

Introduction: “Re-Visioning Love”

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“Love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of the world.”
Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*¹

One can think of few works of literature that do not tell a “love story” or two. Perhaps the most explored theme in literature, love has, however, only enjoyed marginal status in critical literary scholarship. The reluctance to take love seriously might be attributed to the fact that love is itself a subjective experience, one that at best offers, as Jean-Luc Marion informs us, “an interpretation, or rather a noninterpretation, that is purely subjective, indeed sentimental” (71). Thanks, however, in part to the philosophical writings of Levinas, Irigaray, Barthes, Kristeva and Badiou, who have not only “praised” love (in reference to the title of Badiou’s book *In Praise of Love*) but have insisted on its continued relevance for ethics, politics, how we come to know, think, and write of ourselves as subjects, and write ourselves into subjectivity; love is now seen as an important topic to be approached on its own terms in multiple fields of study within the humanities and the social sciences.

That love is taken seriously today is evidenced in the various interdisciplinary research groups that have emerged over the years, which place love at the heart of their research endeavours. Most notable is the Feminist Love Studies Network, who has, since its inception in 2013, published two collections of essays – *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twentieth Century* and *Feminism and the Power of Love: Interdisciplinary Interventions* – under Routledge’s Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality series. Another such group is The International Society for the Study of Gender and Love. Founded in 2015, it is dedicated to studying gender and love from as many reflective, critical and creative approaches as possible², and has so far published two collections of essays under Brill. Its most recent conference, held in South Africa in September 2019, centred on situated knowledges of gender and love, and stands as a reminder that how and what we can know of love is limited to the ways in which love is socially and culturally manifested. This idea that the knowledge of love is a *located* and *situated* practice anchors many of the contributions in this collection.

This special issue is inspired not only by the resurgence of love as a fertile field of study within the humanities and the social sciences, but is also driven by the conviction that love, in our age of advanced capitalism, globalisation, mobility and technology, is more relevant than ever. As one of the fastest growing regions in economic, political and cultural terms, Asia, particularly East and Southeast Asia, is uniquely poised to contribute

towards thinking and re-thinking love. What can the writings of this region tell us about love and loving in an age such as ours – one of change, transience and mobility? How is love experienced between individuals whose subjectivities are increasingly fragmented, non-unitary, multi-layered and complex? What can it mean to love at a time when love is often experienced in between locations or, as Rosi Braidotti confesses, “in translation”? What material and cultural factors condition our experiences, expressions and representations of love? If love, as Barthes teaches us, is nothing other than the discourse that constitutes it, then what does it mean to love between and across ideologies, cultures, traditions and identities – gendered, sexual, racial, national or otherwise? How do the love stories we tell open up spaces for ideological debate?

In this issue, one will encounter a variety of loves: romantic love, first love, ethical love, familial love, transnational love, imagined love, collective love, patriotic love, political love, “red love” (Hardt). The forms these academic encounters with love take are as varied as the types of love they cover, and reflect the transversal dialogue love engages between disciplines. From creative exploration to ethnographic inquiry, literary analyses to media and cultural studies, these pieces engage with topics that range from the personal pangs of love, to political concerns including migration, colonialism and patriotism. Love, in these contributions, steers away from being conventionally thought of as private emotion to embrace what Michael Hardt felt is sorely needed in love studies: “a more generous and unrestrained conception of love.”³ By sheer coincidence rather than curatorial intent, the collection of essays here gravitates towards the theme of movement and mobility: love is seen as a creative and transformative force that motivates and moves us, both towards others, but also towards ourselves. Whether migrants seeking new homes, women looking for love, marginalised persons trying to find their place in the world, loving subjects trying to find their place as political subjects – these are subjects who move, and whose subjectivities are constituted in love, and in being moved by love.

Thus it is that our opening piece by Linda Wells weaves a love story centred around a tin shed known as the Bungalow that was built in Alice Springs – today the third-largest town in the Northern Territory of Australia – in 1914 to house an Indigenous Araban woman named Topsy Smith and her seven children. Topsy remained at the Bungalow for fifteen years, raising her own children as well as forty other “half-caste” children. Wells herself spent three decades in Central Australia, working in education and community development, conducting guided walking tours and writing. It was during this time, she tells us, that she came across the story of Topsy. Using techniques of speculative biography, archival poetics, ekphrasis and auto-ethnography, Wells offers us a cartographic “re-vision” (Adrienne Rich) of the life of Topsy, a shadowy and little-known figure in history, but seen here as a woman full of life and love. Tracing her travels with her husband Bill and mapping their love, Wells’s piece attempts to “sculpt a history that connects the past to the present”, because for Wells, “this history

is embodied. It's personal" (Wells). The Bungalow might be the heart of the story, but Topsy is the lifeblood that keeps it beating. Throughout her piece, Wells is guided by the central question: "How do we move them from being shadowy outliers to people of our past, as fully fleshed as the ones with the biggest names and the most extensive archival records?" (Wells). In the end, Wells comes to the realization that it is only with a love that respects the other's difference that one can tell the story of another, so that love becomes a method of history making as well as the force that motivates that making.

This idea of love as a force that moves and transforms is also the central theme of our next piece by Min Joo Lee, which is part of a larger research project investigating the transnational travel of female Hallyu (Korean Wave) fans to Korea to find love. Drawing on Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic as power, Lee sees these female Hallyu fans, generally Western women, as tapping on their erotic power as a source of creative energy to bring about change and to refuse heteropatriarchal forms of toxic masculinity in their own home cultures in search of alternative forms of masculinity. Immersing herself amongst female Hallyu tourists who have travelled halfway across the world to Korea to find love, Lee unpacks some of the assumptions that inform their expressions of romantic desire for Korean men, a desire motivated by depictions of a particular type of romantic Korean masculinity known as *kkonminam* (flower boy) in transnationally popular Korean television drama serials. While appearing to assert their right to non-sexual and non-aggressive love by pursuing romantic relations with Korean men whom they believe to perform *kkonminam* masculinity, Lee's female subjects however end up co-opting the discourse of romantic love and Korean romantic masculinity towards an Orientalist discourse that essentializes assumed differences between Asian and Western masculinity. What lies at the heart of the love stories these women share with Lee is an ideological discourse that ironically reproduces the very same frames of patriarchal reasoning and positioning these women had initially sought to escape.

Our next piece by Rachel Pitlongay carries on the conversation about love as an encounter with difference, and how love might open up space for negotiation between different cultures, in addition to opening up space for ideological critique. Pitlongay attempts to read love as a "contact zone", conceived by Mary Louis Pratt as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt cited in Pitlongay). Pitlongay extends Pratt's concept to think about how romantic love can function as a contact zone that initiates three types of engagement: confrontation, exchange, and kinship. Romantic love becomes a site (a contact zone) where different cultures are brought into contact with each other, with varying outcomes. Pitlongay puts her theory to test in her analysis of three cultural texts that depict Philippine highland-lowland romantic relationships: the short story "The Girl from Bauko" (1988), the television series *Forevermore* (2014-2015) and the film *Don't Give Up on Us* (2006). Ultimately, she

demonstrates, as Lee does, that love stories invariably involve discourses of power relations, shoring up socio-economic and ethnic differences to varying degrees. While love can, sometimes unwittingly, be co-opted into further drawing boundaries between “us” and “them”, it can also serve as the balm that heals.

This is also the focus of Mahdi Teimouri’s analysis of love constituted as ethical responsibility towards the other in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*. Teimouri’s paper presents a philosophical analysis of both these novels by Coetzee by adopting a Levinasian ethical perspective. His attentive analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians* centers on the non-carnal relationship between the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl, which is interpreted in terms of a transcendental or non-ontological conception of desire capable of liberating the self from egoism, in the sense of a “disruption and persecution of the self” (Teimouri). Love is taken as a manifestation of an ethical responsibility to the other, in the form of care that the Magistrate bestows upon the girl. In Teimouri’s reading, the Magistrate is moved from a self-interested love, to a love that is other-oriented, so that he loses mastery over himself, putting his self into crisis: he transports the Barbarian girl back to her people, and is himself arrested for “consorting with the enemy” (Coetzee cited in Teimouri).

Staying on the subject of precariousness and vulnerability, our next three contributions address the politicization of love, though in very different ways. Abhisek Ghosal’s “Love in Transit” examines ways in which love’s plasticity is sometimes exploited by ruling authorities in the context of refugee politics. Ghosal analyses two recent South Asian novels – Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) and Sharon Bala’s *The Boat People* (2018) – to expose the ways in which authorities overtly or covertly resort to the politicization of love to de-escalate tensions between refugees and natives living on the margins. As Martha Nussbaum observes, love is at once one of the important public emotions as well as being a constitutive element in different public emotions, instrumental towards the practicing of political justice. Continuing along this vein of putting love at the centre of national politics, Da Ye Kim’s “Somewhere between Glory and a Sad Ending: Love and Identity Politics in *Mr. Sunshine* (2018)” explores the ways in which stories of nation building are intimately connected to the stories and personal lives of its people. In her analysis of the Korean drama serial *Mr Sunshine*, Kim looks at how the politics of individual identity and national identity operate through the characters’ romantic engagements. Appropriating the concept of “curative violence”, Kim’s study of this semi-fictional historical drama is evidence that love stories can indeed open up space for ideological and political debate.

The notion of love as a social and political phenomenon, rather than being thought of merely as a private affair between two individuals, lies at the centre of Nicholas O. Pagan’s contribution, which explores the different forms of love that appear in a work that is part family memoir, part autobiography, and part literary fiction — Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991). Chang’s novel portrays love adapting to the vast

political changes taking place in China from approximately 1924 (when Chang's grandmother became a concubine) until 1976 (the death of Mao). Pagan's examination of love across three generations of Chinese women is a reminder again that practices of love are informed by the material conditions in which these practices unfold, conditions that are themselves never fixed. Paying attention to the material reality in which loving relations develop may, as sociologist Stevi Jackson reminds us, "give us clues to its subjective import and enable a self-reflexive empathy with others' loves" (35). Indeed, Pagan's nuanced treatment of the story of three generations of women, all loving in very different political times, compels us to forsake generalities in favour of specific and located understandings of love.

Our last two contributions comprise several works of poetry. The first is a translation of a selection of the poetry of Ashik Basti (1836-1936), an outstanding female ashik in Azerbaijan during the nineteenth century. Her poems are rendered here into English, by a transnational team of three scholars, Shahla Naghiyeva (Azerbaijan), Amin Amirdabbaghian (Iran/Malaysia) and Krishnavanie Shunmugam (Malaysia), working in very different areas. The joint effort to bring Basti's poetry to the English-speaking world is a good example of love's ability to bridge differences across languages and national borders. Basti's poetry is considered here in the context of the art of ashik, a type of Turkic folklore common to Central Asia and especially in Azerbaijan. It is the oral reproduction of mostly love narratives and sometimes epic stories accompanied mainly by the *saz*, a slender-necked lute, alongside other musical instruments. Basti's Azerbaijani epic *dastan* (Persian meaning "story" or "tale") entitled "Basti and Khanchoban", which narrates her personal love tragedy, appears for the first time here in English translation. The ingenious phonic beauty of Ashik Basti's poems might be lost in translation, but the close literal renditions provided by Naghiyeva et. al. sufficiently capture the emotional intensity of one in love. Like Well's piece on Topsy, the work done here brings Basti back to love and to life.

We bring this special issue to a close with two poems by Anitha Pillai, which, like Ashik Basti's poems, deal with pain and desire in love. "Shattered Smile" and "Shackled Stranger in the Night" are two original poems that bring together pain and love as experiences that have in common their unshareability (Elaine Scarry) with others, further affirming Jean-Luc Marion's contention that one loves "only through the lived experiences of [one's] consciousness" (74).

With this, I would like to thank our contributors, including our book reviewers, whose patience and hard work have made this special issue possible. Last but not least, thank you *SARE*, for believing in love.

Notes

¹ *In Praise of Love*. 2012. With Nicolas Truong. Trans. Peter Bush. The New Press, New York, p. 26.

² Website, International Society for the Study of Gender and Love. <https://societygenderandlove.wordpress.com>

³ “A Conversation with Michael Hardt on the Politics of Love”, with Leonard Schwartz. http://labos.ulg.ac.be/cipa/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2015/07/73_shwartz.pdf

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