

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,<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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’<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Dry sex’ is sex when a woman’s vagina is dry due to lack of foreplay.

<sup>3</sup> Most recently, at Sojourner Project’s January convening, ‘Think from Black: A Lexicon’ (see <https://www.racegenderclass.org/think-from-black-a-lexicon>).

<sup>4</sup> See Mupotsa, D. S. (2020). Conjugalities. *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 conjugality 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 confronted 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 form<sup>5</sup> while critiquing how it's been intentionally imposed by law and policy.<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> Macharia, K. (2020). Belated: Interruption. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 26 (3), 561–573.

<sup>6</sup> 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 case<sup>7</sup> 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,<sup>8</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> 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 Danaï'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.

DANAÏ: 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'<sup>9</sup> 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),<sup>10</sup> 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 *rapporteur*ing 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

<sup>9</sup> In youth slang, 'shipping' two people means that the speaker thinks they would make a good (romantic) couple.

<sup>10</sup> 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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