe’s painting, and the arrival a moment that largely eludes the characters in Woolf’s pages. In her hands, the lighthouse is ‘a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, wateringly’ (1927/1977: 91) and throughout the novel light from many sources is ‘steady’, ‘pitiless’, and ‘remorseless’ (1927/1977: 62), but:

Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and this is what you see us by. (1927/1977: 60)

Later, for young James Ramsay:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now –

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks, the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry.

So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too. (1927/1977: 172)

In Woolf’s lighthouse, granite meets ocean, light and dark and weather and waves are as ephemeral as light, as fluid as cloud. The house and garden where the characters interact are fixed, and from here they look out towards the raking light and restless ocean, always moving, just as elements of the Edwardian world that appeared to be static shift and adapt to the modern. As Robert Shaw observes:

... where space is thought of as general, universal and abstract, place is presumed to be specific, particular and lived. Places are embodied and practised, tied into local cultures and ways of living. Thus, theories arguing in favour of ‘place’ have long been considered reactive and conservative, emphasising the parochial over the cosmopolitan and the learned. To be tied to place is, for certain theories of modernity, to be tied to tradition and to reject the global. (Shaw, 2018: 202)

But the lighthouse is able to be both, in Woolf’s novel and many others: it is part of a culture of movement, supporting global shipping and local mariners, and it is surrounded by or focused on everchanging water; but it is also an incredibly localised community of place, with its own rules, cultures, and sense of permanence. It represents past and present, tradition and modernity.

A (possibly apocryphal) idea of Woolf's captures yet another duality: 'Lighthouses are endlessly suggestive signifiers of both human isolation and our ultimate connectedness to each other' (Woolf, cited in Gendell 2020: 116). Each of her characters is isolated from people dear to them, but in different ways: each alone in their own imaginative worlds, they misunderstand, mistake, and even misrepresent each other, and each of them spends much of their time in solitude. Mrs Ramsay describes the prevailing view of the lighthouse keeper: a man cooped up in an isolated place, worried, preoccupied but also bored, and separated from his family (1927/1977: 10). Her husband is keeper-like: taciturn, obsessive, demanding and exacting, a scholar but also representative of his class and of Empire. The Ramsays are based on Woolf's parents (Froula, 2006), and indeed on the traditional, English Victorian family, but at a time of flux. Woolf counters the familiar centring of the narrative around the male figure by revolving the novel and its characters around Mrs Ramsay instead: she is the beacon on the rock to which they turn, 'for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light' (1927/1977: 61). The Ramsay's holiday house itself operates as a guiding light in the darkness, leading them all, one by one, to her side:

'It's almost too dark to see,' said Andrew, coming up from the beach.

'One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,' said Prue.

'Do we leave that light burning?' asked Lily. (Woolf, 1927/1977: 117)

Just as Lily Briscoe's abstract painting represents a new way of seeing and representing the world, Woolf's own work rejected the didactic nineteenth century novel celebrating 'the glories of the British Empire' (Woolf, 1924: 9). Jane Marcus (1981; 1983), Christine Froula (2006) and other scholars have noted the ways in which Woolf critiques either or both gender expectations and imperialism, to blur boundaries, to engender a sense of liminality and develop her modernist aesthetic; for Woolf, Froula writes, 'what makes civilization impossible is the barbarous system of masculine domination and feminine sacrifice' (2006: 12): the very basis for any number of traditional lighthouse stories. Woolf, instead, allows us to see the Ramsays as both lighthouse and seafarers, perhaps lost at sea, or worse: her deconstruction – or, rather, abstraction – of Victorian gender expectations was one of her key contributions to the broader Bloomsbury effort to combine informed critique of power structures with an emerging aesthetic and activism in many forms, including writing and publishing. All three elements are present in *To the Lighthouse*. James F. Wurtz notes that Woolf has Mrs Ramsay pause near a portrait of Queen Victoria, reinforcing the role of British women as complicit in imperialism (1927/1977: 100), and suggests that Woolf's critique is entirely concerned with aesthetics, and is therefore ambivalent rather than 'convincingly' critical of empire (2010: 106). Similarly, Gabrielle McIntire claims that in *To the Lighthouse* the gendered relationships, there to be understood and critiqued, are traditional 'but the poetics are not' (2015: 83). As Woolf wrote in a later essay, she was simply not interested in replicating nineteenth-century literary technique or themes:

Those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us, those conventions are ruin, those tools are death. (Woolf 1924: 16)

In Woolf's lighthouse, empire encounters liminality as well as modernity. But many of the popular novels set in lighthouses revive the tools and gendered tropes that Woolf tried to abolish or interrogate, and in particular historical novels set in settler colonies such as Australia pay little or no attention to lighthouses as sites of dispossession – they may thereby continue the process of boundary marking and risk glorifying colonisation.

IMAGINING GENDERED LOVE IN LIGHTHOUSES

Lighthouses were not only beacons of hope or outposts of empire, but they were often isolated communities, serviced by intermittent supply and mail boats, and reliant on vulnerable communication systems. They were also home to women and children, most famously the heroic lighthouse-keeper's daughter, Grace Darling, who lived with her family at the remote Longstone Lighthouse in the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland, England (Cunningham, 2007). It is the lives of young women such as Grace who inspire many of the recent novels set in lighthouses. Cultural representations of Grace's courage in spotting and rescuing shipwrecked crew and passengers of the *Forfarshire* one stormy night in 1838 were used to reinforce the British nationalist project in the Victorian era and again during the Second World War (Cunningham, 2007). When Huria Matenga rescued ten crew and passengers from the *Delaware* after it ran onto rocks in Whakapuaka Bay near Nelson in 1863, she was feted as 'New Zealand's Grace Darling' (Pickles and Wanalla, 2010) and became a national hero. Ida Lewis, who started serving from the age of fifteen, is credited with saving at least eighteen lives during her many years at Lime Rock Lighthouse in Newport, Rhode Island. Lewis and Darling have been the inspiration for both biographical and biofictional representations: notably, in Lewis's case, although her father was incapacitated when she was

young and she kept the light for more than fifty years, she is still defined by one biography's title as *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter* (Skomal, 2010), not the Lighthouse Keeper. These young women were seen as exceptional, bravely carrying out men's work in a man's world, as well as giving birth to one of the early character types found in lighthouse narratives – feisty young heroines who have become as much a part of our cultural view of lighthouse communities as their fathers or husbands.

It is perhaps not at all surprising, then, that these many varied and compelling cultural concepts of the meanings and mythologies of lighthouse life should become such a popular narrative setting, particularly for historical fiction, set in the days before automation when lighthouses were tiny, intense communities. Lighthouses are particularly useful as settings for historical fiction, offering readers a sense of place that is familiar from earlier stories, but also exotic and sometimes romanticised, their isolation throwing the living conditions of characters into sharp relief and adding layers of narrative tension and atmosphere, but also allowing for consideration of the ways in which the people in the stories operate in and are affected by place and the gender roles assigned to them. That tower, and the white-washed cottages clustered at its base, may appear stable and solid like its keeper, but it is also home to many real and imagined stories of instability, dissolution, treachery, and despair.

The challenges and vulnerabilities of these communities are familiar to readers: 'For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn?' asks Woolf's Mrs Ramsay (1927/1977: 10). We bring to our reading of novels set in a lighthouse the recognition of these hardships, but also a sense that they are unknown to us, almost exotic in their inaccessibility. This too is learned cultural knowledge and even lighthouse keepers bring their own frameworks to the job: Phil Wood points out that British and Scandinavian ideas about the keeper's life grew out of their own expectations of society and community: 'While the lonely and melancholic lighthouse keeper is a common trope in English-language literature, for his counterparts at Tungenes and elsewhere in Norway, the prospect of escaping the throng and making one's livelihood alone and in isolation may have been seen quite differently' (Wood, 2018: 199). For a reader in the English-language tradition, the melancholy and isolation are an inherent thread through the lighthouse story, and the reader also brings to the text the influence of the Gothic, and their foreknowledge of the generative possibilities of remote and liminal places as story sites.

Scholars such as Diana Wallace (2013) and Katherine Cooper (2012) have made clear the constant presence of the Gothic setting and familiar frameworks in historical fiction, particularly novels written by women and/or centred on women as characters through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recurring Gothic themes evident in lighthouse stories include the isolated and unforgiving setting; the effective imprisonment of the women and children (stone lighthouses, after all, can appear as forbidding as the medieval towers or Tudor prisons so popular in historical fiction and Gothic-influenced fantasy novels); the past bleeding into the present, through memory, trauma, or supernatural forces often representing earlier generations; and an underlying sense of the uncanny. It is both a domestic interior and a male domain; a setting of vast scale and also minute detail and intimacy.

All of these elements are present in arguably the most popular lighthouse-set novel of recent years: *The Light Between Oceans*, M. L. Stedman's 2012 international best-seller, which was translated into forty languages and later became a film starring Michael Fassbender and Alicia Vikander (Cianfrance, 2016). It is emblematic of a traditional approach to the light as a gendered geography of love in historical fiction. The story revolves around Tom, a returned soldier marked by his experience in the Great War, who becomes a lighthouse keeper on the remote Janus Rock in Western Australia: 'The white stone tower rested against the slate sky like a stick of chalk. It stood a hundred and thirty feet high, near the cliff at the island's apex' (Stedman, 2012: 49), where, tellingly, 'the dip of the light meant that the island itself was always left in darkness. A lighthouse is for others; powerless to illuminate the space closest to it' (Stedman, 2012: 253). Tom marries Isobel, a local girl, and then finds a baby adrift in a rowing boat – with dire consequences for all. It is about duty, about love, and in terms of gender it is profoundly essentialist:

The simple fact was, sure as a graft will take and fuse on a rose bush, the rootstock of Isobel's motherhood – her every drive and instinct (...) grafted seamlessly to the scion, the baby which needed mothering. (Stedman, 2012: 145)

Tom is the authority, master of this granite and glass miracle of male engineering, while Isobel is irrational, driven by her womanly impulses. He tends to the light, dutiful and steadfast, continuing the tradition and the tasks of the men who came before him:

The logbook tells the tale of the keeper's life in the same steady pen. The exact minute the light was lit, the exact minute it was put out the following morning. The weather, the ships that passed. (Stedman, 2012: 125)

Isobel's actions, and indeed her very presence, disturb his equilibrium and threaten the stability of his service, and even the light. This idea, of the stable hero (or anti-hero, depending on the reader's viewpoint) and the unstable heroine, can be seen in many stories set in lighthouse communities: the woman shakes the steadfast keeper's life out of its routine, reminding us of the lighthouse's liminal nature and rendering its keeper helpless.

This triptych – the light, the keeper, the woman – is a version of a dynamic often seen in historical fiction published from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, in which the man involved in a relationship has a clear role in the world, often bound by duty (a knight, a detective, a king, a mentor) and the heroine of the story is placed in relation to him and his role (a wife, a daughter, a princess, an apprentice) and under his control – even when she is also positioned as a chosen one in historical fantasy. The direct or indirect influence of feminism on writers in the last few decades, however, has seen them pushing back against the traditional representations of women of the past. As Wallace notes:

Within mainstream history women have tended to feature only in certain roles – as queens, witches, nuns, spiritualists – or as femmes fatales like Vernon Lee's Medea da Carpi. Historical fiction has allowed women writers to reassess these figures, and to show how they are often 'hysterical' constructions, reflecting the anxieties and desires of male historians and otherwise disempowered women. (2013: 196)

This preoccupation has led to rediscovery of women's stories that had previously been overlooked or neglected in both fiction and nonfiction. But in fiction, the reimagining of those lives may express the concerns of readers and writers now rather than the reality of the past, and as Cooper and Short have written, 'That depictions of the female figure in historical fiction often reveal far more about present-day attitudes and ideologies than those of the period they seek to represent is particularly evident in terms of the way in which she is positioned in narratives regarding sexuality, marriage and romance' (2012: 9). This ongoing attempt at reclaiming or perhaps retrofitting power to women of the past has become a convention of the genre in recent decades (Wallace, 2005), leading to a proliferation of what are often described as 'strong female characters' including plucky heroines, rebellious wives, Bohemian femmes fatales, pirates, spies, nurses, and detectives; a refreshing flurry of heroines who rebel against the strictures of their roles. But in many cases, as in *The Light Between Oceans*, that mutiny does not shake the foundations of the social structure. The gendered positions of the main characters do not change: the princess marries her true love, rather than the man her father insisted she marry; the nurse goes to war in spite of her parents' opposition, and meets a handsome doctor (they clash at first, of course); the girl who wants to be a knight becomes a queen; the visitor to town solves the crime and stays on to work with the damaged but fascinating detective; and the lighthouse-keeper and his wife or daughter find some way to reconcile his duty with her needs. And therein lies the binary: he has a duty; she has needs. He is stalwart; she is unstable, perhaps even uncanny.

So while many scholars and authors see these developments in the genre as driven by an ongoing feminist project, one has to wonder how universal that progress is, and what readers make of the essentialist narrative that so regularly underlies it. As Lisa Fletcher has written of the historical romance genre, 'historical fictions of heterosexual love are performative to the extent that they participate in the establishment and maintenance of prevailing ideas about the links between sex, gender and sexuality' (2008: 15) and it is clear that at least some popular novels, such as *The Light Between Oceans*, leverage the trope of the rebellious woman in relation to the dutiful man while delivering a traditional outcome: he may feel threatened and she may appear to threaten his authority, but in the end she does not.

In this novel, too, the lighthouse is a traditional nationalist boundary, even on a rock where two oceans clash.

Anyone who's worked on the Offshore Lights can tell you about it – the isolation, and the spell it casts. Like sparks flung off the furnace that is Australia, these beacons dot around it, flickering on and off, some of them only ever seen by a handful of souls. But their isolation saves the whole continent from isolation – keeps the shipping lanes safe, as vessels steam the thousands of miles to bring machines and books and cloth, in return for wheat and wool, coal and gold; the fruits of ingenuity traded for the fruits of the earth. (Stedman, 2012: 154)

Unlike Winterson's string of lights, this is a narrative of globalisation – the lighthouse as the protector of commerce. It is an immutable fact of life, like motherhood and masculinity – like nationhood and territorial borders: a catalogue of nineteenth and twentieth century boundary-building and modernity. Here, the settler reaches land's end.

The Light Between Oceans does not include a single indigenous character, in spite of it being set on Wadandi country, the land of saltwater people. The novel replicates the nineteenth century settler narratives of an alien land, threatening and hostile, conquered by the tough but taciturn whitefella. But as Haraway reminds us 'Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the vision implicit in our visualising practises. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?' (1988: 585). Indigenous writers have pointed out that country was not alien or hostile

to settlers – it was as it had been for tens of thousands of years, minding its own business (Donnelly, 2016). It was the settlers who were alien.

In many of these popular novels, then, the gendered love story reflects and perpetuates the imperial narrative of the rugged white man on the frontier, with women – wife or feisty daughter – placed only in relation to him. He is the border point, the rock, the lit lamp. The woman who loves him or the daughter who rebels against his authority are outsiders – they share his exile but never the light.

There are, however, recent novels which try to reimagine a lighthouse narrative, to negotiate and see around and through mapped boundaries, or to provide greater understanding of that ordered circular world, and here I briefly examine three: British author Jeanette Winterson's novel *Lighthousekeeping*, South African novelist Marguerite Poland's *The Keeper*, and Australian author Kate Mildenhall's *Skylarking*. These offer quite different gendered geographies of love.

THE 'POINT OF LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS'

Lighthousekeeping is narrated by Silver, an orphaned girl who finds a home in the Cape Wrath lighthouse, built by the legendary Stevensons on the northwest tip of Scotland (Bathurst, 1999). Winterson, as is her wont, subverts the traditional lighthouse story – here, the lighthouse keeper, Pew, is blind and represents light, while the nineteenth-century clergyman, Babel Dark, is the opposite – his name hammering home that symbolism.

Silver is lost, adrift, before she arrives at the lighthouse, and again after it is automated. She says:

There were two Atlantics; one outside the lighthouse, and one inside me.

The one inside me had no string of guiding lights. (Winterson, 2004a: 21)

Silver's world revolves around Pew, but he is not the reticent, heroic, remote keeper we see in many other stories: he is warm and articulate, and lights up Silver's life. Pew becomes her 'point of light in the darkness' and he teaches her that the lighthouse and storytelling are the same thing. Silver says to her readers:

The stories I want to tell you will light up part of my life, and leave the rest in darkness. You don't need to know everything. There is no everything. (Winterson, 2004a: 134)

Winterson has explored this idea previously in her novel *Sexing the Cherry*, which is in part a reflection on the ways in which past and present connect in life and in storytelling, and the imaginative uses of history in fiction. It ends:

The future and the past and the present exist only in our minds (...) And even the most solid of things and the most real, the best loved and the well-known, are only hand-shadows on the wall. Empty space and points of light. (1989: 144)

As Ansgar Nünning has noted, postmodernist fiction set in the past is itself a liminal territory: 'Being located on the border between historiography and literature, fact and fiction, postmodernist historical fiction shows a pronounced tendency to cross boundaries and to blur genre distinctions' (1997: 219), as well as asking how text might render or reimagine past and present. In *Lighthousekeeping*, Pew exists out of time, or perhaps can see through time, into the past, and into the tortured life of Babel Dark, who meets Darwin and Robert Louis Stevenson (scion of the Lighthouse Stevensons, possibly seeking inspiration to help write *Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde*). The lighthouse here has both a strong physical presence on this harsh coastline, but is also described as almost ephemeral: 'The lighthouse looked like a living creature, standing upright on its base, like a seahorse, fragile, impossible, but triumphant in the waves' (Winterson, 2004a: 80). But the automated future comes to the old lighthouse, Pew is made redundant, and Silver's guiding light dims, leaving her to wander restless through an unsettling world, like Babel Dark, until she understands a story for herself and can return. In contrast to other relationships in lighthouse narratives, the adult Silver's later love story in *Lighthousekeeping* is ungendered. That is, the love object is only addressed as you, and their gender, if any, is not explicit. The reader may or may not project a gender onto the beloved – a salute to those used to reading queerness where it is not written, and possibly unsettling for others. The relationship doesn't take place in a lighthouse, but it begins on an island, in Greece, where 'the light was as intense as a love affair (...) Nobody needs this much sunlight' (Winterson, 2004a: 196-197), and then intensifies in an isolated cabin in the woods. The beloved is a lighthouse in Silver's stormy sea: 'You are the door at the end of the world. You are the door that opens onto a sea of stars' (Winterson, 2004: 219). The novel is a queer fairy tale, of sorts, about the possibility of storytelling and of love, in which the lighthouse and its keeper are the same thing:

There were days when he seemed to have evaporated into the spray that jetted the base of the lighthouse, and days when he was the lighthouse. It stood, Pew-shaped, Pew-still, hatted by cloud, blind-eyes, but the light to see by. (Winterson, 2004a: 95)

Further, Winterson writes in her Author's Note:

Lighthousekeeping is a story about telling stories. A story about what stories are, and how they affect us. Pew calls them 'Markers, guides, comfort and warning'. I believe that. I believe that storytelling is a way of navigating our lives, and that to read ourselves in fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact. ... If we read ourselves as narrative, we change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find that we can change nothing. (2004b: 20)

This suggests that the parallel between story and lighthouse extends beyond the metaphors of navigation and light, and into the idea of story and the self as liminal spaces – an idea also explored by Marguerite Poland in her 2014 novel, *The Keeper*.

The Keeper is set in 1957 on a guano island off the Eastern Cape, the South African coast where Poland grew up and which is the setting for many of her novels (Eve and Mills, 2003: 39). Lighthouse keeper Hannes Harker suffers a fall in the tower while converting the light to an automated beacon. It's the lighthouse in which he has lived as a child and again as an adult; the island on which his father served and his mother died, and where he worked for many years – it's his light. As he recovers in hospital he shares his story with a nurse, Rika, who becomes the fascinated but always distant keeper of his secrets. The novel both replicates and subverts some of the tropes of lighthouse narratives, sometimes overtly:

'You see,' he says, 'unless you've been in an isolated lighthouse you can't begin to understand what living in one means. It sounds romantic. It is romantic. But, again, it's not. Most lights are pretty harsh.' (Poland, 2014: 38)

This novel, then, contains three interdependent stories of lighthouse-keeping: that of Hannes' authoritarian father, desperate mother, and his own childhood; his memories of his early married years and the wild, beloved wife, Aletta, who ran away; and the damaged man healing from both his fall and his past in the presence of a supportive woman listener (just as Silver is the audience for Pew's many stories in *Lighthousekeeping*). This pattern is reminiscent of what Wallace calls the 'uncanny repetition at the heart of the Female Gothic' (2013: 135) in which we often see the further doubling of the women's roles – first and second wives, for example, in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, and here, mother and wife, and a nurse who understands them both better than the man who loves them. Hannes does not see his mother's pain and misreads his wife's isolation: his focus is on the light, the ocean, the island. For Hannes and his colleagues, 'lighthouse' is an adjective applied only to those who work in and preferably also grew up in the service: a person is either lighthouse, and therefore trustworthy and knowing, or not. People who are not lighthouse must learn to live with those who are. The lives of these generations revolve around one concept: the keeper must never leave the light, and the light must never go out. Nothing else matters. Hannes tells Rika:

'The only certainty is a light. Some light. Somewhere. And relying on lighthouse people who move the same as you. They're the ones who really know you. The ones you can rely on (...) A lighthouse either defeats you or it owns you. There is nothing in between.' (Poland, 2014: 101)

Hannes, like his father, is owned by the lighthouse, but it is the reactions and perhaps defeats of his mother and later his wife, Aletta, that are the secrets driving this story:

Fleeting in his mind he saw the lantern – dark, unlit, as it was now. And beyond, the salted window of the chamber and the gathering storm building like volcanic smoke across the southern. That day his mother had stood stark and white motionless before the lanterns as if in defiance of a god.

His mother – so small, so gentle. And yet so defiant.

Something swept across him like a beam of the light, a clarity, a certainty. It was not fear that killed her. It was anger. (Poland, 2014: 49)

The always-formal structures of the lighthouse-keeping profession are deepened on this island where, under apartheid rule, the public servants in the tower and cottages are white and the Black guano diggers live crammed together in huts, and neither community can cross the line between them to approach the other – when the line is crossed, tragedy follows, but not in the way the authorities fear. In fact, it is the crossing of these lines, and later Aletta's inability to bend to the rules of lighthouse life, that are presented as human truth in the face of official

rigidity. Transgressions – against the rules, against one another, against social expectations – are threats to established order and to the lighthouse-keeping way and therefore Hannes' understanding of the world and his life. But transgression lies at the heart of the Gothic story: as Donna Heiland notes, 'Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one's own identity' (2004: 3).

In *The Keeper*, as critic Karl van Wyk notes, 'The lighthouse is given human characteristics, but not ones we'd expect. It's described as "so exacting a mistress". Instead of representing enlightenment, it is a symbol of darkness' (2014: para. 8) and the weight of it, too, is oppressive, so that it is a surprise but not a shock that two of the central characters fall into darkness— one to her death, and one, Hannes, from losing his grip. It is Aletta who is the light, instead. She is described initially as a 'Sea-child, thin-shanked, light as a sanderling. (...) It was an anguish to love her' (Poland, 2014: 22) and a 'seabird, blown off course. Wary, wild and angry' (Poland, 2014: 38) but later, Hannes tells Rika, "'she's a keeper's daughter. In a way I always thought she was the light.' And she was – until this island. Its misshapen tides, its hidden reefs' (Poland, 2014: 39). He mistakes her anger for either adultery or despair, her story mingling with his mother's in his mind, when in fact it is Aletta's strength and discretion that leads her to leave the lighthouse. Aletta appears – in his mind, and initially in the novel – as that familiar unstable, uncanny lighthouse keeper's wife. But Poland ensures that she is not.

In her weaving of generations of relationships, and the characters' different responses to the light and its harsh island, Poland draws new outlines of a familiar emotional map in lighthouse narratives:

Isolation is very different from loneliness.

Loneliness does not arise from something lost as from a longing for something well remembered.

Isolation cares nothing for memory. (Poland, 2014: 67)

Kate Mildenhall's 2016 young adult novel *Skylarking* revolves around two young women, rather than their lighthouse-keeper fathers. Kate, the narrator, and Harriet are best friends, perhaps more, growing up on the edge of the new Australian colonies. Their passionate, potentially transgressive friendship is disrupted by the arrival of another remote and taciturn man, McPhail, and that disruption ends in unexpected tragedy. But unlike other lighthouse narratives, the men are not centred in the story – in fact, they barely appear on the page, lightly sketched, while Kate and Harriet's worlds revolve around each other. It is based on events that happened in 1887 at Cape St George lighthouse on Australia's south eastern coast, inspired by the author's happening upon the lonely grave of a young woman accidentally shot and killed by her best friend. Again, this lighthouse is built on a site far from the centre of power, but an indisputable part of the British Empire. To these young women, it is home:

They chose a good spot for our lighthouse. High on the layered stone of a cliff face that jutted out, decisively, into the ocean; it was the kind of location that seemed confident, arrogant enough for a lighthouse. The dusty scrub of the headland stood hardly high as the height of a man (...) From the edge of the cliff, or as close to the edge as I had ever dared to go there was only ocean and ocean and ocean, stretched out on the silky blue of a lady's skirt, all the way to the horizon. (Mildenhall, 2016: 3)

The novel tells a familiar story of the lights: 'There is honour in lighthouse keeping,' says Kate, as she watches her father pore over the charts marking known and unknown, solid and fluid knowledge: 'There were jagged lines that appeared to mark the space between land and water, and star-shaped compass points to tell the place on the globe' (Mildenhall, 2016: 20). While Winterson and Poland imbue lighthouse-keeping with the mystical importance of storytelling, Mildenhall's approach is more prosaic: Kate respects her father and his work, and goes to bed at night knowing that he is 'watching over (...) the countless passengers, sailors, captains and fishermen who sailed past our little jut of coast, casting their eyes out into the dark for the steady beam, the signature of our light. Blink, flash, blink' (Mildenhall, 2016: 18). Unlike Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans*, the keeper's focus here is on people, the vulnerable souls at sea – not the cargo, the 'wool, coal and gold', the empire.

Also, unlike Stedman, Mildenhall² reflects on the impact of the lighthouse on the dispossessed local Indigenous community. Kate meets a young Aboriginal woman in the bush, and they have a moment of connection. Mildenhall writes in her author's note that 'The stories of Aboriginal people are not mine to tell but are ones that I respectfully acknowledge' (2016: 280), although her attempt at acknowledgement has been criticised as token (On, 2016; Riddle, 2016). The young Aboriginal woman has no name, her appearance at two critical moments seems slightly supernatural, and her role in the story is to help heal Kate's wounded heart. Mildenhall's recognition of dispossession and her attempt at including traditional owners of the country – successful or not – reads at least as a counter to the total erasure of Indigenous people in *The Light Between Oceans* and can, like the portrayal of the

² I must disclose here that she is a friend of mine.

Black guano diggers' lives under Apartheid and the mention of passing slave ships in *The Keeper*, be read as acknowledgement of that uncomfortable truth at the heart of the lighthouse story set in a colony.

CONCLUSION: TELLING STORIES OF LIGHT

In *Skylarking*, Harriet and Kate devour the books read by young women in the colonies at the time – adventure stories of children at the edges of empire, such as *The Coral Island* – and Kate's mind is full of the stories she loves and the heroines they feature. Aletta, in *The Keeper*, reads constantly, books and dancing her only solace on the island, as the Bible was for Hannes' mother. This is another uncanny echo of the Gothic: other books feature in all of these novels. 'The Female Gothic is always "going back",' writes Wallace, 'texts are haunted by their predecessors and, in turn, haunt their descendants' (2013: 132). Winterson's novel is more overtly intertextual, in an experiment towards a postmodern aesthetic and in part what Linda Hutcheon defined as historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1989), calling to Woolf, Angela Carter, Homer and Robert Louis Stevenson, himself the son of lighthouse-building engineers. As Sonia Kotiah notes, in outlining these influences on Winterson, 'Postmodern storytelling art "pirates" from other narratives so as to create a new, liberated project' (Kotiah, 2015: 25), and Winterson has made this an acknowledged cornerstone of her work, particularly in the early novels. In an interview with Louise Tucker published in the paperback edition of *Lighthousekeeping*, she explains:

Books speak to other books; they are always in dialogue (...) you're aware you write within a continuum, that the books themselves suggest ideas to you which you would not otherwise have had (...) It's a way of rewriting what we know, but in the rewriting we find new angles, new possibilities, and the rewriting itself demands a fresh injection of material into what already exists, so the story itself changes. (2004b: 2)

The Keeper, *Skylarking* and *Lighthousekeeping* also offer very different approaches to storytelling, to the past, to fiction, and to lighthouses – Winterson's metafiction draws on Woolf's modernist masterpiece, while Mildenhall's historical fiction is more traditional in form, but focuses on the complex love between two young women. Poland's novel subverts the construct of the melancholy male figure with women revolving around him to humanise him, and his gendered relationships. All three novels acknowledge and provide an alternative view of the lighthouse and its stories and attempt to recognise the marginalised figures in this history. I suggest this is authentically part of a broader feminist project, as was Woolf's, destabilising traditional narratives of love, ideas of gender, and inscribing a sense of place and light into the imagined lives of women and children in these most hierarchical and utilitarian structures.

In their pages, lighthouses become sites of possibility – of queer love, of intimate storytelling, of liminality, of knowing. 'The stories themselves,' writes Winterson, 'make the meaning. (...) There is no continuous narrative, there are lit up moments and the rest is dark' (2004a: 134). These stories, the lighthouses, and the characters who live in them, become points of light in the darkness.

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Re-appropriating Abjection: Feminism, Comics and the Macabre Coming-of-Age

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ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva's theories on the abject have proven fruitful for feminist criticism, which has produced a huge body of research on the representation of motherhood and femininity as macabre. More recently, the concept of abjection has been blamed for supposedly legitimising, instead of questioning, hetero-patriarchal erasure of women's subjectivity. Despite this theoretical controversy, a growing number of comics and graphic novels, where the abject is used as a technique to illustrate the formation of women and girls' gendered identity, have been published in the last decade. This article contends that the study of graphic narratives that are concerned with a macabre coming-of-age is a crucial site for the re-appropriation of abjection. This position sees abjection as a productive critical category that reflects an ongoing effort by feminist authors to portray the troubled construction of a female Self. To corroborate this idea, the article engages with previous scholarly close readings of comics/graphic novels on girlhood and the macabre. Further recognition of the fecundity of the abject category in the realm of graphic narratives is guaranteed by the in-depth analysis of the comic zine *Fundo do nada* (2017), by the Portuguese artist Ana Caspão. This comic zine, which has been so far ignored by critics, serves as case study given its ability to describe, by means of the medium-specific features of comics, a young woman's coming-of-age, in which the abject functions as a tool to express the disquieting process of negotiating subjectivity from a feminine positioning.

Keywords: abjection, comics, coming-of-age, feminist criticism, Ana Caspão

INTRODUCTION

The notion of abjection, which was introduced by Julia Kristeva in 1980 in her book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* and re-launched by Barbara Creed in 1993 as a critical theory that quickly gained scholarly success, has been widely adopted in the field of feminist cultural studies, to the extent that it has been identified as the core of a discursive regime (Chanter, 2008: 3; Jay, 1994; Menninghaus, 2003: 365–402). However, the widespread adoption of the abject by feminist scholars who drew on Kristeva's theories on abjection to analyse cultural products has been recently blamed for supposedly legitimising, instead of questioning, hetero-patriarchal divisions and the erasure of women's subjectivity (Menninghaus, 2003: 365–402; Tyler, 2009). In this article, my objective is to suggest that the medium-genre intersection of graphic narratives and the female coming-of-age, that is to say, comics and graphic novels (medium) focussing on girls' experiences of growth and approximation to womanhood (genre), can open up a productive space for the critical re-appropriation of the aesthetic category of abjection. The debate on abjection and its uses in the field of feminist cultural studies has mainly rotated around the theme of womanhood and motherhood in cinema and the visual arts.¹ In light of this, re-directing critical attention to the field of graphic narratives' representations of girlhood, adolescence and early womanhood can allow feminists to re-evaluate abjection as an extremely fruitful concept that both describes and contests the symbolic processes of dehumanisation and exclusion on the basis of which girls and women are discriminated against within hetero-patriarchal societies. On the one hand, the coming-of-age genre with female protagonists focuses on an existential process that highlights the phase of the subject's entrance into the public realm and the mechanisms through which femininity is negotiated (Lazzaro-Weis, 1990: 17–18; Pratt, 1981: 14; Felski, 1989: 126–127), which permits artists

¹ On motherhood and abjection in film and the visual arts, see, among others, Alexopolous and Power (2022); Arya (2022); Chanter (2008); Creed (2007); and Ross (1997).

to represent and analyse the gendered dynamics of subject-formation. On the other, graphic narratives have been identified as a medium that supports a multifaceted depiction of the paradoxical position that women and girls occupy in contemporary society, where they are often intimately divided between processes of objectification or abjection promoted by the dominant sexist culture and practices of subjectification enabled by the increased understanding of feminist socio-symbolic operations. It is the graphic narrative's verbal and visual cross-discursivity – its reliance on the collaboration of words and images – that facilitates, together with other features of comics, a multifaceted depiction of the female Self (Chute, 2010: 5–6).

The productivity of this medium-genre intersection is confirmed by the fact that, in recent years, a growing number of comics and graphic novels that portray monstrous/abject girls who go through a path of self-discovery to affirm their subjectivity have been published. These include the graphic novels *Through the Woods* (Carroll, 2014), *My Favourite Thing is Monsters* (Ferris 2017), the serial comics *Monstress* (Liu and Takeda, 2015 (ongoing)), *Pretty Deadly* (DeConnick and Ríos, 2014–2020) and the webcomic *Nimona* (Stevenson, 2012–2014), subsequently adapted into a graphic novel. These cultural products also received critical attention and were explicitly linked to the thematic area of abjection.² This article will draw on existing scholarship on graphic narratives, girls and abjection to hypothesise how feminist abject aesthetics can be productive, in the study of comics and graphic novels. This productivity will be further explored by a case study centred on the comic-zine *Fundo do nada* (2017), by the Portuguese comic artist Ana Caspão, which seems to stem from the same interest in monstrosity and girlhood in comics. The case study will be analysed by combining a set of methodological and theoretical tools offered by comics semiotics (Cohn, 2014; Groensteen, 2007; 2016; Ojha *et al.*, 2021) and feminist theory (Butler, 2002; 2011; De Lauretis, 2007).

The methodological tool of comics semiotics – the discipline that studies graphic narratives from a formal perspective – allows us to illustrate the potential of graphic narratives for portraying abject, yet empowered, female bodies. Theoretical references to feminist thinkers who draw on poststructuralist thought and promote a non-ontological view of gender and gendered identities, can facilitate an understanding of Kristeva's theories as non-essentialist and non-prescriptive, which contemporary graphic artists working on female monstrosity seem to embrace. The case study will serve as a means to substantiate the fecundity and potencies of the critical category of abjection to study the contemporary feminist coming-of-age produced in the broad and highly differentiated field of graphic narratives. The selection of a Portuguese comic-zine produced and distributed at a non-mainstream level, which differs substantially from the Northern-American semi-mainstream texts in popular culture that scholars have previously linked to the category of abjection, is crucial, in this regard, because it testifies to the vitality of the abject paradigm even in the European area of feminist underground circulation of comics, as this is traditionally the space of a 'counterpublic' (Galvan and Misemer, 2019), whose stances are closer to those of grassroots feminist movements and groups. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to demonstrate how the graphic zine *Fundo do nada* reflects a general tendency in feminist graphic narratives' production to establish a renewed dialogue concerning the representation of abjection.

CELEBRATED, CONVERTED, CONTESTED: THE VICISSITUDES OF THE ABJECT PARADIGM

Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* was published in 1980 and two years later was translated into English as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. It is a long, complex essay, where the philosopher engages with psychoanalytic discourse and, in particular, with Lacanian theories on the process through which the individual becomes a subject and accesses the symbolic order, that is, the realm of language where the child gains a stable sense of identity by overcoming the Imaginary phase of indistinct perception of her/himself caused by an uncomplicated connection with the mother or primary carer (Minsky, 1996: 141–142). As an addition to Lacanian theory, Kristeva introduces the notion of the semiotic, which coincides with that mirror-stage of symbiosis with the mother, which needs to be surpassed in order for the individual to become a subject. According to Kristeva, the semiotic phase can be left behind only through a process of abjection or, to put it another way, through the expulsion of the maternal. In light of this, the philosopher associates the concept of the abject to the mother who, she affirms (following Lacanian theories), needs to be *abjected* in order for the child to gain independence and access the 'paternal' realm of the symbolic, which provides her/him with access to 'the autonomy of language' (1982: 13).

More generally, the abject is as an entity that is expelled by the Self so that the not-yet-Self can become a Self. It is what once belonged to the 'I' and was later discharged because it was considered excessive or threatening. Examples include vomit, which Kristeva employs as the main metaphor to introduce the concept of abjection (1982: 3), but also other bodily excrements, such as eggs, corpses, and so on. Since it is precisely through the

² See Ahmed and Kwa (2021); Kwa (2020); Cooper (2020); Corcoran (2020); Precup (2017); and Rossberg (2022).

process of abjection or separation that the individual becomes a subject, the abject can be conceptualised as opposed to the subject. However, abject does not equal object. If the object is without agency and it is virtually imagined or created by the subject to satisfy its ‘desire for meaning’, the abject is an agentic force that actively works to bring the subject to where it does not want to go: ‘toward the place where meaning collapses’ (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2).

When focussing the reading of Kristeva’s theories on abjection to this linear scheme, the philosopher could be blamed for legitimising hetero-patriarchal ideas on subjectivity construction, according to which the subject needs to reject the feminine (the abject mother, the semiotic) and join the father through their identification with the symbolic order. However, *Powers of Horror* clearly conceptualises the abject as an ambiguous, latent entity that is hierarchically inferior to the subject but ‘from its place of banishment does not cease challenging its master’ (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2). To put it another way, the abject, once abjected is displaced, and does not disappear. On the contrary, its presence imposes on the subject a constant tension between the supposed integrity and order that it has reached as an individual and the lack of meaning and borders that the abject represents. So, we can say that abject theory is a product of hetero-patriarchal logic (the same logic that interprets separation as the basis of subjectivity construction); but, at the same time, it challenges the very logic of separation because the abject’s presence always reminds the subject of its previous connection with what it later expelled. Here lies Kristeva’s major difference with Lacan, and later feminist scholars drew on this potentially disruptive force of the abject to develop an affirmative understanding of abjection.

Following the translation of *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* into English in 1982, the abject paradigm has been included in a vast array of feminist scholarly works aimed at interpreting artistic productions that portray motherhood and, more generally, womanhood as monstrous or separate from the category of humanity. Barbara Creed, who published *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* in 1993, is among the earliest and most famous advocates for the validity of abjection as a critical category. She employed it to analyse mainstream horror movies such as Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979); William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973); Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976) and David Cronenberg’s *The Brood* (1979). She noticed how the recurring portrayal of mothering and female reproductive functions as abject in these films sustains ‘the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman’s monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man’s sexual other’ (2007: 83). Creed explicitly affirmed that she interpreted Kristeva’s theories as descriptive rather than prescriptive. She understood Kristeva, not as telling us how things should be, but how things are in our hetero-patriarchal cultural context; she used the abject paradigm as a descriptive tool. Abjection was, for Creed, a critical instrument through which it was possible to unveil the cultural construction of women as monstrous others that was, at the time (but, one may ask: have things really changed in the last thirty years?), reproduced and naturalised through filmic productions where the feminine was portrayed as a threat to humanity and subjectivity.

If Creed saw abjection as an emblematic but mainly negative category for women, other feminist critics, such as Mary Russo and Tina Chanter, looked at the subversive potential of abjection. Without denying the risks of essentialism that representations of femininity as abject inevitably pose, Russo and Chanter thought that there is ‘room for chance that emerges from the very constrained spaces of normalization’ (Russo, 1994: 11). They both argued that, when appropriated by women artists who reflect on their own condition of exclusion, portrayals of the feminine as abject can potentially question the normative idea of subjectivity and the canonical bodily aesthetic regime by introducing a productive shift. In *The Female Grotesque* (1994), Russo described abject and grotesque bodies as open, protruding, irregular, and multiple. As such, she continued, they are generally associated with social transformation because they challenge the prototype of the masculine self-contained, symmetrical and static body (1994: 8). Similarly, Chanter, in *The Picture of Abjection* (2008), saw abjection as a regime of representation that problematises the subject’s stability and the boundaries of identity (2008: 3), which aligns with the feminist project that has been underway since the first feminist critiques of the Cartesian subject-object division. In other words, both Russo and Chanter believed that one can act creatively from within the restrictions of the dichotomy between the subject and abject to open up to the possibility of a new subjectivity that inherently contests the principle of opposition and separation.³ More recently, scholars such as Rafael A. Chico Quintana (2014) and val flores (2013) have aligned with the theoretical path traced by Russo and Chanter and widened its spectrum by adapting to the experience of queer subjects and non-hegemonic bodies who do not necessarily present feminine characteristics or do not necessarily identify as women.

But the tendency to look at abjection in affirmative terms has also been criticised by scholars in the fields of Critical Theory, Cultural Studies and Sociology. Among these, Winfried Menninghaus dedicated an entire chapter of his book *Disgust* (2003) to abject criticism and discussed the academic and artistic currents that germinated on

³ Theoretical and critical productions on affirmative abjection have been developed by other feminist critics. See, for example, Covino (2020), Taylor (1993), and Frueh (2001).

the theme of abjection between 1982 and 1997. Menninghaus harshly criticised those who, while advocating in favour of abjection criticism, appropriated Kristeva's theory for political purposes, extended it to the analysis of the most disparate practices of exclusion, and turned abjection 'into a simple fable of repression and liberation' (2003: 392). Notwithstanding the compelling invitation to engage with Kristeva's theories in a more accurate manner and to avoid simplistic adaptations aimed at legitimising identity politics discourses or the sterile self-legitimisation of some marginalised groups, Menninghaus interpreted and accepted Kristeva's abjection as 'an unchangeable given of subject formation' (2003: 392). In other words, Menninghaus read Kristeva's ambiguous text in prescriptive rather than descriptive terms. By doing so without criticising this supposedly prescriptive approach, he denied the dimension of social construction in subject-formation processes and, with this, the possibility of changing the way we understand subjectivity, which, as we have seen, Kristevian theories on abjection already subsume.

Similarly, Imogen Tyler (2009) warned against the uncritical use of the theoretical frame of abjection to produce and analyse representations of the maternal. In her view, the misinterpretation of Kristeva as a feminist, together with the optimistic and naïve tendency to interpret cultural representations of abjection as a conceptual threat to misogyny, is detrimental to the actual lives of women. Drawing on her background as a sociologist, she cited the example of pregnant women who suffer domestic violence and whose testimonies she collected by means of interviews and through an Internet chat room. This group, according to Tyler, would be indirectly affected by the critical legitimisation of the representation of mothers as abject beings. Like Menninghaus, Tyler interprets Kristeva's theory and its possible uses in merely prescriptive terms and she sticks to the idea that abject theory only superficially re-assigned prominence to a maternal which Lacanian psychoanalysis marginalised when it presented the feminine/maternal as opposed to the subject - which is to say as irredeemably othered, excluded, and objectified (2009: 80–81). In this sense, portrayals of the monstrous maternal are, for Tyler, ultimately dangerous for feminist discourse as they confirm the hetero-patriarchal idea of the feminine/maternal as a non-subject. Following this line of thought, the author talked about a supposed 'theoretical violence of abject criticism' (Tyler, 2009: 87). The problem with Tyler's reflection on abjection is that it is sustained by a simplified reading of Kristeva, from which the sociologist problematically erases the description of the abject as an agentive force that threatens the subject and its integrity. To put it differently, Tyler conceptually collapses the concept of the abject with that of the object to the point that there seems to be no distinction between the process of abjection, which for Kristeva implies banishment but not an erasure of power, and that of objectification, in which the negation of the other's agency is a primary component.⁴ In this way, Kristeva's abject is deprived of the possibility to challenge the subject's cohesion and stability, which is to say the very principles that dictate its own (the abject's) exclusion.

Both Tyler and Menninghaus developed a critique of abjection that is problematic from my feminist perspective, taking feminism to be a political and theoretical movement devoted to subversion, not the confirmation and/or mere inversion, of hetero-patriarchal discursive features. Following their reading of Kristeva, they both appear to validate the oppositional logic to which they refer in the philosopher's essay, thus conceiving the subject/abject dichotomy as inalterable and, in the case of Tyler, as detrimental to the category of the maternal/feminine. The failure to acknowledge the abject's potential in threatening the subject, which Kristeva (though ambiguously) outlines, corresponds to these authors' insufficient questioning of the principles of separation and opposition, according to which the subject is constructed in hetero-patriarchal societies. To borrow from Judith Butler, who blamed Kristeva for being excessively enigmatic and not radical enough (2002: 101–118), but recognised the subversive possibilities of the abject paradigm, we should not view the abject as an entity that is merely antithetical to the subject. On the contrary, 'we need to consider the abject as something that allows to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic, legitimacy and intelligibility' (2011: xiii).

In light of this, subject-formation can be creatively rearticulated, even starting from the controversial Kristevian paradigm. This can be done by employing the category of the abject as a tool for describing and denouncing the exclusion of women from the rigid and impermeable idea of male subjectivity.⁵ The category of abjection can also

⁴ It is not a coincidence that philosophical conceptualisations of gender violence, which is the area Tyler is working in, mostly describe acts of violence against women, such as rape or femicide, as acts aimed at annihilating, controlling and depriving of agency (objectifying) the victim. See Cahill (2001) and Radford (1992).

⁵ When mentioning the idea of 'male subjectivity' here (as throughout the article), I refer to the general conception of the Self as rigidly impermeable and autonomous that western hetero-patriarchal culture traditionally assigns to male subjects and male characters or figurations. Far from implying that male subjects naturally align with a solid type of subjectivity, while female subjects automatically disrupt this scheme by preferring a relational typology, I embrace R. W. Connell's insights, according to which a myriad of different and constantly evolving masculinities orbits around a general model of masculinity imposed at a cultural and societal level for a certain period of time (2005: 76–80). Further studies should investigate how the transgression to the hetero-patriarchal subjectivity model in graphic novels is slowly contributing to altering the shape of hegemonic masculinity, if it is true that, as Connell writes, hegemonic masculinity occupies 'a position always contestable' (2005: 76).

be recuperated by stressing the paradoxes that Kristeva herself assigns to the abject as an entity that is expelled by the subject but constantly hunts the Self, thus questioning impermeability and separation.

MONSTROUS GIRLS IN SEARCH OF THEIR SELF: A NEW TREND IN COMICS PRODUCTION AND CRITICISM

Tyler and Menninghaus' critique does not only rotate around Kristeva's notion of abjection. On the contrary, it extends to embrace the whole set of uses that critics, and even creators, have made of it. In the case of abjection, a theoretical effort of conceptualisation by Kristeva was followed by a critical appropriation by some Cultural Studies scholars, which has, in turn, further stimulated artistic productions. This osmosis between theory, criticism and art resulted in the institutionalisation of so-called 'abject art', a trend emerged during the 1990s in the field of visual/performative arts and curatorial practices, in which the abject critical paradigm was consciously used, explicitly referenced, adapted and re-worked, most of the times to convey feminist messages and visions, arguably an eccentric view of gender and sexuality.⁶

The predominantly visual sphere of graphic narratives (Groensteen, 2007: 9), where feminist trends have been noticeable in the underground scene since the 1970s (Galvan, 2015; Kirtley, 2018; Munt and Richards, 2020), and have now been consolidated and popularised by the recent format of the graphic novel (Chute, 2010), have been certainly influenced by abject art and by the critical trends emerged around the conceptual category of abjection. This is demonstrated by the dramatic increase in feminist production of graphic narratives dealing with the trope of female monstrosity (Langsdale and Coody, 2020).

Coming-of-age graphic narratives that portray monstrous girls and young women seem to be particularly well suited to the creative reworking of subjectivity though the paradigm of abjection. This is because they are a privileged site for investigating girls' transition to adult femininity and the related challenges that girls face when they confront the symbolic othering with which the hetero-patriarchal order excludes women and those who manifest female reproductive functions. In this sense, coming-of-age tales where girls' monstrosity is clearly engendered are a political tool to describe and denounce sexist abjection whilst continuing to represent girls' struggles to affirm their subjectivity, since subject-formation is the core of the coming-of-age genre.

Here it is fruitful to recall the work of literary scholars who have already observed a tendency in the feminist *Bildungsroman* to propose an open, unstable, relational and plural understanding of subjectivity, which redefines the concept of a definite, rigid Self offered by traditional male-centred versions of the coming-of-age genre. In her analysis of Anglophone coming-of-age novels published in the second half of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century by feminist authors such as Angela Carter, Jean Rhys, Joan Riley and Andrea Levy, Maroulla Joannou identified a propensity to challenge the conventional linear and progressive narrative process of self-discovery. This results from the impossibility, for female characters, to experience the same type of adventures that the male character of the *Bildungsroman* experiences without running the risk of being socially marginalised or abused (Joannou, 2019: 203). In other words, the feminist *Bildungsroman* with female protagonists traces different routes, which can be described as 'explorative rather than goal oriented, epistemological rather than teleological, relational rather than linear' (Joannou, 2019: 203). This couples with the findings of critics such as Joanna Frye, who observed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) a representation of the female Self as multiple (*Living Stories*). Similarly, Carol Lazzaro-Weis labelled the inclination to avoid portraying the protagonists' identities as stable or definite as one of the landmarks of the Italian female *Bildungsroman* of the 1980s (1990: 33–34). Things do not change in the postfeminist coming-of-age, where young women and girls are depicted as individuals who gained apparent emancipation and power, but continue to be haunted by the likelihood of their objectification and domestication, thus presenting a troubled and always negotiable and vulnerable sense of Self (Šrnicová, 2017: 61–93).

The creative redefinition of subjectivity is also made possible by the specific features of graphic narratives: a medium where, as can be seen, the presence of more or less definite boundaries (the page's layout, the panel, the frame, the grid, and the speech balloon) and progressive sequences (the linear arrangement of different panels that determines narrative) is often counterbalanced by the innovation allowed by the technique of cartooning, as well as by the employment of formal strategies aimed at challenging these boundaries (bleeding, borderless panels, inset panels, etc.) and linear development (braiding, fragmentation, gutter erasure, etc.).⁷

This has been highlighted by scholars in the field of Comics Studies who have employed the abject paradigm to analyse graphic coming-of-age narratives with monstrous girls as protagonists. Ayanni Cooper, for example, read two recent Image Comics centred on young abject women in search of themselves – the steampunk series

⁶ On 'abject art' see Arya and Chare (2016) and Foster (1996).

⁷ For definitions of terms in comics semiology, which will be explained later as necessary, see La Cour, Grennan and Spanjers (2021: 26, 40, 116–117, 117–118, 140–141, 142–143, 227–229, 289, 303–304).

Monstress (Liu and Takeda, 2020-ongoing) and the epic fantasy *Pretty Deadly* (DeConnick and Ríos, 2014-2020) – through the lens of Kristeva's theories. Cooper explores Maika, the woman-monster protagonist of *Monstress*, and Ginny, the half-human daughter of the personification of Death and main character in *Pretty Deadly*, as hybrids who are made both abject and strong by their eccentric lineage: they are said to be 'empowered by their liminal positionality' and their very heroism is deeply bound up with their own monstrosity (Cooper, 2020: 52). As agentive abject subjects, they embody boundary-breaking and, precisely because of their hybridity, they challenge the principle of separation that dominates hetero-patriarchal concepts of subjectivity. To borrow from Butler's definition of abjection, they epitomise that 'abjected outside, which is, after all, inside the subject as its own founding repudiation' (2011: xiii). Cartooning, according to Cooper, is crucial to the articulation, display and reproduction of this process of overcoming borders. In particular, the representation of the female abject as violent and obscene, but at the same time aesthetically beautiful, that is facilitated by the technique of cartooning permits 'delaying, if not denying, a complete rejection' (Cooper, 2020: 51) by the readers, thus allowing reader identification, and, consequently, their recognition of the abject as being part of their subjectivity.

Similarly, Miranda Corcoran published an analysis of Carroll's collection of short graphic stories *Through the Woods* in which she discusses comics as a fruitful medium to portray the threat of abjection posed to girls by their own future as women. Carroll frequently uses the technique of bleeding, which erodes the panel's frame so that the image directly touches the borders of the page, to represent the threat of abjection and the abrasion of the boundaries that the abject's presence implies (Corcoran, 2020: 2–3).

Abjection is also crucial in the analysis of scholars who conducted a close reading of *My Favourite Thing Is Monsters*, Ferris' graphic novel about the city adventures of Kate, a lesbian girl living in lower-class Detroit who sees herself as a werewolf fighting the imaginary monsters that populate her world. A graphic coming-of-age (Kwa, 2020: 469), Ferris' work was read as a book guided by the principle of interconnectedness, where monstrosity emerges as a feature that illustrates excess and is conveyed by the comics technique of the grotesque caricature (Ahmed and Kwa, 2021: 38).

Finally, Michaela Precup described the title character of Stevenson's *Nimona* as a monstrous girl who redefines the categories of hero, villain, child and monster by challenging rigid oppositions. *Nimona* is, in fact, a strong queer child who uses her abilities as shapeshifter to support the villain Ballister Blackheart. However, Stevenson's representation of the protagonist as the epitome of cuteness complicates her identity and leaves the readers with no choice but that to accept the untenability of a rigid distinction between the roles of monster (abject) and human (subject) (Precup, 2017: 554–557).

The connection of the feminist graphic narrative's coming-of-age story with the tropes of monstrosity and abjection should not come as a surprise if we consider underground women cartoonists' engagement with the practice of using grotesque self-caricatures as a parody of the stereotypical female beauty proposed in mainstream comics. The works of crucial figures from the North American feminist underground comics movement, such as Aline Kominski-Crumb and Julie Doucet, have been analysed following this critical thread (Diamond and Poharec, 2017: 408; Köhlert, 2012). In this article I have selected a case study from the underground of feminist comics production that, in the following pages, will further substantiate the idea of the abject paradigm as a productive analytical tool with which to read the growing number of coming-of-age graphic narratives with monstrous girls as protagonists.⁸

FUNDO DO NADA: THE POTENTIAL OF THE FEMINIST MACABRE COMING-OF-AGE IN COMICS

My close reading focuses on a 2017 Portuguese comic-zine, of which only 50 copies were published by the independent feminist publisher Sapata Press: Ana Caspão's *Fundo do nada*. Despite its limited circulation, *Fundo do nada* is part of the most influential and successful feminist cultural project in contemporary Portuguese *banda desenhada*. Sapata Press, which was established in 2017 by the Brazilian but Lisbon-based comic artist Ciço Silveira, provided feminist artists working with comics in Portugal and in the broader Lusophone area with a safe space to discuss feminist and LGBTQ+ issues and with the possibility of reaching a wider public. Sapata Press' operation reached mainstream recognition (Monteiro, 2017) and resulted in the publication of 25 short books (or 'zines') on topics ranging from queer sexuality and identity to women's experiences of isolation and migration. Among these,

⁸ The common underground context of Kominski-Crumb's, Doucet's and Caspão's work is highlighted here, but not to suggest that the North American artists influenced Caspão. The objective of this article is not to suggest the presence of a genealogy on the themes of monstrosity and abjection in feminist underground comics. On the contrary, its aim is to hypothesise the presence of a general interest in abject aesthetics in the contemporary coming-of-age graphic narratives. Caspão's work demonstrates that this interest goes beyond specific cultural contexts, distinctive sectors of the comic industry and explicit commonalities, which testifies to the transversal dimension of the phenomenon.

many centre on experiences of female or LGBTQ+ children and adolescents, such as Ellie Irineu's *</3 ou coração partido* [*</3 or Broken Heart*] (2017), Joana Estrela's *Os vestidos do Tiago* [Tiago's Dresses] (2018) and Raquel Vitorelo's *Tom Boy* (2019).⁹ Sapata Press, which closed down in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Silveira, 2022), played a major role in supporting the growing number of women's voices that, in 2015, João Machado had noticed as a new phenomenon in Portuguese comics (2015: 58–59). Centred on the abject and monstrous iconography of the witch, Sapata Press also published the multimedia comics-zine *As bruxas de Blergh* (2017). On monstrosity and girlhood, they also circulated the two-page zine *Satan* (Silveira 2017). Beyond Sapata Press, recent Portuguese comics production includes *No caderno da Tangerina* [Inside Tangerina's Notebook] (2017) and *Tangerina* (2019), by Rita Alfaiate. Both works, published by Escorpião Azul, are part of a unitary project with thematic affinities and a plot continuity focussed on the relationship between a young monstrous girl and one of her schoolmates.

The 19-page zine *Fundo do nada* is a brief and highly symbolic narrative that revolves around the coming-of-age of a girl and her self-discovery when dealing with the world. In other words, *Fundo do nada* is a feminist *Bildungsroman* journey where a young feminine individual struggles to gain a sense of Self. This, however, is done through a constant confrontation with emblems of the abject and the macabre, which are clearly exhibited even at the level of the work's simple but dense plot. After an idyllic and solitary early childhood, a girl meets a man and a woman to whom she gets attached. When the man and woman, together with the idyllic world, suddenly melt and disappear, the girl precipitates in a subterranean and creepy world where she is re-born as a young woman. Here, she is condemned to carry an egg-like ball that she eventually manages to bring to a bird's nest where she offers it to the mother bird. The mother bird, however, catches both the protagonist and the sphere that she carries between her legs. During the catch, the young woman ejects the egg-ball, which is ultimately eaten by the baby bird who inhabits the nest. Later, the protagonist is herself ejected by the bird, who lets her fall, leaving her injured but alive on the ground.

Fundo do nada describes abjection, the abjection of the feminine, and the process of subject-formation outlined by Kristeva in an exemplary way. Even at a visual level, Caspão fills her comic-zine with macabre images, the first of which is the representation of the melting woman who slowly disappears. The woman, who can be interpreted easily as the girl's primary carer and mother, given the affectionate gestures that characterise the relationship between the two, is represented while losing her human features (Caspão, 2017: 5). The melting process is well conveyed through the classical comics division of the images into sequential panels; these are interrupted only by the caption '*Claro que, passo a passo, o mundo começou a escapar das minhas mãos*' [Obviously, one step at a time, the world started getting out of hand] (Caspão, 2017: 5), which further reinforces the idea of loss of unity with the maternal that characterises the semiotic/pre-symbolic phase.

The process of painfully abjecting the mother, which corresponds to the act of separating from her, is what clearly determines the girl's progression into adolescence and then early womanhood in *Fundo do nada*. In other words, it allows her re-birth as a fully grown subject. This is represented in a six-page sequence of panels (Caspão, 2017: 6–11) where the girl passes through the anatomical changes of puberty while descending into a series of underworlds which are connected through the element of water, a symbol of amniotic connection, but also of change and difference (Neimanis, 2017: 68). The multifaceted symbolism of water, which accompanies the process of evolution and separation though recalling gestational connection, is not the only strategy that complicates the idea of subject-formation as result of mere partition. When the protagonist resurfaces from an oyster like a strong and macabre Botticelli Venus, she finds a sphere between her feet (Caspão, 2017: 10–11), which she has no choice but to carry during her explorations of the creepy underworld she finds herself in (Caspão, 2017: 12). The sphere, which the protagonist calls '*mágod*' (the Portuguese word for 'pain') is clearly an egg, another symbol of abjection, a product of bodily expulsion (Kristeva, 1982: 3). The link between the sphere and the Kristevan idea of abject femininity, of which the protagonist is both product (as a daughter) and bearer (as a young woman), is suggested by the fact that the egg is often carried by the protagonist between her legs (Caspão, 2017: 11, 14, 16, 17). Moreover, when she places the sphere in front of her face, the egg turns into an orbuculum that changes the young woman's features so to resemble those of the abjected and melting mother, which in turn recall the attributes of another symbol of abject femininity: the witch (**Figure 1**).

In light of this, Caspão clearly positions her narrative within the restrictive frame that describes the claustrophobic cultural entanglement of abjection and femininity. However, she manages to introduce elements that insist on the ambiguous dimension of the abject and ultimately question the idea that subject-formation equals separation. This is further confirmed if we look at the panels where the protagonist resuscitates as a grown-up young woman: this re-birth is represented as the act of escaping/leaving the oyster, whose vagina-like shape

⁹ Ireneu and Vitorelo are Brazilian artists whom Sapata Press introduced to Portuguese readers. Vitorelo, who occasionally reproduces an abject/monstrous aesthetics in her work by using the iconography of the dragon, dedicated a long post to Stevenson's *Nimona* on her website. In the post (Vitorelo, 2021), she discusses female subjectivity, girlhood and the challenges of being a female cartoonist at length.



Figure 1. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada* (2017), p. 13.

(Caspão, 2017: 9) recalls the cavity on the ground from which, at the beginning of the zine, the girl entered the world (Caspão 2017: 2). This suggests that the individual is what leaves the maternal behind, it is what abjects it. However, as our protagonist is a young woman, she necessarily carries signs of what she abjected as part of her own body (the egg-like sphere and the motherly, witchy features). This opens a fruitful representative space that allows the author to draw the woman as an agentive subject but, at the same time, as a clear repository of abject herself.

Even the ending seems to suggest an association between the protagonist's subjectivity and the abject element: as soon as she lets the egg go and it disappears (eaten by the baby bird), the woman herself is ejected by the mother bird, landing without agency on the ground, trapped by serpent-like roots (Caspão, 2017: 19). To put it differently, Caspão stresses the fact that the abject (represented by the sphere) is constitutive of the protagonist's subject; without it, the subject cannot exist and it loses its agency. That paradoxical characteristic of the abject that Kristeva outlined when she stated that the abject always challenges the subject, even from its place of banishment, is expanded here and is brought to a degree of intensity that allows the narrative to contest, from within the paradigm, the very principle of subject-formation through separation. This operation is supported and amplified by the specific features of the medium of graphic narratives that, in *Fundo do nada*, are employed to represent the abject's capacity to surpass borders and positions to the extent of contaminating the subject's integrity. In particular, the page layout is used to provide the reader with a depiction of the subject as a mobile, unstable and permeable entity. The zine generally presents a traditional page layout, with distinctively separate panels and linear borders. But disruptions to the comics grid are also present and often coincide with crucial moments in the process of subjectivity-building in which the abject plays a role. One example is the page depicting the painful process of separation from parental figures and the progression into adolescence. The passage into womanhood is directly connected to the re-birth of the protagonist and to her development into an autonomous subject, as demonstrated by the fact that this page is the one that precedes that of the resurrection from the oyster. But the subject-formation is here clearly haunted by the abject, which is embedded in the girl's changing body and highlighted by close-ups on some of the most sexualised parts of her anatomy (her hips, breasts, and feminine face). Moreover, in the dark space between the close-ups, Caspão inserts abject elements (**Figure 2**) that resemble the vagina and the umbilical cord from which the girl escaped during her first birth (**Figure 3**). The presence of these liminal elements, together with the absence of borders that characterises the page, transfigures the traditional page structure and confirms



Figure 2. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, p. 9.



Figure 3. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, p. 1.

the genre's ability to support the thematic and narrative idea of subject porosity imposed by the abject with formal strategies.

Another example of productive disruption of the canonical comics grid is a double page – two adjacent pages that the reader can cover with a single glance (Groensteen, 2007: 35) – where the protagonist is trying to establish communication with the baby bird she finds on the nest (Caspão, 2017: 14–15). The creature, which is clearly another embodiment of the abject according to his horrid features, reacts to the young woman's presence with a frightful scream that resonates throughout the entire second page (**Figure 4**). The scream and the distorted speech balloons that are used to represent it transgress the panel's borders, like a breach that ends up contaminating everything and leaves the reader, once again, with the idea of the subject's extreme permeability to the abject's call. The unsettling continuity between subject and abject is further suggested by other characteristics of the layout, such as the inset panels – a technique used in comics to draw focus on a specific element in a scene (Cohn, 2014) – with which, in the first part of the double page, the eyes of the protagonist and those of the abject bird are clearly associated, being at the centre of a threefold close-up (Caspão, 2017: 14).

Similarly, in the second page, the bird and his eye are visually associated with the sphere, which not only has the same round shape and is displayed adjacently, but also shows the same *emanata*/pictorial ruins. In comics semiotics, *emanata* or pictorial ruins are non-mimetic signs that provide the reader with important information about movement or the emotional state of characters (Ojha *et al.*, 2021: 3). Here, they appear in the form of small droplets positioned around the baby bird's head and around the sphere to represent a state of internal turmoil (Caspão, 2017: 15). This iconographic association testifies to the impossibility of drawing a clear line between the protagonist's self, to which the sphere belongs, and the abject (the bird). The implicit connection is also demonstrated by the reverberation of the creature's scream, which is made visible by the presence of *emanata* that surround both the nest and the protagonist's head (Caspão, 2017: 15).

In light of the analysis, it is possible to affirm that graphic narratives and the comics' medium potentially offer a privileged platform for the representation of the abject, in Kristevan terms. The description of the process of separation that leads to identity development and the concomitant portrayal of the constant and productive threat to the same development posed by the abject is facilitated by at least two medium-specific features of comics. The first is comics' tabular division into panels that are often deprived of their borders, or whose delimited space is



Figure 4. Source: Ana Caspão, *Fundo do nada*, pp. 14-15.

often transgressed by the presence of disruptive elements (bleeding).¹⁰ In addition to this, comics permit the reader to establish quick connections between components of the page (or double page) that are positioned in different panels. This characteristic, which is called *braiding* and consists in a sort of ‘dialogue’ that panels have with each other across the perceptive unit of the page (Groensteen, 2016: 88), further allows the author – Ana Caspão, in our case – to exceed the panels’ partition by virtue of iconographic or semantic assonances.

CONCLUSION

The conventions of graphic narrative are innovatively exploited in *Fundo do nada* by Ana Caspão, a compelling and provocative graphic zine, where abjection is described and denounced as a burden, which the growing girl needs to confront, but through which she can re-define herself as an eccentric being. This paradox, which allows the representation of the protagonist neither as a rigid subject nor as a rigid abject, is at the core of a strong trend in contemporary comics and graphic novel production by female artists who engage with the coming-of-age genre and interpret it as a space for the construction of a feminist subjectivity, which, following Teresa de Lauretis’ valuable insight, in hetero-patriarchal societies, cannot but have contradiction as ‘its condition of existence’ (2007: 174).

As we have seen, critics in comics studies have already analysed various texts in the category of the graphic coming-of-age by using the abject paradigm. This is the case in the graphic novels *Through the Woods*, by Emily Carroll, and *My Favourite Thing is Monsters*, by Emil Ferris. Moreover, an abject aesthetics has been identified in examples from the world of serial comics (*Pretty Deadly*, by Kelly Sue De Konick and Emma Ríos, and *Monstress*, by Marjorie Liu and Serena Takeda), as well as in the digital comic *Nimona*, by Noelle Stevenson. By discussing abjection and its representation at a thematic as well as at a formal level, the article has provided the reader with a review of scholarly contributions to abjection in the contemporary graphic coming-of-age and adds the close textual reading of a comic-zine created and distributed in the underground scene of Portuguese comics. The analysis of *Fundo do nada* by Ana Caspão and its association with texts that portray girls’ and young women’s

¹⁰ Despite being a common feature in comics, the grid and panel division are not always present in graphic narratives. Authors such as Will Eisner and Guido Crepax have experimented with the alteration or erasure of the grid since the 1970s. However, the grid and panel division still remains a reference for many comics artists, including Caspão, whose work is characterised precisely by a productive tension between the reproduction and the transgression of the grid’s scheme.

monstrosity points to the presence, in contemporary comics production, of a transversal trend that, by transcending specific cultural contexts and sectors of the comics industry, is re-assigning feminist relevance to the category of abjection.

Other investigations and close readings of graphic coming-of-age narratives that feature abjection are needed to further substantiate this argument and confirm the presence of this trend at a transnational level. Apart from Caspão, all the other close readings on the topic focus on Northern American texts that, despite benefitting from a wide international circulation, stem from a culturally specific comics tradition. The tendency to prioritize studies on this visual tradition, probably deriving from the current Anglo-centricity of comics scholarship in regard to the selection of a cultural studies and formal approach, should be counteracted by analyses of non-Anglo-American works where a girl's path towards womanhood is depicted as coinciding with a threatening and at the same time, potent, manifestation of the abject.

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Interview

On the Edge: New Research on Gender and Love

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ABSTRACT

A roundtable discussion featuring Serena Petrella, Associate Professor of Sociology, Gender and Women's Studies at Brandon University, Canada; Amanda Gouws, SARChI Chair in Gender Politics at Stellenbosch University, South Africa; and Danai Mupotsa, Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Hosted by Dr Wernmei Yong Ade (Mei), formerly from Nanyang Technical University, Singapore, now living in the US; Professor Deirdre Byrne (Deirdre), University of South Africa, and Dr Kelly Gardiner (Kelly), La Trobe University, Australia. The roundtable discussion was held online and recorded on 2 February 2023.

MEI: Welcome, everyone, to this round table on Situated Knowledges of Gender and Love. We are joined by three wonderful scholars: first of all, Serena Petrella, who is Associate Professor of Sociology, Gender and Women's Studies at Brandon University, Manitoba, Canada. Serena works on gender and love in North America, including BDSM, new materialism, and couples Living Apart Together (LAT). Next, Amanda Gouws, South African Research Chair in Gender Politics at Stellenbosch University. Amanda has done extensive research on rape, and today she will be sharing her research on how rape reduces women to 'bare life' in Agamben's (1998, 2005) terms. And last but not least, we have Danai Mupotsa, Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, who has contributed extensively to work on queering language and love for Black women. Serena, Amanda and Danai will now share with us some of the work they are doing right now, specifically their latest research in the context of situated knowledges of gender and love. After everyone has spoken, we can begin thinking about how the work that each of you do speaks to one another and draw some connections to the topic of this special issue.

SERENA: Thank you so much. It is a privilege to be here in such esteemed company. I'm a sociologist, so I basically study evolving patterns of relationships and I am interested in mapping out the evolution of Internet norms related to love. Being a sociologist, I'm keenly aware of intersectionality. Gender is very important, but so are ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. We looked at all these intersections and found that looking at the life phase of individuals we studied was very relevant to our study of love. Recently I've been doing a study on Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships and now I'm going to share the findings of my preliminary research. I was particularly interested in Living Apart Together just before the pandemic. It was something that had basically blipped onto sociologists' radars. Just from the previous Canadian national census to the most recent one (the latest one is being carried out right now, but we have data from 2016), we discovered pretty major jumps, statistically speaking, in relationships that are Living Apart Together. So we've gone from when we started tracking this kind of relationship, which was about 15 years ago at around 3%, right through to when they were statistically significant, almost 10%. And the last jump from the previous census to the present was an almost 4% hop. It's really interesting to see how this type of relationship is becoming statistically significant, but also, when we drill into these relationships, we notice that the life phases of people in these relationships carries significant importance. About 20% of these relationships are made up of people between 25 and 34, and then about 7% of them are

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between 35 to 54, and then the rest is congregated in later life. And when we asked for the motivation for LAT relationships, we discovered that the youthful forms of Living Apart Together tend to be structural in nature. They are a very young cohort of people who either cannot afford to live alone, so they are fundamentally living at home and then having intimate relationships with partners who are themselves dwelling with their families of origin; or potentially they're living in urban settings, but their conditions of work don't allow them to be close to the people that they love. So they're kind of torn, fundamentally, by the conditions of late phase capitalism, in which competition for work and placement becomes so severe that it is significantly more complicated to find significant others in the same social circles.

As we progress through life, we discover that the motivation for LAT becomes significantly more ideological and also structural, but for very different reasons. These are ideological in the sense that they tend to be motivated by having had tough conditions of love that did not pan out – they are people who have gone through relational dissolution and are therefore not really interested in giving their all to the love relationship and hence prefer to maintain a certain amount of independence by setting up this kind of relationship specifically; to stay apart and maintain a much stronger sense of self, but especially not to be embroiled in the responsibilities that love usually entails. And what's fascinating here is that we see gender variants. So we find that women tend to be volitional in Living Apart Together, so it's their choice. They impose this will on their significant others, and they are not interested in the care they keep, or the managerial functions they would have otherwise been forced to undertake. On the other hand, men are inadvertent Living Apart Together practitioners: they would prefer to live in a permanent coupled relationship. But their partners prefer not to. And finally, the other fascinating thing which intersects with my other research now, which has to do with non-normative or emerging forms of intimacy and love: a lot of polyamorous people practice a form of Living Apart Together because, of course, in this situation, they have multiple partnerships and from the point of view of the strategic aspects of managing multiple partnerships, it is much simpler to have a specific home and then travel on to visit and be with other partners. In a nutshell, this gives you a basic snapshot of recent developments in Living Apart Together.

My research started just before the 2020 Covid pandemic and when the pandemic struck, it was fascinating to see how, in LAT relationships, the situation became frozen, as partners found themselves forced apart, unable to see each other for months at a time. This caused a significant amount of disruption in their lives emotionally, in terms of adaptation to the responsibilities that they had at home, but also in terms of the feelings of isolation that, of course, were compounded by the pandemic.

In other situations, LAT partners were pushed together for longer periods than they were used to, which interestingly also caused some disruption in their lives because if they were fiercely independent or had managerially organised their lives elsewhere, finding themselves in this intense intimacy was disruptive to their lives as well. I'm going to stop talking now, to allow Amanda and Danai to speak, and we can always return to the topic after. Thank you.

AMANDA: Thank you, Serena, for that presentation. I find it really fascinating. I'm not sure that we've investigated LAT relationships in South Africa, but that would be very interesting to do. I don't specifically work on love, but I work on gender-based violence and sexual violence. I looked at the work of colleagues in Australia – Power, Koch, Kralick and Jackson (2006) – who have done empirical work on women who stay in abusive relationships, and they argue that women (or partners) enter these relationships willingly. It's not as though they are arranged marriages, so there is free choice; and a lot is motivated by the language of romantic love and that discourse establishes desires for what women are supposed to achieve in a relationship, and what they are supposed to be in a relationship, and also their understanding of femininity and masculinity.

The power and status of being attached to a man is very important to heterosexual South Africa black women; and of course, this notion and this cause of romantic love is promoted by popular culture. Romantic love is also something that's quite private, so if there is abuse, it remains hidden. And women then embrace different subject positions where they actually start to defend their romantic partner's behaviour around interpersonal violence. So rather than seeing abuse as incongruent with a loving relationship, women downplay it. They say, 'Uh, they stepped out of line. They need to toe the line. The partner was under stress,' and so on. They also view jealousy as a sign of love, rather than a danger sign and a warning. Romantic love is a compelling discourse, and it induces infinite giving on the part of women, who see violence as the downside of love, but very often stay for years in abusive relationships. If we look at the South African statistics on gender-based violence during 2019-2020 (during lockdown, of course, these numbers went up, but we don't have accurate statistics), in 2020 we had 42,289 reported rapes and 8,000 cases of sexual assault. Intimate femicide in South Africa is 5 times the global average, so it's really high. Women die on a daily basis at the hands of partners, lovers, boyfriends and so on.

In my theoretical work, I apply Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer* and bare life to the conditions of sexual violence in South Africa. Agamben (1998) argues that there are two types of life: *zoe*, or life in general and *bios*, or life of political significance. And when the law is suspended in certain cases, which he calls 'the state of exception' (Agamben, 2005), it means that some groups of people are turned into what's called 'bare life'. It's life, or mere

survival, that has no political significance. Violence against these groups of people is not considered a crime, even if they are exposed to very severe violence. Agamben argues that, in late modernity, the state of exception has become the rule, and his theory resonates with Achille Mbembe's politics of death or 'necropolitics' (2019). Agamben's theory is gender blind, so I and other feminists argue that when we look at women's conditions of being considered as part of the private sphere, the private sphere is depoliticised. It is as though the law does not apply to the private sphere and women in general are stripped of a life of political significance as related to the private sphere. Agamben is concerned more with crime and violence while I'm concerned with sexual violence. In the South African context here, these very high statistics indicate a state of exception where women's lives mean very little and they are reduced to a state of bare life. Here the state of exception has become the rule, and it's not a case of, as Agamben theorises, the sovereign taking a decision. The situation here is the sovereign's neglect or abandonment. The sovereign just doesn't care about what happens to women, regardless of the statistics in the face of violence that's in the papers every day.

I've also looked at conditions of colonialism, because we are a postcolonial state; and if we look at Morgenstern's (2021) and Wolfe's (1999) work, they talk about colonialism as characterised by the logic of elimination. But that's talking about more general conditions. If we look at what happened to African women, and specifically slave women in conditions of colonialism, they could be raped with impunity, and the people who raped them were never prosecuted. Black women in general had their sexuality stigmatised as insatiable, being seen as hypersexual, and so on; the work of Pumla Gqola (2015) in the South African context is very important. Women's sexuality was controlled through violence in the colony, but this has a spill over effect into the postcolony where that same stigmatisation or characterisation of African women's sexuality continues. And we also see a very high level of violence with impunity against women (specifically African women). In addition, settler colonialism is a bit different from other forms of colonialism in the sense that the colonisers stay. They don't leave as we see them do in other African countries, and there's a link between settler colonialism and the construction of masculinity. Here we can draw on Kopano Ratele's work (2018), for example, which discusses the construction and reconstruction of tradition that's a romanticisation of a pre-colonial type of masculinity, the warrior masculinity. For example, when our ex-President, President Zuma, was on trial for rape,¹ his defence showed some continuities with colonial violence and cultural constructions. He argued that his culture prescribed that he couldn't refuse the need to satisfy an aroused woman. So there are linkages between colonial constructions and understandings of women's sexuality and violence in South Africa.

Not only is there a lack of political will from the sovereign or the state to deal with these very high levels of violence, but the arms of the state that are supposed to protect women (they are meant to protect all citizens, but specifically women) are complicit. The statistics for police officers who have been accused of rape are quite high. Also, the police very often do not take cases that are reported to them seriously. They frequently actually argue that women are making this up or they should go home and sort their problems out.

We also have problems with the judicial system. In rape cases in South Africa, only 14% go to trial. In only 7% is there an outcome and only in 4% is it a guilty verdict. Zuma wasn't found guilty because of a lack of evidence. It was a case of 'he said, she said'. [His accuser] 'Khwezi's' experience in and through Zuma's rape trial was one of the worst secondary victimisations that I, as a feminist, have ever seen. At the trial, she was later accused of being a serial rape accuser, told that she doesn't understand the difference between consent and non-consent and so on. So the judicial system is also complicit. After the trial, South African women organised #TotalShutdown, which was a protest march to get the government to do something. Finally, they wrote a national strategic plan on gender-based violence. It was consulted and agreed on in all the provinces, and yet that was 2018 and here we are in 2023, still waiting for the rollout. This is really negligent, and tells us something about the sovereign's lack of political will.

In my latest research, I work with an American collaborator, and we've done a survey in two provinces. It was a survey with an embedded experiment in it. What we're trying to look at is how most people, if you ask them, will say they oppose gender-based violence and they will never beat a woman and so on; and the experiment then looks at exceptions. When does violence actually become acceptable? It is quite interesting how people then construct certain exceptions, and those go back to rape myths, they go back to gender stereotypes. We are in the process of analysing that data.

DEIRDRE: Recently I did some research on Carmen Maria Machado's book *In the Dream House* (2019). It's a memoir of domestic violence and abuse between lesbian partners and it forms part of the body of texts about love gone wrong. What Amanda was saying about love going wrong in the case of attacks against women and intimate

¹ Jacob Zuma was accused of rape by a family member, known as 'Khwezi', in 2005, during his term as Deputy President of South Africa. He admitted that sexual intercourse had taken place, but his defence was that she had come to his room dressed only in a cloth and that he, as a Zulu man, was culturally obliged to satisfy her sexually. Zuma was acquitted on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The case sparked outrage from South African feminists (see Motsei, 2007).

femicide and rape is that there is a public myth that, for example, ‘dry sex’² is great and that consent is unnecessary. Consent is seen as unnecessary, particularly in marriage where men will argue that they have paid *lobola* (bride-price) for their wives and that therefore they are entitled to sex whenever they choose. I found it particularly interesting, looking at research on domestic violence and abuse in lesbian relationships, that there is a story that domestic violence and abuse is solely a heterosexual problem. This reinforces a feminist idea from the 1960s that same-sex relationships between women are utopian, egalitarian, and all ‘sunshine and roses’. At the same time, it also legitimates the idea that the only people who can perpetrate violence are men. Men are seen as strong and dominant, and they perpetrate violence, while women are weak and passive, and they are victims. And for me, the idea that there can be domestic violence and abuse between partners in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships or relationships including those folk, at a philosophical level, challenges the gender stereotypes that prescribe the man to be strong and dominant, while the woman just lies back and ‘thinks of England’. The other myth about domestic violence and abuse is that it must be visible to be serious. So, for example, there is nothing wrong in what your partner said to you because you don’t have bruises, broken bones, a cast or a bandage. When in fact, your partner has been gaslighting you for years and you are losing your mind and your mental health is gone and your self-esteem is gone. So there are lots of myths that we need to start dismantling as feminists and gender scholars. What Serena said about couples in LAT relationships subverts the idea that, when you fall in love, you get married, you buy a house with a white picket fence, you have 2.5 children, and you live together happily ever after, which we all know is absolutely untrue.

DANAI: Deirdre, thank you for all your comments. They are really helpful. My training has primarily been in Gender Studies and in Black Studies. My work is cross-disciplinary and driven by a range of questions that come from experience, so methodologically it takes very different shapes and orientations. I’m currently finishing a book that explores the sovereignty and freedom that is attached to the assumptive logics that Deirdre pointed out; in particular, involving how we engage with conditions of freedom and constraint in relation to forms of kin and as they appear in relations of intimacy outside the assumptive heteronormative condition.

My work has generally been on kinship and I was in a conversation with Keguro Macharia recently.³ He has been writing about how African feminists have offered deep critiques, not only of the Western dual sex/gender systems as a dominant model from which we can orient an understanding of sexuality and gender, also critiqued settler colonialism. Coloniality produces a social/sexual labour/power division, in addition to the dual sex/gender system, that reimposes the relation of the Self onto many relations, even linguistically: for example, I am my child’s mother or I am this person’s lover.

I work in the discipline of African Literature. The Department of African Literature emerged at a historical period of high insurgency on the part of the anti-apartheid struggle to respond to apartheid education and its construction of how Black people are not really meant to learn and what roles we are meant to occupy. There has been an instructive process of thinking through and engaging Black Public Humanities within a university context where the academics in most of our disciplines are simply white supremacists (with all due respect to them). My department comes from a specific context of engaging cross-disciplinary knowledge, which resonates with my training.

When I discussed kinship and kin with Keguro Macharia, he spoke about his thinking through feminist interventions on the man/woman distinction that may or may not always operate, but is meaningful and powerful precisely in the conditions Amanda expressed, that while it’s productive, it also doesn’t always engage things. So, for instance, when Black lesbians will opt, even though they have the option of a civil marriage or union, to have a traditional marriage. Part of what that signals is a broader understanding of personhood outside the condition of individual sovereignty.⁴ This is a condition from which we build relations; so we need to understand that, outside of our inscription into the consumer revolution, the industrial revolution and the affordances we can receive from particular forms of sanctions that are socially and structurally conditioned, such as heteronormative couplehood, there are other kinds of attachments, including with ancestors, with other forms of kin, including fictive kinships and different forms of family. Certainly I have many forms of blended family conditioned around not only my own status as a queer person, but also for many heterosexual women who do not have the normative family structures. This is not a condition of lack but of the social historical systems that normalise Mommy-Daddy-Me and 2.5 children.

My work has been driven by that set of questions, and also by my realisation that our normative understanding of freedom cannot always condition us to understand freedom and constraint as a way of being in relation with

² ‘Dry sex’ is sex when a woman’s vagina is dry due to lack of foreplay.

³ Most recently, at Sojourner Project’s January convening, ‘Think from Black: A Lexicon’ (see <https://www.racegenderclass.org/think-from-black-a-lexicon>).

⁴ See Mupotsa, D. S. (2020). Conjugality. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 26 (3), 377–403. Also see Macharia, K. (2017). African pleasure (in 5 movements). *Gukira* 17 November. Available at: <https://gukira.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/african-pleasure-in-5-movements/>.

everybody. Because of that, we call it agency, when it doesn't look like what we understand as a liberal individual freedom. So this is my (painful and painstaking) process, particularly as it relates to Black women, Black people in the world, Black femmes, Black queers across the world, but also in the spaces that I occupy, because that's where I begin and orient my work from. Intimate modernity and its construction of freedom has often been constructed in a way that makes it almost impossible to think of Black women in that space. And it's always 'If it's tradition, it is therefore constraint'. So if it's a white wedding or a chosen celebration – all these notions within liberal feminism – even when we abandon it, the attachment remains around this notion of the sovereign. This is so influential that one feels as though one is negotiating, but also often there's a moral virtue applied when people signal 'African woman' or 'Black woman' or any kind of other minoritised woman as the sociological or anthropological subject of their work without having to do any work, because the assumption is that any kind of attachment or engagement with that subject is virtuous in and of itself, because it has some kind of feminist ethics to begin with. Trying to think about that space has led me to thinking about relations, so I've written on conjugalities and forms of marital relations.

I was thinking about marriage practice as a subject, and especially Black women's experiences entering into white weddings as an assumption of entering into a category of not only choice or romantic interest, versus the assumption that other relations embedded within kinship structures are not only not based on choice, autonomy, freedom, and otherwise, or don't produce the conditions from which to begin a conversation about equity. I think that this has also to do with the preoccupation with the social constructivist understanding of gender that has taken over most fields of study. The preoccupation with romantic interests, no less desire, which is not necessarily always presumed to belong to Black and African people, is consumed within a kind of sociological structure. It's all in relation to agency and power as oppositional, structural and unconditional formations because our sense of personhood is so deeply attached to provisional admission to the Human within the terms of coloniality. I'm thinking through a new set of relations around our notions of sovereignty and freedom. There's a construction of intimate modernity that will always place Black people and African people as though we are always entering it. It's a surprising entry that requires a devout interest in thinking through that very condition itself, as though the achievement of it, including romantic love, is the condition of freedom and the true condition of that love.

It's a really beautiful conversation we're having in this piece written by my beloved Keguro Macharia, and even while he's engaging with the broader field of Gender Studies or queer African Studies as it develops, in the article I am referring to he engages playfully with some very influential African feminists who confront many aspects of relationality in the ways I imply above. What Macharia offers is that despite their critiques, they are still attached to an Oedipalised intuition of the family form⁵ while critiquing how it's been intentionally imposed by law and policy.⁶ And the sovereign may be a man, as Amanda said, but also mobilises the modernity of the nation as Mommy-Daddy-Me and 2.5 children. But the use of women's bodies as material signifiers – as sign and flesh – as the retainer of tradition means that a certain backwardness is assumed: not a literal backwardness, but the signifier of backwardness. A woman occupying the space of culture and tradition means, in this juxtaposition of future forward for the nation to endure with an Oedipalised notion of the nuclear family as the notion of modernity that men can occupy. And yet there are all these histories of more complex relations, of sociality, of sexuality that occupy the very same consciousness of national space, but then become marked as dangerous and create conditions that are very harmful for minorities. So the structural conditions produce this. But Macharia is also posing that even to begin a conversation about what it might mean to engage with intimate modernity rather than love, though love is one of the clear signifiers of it, assumes that you're always coming late towards it and that it belongs elsewhere; the repetition of that assumption means that it can be a genius invention to simply notice people getting married – Black women be like, 'Oh, look at this thing that happened!' – without ever historicising the conditions around that commodity formation and circulation. That particular kind of construction is made precisely through an engagement with those authorised as others and then it requires a particular claim of culture as imposed on those who don't enter into that attachment to white supremacy. And I think it does affect even how we understand gender-based violence, and who becomes the true subject of that engagement of woundedness.

MEI: Thank you so much for these insights into your work, and these myriad intersections between love and gender. My first question is for Serena, but I'm interested in hearing from all of you: what is the place that romantic discourse has in decisions for Living Apart Together? And then, secondly, what is the role of abuse and violence in decisions to live apart together? You also say that, during the Covid pandemic and lockdown, couples were forced to live together, forced into this sort of intimacy: did your research show any increase in incidences of violence and abuse, like couples having to stay together, even to endure abuse and violence because of the pandemic? And thirdly, did you look at LGBTQ+ couples as well, or were you mostly examining heterosexual

⁵ Macharia, K. (2020). Belated: Interruption. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 26 (3), 561–573.

⁶ See Macharia, K. (2013). Queer Kenya in law and policy, in Ekine, Sokari, and Abbas, Hakim (eds), *Queer African Reader* (pp. 273–289). Dakar: Pambazuka Press.

couples? And then of course, of racially diverse, ethnically diverse couples? I'm also thinking about international couples, like my husband and myself. We were forced to live apart for two years for a number of reasons, the pandemic being one of them. I was also having a difficult time securing my immigration papers, and our children in fact came to the USA to live with their father for a while before I finally joined them. It was a very interesting situation for me; and, having listened to you speak about your work on Living Apart Together for some time now, and the forces that keep people apart, and then experiencing it first-hand the frustration of being forced to live apart, was quite something. So those are my questions for Serena, but, for Amanda and Danai: Living Apart Together, is that something that women or couples in your particular context consider or is that something that's completely alien to the cultural and ideological context of love in South Africa?

SERENA: Thank you. These are excellent questions. I was excited to hear, first Amanda and then Danai, speak in terms of the ideologies related to intimate relationships, specifically love. I agree that romantic love is very much an ideological trope that can be used in affairs and political manoeuvres to create conditions of oppression and conditions of self-disciplining that become diminishing and completely oppressive. And it's interesting to see these mechanisms that have become imbricated in our systems of thought related to intimacy and love, in which a lot of this violence is actually self-perpetrated. It begins by buying into the ideologies of what ought to be a loving relationship, which then unfortunately allows for a number of machinations that have massive oppressive results.

I would like to touch on the concept of necropolitics that Amanda raised (following Mbembe). In Canada, we're a settler nation and we have a horrific discrepancy in the way life is organised. We are basically a so-called developed nation, living alongside an underdeveloped nation. We treat indigenous populations horribly, and especially in terms of murdering indigenous women, and the way in which human trafficking survivors and sex workers are organising in Canada, we see necropolitics at play; first and foremost, because our government refuses to consider this kind of abusive situation seriously, and therefore we have this perception of certain populations that are worthy and in need of defence, versus others that can be completely excused and left to their own devices. The ongoing effects of settler colonialism put especially young girls and young indigenous women at particular risk because a number of conditions propel them out of their home. Then, when they find themselves in public spheres, they tend to be exploited; and they are recruited specifically by organised sex work for human trafficking by relying on these ideologies related to loving intimacy. So the trope of being saved, the trope of finally finding someone who loves you, the trope of finally securing an intimate relationship is utilised as an instrument for these girls to be brought into these relationships. They first make a loving relationship that quickly devolves into abusive relationships in which these young girls and young women, who are now being literally kicked out, first are captured through this ideology of love.

I would also like to make a connection to the infamous Andrew Tate case⁷ that is happening in Romania. You may have heard that the methodology that he [allegedly] uses to recruit these young women into exploitative sexual relationships is using the 'loverboy' method, which is exactly this: there's a trope of young women or girls being wooed by these highly idealised Princess/Prince Charming mechanisms. They find themselves indebted to their lover, and then the lover can then oppress them by exploiting them sexually, by putting them into a condition of victimisation in sex work.

Another thing that I wanted to touch on is the idea of the relationship that Danai described so well, and Amanda also touched on: we have a sense of love, which is also tied to all these structural conditions of the ways in which the relationship ought to unfold, which are very normative and binding. In my work on polyamory,⁸ I find that people are trying to escape this ideology and they talk about it as the 'relationship elevator'. This is the idea that first you come together, then the relationship becomes serious when you get married, then you buy a house together, then you have kids, so there's a life path that is fundamentally already organised for your progression through life. Going back to Living Apart Together relationships, Mei is basically asking if these conditions of ideological love are something that people that are performing these Living Apart Together relationships are cognisant of; and they absolutely are. First and foremost, Living Apart Together is definitely a structural response to having experienced violence or dissatisfaction or a potentially exploitative relationship in a previous intimate relationship. They were supposed to be loved. We see a process of emancipation, which then brings people to ideologically tackle this normative notion of love in a manner that allows them to think outside it. Therefore they're able to proactively structure their new relationships in different terms. It's not surprising then, that we find that a lot of women, especially if they are traumatised, use Living Apart Together precisely as a form of emancipation, as a way for them not to fall back into these potentially exploitative, harmful, loving relationships.

In terms of whether or not I've looked into queer, trans, and various other forms of intimate relations, I have definitely seen that these patterns of problematising ideologies of love are intrinsically bound into the ways in

⁷ Oxenden, M. and Gross, J. (2022), Andrew Tate is charged with human trafficking and rape in Romania, *New York Times*, December 30, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/30/world/europe/andrew-tate-romania-arrest.html>.

⁸ Petrella, S., (2014), Free to love freely? The de-criminalization of polyamorous love in Canada, in A. Knaggs and S. Frischmuth (eds.), *Gender and Love: Constructions and Representations*. Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

which queer and trans relationships are organised around that. When we're exploring specific subcultures within the large demographic profile of the nation, when we see people that have already been going against the grain in terms of normative expectations for life, we also see congruence in this resistance of ideological imposition of love, which can be exploitative. It is therefore no surprise that LGBTQ+ relationships take up positions as the vanguard. I have seen how polyamory in queer relationships cross-pollinates and then is taken up and performed by heterosexual and heteronormative relationships too, turning LGBTQ+ polyamorous relationships into trailblazers. We're learning significant things from these queer conditions about the way you do love. This is something that we can see as a form of emancipation which I think should be celebrated.

I wanted to mention, in connection with Danai's engaging and interesting work on the connection about coloniality and the ways in which it is almost impossible to live outside of this relationship because we're damned if we do and we're damned if we don't. Some of the work that I do is on polygyny, specifically in the counterculture that exists in Canada. I've examined fundamentalist Mormon polygyny in British Columbia, and what I see is extensive celestial marriage, which is a religious practice with very young girls married to older men who are powerful in the theocracy of the FLDS [Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints]. It is amazing to see how the concept of meaningful choice is relevant in these conditions. It's interesting that, ideologically speaking, these young women and girls are raised to think that a function of their gendered destiny is to be open to polygamous marriage. And, even though every woman or young girl that enters a celestial marriage reports to have made the choice for herself, a meaningful choice is impossible in this situation because it's patently foreclosed. You're raised in the structural conditions in which your ability to establish yourself as a good wife and a good mother can only be constructed through the forging of these families and through accepting polygamy and then becoming a second, third or fourth wife within these structures. So it's amazing how when interviewing these women that are entering into celestial marriage, the language is, discursively speaking, one of emancipation and choice. But the result is a form of structural enslavement, reproductive enslavement, domestic enslavement and severe exploitation. Unfortunately, the other thing is the impossibility of ever escaping these relationships, because the moment in which the relationships break apart is the moment at which these women are shunned by the community, so their entire organisational structure around ontology cannot be disconnected from these marriage practices, and therefore we find ourselves in these conditions, from which there is no ideological escape.

AMANDA: I think Living Apart Together in South Africa is complicated because of high levels of poverty. So very often people don't have choices. They can't choose to be together because there's just no money for moving somewhere else and sometimes there are three generations of people living in the same house that consists of two or three rooms. So it's complicated, and I'm not aware of research that's being done on that.,

If you look at my generation, our understanding of intimacy came through a dating process in which sexual intercourse was deferred. We didn't just jump into sex right away. But I've noticed – and I have daughters in their 20s now – and I have friends who also have kids in their 20s – for these kids now, the first contact is through sex and then, if that sexual relationship doesn't work, it's the end of the relationship. So it's not an exploration in terms of romantic love, of the other person as a person, as a complicated multi-layered being; but the first contact is through sexual intercourse and then it becomes something else. I don't know to what extent research has been done on it, but I think it's worth investigating.

DANAI: Regarding Amanda's last comment: my daughter is 13 and there is an interesting generational aspect to this. There is some research indicating that in Gen Z they're having sex much later because they have much better understandings of consent, but also boundaries, a much better understanding of gendered identities, and what a minority status is. People who do youth studies would be able to engage with this. In our conversations, even when people will say, 'oh, they *shipped* this person and this person'⁹ on the assumption that because they are presumed a boy and presumed a girl, therefore they must be 'shipped' together. But my daughter, aged 13, is saying, 'well, that's a normative assumption'; this is a child who's lived in many Southern African countries and contexts: her community, her father, her father's partner, myself and others are all Black people from different contexts of the southern African space and we are speaking to each other about relations in ways that we probably all could not identify with.

I have this huge copy of the US feminist classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1997/2011),¹⁰ and I think I'm 'doing the most' [in educating my daughter about women's health issues], while she thinks I'm crazy because she did that when she was seven. I'm not a big believer in progressive time, because there's not a lot of evidence of social change that is radical or interesting, so I'm always reluctant, but there is something that relates to bodily autonomy and social relation and consent that is present in discussions and across classes. I did some rapporteuring around the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) commitments being made by the state when civil society confronted broken promises, and the adults didn't know what they were talking about. Educators were completely

⁹ In youth slang, 'shipping' two people means that the speaker thinks they would make a good (romantic) couple.

¹⁰ Boston Women's Health Book Collective (Norsinger, J. (ed.)). (1970/2011). *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

confused about SGBV as a notion; but when I talked about school violence, they could speak about violence that we ascribe to individual social behaviour. Their responses were about streetlights, about roads to school, and about school violence. This structural analysis of how intimacy is constrained operates also at the level of young people who are living in profoundly violent environments and are still able to express that. How would I understand intimacy when, as you said, Amanda, I'm living in a very constrained environment at school, at home, etc.? And the conditions around which we've idealised childhood, which is also a construction, and adulthood, which is also a construction, are meaningless, because they depend on the conditions of my understanding. If there is anything progressive about our present, it's that some of the language is showing up as young people begin to express and articulate, but the structural conditions themselves are not productively helpful, and so I don't believe any kind of harm will shift.

I also wanted to think about living together and apart, partly because, for people who are choosing to live together, there are advantages in terms of what it costs you to live. So there are value systems that support cohabitation, but also taxes and other simple things as well as the fact, at least in southern Africa – meaning the broader ambitions of Rhodes and his friends and their capitalist interests that become nations – in most of these countries, to grow up in them, to be a Black woman, to live in a city, you needed the status of citizenship; and access was through marriage. So the prize of marriage, beyond the idealism of romance, was attached to a capacity for citizenship. If we look into the legal infrastructure and the archive of how the notion of a person is made, it's global and not restricted to Africa. I was in Thailand recently and I went into the archives: the same legal conditions of the Dutch East India Company, of which the company was the first person, apply and also mirror how cities are constructed across the territory of their colonial process, not simply as an ideal, but also as a legal, social and economic global infrastructure. So most of what we attach ourselves to as freedom, legally speaking, is about a very clear instruction of the person and capital, and a masculinity that we've all been provisionally included in. Because of that condition, my sense is that, until we can have a more historically embedded understanding of what we are adapting ourselves to, my pessimism is profound: we have a lot of hard work to do. Because, looking at that archive again, I thought: this is remarkable, because this is why labour and gender and power are distributed as they are, and this is also here to say that most of us and most of our relations, when authoritarian processes make decisions, sometimes it's about heartbreak.

What drives my work is that there are very few tools that deal with Black interior life, because it's presumed not to be there and because pathology is often where we begin. When we talk about who are minoritised, the presumption is that the majority of people are in fact not the minority. The assumption isn't one of power in terms of what is hegemonic. Most of us don't fit into that notion, but the category allows us to use diversity and other forms of language to begin to normalise inclusion as a primary target, without engaging the foundations of what we're trying to be included in. I think most people's social and intimate relations and engagements are a confrontation between trauma, personal relations to our family – Daddy love me, Mommy love me; confusion; family interactions that don't make sense – and lack; we don't know how lack is potentially generative, because it can be, when it's better engaged with. In my work, Black interiority matters, and it matters to me, because Black pathology does not, as well as it applies to queer folk and others, and the social spaces are occupied. But the majority of people on this planet do not live the majoritarian view of what is privileged. So I think we need to focus our interest in engaging with not only a separation of interiority and exteriority, because they're completely attached; but, even in the condition of that engagement, we need to shift our attention to the valuation system of the hegemonic, because it can allow us to approach most of ourselves and those we are in relation with from the condition of their pathology or lack. And what's otherwise generative about what's happening becomes impossible to view, because we can't even begin to think about what is otherwise flourishing as a different set of models from which to live.

DEIRDRE: Thank you, Danai! This has been a fascinating conversation I wish would continue for much longer: obviously we could hold an entire conference on these topics and intersections.

SERENA: What a privilege to be here with these amazing scholars. Thank you.

MEI: Thank you, everyone.

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Book Review

Gender Dynamics, Feminist Activism and Social Transformation in China

Jacqueline Zhenru Lin ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

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With *Gender Dynamics, Feminist Activism and Social Transformation in China*, editors Wu Guoguang, Feng Yuan, and Helen Lansdowne bring together a comprehensive range of entries that highlight women's roles in changing Chinese society, particularly the political and economic dynamics, over the twentieth century and into the current era. Integrating insights from feminist scholars of political science, legal studies, education, social work, sociology, and activists who work for women's rights in the People's Republic of China, this collection is a great example of how academic dialogue can contribute to pressing gender issues and public debate. The nuanced analysis of women's experiences as active agents and the historical positioning of Chinese feminist actions paves the way for more collaboration between academia and activism.

Wu and Lansdowne's introduction sets out the volume's ambition to bridge the scholarship on women's and gender studies on China with research on China's transformation. They highlight a lack of analysis of macro factors in the former and the gender perspective in the latter.

'How do Chinese women act as initiators, mobilisers, and driving forces of social transformation, while women's fate, gender relationships, and feminist values have also been shaped and reshaped during such struggles in China?' is the central question asked in this volume. In this inquiry, the authors are first concerned with women's struggles and strategies in China in order to gain rights, instead of framing women's efforts as part of the social engineering project of modernity or state-building. This priority of women's activism in social movements is outstanding among the existing scholarship in which privileges terms such as state feminism or NGO feminism.

To provide a historical lens on understanding the fate of 'Chinese women', the chapters cover the following four aspects, 1) the shifting political, social, cultural, and ideological sources of feminism from the Mao period to post-reform China; 2) pressing economic issues in social transformations; 3) women's gender and sexual consciousness and its expressions; 4) achievement of feminist actions led by NGOs and digital engagement.

As a researcher who uses an anthropological approach to study gender issues in China, I found the chapters (chapter five and six) that start with material on self-reflection and the lived experience of rural elder women, who are usually excluded from 'feminist communities,' uniquely revealing in comparison with similar studies on feminist activism and social transformation in China.

Also, as Zhou highlights, the scholarship on the gendering of labour in the socialist state during the Mao period has been superseded by critics who mainly target the impact of global capitalism and neoliberalism on migrant women. This discontinuity in the scholarship neglects the continuity of the gender-based exploitation towards women in current state enterprises. Zhou's analysis not only illustrates the narrow conceptualisation of feminist

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activism in both academia and practice but also points out the importance of achieving cross-generational solidarity.

By the same token, Guo and Lv's chapter focuses on the structural disadvantages faced by those who remain in the countryside and rely on land for their livelihood. They highlight the critique put forth by those concerned with the impact of neoliberalism on migrant workers, emphasizing the absence of attention given to these issues. On a related note, Sophia Woodman (chapter 3) and Feng Xu (chapter 4) trace the international network of feminism and its influence on Chinese women's organizations. They explore the connection between the discourse of human rights or liberal feminism and the rhetoric employed by Chinese women in their public engagement today. Through their analysis, they illustrate the political, economic, and cultural resources of Chinese feminist movements, drawing comparisons and noting differences between women's NGOs and other forms of activism. These insights partially explain why the NGO sector in China has been significantly affected by the Western #MeToo movement and the challenges encountered in connecting gender-related activism with other forms of activism targeting various social injustices.

In their conclusion, Wu Guoguang and Feng Yuan offer intellectual and practical reflections, pointing out directions for further research and public engagement. First, they highlight the Maoist hypocrisy of women's liberation, which is evident in the discrepancy between the rhetoric/ideology and the institutional realities. Secondly, the editors describe what women face in today's China as 'from state repression to state-market oppression.' This is a valid and important point, challenging the emerging Maoist feminism that appraises the Maoist legacy on gender issues in order to criticise China's market transition.

For me, a minor disappointment is the lack of reflection on male-dominated institutions, the sequential patriarchal structure in the NGO sector, and collective action for non-gender related issues. Further research on the contentions between women's NGOs and other activist organisations can further contribute to this exploration. However, this volume seems certain to be a thought-provoking collection for researchers and students interested in how the state and the market shaped feminist activism. Furthermore, it serves as a catalyst for new research on gender issues in the context of the social transformations taking place in contemporary China.

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Book Review

The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan

Kai E. Tsao ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

Book's Editors: Gitte Marianne Hansen and Fabio Gygi

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The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan is a collected volume of seven chapters that examine the performances of gender, intimacy and agency. The book is mostly written by early-career researchers, who applied an ethnographic approach to analysing the ways these performances are lived and commodified within interpersonal relationships and a service industry that caters to a variety of customers in present Japan. If you are a scholar with interests in reflexive methodology and/or social anthropological studies of Japan, or a reader who would like to learn more about gendered relations and sexuality in Japanese culture, I would highly recommend this engaging book.

As someone interested in gender, sexuality and visual methodology, I have rediscovered the joy of reading manga just over a year ago. I grew up in Taiwan in the 1990s, with many of the Japanese anime and manga available, and their popularity has only surged since then. It was not until more recently that I picked up manga again, having lost touch with it for over ten years. This time I have looked at it with a 'feminist' lens. The more I read, the more I find myself drawn to the social relations and culture depicted in this form of visual storytelling: how, for instance, one's mannerisms and the use of language are highly gendered, and the shifts in honorifics and names demonstrate the changing relationship between people. The stories also seem to suggest more openness to non-heteronormative identities. For example, in *Komi Can't Communicate*, the gender of the character Osana Najimi is ambiguous. Within the broad 'Boy's Love' label, more titles are produced to illustrate the barriers faced by gay communities in Japan. I first learnt about how same-sex couples may use adoption to be legally recognised as family from Tanaka Ogeretsu's *Escape Journey*, since same-sex marriage is not yet possible in Japan. As illustrated in this book *The Work of Gender*, there exists a service industry that has options for men *and* women, queer *and* straight people. I sometimes caught myself thinking: for a society that has such a rigid heteronormative culture (see, for instance, Jackson, Liu and Woo, 2008), Japan seems to be 'full of contradictions'.

Reading *The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan* has provided me a space to learn and to critically reflect upon my own interpretation of gender as performed and lived in Japan. I often think about my positionality and how my curiosity about Japanese culture arose, alongside the increasing interests in Japanese and Korean pop cultures in the 'Western' world. The ethnographic projects in this book provide insights into how researchers navigate the complex and unfamiliar field in which they situated themselves. Their discomfort and exploration collectively unveil how gender *works* at individual, interpersonal and structural levels.

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Researchers who worked as service providers as part of their fieldwork provide narratives of their embodied experiences of the different types of commodified emotional work. Francioni's chapter 'Serving gender' (Chapter 2) vividly documents his conflicting affective responses and unease when working at the gay bar Zenith in Tokyo. Francioni's conceptualisation of service as expressing endless availability captures the expectation on staff to offer attentive care which requires the skill to anticipate customers' needs without them being directly expressed. While service provided at Zenith aimed at enabling gay male customers to have a good time at the bar, Fanasca's (Chapter 3) experience of being a female-to-male cross-dressed escort emphasises how the business profits on inspiring female clients' emotional response to their escorts performing empathy, affection and even love. In '(Re)searching (for) identities: Crossed-dressed ethnography in a *dansō* escort company', Fanasca expresses an empathetic critique of the potential harm brought by the industry in which the escorts' gendered self was constantly placed in negotiations, and the clients' feelings were being exploited for financial gains. *Dansō* escorts must play the role of a 'perfect man' that is charming, protective and non-threatening, befitting the fantasy of their female clients, in order to create a sense of companionship and closeness.

'Intimacy' is also deployed in sex work. In 'Professional amateurs: Authenticity and sex work in a 'delivery health' shop' (Chapter 4), Phillips' interviewees – who are women in their 40s and 50s delivering sexual services to men – considered their work as 'healing' that is possible only through a personal, close understanding of a client and indulging his needs. The attentive care that was required echoes Francioni's experience of serving at Zenith. Likewise, Kodaka (Chapter 5) gives us a glimpse of how intimacy is commodified between the actors *eromen/lovenen* and their female fans in an adult video (AV) industry targeting hetero-women, as the chapter title 'The coin-operated boyfriend' demonstrates. The marketing strategy of these *eromen* is modelled after the idols', offering opportunities for the fans to meet the actors in groups or in more intimate private meetings. These events enabled female fans to live out their fantasies, and to obtain their physical and emotional pleasure with financial transaction. Kodaka's narrative of taking part in one group event leaves a vivid impression of the intimate interactions between the actors and fans. Her analyses also indicate how women may choose to attain their desire through this commodification of intimacy – that could be financially exploitative – rather than offering free emotional labour in a 'love' relationship.

As Gygy and Hansen (Chapter 1) point out, the sense of 'bounded authenticity' and the agency of those participating in the service industry – the providers *and* the clients – stand out in most of these chapters. The genuine psychological and emotional responses, as the researchers analysed, are embodied experience mediated by financial transaction. The only exception here is the 'delivery health shop' (Phillips, Chapter 4) in which an *atmosphere* of authenticity was deliberately created. Still, what is clear is the participants' awareness of the rules and customs that they should adhere to, as well as the time (and space) limited nature of the service. These, in fact, seems to enable the clients to experience their scripted encounters comfortably and affectively.

This volume reveals that, unsurprisingly, gender performance in the service industry aligns with the heteronormative binary embedded in modern Japanese culture. And at the intersection of gender and the service client-provider relationship, hierarchies and power dynamics are shaped. Women working in sex services are still stigmatised (Phillips, Chapter 4), even by their male peers in the industry (Kodaka, Chapter 5). The AVs made for women continue to portray men as saviours, reinforcing the discourse that female agency and sexuality are dependent on men (Kodaka, Chapter 5). The masculinity sought by female clients may be a beautified androgynous character that is not threatening, still it should be charming and protective (Fanasca, Chapter 3). Even in the field of a gay bar, the performance of sexual roles aligns with the binary gender roles to build a 'pyramid of desirability' (p. 55). At Zenith, staff members were judged and categorised as *either* a masculine presenting 'top' *or* a non-masculine presenting 'bottom'; and the customers were empowered to 'correct' them when there was any slip in their language use or demeanour (Francioni, Chapter 2). The confession from Tazu, the non-masculine presenting owner of Zenith, is an intriguing one: sometimes, he did not know whether he should be a boyfriend or a mother to the customers. He was expected to be flirtatious, but also had to be materially and emotionally caring. How have these attributes been gendered, and why did Tazu present them in such a specific and conflicting manner?

These services are subcultures situated in a wider society where gendered interactions, over time, reshape one's experience of selfhood and their relationship with the public space. Simpkins (Chapter 6) observed and interviewed music performers at a Tokyo station, and his chapter demonstrates that the musicians' experiences of dis/comfort, im/mobility, security and threat, as well as their coping strategies, are all gendered. Male musicians considered their experience, occupying and transgressing in public space, as performing their authentic self and self-realisation. This sentiment was not shared by the female musicians. Instead, they performed 'charm' and created a 'non-threatening atmosphere' to navigate social interactions in a station space with a predominantly male presence. Public space around the station is coded: compared to their male counterparts who 'naturally' hung around to interact with their supporters, female musicians were much more cautious about the risks of inviting passers-by to take an interest in their performance. This makes me wonder: how is the performance of invitation gendered? How might female musicians be perceived if they invited an audience in a space where they were 'not supposed to be'?

The ethnographies in this collection provide a rich insight and reflection into the individual processes and interpersonal negotiations, contextualized in the macro-level of social structure and cultural scripts that prescribe what kinds of behaviour or ‘performance’ are acceptable. Gamberton’s (Chapter 7) experience of conducting fieldwork in Japan reveals the everyday gender labour as well as the systemic barriers a trans person had to navigate through. In ‘I sing the body contingent: Transition as gender-work in contemporary Japan’, Gamberton explains how binary gender norms are enforced in law in the name of protecting children and family units in Japan. This is suggested in Hotaru’s – one of Gamberton’s interviewees – narrative. Hotaru seemed to express a slight dismay about their gender being questioned by students, since a certain level of respect was expected in the professor-student hierarchy in Japan.

In contrast, the ideology of binary gender and family norms is so entrenched that Hotaru seemed to ‘naturally’ accept the public scrutiny of their family life as their gender became a communal concern. This reveals a sense of ‘collectivism’ that is different from the individualism and perceived boundaries between the public and the private in the West. Similarly, Gamberton’s reflection on his fieldwork becoming a communal affair (p. 186) represents this collectivism: he was ‘vetted’ by the community, and the respondents would check on whether their recommended interviewees were taken on. Gamberton’s ethnomethodology not only demonstrates the larger cultural forces at play, but also offers an opportunity to critically review how research ethics is considered in the UK.

Approaching the end of the book, I found myself drawn to Fabio Gygi’s writing on gender performance and ‘passing’: that it is ‘part of the work of gender, in that the performance is both artificially natural and deeply superficial. It is sincere, but not authentic, and it is precisely because it lacks authenticity that it entails a degree of freedom’ (p. 214). Although the *performance* of gender cannot be authentic, ‘bounded authenticity’ enacted by this performance can be. Could this open more possibilities for agency and different imaginations of gender? *The Work of Gender* is a thought-provoking collection of essays that examine gender performance and relations in varied subcultures and in the everyday, heteronormative society in contemporary Japan. For me, the authors’ ethnographic reflections evoke important critiques of researchers’ positionality, including how and from what perspectives we are viewing. Gender work in Japan is, thus, not ‘full of contradictions’, but consisting of varied and constant negotiations within a changing society.

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Book Review

Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity and Affect in Postsecular Turkey

Didem Unal ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

Book's Author: Zeynep K. Korkman

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Zeynep K. Korkman's book *Gendered Fortunes: Divination, Precarity and Affect in Postsecular Turkey* examines the proliferating fortune-telling economy of millennial Turkey with a focus on the gendered practices of commodified divination in Istanbul, where fortune telling coffee houses have mushroomed in the last two decades. As Korkman aptly chronicles in this book, Istanbul's divination economy is composed of business arrangements where fortune telling services are provided upon the purchase of coffee, in conjunction with a variety of supplementary services such as Reiki, lead-pouring sessions and life coaching, and operates in various platforms including cafés, offices, and online platforms. *Gendered Fortunes* draws on extensive ethnographic research to expose the affects, gendered sociabilities, and labours in the divination economy through which secular Muslim women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTI+) individuals navigate their precarious livelihoods, secular Muslim identities, the vicissitudes of neoliberal economy and gendered vulnerabilities. The divination publics Korkman studied are made up of mostly secular Muslim women and a minority of LGBTI+ subjects who are disadvantaged and feminised in heteropatriarchal relations of domination and subordination.

Exposing the multifarious layers of the gendered practices of divination, *Gendered Fortunes* highlights the political potentials of feminist engagements with affect, emotion, and feeling. Regarding divination service as a form of 'feeling labour', the book employs it as a feminist lens to marginalisation, precariousness and vulnerabilities in millennial Turkey.

This book engages with and contributes to different strands of feminist debates. It poses novel questions on how the coupling of capitalism and heteropatriarchy constitutes gendered lives and livelihoods and underscores the central role of affects in feminised labours under neoliberalisation. It also draws on and expands the insights of feminist scholarship on emotional and affective labours by developing the concept of 'feeling labour' as a spiritual economic endeavour for healing the vulnerabilities of post-secular neoliberal selfhood through the affective modes of divination. As such, *Gendered Fortunes* attests to how fortune telling, which seems like a seemingly insignificant practice in everyday life, can offer an original perspective to understand the ways in which precarious and anxious feminised subjects navigate the gendered vulnerabilities inherent in the logics of neoliberalism, postsecularism, and the masculine public sphere.

This book is innovative, inspiring, and noteworthy in many respects. First, it foregrounds significant attention to the post-secular, authoritarian, and political moment in millennial Turkey, where the informants engage in the divination economy as readers, entrepreneurs, and customers, while transversing broader social formations. Korkman's analysis meticulously situates the informants' engagement with the divination economy *vis-à-vis* the

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shifting terms of the affective atmosphere of millennial Turkey. She extensively notes the transformation of the political and public spheres where the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party)) rules. Globally and domestically regarded as a model Muslim democracy in the first decade of 2000s, Turkey became increasingly authoritarian by the 2010s, stepping back from democratisation and EU membership ideals, exercising masculinist state power, and targeting feminist and queer movements and eroding gender sensitive legal frameworks.

Noting these shifting terms of the political milieu, together with the marginalised and disempowered subjects' negative feelings arising from suppression and heteropatriarchal hierarchies, *Gendered Fortunes* suggests that divination provides an alternative public space away from the overarching antagonistic political struggles where feminised subjects are more free to express their anxieties, vulnerabilities and hopes through the affective language of divination. Korkman's analysis also evaluates the novelty of divination publics in terms of the post-secular condition in contemporary Turkey where secularism is no longer hegemonic *vis-à-vis* AKP's growing authoritarian Islamist dominance. The author argues that fortune-telling publics destabilise the secular-pious binaries inherent in the composition of the public in modern Turkey in that 'they are neither exactly gender-mixed, as proposed by secularist recipes, nor are they strictly gender-segregated, per reinvented religious precepts' (p. 11). It brings to our attention that 'while coffee divinations have long served as a medium of feeling one's way through gendered vulnerabilities, they are increasingly appropriated in the service of managing a compounded neoliberal and postsecular precarity' (p. 163). Taking as its object of inquiry a seemingly unimportant practice, this research opens a window into feminised and marginalised ways of engaging with affects in a context marked by the religio-conservative gender regime, secular hegemonic decline, political authoritarianism, and neoliberal precarities.

Second, it conceptualises divination service as a labour of 'feeling' (*bissetmek*) mobilised as a way of articulating and processing 'ordinary yet deeply felt gendered desires and anxieties' (p. 10). As such, this conceptualisation provides solid ground to expose how divination services generate an enchanted, affective intersubjective space in which both the clients and the fortune tellers can explore, experience, and engage with a range of affective emotions, ranging from the anxieties of an increasingly Islamist post-secular public sphere to the neoliberal labour precarity. Korkman meticulously differentiates between the concepts of *emotional*, *affective* and *feeling labour*. She puts her research into dialogue with the feminist scholarship where the concept of emotional labour has been used to expose gendered workers' inner states and how they are incorporated into labour processes to produce desired emotional results, while the term affective labour is employed to put the stress on the commodified production of affects (p. 164-165). Expanding this scholarship by developing the concept of *feeling labour*, Korkman emphasises fortune tellers' self-reflective understanding of divination as an active process of feeling where they engage in an intersubjective process of affective attunement and emotional expression that is commodified under neoliberal precarity, but the author also argues should not be reduced to this commodification. Within this frame, she argues that 'interpersonal processes of affective attunement foster emotional incitement and identification and thus blur the very boundaries between self and other as well as between spontaneous versus manufactured feelings' (p. 165).

To explain this nuanced approach, Korkman reports intimate conversations between fortune tellers and their clients that expose the intertwined affective and emotional qualities of the divination service. One of her informants, Esra, a queer woman in her thirties, expresses how she actively regulates the affective intensities and emotional states that might emerge during the intersubjective space of a divination service: 'It's like opening a wound, and you'd better not open it unless you know how to heal it.... One of my clients told me the most beautiful thing. She told me, "Esra, you make me walk naked in the snow and not get cold"' (p. 172). In a similar vein, another informant in Korkman's study, Bayhan, states: 'I can relax people, no doubt. But it all depends on me. I could speak in a way that makes the client anxious. Their spirits would definitely not be raised were I to tell them that their past was horrible, their present sucks, and their future will only get worse!' (p. 171).

In an era where the anxieties of economic neoliberalisation, precarious labour, rising Islamism, and attacks on gender-equal democracy are surging, this scholarly focus on feeling labour is novel and inspiring in that it provides feminist scholars useful tools to grapple with the affective modalities of 'juxtapolitical publics' that can offer some relief from the antagonistic struggles of the political and public spheres. Korkman defines 'juxtapolitical publics' as publics that 'lie to the side of the political and are valued by their participants for their very distance from the formal political realm' (p. 155). Korkman's study reveals that divination spaces provide underprivileged and minoritised subjects novel socio-spatial arrangements through which they can try an alternative engagement with the public and reflect on their affective states to mitigate the gendered vulnerabilities of post-secularism, gender conservatism, neoliberalism, precarity, and feminised labour.

The book consists of three parts. In Part I 'The Religious, the Superstitious, and the Postsecular', Chapter 1 historically contextualises divination practices in Turkey in terms of their relation to rationality and secularism, which are among the founding principles of Turkish modernity. It highlights how the disavowal of superstition and fortune-telling was significant to the making of the secular from a historical perspective. As such, it underscores the significance of the production and display of mixed-gender socialising in the Turkish secular public sphere in

opposition to the gender-segregated traditional and religious publics. Chapter 2 positions secular Muslim fortune-tellers *vis-à-vis* the gendered dynamics of Turkish secularism. It reflects on their engagement with the category of the secular and describes how they navigate their secularist identities and the present post-secular public by differentiating their divination services through ‘a secularised but enchanted discourse of feeling’ that complicates the ‘the rational/superstitious, Western/Eastern, and masculine/feminine distinctions’ (p. 86). Chapter 3 chronicles fortune tellers’ complex engagements in religion and divination and the ambiguous modes of their identity narratives that lay claim to both secular and Muslim modes of belonging, and portrays the intricate ways through which they attune themselves to the postsecular condition of millennial Turkey.

In Part II ‘Femininity, Intimacy, and Publics’, Chapter 4 examines the affectivity of divination and its role in production and navigation of gendered hopes and anxieties. Korkman defines divination publics as intimate publics where feminised subjects emotional and affective labours and encounters constitute a sense of belonging to a community marked by a feminine, relational intimacy (*mahrem*) and affective epistemology. Here, she details the socio-spatial relations of gendered intimacy in modern Turkey and defines post-secular divination publics as novel arrangements that are distinct from both gender-segregated Islamicate and gender secular mixed sociabilities and foster new public intimacies between women and LGBTI+ subjects. Chapter 5 neatly situates the divination publics *vis-à-vis* the proliferation of discourses on sexuality and intimacy under the AKP rule, especially in the post-2010 period. As Islamically accented neo-conservative familialism increasingly regulated marital, reproductive, sexual intimacies through heteronormative norms, premarital and pronatalist policies as well as coercive powers directly targeting feminist and LGBTI+ bodies and activism, the disciplining of intimacies and sexualities under the processes of neoconservatisation have become overwhelming. Against this background, Korkman develops her argument that by reducing the risks associated with being intimate for gender and sexual minorities, divination publics can provide certain relief from the neoconservative regulatory discourses and coercive powers of the political public sphere and mainstream public culture.

In Part III, ‘Feeling Labor, Precarity and Entrepreneurialism’, Chapter 6 explains how fortune tellers appropriate feeling labour to manage and navigate post-secular and neoliberal precarity. Here, Korkman describes that secular Muslim fortune tellers and entrepreneurs may engage in divination work as a result of downward mobility or the motivation to become part of the booming new age entrepreneurial industry and employ the dominant therapeutic ethos of neoliberalism to manage their own and their customers’ feelings of precarity and unsettlement. Chapter 7 reflects on the deepening precarities and the gendered, post-secular, economic vulnerabilities underlying the transnationalisation and digitalisation of divination economy by portraying the growing insecurities, anxieties and self-doubts of the precarious labour force working in the newly emerging modalities of divination economy such as online fortune tellers and translators from Turkish to Arabic catering to the needs of foreign clients from Arab countries.

Overall, this book is innovative, thought-provoking, and well-written. It offers novel insights for scholars interested in feminist scholarship on gendered labour and its affective modalities in the age of neoliberalism. Moreover, it is a necessary read for those who aim to grasp the shifting terms of the affective atmosphere in the political sphere and public culture of millennial Turkey and how divination publics constitute novel public arrangements at the intersection of gender precarities, emotions, affect, neoliberalism and postsecularism.

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Book Review

Feminist Institutionalism in South Africa

Bih-Er Chou ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

Book's Editor: Amanda Gouws

Publication Date: 2022

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Price: \$45,00

Number of Pages: 346 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-538-16008-4

The book is based on the papers presented by the authors of the Feminist Institutionalism Project in the 2019 Feminist Institutionalism Conference held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The Feminist Institutionalism Project is an attempt by the editor, as well as the authors of the book, to better understand the experiences of feminist activists/feminist scholars in the National Gender Machine (NGM) in South Africa to answer the basic question: Can equality be designed? In addition to an Introduction, 'Feminist Institutionalism: Views from the South', the topics of the book are divided into four parts. Part I, chapters 1 to 4, provides a history of the Commission for Gender Equality and its problems and challenges over the past 25 years since its establishment. Part II, chapters 5 and 6, delineates the successes of the feminist efforts of the Commission in the courts. Part III, chapters 7 to 10, details the internal problems of the Commission and its perceived failures in battling against the state for the feminist projects of gender equality. Part IV, chapter 11, as the conclusion for the book, calls for African feminist direct action and protest in order to forge a National Strategic Plan on gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa, in abeyance of the state.

This is an informative as well as important book for feminist scholars and practitioners who are interested in and concerned with theories of feminist institutionalism and the debates around state feminism. The book asks the basic question to institutional feminists: can equality be designed? Specifically, it addresses the question of: can (the state) institutions be designed in such a way that they can ensure innovative measures for and institutionalise feminist vision of gender equality? South Africa, due to its late democratic transition in 1996, provides a unique setting for examining the effect of feminist institutionalism in action. Through the involvement of feminist scholars and working together with women's organisations, feminist academics played an important role in the design of the Constitution and, thus, were able to extract concessions such as a gender pact, which resulted in the NGM, from out of the negotiation process. By examining the 25-year lifespan of one key institution of the South African NGM, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), this book provides empirical data to answer some of the questions regarding feminist institutionalism. It asks such questions as how the feminist institutions were designed, how these designs enhanced or constrained feminist initiatives, and how the logics of design may become detrimental to attaining feminist goals.

By examining the various aspects of initial design of the CGE, and comparing its different organisational forms under the auspices of different Presidential reigns in the South African democratisation process, different chapters of the book are able to shed light on some fundamental concerns regarding feminist institutionalism. Such concerns examine how the original intent and aspirations of the feminist design of gender equality can become undermined

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over time and what factors are contributing to this turn of events. From the South African's CGE history, it is found that patronage politics, the co-optation of 'femocrats' in the state, ideologies of nationalism, party politics and the shrinking space in which women's organisations can engage the state under the unchanging patriarchal regime, are all major factors contributing to the perceived failure of CGE in fulfilling its mission of gender equality, especially in its fight against gender-based violence.

This research also makes a contribution to the existing literature on state feminism which is mainly based on the experiences of the so-called global north, especially that of the European states. Since the creation of supranational bodies such as the European Union (EU), and its implementation of gender quota systems, the European states have demonstrated progress in gender equality in both the legislative bodies and the executive offices, as well as in the economic organisation. Moreover, this reconfiguration of the global north states provided the state feminists there with a different set of contextual factors to encounter which include multi-level governance, diversity in political economy and the intersectionality of racial/national compositions.

For the South African case, as the book delineates, the biggest hurdles that the state feminists experienced includes an arguably dysfunctional nationalist state, the corruption of 'femocrats', the co-optation of feminists by political parties, and the incorporation of CGE as a department within a multi-mission ministry such as the South African Ministry of Poverty, Youth and Women. All of these factors have contributed to the invincibility of the traditional patriarchal gender regimes in South African politics, including even in the democratic movement and party. These findings not only contribute to the advance of feminist institutionalism theory, but they will also shed light on the debates among political feminists regarding the advantages and shortcomings between a single, independent Department for Women versus an integrated multi-departmental Gender Equality Commission. The latter will be of special relevance to the feminist organisations and movement of many developing countries in its institutional efforts to advance political gender equality.

For the readers unfamiliar with the history of the democratic transition of South Africa and its political organisations, this book, with many chapters of detailed and sometime different accounts (of personal experiences and stories) can cause some confusion to the reader not well informed about the South African context. Authors with different experiences inevitably give differing views thus painting different pictures of events, this can be confusing to the non-South African reader. It may have been helpful if the book had provided readers with a succinct chart of the history of main political events and related personnel of the NGM and CGE in its introductory chapter. This could have facilitated readers (particularly, those outside the African continent) to better comprehend the whole picture of the history of the NGM and CGE. Also, in addition to the List of Acronyms provided in the book, many more acronyms were used by various authors throughout the book, which provided additional reading obstacles. Future editions of the book may like to take this problem into consideration. Finally, for international readers the book would benefit from a summative conclusion in response to the basic question posted by the book (can equality be designed?) and then to give readers a short version at the end as to the arguments as to why and how. However, this book is a great resource for those feminists in South Africa who wish to have a cogent history of institutionalised feminism and gender reform within that country.

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Book Review

The Sexual Politics of the Empire: Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti

Sarala Krishnamurthy ^{1*}

Published: September 1, 2023

Book's Author: Erin L. Durban

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The 2010 earthquake in Haiti attracted the world's attention to the devastating impact of a natural disaster on the people of Haiti. While on the one hand the indigenous population had to cope with the aftermath of the ensuing tsunami, loss of habitation, lives and livelihoods, they also had to deal with the evangelising missionaries who descended on Haiti with their own interpretation of why the catastrophe took place. Erin L. Durban's book, *The Sexual Politics of the Empire: Post Colonial Homophobia in Haiti* explores the conflicting responses of the evangelising missionaries and the international LGBTI+ activists to a beleaguered nation concentrating particularly on the ensuing homophobia on the same-sex desiring and gender creative Haitians. Arguing that the intervention of foreign agencies in Haiti started long before the natural calamity struck, Durban claims that Haiti has been a 'laboratory' for the US empire not only to increase its imperial desires, but also because it fulfils a strategic military outpost for the presence of the US military, to position itself in the Caribbean. She points out that the US government has always had an eye on the island, and the earthquake became an excuse for US imperial plans for an ongoing militarisation in the region. In order to justify its occupation of Haiti, an imperialist narrative is articulated and critiqued in the research, attributing its problems to its African/Black roots and the attendant indigenous cultures.

Durban cites the feminist sociologist, Ashley Currier's theorisation of political homophobia in Namibia in particular and Africa in general, in which she draws attention to the continuity of colonial apartheid and postcolonial homophobia stating that this was used as a tool by the nationalists to entrench the masculinist notions of superiority and liberate the country from colonial rule.

Also, she posits that postcolonial homophobia is the result of 'historical and contemporary' Western imperialists bio-political intervention to 'regulate/manage/govern/liberate gender and sexuality' (p. 10). Her book, therefore, presents an interdisciplinary inquiry into the individual and collective experiences of homophobia post 2011. Describing her research as a 'decolonial turn away from sites' (p. 13) towards a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis of the connections amongst various sites, she focusses her attention on Queer Haiti, represented by the 'same-sex desiring and gender creative' people located there. She problematises the definition of Queer itself since it is a term relatively unknown in Haiti and also because it carries multiple meanings for academics in the USA. Preferring to use the phrase 'same-sex desiring and gender-creative' for LGBTQI+ her book is a culmination of her research practice in Haiti where she conducted interviews, focus groups discussions, and data collection over a ten year period. She has also included creative works by same sex desiring and gender creative groups in Haiti with official documents, public records, newsletters, newspaper articles, magazines, social

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media posts and other anthropological research. She claims that the US imperialist state ‘othered’ Haiti, constructing the island as this dark and dangerous land of ‘voodoo/*randaux*’ which had to be protected from itself, therefore recolonisation was warranted. She traces the growth of the concept of ‘*zonbi*’ (zombie) over five historical periods of Haiti. The zombie is perceived as a horrific and disgusting figure which symbolically belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead, and is directly linked to homosexuality in the Christian church. This loathsome figure was used as an excuse by the US imperialists to move into Haiti; but it was later reclaimed by the same sex desiring and gender creative Haitians to protest and perform anti-colonial queer critiques of homophobia.

Durban describes in detail how the Christian missionaries from US relocated into Haiti to ‘save’ the Haitians. According to her, there were two waves of missionaries who came to Haiti. The first were the Roman Catholics who landed when France colonised Haiti in the 1400s and the second group were the Protestant missionaries who came to help Haiti after the earthquake in 2011. Both Christian groups’ proselytisation resulted in homophobia which negatively affected the same sex desiring and gender creative groups in Haiti. But their approaches were different: whilst the Roman Catholics believed in silence and not acknowledging the existence of same sex desiring and gender creative people, the Protestant enforced public annunciation and denunciation of such groups.

In the following section of the book, Durban elaborates on the Pierre Louis controversy, when President René Preval appointed ‘educator, economist, and human development leader’ (p. 88) Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis as his prime minister. She was subsequently removed from office because she was suspected of being a lesbian even though she acknowledged the presence of her daughter and a grandson in her acceptance speech, presumably as a way of appearing heteronormative. Durban states that according to feminist organisations in Haiti, this was used to prevent women from occupying leadership positions. Durban cites Susanne Parr (1997) who calls this ‘lesbian-baiting’, which is an effective tool to destabilise women, since there is no defence against this kind of accusation. Lynda Hart (1994) explains that kind of behaviour can be called ‘heteropatriarchy’ in which sexism is used to generate hatred of homosexuals leading to gender asymmetry because it is the women who are targeted the most.

Next, Durban turns her attention to the performance of ‘Zonbi, Zonbi’ at the 2009 Ghetto Biennale in Port au Prince. She gives the example of a cultural group called Lakou and argues that performance represents a resistance and challenge to enforced, Christian homophobia in the country and is a form of protest to provide a safe, secure place for same sex desiring and gender creative people to contest heteronormativity. The Biennale itself has become very popular over time and is well attended by people from different parts of the world. Particularly, people of the diaspora make use of this opportunity to connect with their cultural roots. Referring to different studies on queer practices by several scholars, Durban explores Frankétienne’s novel, *Defaz* (1975), which is this first novel ever written in Haitian Kreyol. According to Durban, *Defaz* is an allegory of life under the tyrannical rule of Duvalier and is symbolic of the *Zonbi* anti-hero who is physically present but lacks soul, a revolting creature which links in with performances by cultural groups like Lakou. In other words, Durban asserts that queerness is represented culturally in several forms whether it is a public performance or in creative writing providing a space for the *masisi* (a Kreyol term for same sex desiring person, mostly men), *madinin* (a Kreyol term for same sex desiring person, mostly women) and others to dwell peacefully.

In the final section, Durban traces the emergence of the social movement against homophobia linking it to the many activist human rights organisations that moved into Haiti to develop transnational movements to combat this problem. She asserts that any conversation about Haiti and homophobia has to include the element of race and that any queer anti-imperialist activism towards a vision for revolutionary change is impossible in the NGO laboratories. It is really these Haitians who keep this struggle for acceptance of the same sex desiring and gender creative people alive in the national consciousness.

Durban’s book presents a penetrating analysis of homophobia in Haiti and links it to an ongoing imperial agenda of the US government. Her insight into the nature of same sex desiring and gender creative people and the challenges they face in a society fraught with interference from different religious sects as well as international LGBTQI+ organisations is not only masterly, but she is able to make an incisive argument for the need to look beyond superficial reasons of race and gender. What is most impressive about her book is her ability to weave together a narrative from anthropological standards to literary and cultural examples to make her argument comprehensive. Her ability to make connections across historical, political, religious, sociological and other fields, makes this a book of interest for any scholar researching these areas. Her writing is academic, but not dense and incomprehensible for any reader with an interest in non-fiction and abstract ideas. She gives many examples to illustrate her arguments about the assertion of same sex desiring and gender creative people’s identities, thus making it a thought provoking and compelling book to read.

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