

Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (editors)

Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

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Reviewed by Bonnie Mann, 2016

Narrated by Theodra Bane

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With all of the excitement these days about the "new material feminisms," many of us old material feminists have become concerned about our collective attentions turning away from the realities of our economic lives, the division of labor, and practices of exploitation as key structuring elements of various modes of subordination--including the persistent subordination of women to men. This very persistence--given the mitigation of the most extreme forms of gendered economic inequality and the rollback of overt formal and legal discrimination against women in what we call the "West"--calls for a kind of feminist analysis that the new material feminisms, despite their great value in reworking our understandings of our embodied, material existence and place in nature, seem ill-equipped to provide. It is in this context that the value and importance of *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* can be understood. Advocating a renewal of the kind of feminism that "assumes that social power relations are built around meeting life's needs related to the body . . . but also social needs . . . and a sense of belonging in relation to social groups" (250), a feminism that "begin[s] with the premise that the meeting of needs constitutes the baseline of history" (265), *Love* reintroduces a much needed materialist perspective into contemporary feminist discussions of patriarchy and resistance in the twenty-first century.

Another way to understand the importance of the volume is to see it as one feminist contribution to the "affective turn," or the emergence of efforts to engage dimensions of human experience that are embodied and pre-reflective rather than symbolic and representational. "Without rejecting the insights of post-structuralism," the editors tell us, "the book represents a return to and deepening of the strand of materialist feminism which both includes and goes beyond the study of discourses" (1). The turn away from a strict focus on "norms and values" to "the dimension of the communication of affect in social relationships and its institutionalization" (25) defines a space in which feminist concerns about love can be developed both as a contribution to and as a critical intervention in affect theory, which tends to sideline questions of gendered power. As Rosemary Hennessy puts it in the concluding essay to the volume, capturing the hope and optimism that characterize a number of the essays in *Love*, "the potential to form affective attachments is never completely consumed by capital or ideology" (269); it constitutes a "surplus that capital cannot harvest" (268). At the same time, the "affective economy" (250) is key to how gender subordination persists and reworks itself--through institutions and practices associated with love and care: "It is male power in the ongoing production and exchange of love as a material energy in love and caring practices, not simply ideological beliefs or discourses on love, gender or sexuality, habits or physical coercion, that must be analyzed to understand both the persistence of, and resistance to, male domination" (6).

Love is a collection of eighteen separate essays addressing themes ranging from the mitigation of the tension between democracy and monarchy in Sweden through the spectacle

of royal love (Adenji), to coded references to the body and sexuality in Iranian love blogs (Jabarooty), to what are essentially useful literature reviews of work by Norwegian family researchers (Bjornholt) and of classic texts in feminist philosophy (Lowe), to essays that tackle questions of capitalist patriarchy on a grander scale. The essays are of uneven quality. I found that at some moments "materialist feminism" became a rather blunt instrument, and particular contemporary phenomena were somewhat awkwardly stuffed into the straitjacket of a preformed analysis.

Alyssa Schneebaum explores the question of whether "a couple composed of two people of the same biological sex may not be less exploitative" than heterosexual couples (131). She raises a very important question, and identifies a key problem--that when same-sex couples have children they often find themselves structurally constrained to divide paid labor and unpaid care labor unevenly between them. Unfortunately, she then resorts to a division of the members of such couples into "social males" and "social females," which seems to me to force the phenomenon into the analysis rather than attend to its complexities. I think it is a mistake in this case not to thematize the lived experience of the couples in question, most of whom would no doubt reject the quick labeling of the employed partner as the "social male" and the unpaid caretaker as the "social female"--although they may well experience these unwelcome roles supervening on their own self definitions. In other words, same-sex couples may indeed go through a kind of involuntary re-gendering process in terms of the social roles they are economically and structurally constrained to play and find they are subsequently valued and devalued in relations of power that they do not control--a process that is both painful and puts great strain on such relationships--but the quick turn to naming one the "social male" and the other the "social female" makes a complex experience too simple. It also runs the risk of unintentionally echoing both the force of the structural prescription being analyzed and the age-old heterosexist presumption that in a same-sex relationship one partner "is the man" and one "is the woman." More care is required in such accounts to capture the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon from the perspective of those undergoing it as well as the multidimensionality of the structural constraints at play.

In Lena Gunnarsson's analysis of the persistence of "normalized asymmetrical tendencies" in heterosexual love relationships, she offers a "microsociology of power" that takes her readers *inside* the dynamics of "asymmetrical role taking" in intimate relationships between men and women. Drawing on empirical studies by feminist sociologists, she defines "role taking" as the ability of one partner to displace their own perspective, to see things from the point of view of the other, and gives a concrete and detailed accounting of the normalized asymmetries in this capacity by appealing to particular instances. She then links this careful account back to Jónasdóttir's analysis of love, embedding her reference to particular patterns of experience in a broader understanding of the role of love in fulfilling basic human needs. Her interpretation of these patterns as rooted in the basic human need to be loved, which is constrained normatively and structurally in contemporary patriarchy, leads her readers to a compassionate understanding of the motivating force behind heterosexual women's seeming embrace of associations between their femininity and subservience. I found her account to be both convincing and powerful.

A number of other powerhouse essays in this volume deserve special attention. In Jónasdóttir's opening essay reviewing her historic contributions to these discussions and her understanding of love as a human activity comparable to labor power in its creative potential and importance, she sets the stage for many of the other essays that draw directly or indirectly on her work. For her, "love power" is "an alienable and exploitable human social

force" that "contemporary, formally equal patriarchy depends on" (13). As a "specific creative/productive power," this power is also potentially transformative (14).

Both distinguishing herself from and building on Jónasdóttir's account, Valerie Bryson encourages us to think critically about the "time cultures" (115) in which we are embedded, where "commodified clock-time" that "dominates our human relationship with time today" (116) is in deep contradiction to and interferes fundamentally with the temporal logic of care (114). When people doing care work are "expected to operate within a rigid or inappropriate time culture," both the cared-for and the caring laborer suffer. She understands the sphere of (re)productive labor where care takes place primarily as more independent from the sphere of production than Jónasdóttir does (114), but both authors provide us with sharp analyses of dimensions of our contemporary world and the politics of love and care that shape everyday experiences of love and time.

Kathleen Lynch expands Nancy Fraser's well-known three-dimensional analysis of injustice, which includes issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation to include "affective inequality and relationality" as a fourth dimension (173). Drawing on feminist care ethics to thematize the "profound states of dependency and interdependency" that characterize the relational beings we are, she identifies two forms of "affective inequality": inequalities related to giving care and those related to the receipt of care. She wants to open a space "to direct political desire towards an admission of vulnerability and other-centeredness," and elevate these aspects of the human condition to a new status in our politics and social policy (184, 185).

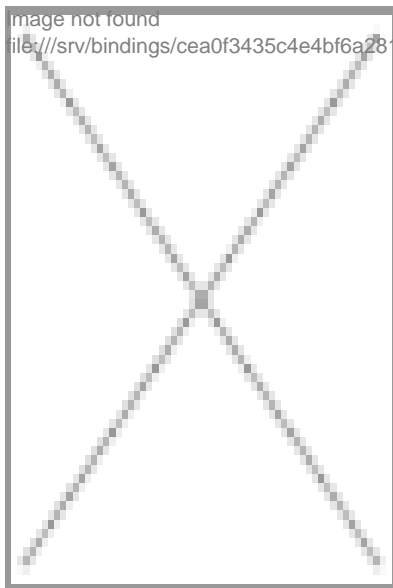
Lynch's essay resonates powerfully with Ann Ferguson's contribution, in which she points out that "people's rights to care for their children and elders is under severe siege" (251). Ferguson brings these concerns to a global analysis of capitalist patriarchy, in which structures of inequality "continue to distribute greater status, love and affective energy to some men in relation to other men, and most men in relation to most women in the affective economy" (252). In a global affective economy, the structures of care are "reterritorialized" in the sense that some people see their caring relations stripped away, as they leave their intimate circles of care to travel to distant lands and provide care for others, for example. The traditional "territorialization" of care in relations between individuals, in the couple, in relations between parents and children, in the heteronormative family as a site for capitalist consumption, are under strain in many contexts. In some cases, there can be a creative "reterritorialization" of these energies to groups, to revolutionary solidarity between groups, and thus to social transformation.

Hennessey further elucidates this "surplus that capital cannot harvest and that generates revolutionary changes" (268). "The potential to form affective attachments is never completely consumed by capital or ideology," she argues; it constitutes "an externality" or a surplus, which she calls the "surplus common" (270). One of the most significant insights of this important essay is the degree to which unexpected affective attachments drive political motivation in social change efforts. "Love," for Hennessey, is "the articulation of passionate politics that transforms unmet need into the possibility of reclaiming the common" (270). She explores the passionate, specific affective attachments that were key to the activist work she witnessed and participated in on the Mexican border, particularly the work of the residents of the *la colonia* Blanca Navidad in Nuevo Laredo, where she found that "critical consciousness is leavened with ineffable affective attachments" which "nudge right up against the familiar discourse of romantic love" (274). This kind of love engenders a "surplus of cooperation capital cannot appropriate" which might enable us to reclaim "the common ground on which

we live" (276).

Taken together, the essays in this volume rejuvenate feminist materialist perspectives on contemporary forms of capitalist patriarchy and in relation to the role of love and care both in practices of exploitation and practices of resistance. They provide a convincing, multi-dimensional analysis of the ways that love and care have become sites for the intensification of women's exploitation by men even as overt formal, economic, and legal forms of subordination have eroded. They offer inspiring and hopeful accounts of love as a power that remains, at least to some degree, excessive to capitalist modes of production and consumption--fueling collective practices of resistance. Ferguson and Jónasdóttir's volume provides an urgently needed invitation to readers to renew an approach to feminist questions that is materialist, without being reductive, attuned to affect without neglecting macro-structures of power, and deeply feminist, but in a radically intersectional sense.

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