

Editorial

## Feminist Encounters with Situated Knowledges of Gender and Love

Wernmei Yong Ade <sup>1\*</sup>, Deirdre C. Byrne <sup>2</sup>, Kelly Gardiner <sup>3</sup>

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 coupledness. 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 – *themselves* – has become current again, being used to refer to reflexive acts by a non-binary person, as in ‘Rae has been entertaining themselves 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. ‘Spacetime mattering’, 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

<sup>1</sup> Nanyang Technological University, SINGAPORE

<sup>2</sup> University of South Africa, SOUTH AFRICA

<sup>3</sup> La Trobe University, AUSTRALIA

\*Corresponding Author: [wmyong1904@gmail.com](mailto:wmyong1904@gmail.com)

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 debut 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.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2006). Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12(4), 543–574. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-002>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq>
- Barad, K. (2011). Nature's queer performativity. *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 19(2), 121–158. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121>
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- 

**Citation:** Ade, W. Y., Byrne, D. C. and Gardiner, K. (2023). Feminist Encounters with Situated Knowledges of Gender and Love. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 7(2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/13545>

Copyright © 2023 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.