Lena Gunnarsson
The Contradictions of Love: Towards a feminist-realist ontology of sociosexuality
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"How does it come about that women tend to give more love to men than men give to women, when mutual love is (supposed to be) the very raison d'être of the relationship, when the ideological context prescribes gender equality and when there are no salient external factors stopping women from breaking up a relationship in case they are not satisfied?" (100).

This question drives Gunnarsson's book and compellingly articulates a bewildering, frustrating reality in many women's lives. Following achievements in the public and legal spheres, feminism recognizes that (particularly for white, Western, gender-conforming, heterosexual women enjoying associated forms of privilege) patriarchal oppression today plays out most powerfully and insidiously in the private sphere. Philosophical attempts to reckon with this stubborn form of injustice include bell hooks's influential multi-book series on love and Tom Digby's recent work examining "the battle of the sexes" that asks "why is heterosexual love so hard?" (hooks 2002; 2004; Digby 2014). Answers point to men's emotional withholding, women's insecurities and lack of solidarity, masculinity defined by violence and entitlement, the double binds of feminine sexuality, general disempowerment in the face of discursive and institutional entrenchments, and other too-familiar symptoms of patriarchal malaise.

While targeting this perennial problem set, Gunnarsson's book makes two shifts in conversational register: to more fine-grained analyses of hetero-relations and to a deeper explanation of the conditions of their problematic emergence. In *The Contradictions of Love*, Gunnarsson stages an ambitious ontological and materialist treatment of the present situation in which "the most striking feature of contemporary heterosexual relations is perhaps that . . . gender inequality continues its monotonous beat" (9). Both her diagnosis and proposed remedy strive for an original philosophical perspective that is meant to generate direct intervention in the lives and practices of the women for whom she is

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writing. Pairing Anna Jónasdóttir's theory of *love power* (used interchangeably with *sociosexuality*) with Roy Bhaskar's critical realist ontology of metaReality yields a dialectical and ultimately liberating understanding of the "battle of the sexes" as a "demi-real" yet "causally efficacious illusion" (123).

Love power is a "current" consisting of care as well as erotic ecstasy and running through all of human social life (44; see also 47). It is the power of producing and sustaining life; all humans give and take of it. The labor of love is a real-time resource, and human embodied existence dictates limits on how much of this current any one person can generate. Male authority, analyzed in a way that echoes Beauvoir's classic treatment of the masculine Subject in relation to the feminine Other (thus echoing in turn Hegel's master–slave dialectic, though the author refers only to a Marxist lineage), operates so implicitly and pervasively that women, in their self-understandings and their social interactions, *willingly* give away more love power to male counterparts than they receive. In Jónasdóttir's Marxist historical-materialist account, accumulated "male authority" then enables men to exploit women's love power, leaving women in a perpetual state of "sociosexual poverty" (54–56). Gunnarsson finds support for this theory through analysis of interview data of couples and of women about love (taken from Holmberg 1993/1995 and Langford 1999, respectively). The data itself is minimal, but she plausibly draws out the existential and emotional consequences of "normalized asymmetrical tendencies" presumably at play in hetero-relations as such.

As suggested by these sociological and existential themes, much in the analysis will be familiar to feminist readers. Yet on the basis of them, Gunnarsson offers intriguing explanations for the persistence of heterosexual relational inequalities. For example, she suggests that women may stay in nonreciprocal relationships because "the experience of being loved is largely based on the experience of being better treated than one could demand or expect," which "helps explain why feelings of mutual love can co-exist rather smoothly with actual practical asymmetries concerning who cares more than the other" (110). Some love is better than no love at all; furthermore, humans need *to* love. This view importantly acknowledges that "we are dependent on one another not only because we need to cooperate in order to produce our means of subsistence; we are also existentially dependent on one another in a more immediate sense. . . . [T]he force that is generated by this socio-sexual neediness is manifested in 'erotic links between people and compelling erotic need for access to one another's body-and-mind' (J 1991/1994: 101)" (49–50).

Jónasdóttir's theory of love power is attractive and powerful in its fluent naming of subtle, pervasive dynamics most people can recognize in their everyday experiences, in classrooms, workplace meetings, holidays with family, in mainstream narratives, as well as in intimacy. This is not to claim that we necessarily strive for sexual acts or romantic attachments in all moments or social relations; rather, it reminds us that we are basically desiring, striving, and intersubjectively energized beings. The idea of an active sociosexual current pulsing through our lives may help to illuminate the shadings of gender difference that fill in our unconscious expectations in encounters, or the unspoken reasons we have for speaking to each other as we do—and, of course, the tensions and

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disappointments that so often follow when normative scripts prevail over genuine connecting.

Optimism for overcoming these stifling roles is licensed by Bhaskar's deep ontology of love as humanity's "really real" ground state. One of Gunnarsson's original contributions comes in taking the opportunity presented by Jónasdóttir's materialism to reject poststructuralist feminist theory (strongly, in sharp and sustained argumentation) and, more interestingly, to advocate for a critical realist ontology that may be able to put oppressive gender relations in their proper place. On this view, "male authority, female sociosexual poverty and the exploitation which they both depend on and sustain are real inasmuch as our collective belief in them informs our practices, which construct the reality in which we must act. Yet, they are only half-real, since they negate necessities on which they depend," namely, our actually undivided, nonantagonistic, loving connection to one another (123). For Gunnarsson, the instability of this dialectic allows for the real moments of joy and connection, which, rather than any simple false consciousness, are what motivate women to choose and stay in relationships. Further, in contrast with some social-constructionist accounts that reify and unintentionally entrench patriarchal oppression, the "demi-real" status of female powerlessness opens up the possibility for positive change.

In the chapter "Reality and Change," Gunnarsson recommends a "twofold mode of feminist struggle" (150). First, on a collective scale, women must redirect their caring and erotic energies toward one another at the same time as they withdraw these energies from their relations with men, thereby deriving strength and existential-emotional sustenance from one another rather than from hetero-relations. (If this calls to mind the case of Lysistrata and her sisters, Gunnarsson has indeed made her point [152].) This withdrawal will disorient men and force them to do their own work of recalibrating their relations to sources of love power. Second, on an individual scale, women must withdraw from external dependencies and distractions, turn inwards, and change themselves, particularly seeking productive transformations of their anger. This second step is meant to work in dialectical complement to the broader withdrawal from men. Both moves involve recentering energy on women and on women's responsibility to shed the illusions of the demi-real and instead practice wholeness and spiritual love.

These interventions follow from Gunnarsson's innovative juxtaposition of Jónasdóttir and Bhaskar: love power is real, but the current imbalance of its distribution does not have to be. This is a welcome, potentially powerful message, and a fine payoff of adroit negotiations between two large-scale theoretical systems.

I find that much of Gunnarsson's success in this work is in the way in which it breaks with rhetorical and practical cycles that stymie progress. Agreeing with hooks's analysis of the feminine experience of unworthiness in love (hooks 2002), Gunnarsson offers "a way for women to break this tendency in relative independence from changes in the structural conditions generating it: they can seek out in themselves the grains of self-love which do exist, and cultivate or 'exercise' this capacity from within" (161). Hence the second fold of her feminist struggle. Her unqualified confidence in women's self-and-

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other-empowerment stands out as a bold proposal, especially given the backlash against pull-herself-up-by-her-bootstraps books like Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In.* In our current catch-22 postfeminist millennial climate, it is not easy for women to give this sort of candid advice to other women. Much-shared print and internet articles worry over women's overburdened existence, but that very abundance of concerned writings puts increasing demands and pressures on women to manage vigilantly and improve all aspects of life. How, then, should one receive Gunnarsson's invitation to women to take on more labor, do more to bond with one another, and build up more inner strength and understanding to cope with the shortcomings of their male partners? A charitable reading must see it as self-consciously audacious and committed to the inevitably hard work of transformation.

Yet precisely because of the present moment's complexity, Gunnarsson's call to collective withdrawal cannot but feel abstract and outmoded. She acknowledges intersectional movements in feminist theory, but only en route to her insistence that "although women and men are more than women and men, they are still women and men" (93). This still leaves unresolved conflicts and contradictions in everyday people's experiences that result from their imbrication in multiple systems of power. As hooks reminds us, the Leviathan we battle is "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2004, 17). One is left wondering how women will come together across many different identities and situations to pool their sociosexual riches, what sorts of real difficulties might lie in the way of this, and indeed if this blueprint offers us the right lines along which to redraw society to enable social justice. The theoretical trappings are new, but I am not sure what advantages the project offers over similar second-wave separatist movements, and it does not appear to address any of the problems that plagued them.

I do not mean to dismiss *tout court* Gunnarsson's remedy for rebalancing "the micro-sociology of power in heterosexual coupledom" (19). I take it that Gunnarsson recommends collective withdrawal because she senses that a radical disruption is required to shake off the iron grip that asymmetrical role-taking has on the man–woman relational dyad. Again and again in the conversational data she reviews, what goes on is not simply about any two interactors but involves the excesses and influences of broader and internalized discourses, and perhaps what linguist Per Linell refers to as "third parties" (Linell 2009): the "others" implied and virtually present in our conversations, including generalized other(s). It may also be fruitful to consider how some enactive cognitive theorists treat the emergent power of social interaction dynamics, for example in claiming that "the behavior of agents in a social situation unfolds not only according to their individual abilities and goals, but also according to the conditions and constraints imposed by the autonomous dynamics of the interaction process itself" (Torrance and Froese 2011). Dialogical and inter-enactive perspectives on social behavior confirm Gunnarsson's premise that what is needed is not only a change of heart or habit for any particular woman or man, but a completely different discourse context: a different world in which the conversation takes place, or a different system from which the interaction dynamic might draw its role-distributing power (see also De Jaegher and Froese 2009). In short, to switch the vocabularies we live by, we must switch forms of life.

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My suspicion then is not that Gunnarsson's proposal is too radical, but that it might not be radical enough. The time for utopias rooted in gender difference has passed, but it is nonetheless critical that we (diverse humans) find ways to form communities to support one another in seeking and sowing the grains of love power.

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