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Love at the Heart of Feminist Epistemology

On the Interconnectedness between Love and Gender

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This spring, my beloved grandmother passed away at the age 93 due to complications from the infamous COVID-19 virus. She was one of the strongest and toughest people I knew, and always decided to go her own way, even if the world was against her. Much of who she was, I am today. I therefore dedicate this thesis to her. I love you, mormor.

Abstract

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In this thesis, I investigate the concept of love in relation to feminist epistemology. Through a theoretical analysis and assessment, the aim has been to first of all examine ontological tensions between feminist works theorizing on love; secondly, to analyse which role the concept of love has in the works; and thirdly to contextualize the different ontological assumptions made within the basic tension in feminist epistemology, i.e. that which concerns the enabling of collective solidarity or the deconstruction of gender itself. The literature analysed I position in the relatively new field of feminist love studies, and it has been selected according to what I define as the field's meta-theoretical epistemic doxa: (1) love serves as a key concept and is assigned a relatively independent social, political and/or ethical significance; (2) the theorization of love is carried out explicitly in relation to feminist theory that articulates a particular relationship between gender, sexuality, power and resistance (Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, radical feminism(s) and/or queer theories). From a materialist-realist vantage point, I argue that collective solidarity is a prerequisite for an effective deconstruction of gender. Secondly, I stipulate a sociological notion of love as possibly transcendent given particular socio-material conditions. Thirdly, I argue that feminist theory needs to articulate a basic ontology of gender that emphasizes its socio-historically contingent materiality. I conclude that feminism needs to define love as a potential, socially transformative site for women and queers, and generate spaces based upon collective solidarity where love transcends patriarchal contradictions.

Keywords: epistemology, ontology, feminism, love, materialism, realism, queer theory

Popular Science Summary

In this thesis, I have assessed and investigated tensions in feminist literature which theorizes on love. The most basic tension in feminist theorizing and activism in general is whether the categories of ‘women’ and ‘men’ are accurate in describing gendered relations of power, or whether one should reject such a categorization, as it is inherently exclusionary. Love has also historically rendered problematic within feminist theorizing and research, often understood as deeply interconnected with patriarchal power relations and heteronormative discourses.

The feminist literature on love has been selected according to what I argue are defining aspects of feminist love studies; first of all, love serves as a key concept and is understood to be particularly significant in understanding gendered power relations; second of all, one applies feminist theories on sexuality. The second point, here, deserves some further elaboration. I argue that gender is deeply embedded with sexuality, in the sense that without sexuality, there would be no gender. Therefore, I believe that the best way to get an understanding of gendered relations of power is to particularly investigate notions that specify a relationship between gender and sexuality. Such theories include Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy of the second sex, radical feminism(s) and queer theories. Queer theories differ from the former ones as they reject a binary (‘women’ versus ‘men’) understanding of gender.

When assessing the literature, I have done so through the lenses of critical realism and Marxist historical-materialism. Such philosophies recognize that there are aspects of reality, such as social structures, that are not directly observable but nonetheless affect our lives. Therefore, there will always be variances in how gendered relations of power take their expressions. As such, I argue that the concepts of ‘women’ and ‘men’ are not so exclusionary as they for example appear to be in queer theories, and that they in fact are necessary for feminist theory. Second of all, I argue that love should be recognized as potentially liberating for women and queers, given that one creates spaces where love generates a sense of agency and confidence. Thirdly, I argue for a concept of gender in which one departs from the fact that sexuality is necessary for the human existence, and thus that gender is the arbitrary, social organization of sexuality. I conclude that feminist theories on love should emphasize love’s liberating potential, and that this is most fruitfully done if one can create loving spaces through explicit, collective solidarity between those exposed to patriarchal oppression; in particular, women.

Foreword

This thesis is very much an attempt to make sense of the flux of thoughts and emotions that I have dealt with for the last few years. Having experienced mental, physical and sexual abuse from someone I was in love with has given rise to a lot of questions—why did he do it, despite that he professed to love me? Why did I blame myself? How do you move on? Over six years have passed since the relationship ended, and although I am not the same person today, I am still struggling to come to terms with these experiences.

Parallel to all of this, I have struggled a lot with my own sexuality and gender identity. Despite knowing from an early age that I carry an attraction to women, I have suppressed this knowledge since my teenage years, believing that I can never truly be in love with someone who is not a man. Only relatively recently, as I have had the possibility to rebuild the sense of self that I was deprived of in the relationship with my ex, have I started to embrace my desire for women. But this has, paradoxically, only lead to more confusion. Why did it take male violence, a destruction of my own sense of self, and a long process of mental recovery for me to finally recognize that I am not destined to end up in a potentially destructive, heterosexual relationship?

Similarly, as I started to see myself in a new light, I did not recognize who I was. Looking in the mirror, there was a dissonance between what I saw and how I identified. There was something in me that went beyond the preconceptions of others. I am no woman, but I never can shake off womanhood—all it entails will forever haunt me. But where do these thoughts and feelings come from? Is it something inherent within me? Experiences of gender dysphoria are indeed very much real, and very painful. But is gender not a social construction, something that we negotiate in our interaction with others? Can we ever *really* grasp what gender is, and why it is such a key feature in how we encounter the world around us?

I cannot even attempt to give rigid answers to all these questions, I can only try to make sense of them. And I guess writing a thesis in epistemology is my own peculiar way of dealing with all this confusion.

Big thanks to my supervisor Bo for an incredible support throughout this project. You have been an invaluable mentor to me, believing in myself when I did not, and bringing me back to earth when I have soared away. I could not have done this without you.

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Introduction

This thesis is a complex story that places love at the heart of feminist epistemology. The story takes place in a context in which men and women have formal equality, and in which ‘love’ has largely been democratized and individualized, meaning that the individual freedom to determine one’s own relationships has become increasingly more available across populations (Luhmann, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003). As such, ‘love’ has also in this context become a means to individuality, i.e. self-assertion (Illouz, 2012). Therefore, it seems like love has an increasingly independent social, political and ethical significance, contributing to the emergence of the relatively new field of *love studies* in the academia since, approximately, the 1990s (Jónasdóttir, 2014, pp. 11ff.).

I concern myself with feminist inquires on love in this social context. The basic task for feminist theory is to disclose and facilitate resistance against how the reality of being a particular a gender is contingent upon relations of power surrounding sexuality (Gunnarsson, 2013, p. 15). As such, ontological assumptions on gender, sexuality, power and resistance are innately related in feminist theory.¹ Hence, the basic feminist-epistemological inquiry when it comes to love is to ask what its relation to gender, sexuality, power and resistance is, and to therefore disclose what the present social conditions of love imply for gendered subjectivities and gendered relations of power. In many ways, it seems like love is not free at all; an unequal relationship between men and women remains, and queer acts of love continue to be suppressed.

Love has historically rendered problematic within feminist theorization and activism as a site of patriarchal relations, surrounded by a romantic, illusory discourse that traps women with their oppressors or locks them in immanence (Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; The Feminists, 1973; Atkinson, 1974). Such stipulations do, however, as similarly pointed out by Jónasdóttir and Ferguson (2014, p. 3), merely translate into sexuality politics and politics of ‘care’, i.e. questions of reproduction, domestic work and sexual autonomy, or, interconnected, a cultural critique of romantic narratives. In this thesis, I concern myself with a broader notion of love as a *relatively independent concept* that still encompasses, yet goes beyond, sexuality, care and

¹Of course, a theory can be claimed as feminist without theorizing *explicitly* on sexuality. My point is, however, that any notion of gender contains with it notions of sexuality (see Butler, 1990; Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991], p. 88), meaning that, in evaluating feminist theory, a criterion for the strength of such a theory is how the relationship between gender and sexuality is articulated. Similarly, I want to clarify that sexuality here is not understood in terms of sexual orientation, but as a feature in social life through which gender is organized.

romance. This is very much in line with how love is addressed in more contemporary feminist inquiries on the topic, i.e. the emergent field of *feminist love studies* (see Jónasdóttir, 2014; Ferguson & Jónasdóttir, 2014; Ferguson & Toye, 2017). In other words, in a social context where love is ‘free’, it can become a powerful source of its own; both as a particular site of action, subjectivity and transformation, *and* a particular site of oppression, objectification and constraint (cf. Gunnarsson, 2013; see also hooks, 2000).

Love is, indeed, tightly bound up with heterosexuality and heteronormative, romantic discourses. However, since gendered relations of power and the emergence of gendered subjectivities are always products of social organization and its processes, this begs the question of how one can extend practices of love and the meanings and possibilities attached to them. This is, I believe, the key task for feminist inquiries on love in the early 21st century.

Ontologies of Gender: A Brief History

This thesis is also a story about the interconnectedness between knowledge and relations of power (cf. Foucault, 1978) and how knowledge can become a political, emancipatory tool (cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845]; Marx, 2013 [1867]; Bhaskar, 1986). The concept of gender has been rendered particularly problematic in feminist activism, theorizing and research. The main tension regards the deconstruction of gender itself versus the enabling of collective, political solidarity.

The so called ‘second wave’ of feminism emerged in the United States in the 1960s, and was thereafter a present feature in many European and English-speaking countries for roughly two decades. While the so called ‘first wave’ of feminism in the 19th and early 20th centuries mainly concerned itself with formal equality (see e.g. Banks, 1986), the second wave was generally characterized by the politicization of e.g. child care, domestic work and sexuality. As such, one aimed to conceptualize women’s particular reality in social life, meaning that feminist theory in this context mainly concerned itself with ontological inquiries on gender (Gunnarsson, 2013, pp. 15 – 16). The oppression of women was located in their bodies as sexual beings; this is manifested in *Marxist-feminism* which claims that the capitalist economy facilitates the sexual exploitation of women (Hartmann, 1979; Hartsock, 2004 [1983]; see *Theory I*; see also Engels, 2008 [1884]), and Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) *existentialist feminism* and the subsequent *radical feminism(s)* which, in contrast, provide a notion of sexuality as a particular

locus of women's oppression (Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989; see *Theory II*).

It was in this context that *feminist standpoint theory* emerged, which claims that, by virtue of being oppressed, certain groups (e.g. women and/or groups exposed to racism) carry with them privileged epistemic vantage points that reveal distortions in knowledge production (Harding, 2004, pp. 4ff; cf. Haraway, 1988; Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845]).² In other words, feminist standpoint theory is a *political epistemology* by virtue of that it aims to reveal how relations of power generate particular perspectives on the world with the aim of transforming these relations. Theorizing on gender with an ontological starting point meant that the early feminist-standpoint theorists employed a *materialist* and *realist* social philosophy. That is, they defined gendered categories, i.e. 'women' and 'men', by the structurally unequal material and social conditions of the sexes—conceptualized as *patriarchy*. This stems from the claim that social life has structural, causal effects irreducible to subjectivity, however facilitates particular subjects (Smith, 1974; Hartsock, 2004 [1983]; cf. Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000).

Roughly during the 1980s- and 90s, feminist theorizing shifted analogously with the so called 'linguistic turn', i.e. when (Western) philosophy in general was characterized by theorizing on reality in relation to language, departing from the notion that language necessarily sets boundaries for one's access to the world (see Scott, 1988; Hekman, 1997a). The co-occurring so called 'third wave' of feminism highlighted differences in women's experiences that were based on e.g. sexual orientation, race and postcolonial relations (Schuster, 2017, p. 648), meaning that a universal, basic ontology of women's realities was rendered problematic, i.e. that a particular gendered standpoint would be epistemically privileged (see Hekman, 1997a).³ As such, the *poststructuralist* and *postmodern* concepts of deconstruction (see e.g. Derrida, 1988) and discourse (see e.g. Foucault, 1978) became common tools in feminist theory.⁴ Hence, instead of theorizing on a basic ontology of gender, one became more

²Friedrich Nietzsche was, however, one of the first to establish a notion of knowledge grounded in particular standpoints. He claimed that knowledge is in itself perspectival, denying any metaphysical idea of an objective knowledge from 'nowhere' (see e.g. Nietzsche, 1994 [1887]).

³Different branches of *intersectionality theory* can be seen as somewhat an exception to this rule. In order to theorize the intersections of different forms of oppression (based on e.g. gender, race, class or sexual orientation), many such theories depart from explicit ontological articulations of what the nature of different forms of oppression is, and thus how they are manifested when they intersect in women's different realities (see Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

⁴I will not make an account for a unitary definition of postmodern and poststructuralist theories, as I, because of the diversity of such theories, do not believe that is possible. Common characterizations are however that language (broadly defined) is the main locus of analysis and that one questions any meta-narratives of modernity, e.g. that of liberalism or Marxism (see also Aylesworth, 2015).

concerned with the linguistic, epistemological boundaries of gendered categories (see Scott, 1988; Hekman, 1997a; Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]).

More contemporary theorists have reacted towards the linguistic turn and its underlying epistemological reductionism, and, as such, have aimed to renew our ideas of the ontological status of gender, e.g. either by deconstructing the gap between ontology and epistemology (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Hemmings, 2012), or by suggesting a *critical realist* approach to gender theory (Gunnarsson, 2011; Mussell, 2016; see also *Assessing the Literature*).

If feminist theory, as I have argued above, contains with it assumptions on gender, sexuality, power and resistance that are innately related, how one defines gender as a relatively autonomous concept necessarily sets boundaries for how such a theory can be articulated. Hence, in this thesis, I will examine the tensions outlined above and their implications for feminist theories on love.

Aim and Research Questions

Through a theoretical analysis and assessment, this thesis concerns itself with the concept of love in relation to feminist epistemology. The over-arching issue can be sub-divided into three particular aims: (1) to investigate theoretical-ontological tensions between feminist works theorizing on love that explicitly articulate a particular relationship between gender and sexuality, and, as such, examine their relative position in the broader field of feminist theorizing, (2) investigate which role the concept of love has in those works, and (3) contextualize the theoretical-ontological assumptions in the feminist literature on love within the basic tensions regarding the ontological status of gender in feminist epistemology. Hence, in the analysis, I wonder:

- What ontological assumptions of gender, sexuality, power and resistance are made in the feminist literature on love?
- Which role does the concept of love have in that literature?
- How can the different conceptualizations be contextualized within the tensions regarding the ontological status of gender in feminist epistemology?

Disposition

The structure of the thesis is outlined according to the aim and research questions. In *Theory I*, I will account for the basic tensions regarding the ontological status of gender in feminist epistemology. In *Theory II*, I will account for ‘ontological’ and ‘epistemological’ theories on gender and sexuality respectively, which are very much constitutive of the broader field of feminist theorizing. In *Theory III*, I will account for feminist theories on love that will make up the main locus of analysis, which are all, more or less, positioned in relation to the theories introduced in the previous chapter (*Theory II*).

After the theoretical accounts, I then on move on to analysis and assessment. In *Analysis I*, I examine how the concepts of gender, sexuality, power and resistance are distinctively articulated in the literature on love, and, as such, how they may be internally related. Therefore, I will here also investigate the relative positions of the works in relation to constitutive theories on gender and sexuality in the broader field of feminist theorizing. In *Analysis II*, I examine which role the concept of love has in the literature, and in *Analysis III*, I revisit the ontological inquiries on gender that lie at the heart of feminist epistemology.

Epistemological Reflections

Selecting the Literature

In this study, I have selected a body of feminist literature on love which have undergone a theoretical analysis and assessment. The literature I position in the field of feminist love studies (see Jónasdóttir, 2014; Ferguson & Jónasdóttir, 2014), and it has been selecting according to the structure of the meta-theoretical *epistemic doxa* of the field, i.e. the particular presuppositions for thought that have their grounds in any field's particular social conditions of possibility (see Bourdieu, 1990, p. 381).

Any epistemic doxa in a particular field constitutes its internal logic for knowledge, and is based upon the struggle for recognition, i.e. resources of power, in that field. This both regards the particular socio-structural positions different scholarly subjects exhibit, and the theoretical points of view that are interconnected with their social positioning, which however cannot be reduced to that positioning (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]; cf. Haraway, 1988). In this thesis, I will concern myself with the latter, i.e. the field's *distinct* theoretical-ontological tensions. This aspect of the epistemic doxa in the field of feminist love studies is, I argue, structured according to two, intersecting axes: (1) tensions regarding how gender, and therefore feminist theorizing, should be defined, and (2) tensions regarding which role love, as a relatively independent social, political, and/or ethical phenomenon, should exhibit in feminist-epistemic inquiries.

The first axis concerns the field's relative position in relation to the broader field of feminist theorizing and research, in which the basic meta-theoretical epistemic struggle concerns the tension between ontological theorizing on one hand, and epistemological theorizing on the other, and examples of this will be accounted for in *Theory I*. This tension in the broader field of feminist theorizing and research furthermore extends into inquiries that either expand on so called 'malestream'/'gender blind' conceptual frameworks in the wider fields of the humanities and social sciences (such as Marxism and poststructuralism), and/or result in distinct theories on gendered subjectivity and power relations, articulating the specific relationship between gender and sexuality; this includes Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, radical feminism(s) and queer theories, and are all very much constitutive features of feminist theorizing. If any feminist theory, as noted in the introduction, bears with it an internal relationship between assumptions

on gender, sexuality, power and resistance, then investigating gender as a relatively independent concept is most fruitfully done in relation to theories that make inquiries on the distinct social processes of gender, i.e. its relation to sexuality. Such theories will therefore be accounted for in *Theory II*. This is also a clear limitation of the thesis, as I do not explicitly examine gender in relation to other social processes, such as class, race and postcolonial relations. I will further elaborate on this consideration in *Assessing the Literature* below.

Within the narrower field of feminist love studies, one investigates the increased relatively independent social, political and/or ethical significance of love, expanding on contemporary ‘malestream’/‘gender blind’ theories on the subject (e.g. Luhmann, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bhaskar, 2002; Bauman, 2003) and/or creates distinct theories on love, through explicit, systematic analyses of its relation to the emergence of gendered subjectivities and gendered power, often in a broader social context of individualization where love is ‘free’ (cf. Jónasdóttir, 2014). As such, the second axis of the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa of the field fundamentally concerns which role the concept of love should exhibit in feminist inquiries.

The source material that constitutes the main locus of the study has therefore been selected according to two principles that are very much interconnected with the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa at the heart of feminist love studies: (1) ‘love’ serves as a core concept and is assigned a particular, relatively independent social, political and/or ethical significance, and (2) the theorization of love is explicitly deployed in relation to theorizations that articulate a specific relationship between gender and sexuality. This will be accounted for in *Theory III*. As I examine the distinct social processes of gender, feminist studies on love that do not make explicit theoretical inquiries on sexuality have been excluded from the study (see e.g. Holmberg, 1993). The bodies of works accounted for in *Theory III*, as they also are positioned in a broader field of feminist theorizing and research, furthermore expand, transcend and/or employ the frameworks and concepts introduced in the preceding section (*Theory II*).

While explicit ontological/realist/materialist theories on love in relation to gender and sexuality often are very extensive, epistemological/poststructuralist ditto are quantitatively fewer and often qualitatively not as elaborate. I will not, for now, speculate on as to why this is the case (see Jónasdóttir, 2014, and Ferguson & Jónasdóttir, 2014, for further inquiries on this subject), but this has had a particular methodological consequence: whilst a rule of thumb has been to assess literature that is contextualized in broader processes of individualization (this is indeed a significant aspect of the field), my account of queer theorist Megan M. Burke’s (2017) mere philosophical investigation (see *Queer Optimism*) is somewhat an exception, but has yet

here been included in order to give a balanced account of how love may be conceptualized within queer-theoretical frameworks in the field of feminist love studies.

Assessing the Literature

In the analysis, the reader will notice the presence of the conceptual frameworks of critical realism and (Marxist) historical-materialism when I evaluate the literature. As noted in the introduction, a realist and materialist social philosophy departs from the notion that social life, although being constituted by subjects, is irreducible to subjectivity. From this follows that ontological inquiries necessarily have to precede epistemological ones (Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000).

A realist and materialist social philosophy recognizes that human beings have distinct and *necessary* and natural, i.e. material, needs and therefore relations of dependence that condition social life (Creaven, 2000, pp. 71ff.; cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845], pp. 142 – 144). Through the concepts of *base* and *superstructure*, the social organization of material needs is in Marxist historical-materialism ontologically distinct from any society's normative institutions, however the two mutually reinforce each other (Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845], pp. 144 – 145). Furthermore, the causal effects that any social organization has, i.e. how it manifests itself, will depend on, however cannot be reduced to, how our basic material needs are met (Creaven, 2000, pp. 71ff; see Marx & Engels, 2012 [1975]). Similarly, a realist social philosophy proposes a stratified ontology, in which the causal properties of any social phenomenon are irreducible to how they are actualized and experienced, i.e. that

the world is characterized by *emergence*, that is situations in which the conjunction of two or more [ontologically distinct] features or aspects gives rise to new phenomena, which have properties irreducible to those of their constituents, even though the latter are necessary for their existence (Sayer, 2000, p. 12, emphasis added).

In other words, any structural set of social relations has internal mechanisms that can become potentially realized in particular conditions and not others, meaning they manifest themselves as tendencies (ibid., p. 15). This, furthermore, highlights the particular, *necessarily contingent* aspect of social life: how subjects experience and act in the world is never pre-determined (ibid.). These notions of causality, emergence and contingency are also present in historical-

materialism: how social structures, i.e. material sets of relations and their interconnected ideas, are manifested (i.e. emerge) depends on context—although the organization of material needs sets boundaries for, i.e. causes, any subject’s contextual possibilities for action, acting subjects are nonetheless social life’s distinct constituents, meaning it is contingent (Creaven, 2000, pp. 142ff.; cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1975], pp. 151 – 152). The historical aspect of the philosophy, in particular, highlights the contextuality/contingency of social organization (Creaven, 2000, pp. 204ff.). As such, any realist/materialist theoretical inquiry will, at best, be a provisional conjecture, trying to capture the ontological depth of social life, i.e. that which we cannot directly observe, yet is distinctively real—however tomorrow can be something else (cf. Sayer, 2000, pp. 13 – 17).

Following this, a (critical) realist and materialist social philosophy contains within it a notion of *emancipatory knowledge*. From the fact that acting subjects are social life’s distinct constituents, it follows that particular social-scientific inquiries can transform subjective beliefs, by highlighting that taken-for-granted aspects of society (such as gender, capitalism and racial structures) are in fact not so essential as they first appear (Bhaskar, 1986; Sayer, 2000, pp. 18 – 19; see also Marx & Engels, 2012 [1848]).

In this thesis, I will examine gender as a relatively independent concept necessarily interconnected with notions on sexuality, power and resistance. I therefore believe it is fruitful to employ a non-reductive approach to the sociology, politics and philosophy of gender that emphasizes its *socio-historically contingent materiality*. In other words, although I would argue that poststructuralism offers useful analytical tools for investigating the language of gender, I reject its epistemological reductionism that collapses different aspects, or strata, of reality into one single totality. The fact that gender is a distinct social structure does not undermine that it is multiply realized in different social and historical contexts and processes (such as class, race and postcolonial relations).

Theory I: Tensions and Debates in Feminist Epistemology

From Ontology...

Dorothy E. Smith has argued that the sociological enterprise “has been based on and built up within the male social universe” (1974, p. 7). The worlds of women are defined by (although not restricted to) the private domain, whereas the worlds of men are defined by (although not restricted to) the public domain. Ultimately, this generates different bases of knowledge and experience, that also stand in unequal relation (ibid.). The gendered division of labour, Smith argues, generates conditions for the male abstract and conceptual world; the sociologist is a ‘he’, and ‘he’ could not enter the sociological domain without ‘her’ reproductive and maintenance work, meaning that women’s particular perspectives reveal distortions in sociological knowledge production (ibid., pp. 9 – 10).

Marxist-feminist Nancy C. M. Hartsock has suggested that “women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy” (2004 [1983], p. 36). Women and men have, she argues, different epistemological standpoints that are grounded in the sexual division of labour. Just like Smith (1974), Hartsock suggests that women’s lives are institutionally defined by (re)production in the domestic sphere, while men’s lives are characterized by detachment from bodily experiences. The sexual division of labour provides a base for a concrete-abstract conceptual dualism, which is argued to be a dominating ideology within the patriarchal, capitalist society (ibid., pp. 42ff.). She concludes that feminist materialism is necessary for an effective critique of such an ideology and the institutions it serves:

Women’s lives, like men’s, are structured by social relations which manifest the experience of the dominant gender and class. /.../ Feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women’s material activity and must as well be a part of the political struggle necessary to develop areas of social life modelled on this activity (ibid., p. 49).⁵

⁵Heidi I. Hartmann (1979) has similarly to Hartsock argued for a union of Marxism and feminism through a dual systems theory, suggesting that patriarchy exists as a social and economic structure, and as such upholds capitalism.

...to Epistemology (Or, the Linguistic Turn)...

Joan W. Scott's "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference" (1988) was one of the first articles on feminism that distinctively and explicitly positioned itself as poststructuralist. Scott argues against any universalist ideas of a particular kind of gendered experience, as such notions merely reverse or conform to gendered hierarchies (p. 33). Language, she argues, is crucial for the gendered experience and the establishing of collective identity, and poststructuralists have effectively illustrated that the meanings constituted by language by no means are either fixed or intrinsic. As such, poststructuralism requires of feminists to ask how meanings change over time, i.e. to reveal how language conforms to gendered power relations (ibid., p. 35). Scott argues that linguistically fixed oppositions, such as masculine/feminine, categorize bodies and experiences in an arbitrary manner. Henceforth, she refers to Derrida's tool of deconstruction, that is, disclosing how differences and meanings are constructed through language (see Derrida, 1988). As constructed binary oppositions (e.g. masculine/feminine, universality/specificity) are hierarchical, she argues that deconstructing them is political (ibid., pp. 37 – 38).

Scott suggests a 'poststructuralist politics of difference', concluding that 'systemic' feminist criticism must involve two things:

The first is the systematic criticism of the operations of categorical difference, the exposure of the kinds of exclusions and inclusions—the hierarchies—it constructs, and a refusal of their ultimate 'truth'. A refusal, however, not in the name of an equality that implies sameness or identity, but rather (and this is the second move) in the name of an equality that rests on differences—differences that confound, disrupt and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition (1988, p. 48).

The Hekman Debate (*Signs*, 1997)

Susan Hekman has been a prominent advocate for establishing postmodern and poststructuralist thought within feminist theory. In "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited" she argues against the notion of standpoints as they are theorized by e.g. Smith and Hartsock. Because of the 'linguistic turn', she argues, we must take seriously the notion of difference (such as race and sexual orientation) in women's standpoints (1997a, p. 349). The problem is, she argues, two-fold: (1) if there exists a multiplicity of women's standpoints, it logically follows that a coherent analysis of a gendered experience becomes impossible and (2) if multiple standpoints are acknowledged, how are we to discriminate among them (ibid., p. 359)?

From this follows, Hekman suggests, that truth claims based on feminist standpoint theory are contradictory and thus, invalid.

Hekman's ideas received various forms of critiques from standpoint theorists. For example, Sandra Harding (1997) asserts that Hekman distorts the aim of standpoint theory as justifying the truth of feminist claims; rather, it is about disclosing the relation between power and knowledge, i.e. to identify the interconnectedness between male supremacy and knowledge production and counter prevailing conceptual frameworks (pp. 382 – 383). To do this, a notion of a particular kind of gendered reality beyond linguistic constructions is necessary (ibid., pp. 384 – 385). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (1997) asserts that the “notion of standpoint refers to groups having shared histories based on their location in relations to power” (p. 376), i.e. she argues that Hekman depoliticizes standpoint theory by decontextualizing it from a knowledge/power conceptual framework to a discussion about justification of truth claims.⁶

...and Back to Ontology Again?

Together with Stacy Alaimo, Susan Hekman has later on argued that although feminism has been enriched by postmodern insights, it cannot suffice as a basis for feminist theory. The problem is, that although it rejects dichotomies, the very foundation of postmodern thought relies on a language/reality opposition, i.e. that one cannot grasp any reality beyond language (Hekman & Alaimo, 2008, p. 2). This “retreat from materiality” (ibid., p. 3) has led feminist theorists to exclude the lived bodily experience from consideration, as well as to ignore how the material contributes to the development and transformation of language and discourse (ibid., pp. 3 – 4). In particular they argue the material world itself need to be reconceptualised and ascribed with agency and transformative power. As such, one can grasp the complex ‘intra-action’ of material phenomena (i.e. technology and the ‘natural’ world) and discourse, i.e. bridge the gap between ontology and epistemology (ibid., p. 5; see also Haraway, 1990 [1985]; Barad, 1998; Hekman, 2008).

Clare Hemmings (2012) further problematizes the opposition between ontology and epistemology in feminist theory. She questions whether there is a difference between one's own (subjective, epistemological) sense of being and one's (objective, ontological) social

⁶For more comments in this debate, see Hartsock (1997) and Smith (1997). For Hekman's response, see Hekman (1997b).

possibilities (p. 154). Through the concept of *affective solidarity*, she argues, feminist theories can move away from identity politics without implying an epistemological reduction of gendered experiences. The experience of affective dissonance—feeling that one is undervalued, not fitting social expectations etc.—depends on the discordance between one’s subjectivity and one’s objective position in the world (ibid., pp. 148 – 150). Such an experience can in turn generate a sense of solidarity and, as such, serve political transformation (ibid., pp. 151ff.).

As an advocate for a critical realist approach to feminist theory, Lena Gunnarsson (2011) writes: “Is it not the very point of departure of feminist theorising that women are oppressed/exploited/discriminated/excluded *by virtue of their being women?*” (p. 24, original emphasis). She argues that the fact that ‘men’ and ‘women’ exist as ontological categories, does not contradict the claim that gendered relations and identities are contingent, socio-historical products (p. 29). Without ascribing an ontological reality to gendered categories, Gunnarsson asserts, feminist theory becomes insufficient in conceptualizing the material relation between any woman’s life and structured gender positions (ibid., p. 34).⁷ Helen Mussell (2016) similarly argues that critical realism supports the feminist standpoint-theoretical notion of epistemic privileges, and resolves potential contradictions it might entail (see Hekman, 1997a). Mussell questions whether feminist standpoint theory really is contradictory in its conceptions of reality (i.e. that knowledge is socially located in experience and that certain locations should be privileged due to their ‘reality’); it is not contradictory to state that material relations can become claimed via social constructions *to appear as* culturally fixed (ibid., p. 543).

Summary

This short and comprised historical overview has served to illustrate the basic tensions within the epistemic doxa of feminist meta-theoretical inquiries. On one hand, there is the notion that ontological assertions are necessary for epistemological claims. On the other hand, there is the notion that language and ideas of difference, i.e. epistemology, constitute the boundaries of ontological statements.

In the next section, I will account for how the concepts of gender, sexuality, power and resistance may be theorized from ontological and epistemological points of view respectively.

⁷Gunnarsson’s (2011) article has subsequently been revised and makes up a chapter in her dissertation *On the Ontology of Love, Sexuality and Power* (2013), which is accounted for and assessed in this thesis.

I will depart from the tensions outlined above, exemplifying specifically how the articulation of these concepts depends on meta-theoretical points of departure, i.e. how the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa extends into constitutive theories on gender and sexuality in the broader field of feminist theorizing. For some clarification, it should be noted that the categories of ‘ontological’ and ‘epistemological’ theories, as they here are stipulated, are neither exclusionary nor homogenous; this conceptualization serves as a mere tool for the purpose of this thesis.

Theory II: Gender/Sexuality/Power/Resistance

On Patriarchy

Here, I will account for ontological theories that explicitly articulate a relationship between gender, sexuality, power and resistance. This includes the early existentialist feminism of Beauvoir (1949) and subsequent radical feminism(s), and they all argue that sexuality has a relatively independent social and political significance in the oppression of women.

Simone de Beauvoir is perhaps the most prominent philosopher in the field of gender studies, preceding radical feminists as being the first to systematically analyse the category 'women' as a part of *being* (i.e. ontology). From the existentialist notion that existence precedes essence, Beauvoir notes in her seminal work *The Second Sex [Le Deuxième Sexe]* (1949) that there is no essential womanhood: the category 'woman' is a socio-historical product, constructed as 'the other' in relation to men. This otherness, she writes, entails that women in different ways become socially conditioned by their *biological* 'otherness', i.e. their sex (2012 [1949], pp. 41ff.). To men, the woman will in her (hetero)sexual encounters become mere object—body—deprived of subjectivity and transcendence, meaning that heterosexual 'love' is inherently *inauthentic* as it cannot facilitate women's freedom (ibid., pp. 430ff.; 748ff.). The woman's destiny to become *the second sex* means that she will most likely marry and become a mother, i.e. remain immanent in her bodily situation, becoming deprived of any autonomy and creativity (ibid., pp. 489ff.; 577ff.). As such, Beauvoir asserts, the liberation of women must involve a social condition in which any woman can transcend her bodily, sexed, situation.

In her work *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Shulamith Firestone extends the analytical tools of dialectical historical-materialism, i.e. the Marxist notion that history develops through oppositions based on material conditions. She suggests that the most fundamental dialectic in historical development is not that of dominant and exploited classes, but that of a dominant and an exploited sex. This sexual inequality, she writes, has its grounds in biology itself. Women's bodies constitute the main site of reproduction, and therefore, in the *biological family*, women (and children) have historically been dependent on men for protection and/or subsistence (ibid., pp. 8ff.; 205). As women inhabit the role of reproduction (i.e. childbearing and childrearing), sexuality and (heterosexual) 'love' become tools of male dominance (ibid., pp. 126ff.; 146ff.).

Therefore, Firestone argues, the end of a sex-class system must mean an end to the family itself (ibid., pp. 206 – 209).

Adrienne Rich (1996 [1980]) has been a prominent figure within lesbian radical feminism, suggesting that by making visible the feelings of passion between women, one can make possible political liberation for women as a collective (p. 233). In other words, *female compulsory heterosexuality*, i.e. the assumption that women unavoidably are attracted to men, is deeply embedded in patriarchy (ibid., pp. 233 – 234). Following this, Rich argues, lesbianism unavoidably becomes political: it reveals the patriarchal institution that is heterosexuality, and frees women from having to enter intimate relationships with their oppressors (ibid., pp. 234ff.).

Catharine MacKinnon (1989) suggests that just as Marxism theorizes about the exploitation of labour, feminism needs to view sexuality as an exploitative social relation, conceptualized as *sociosexuality*. She argues that women's particular vantage point on social reality is grounded in their sexual objectification (p. 127). In other words, men define what it means to be a woman; a mere sexual object. Sexuality is in MacKinnon's account a social construction, i.e. cannot be understood beyond social relations, and constitutive of any conceptualization of gender (ibid., pp. 128ff). As such, any notion of sexuality and sexual practices cannot be distinguished from expressions and confirmations of male dominance (ibid., pp. 127ff.). Resisting male dominance thus appears to become almost impossible: the condition of women is determined by men, meaning that one cannot know if feminist practices actually resist or merely conform to male dominance (ibid., pp. 101ff.).

On Heteronormativity

Theories on gender, sexuality, power and resistance in mere epistemological terms are usually categorized under the umbrella term *queer theory*. Queer theories highlight the conceptual and discursive boundaries of gender and sexuality, i.e. *ideas* of normality and deviation (Ambjörnsson, 2016, p. 74). A key concept is *heteronormativity*, or, the “institutions, laws, structures, relations and actions that maintain heterosexuality as something unitary, natural and all-encompassing” (ibid., p. 47, my translation). As such, a key task for queer theorists is to deconstruct the heterosexual norm (ibid., p. 48).

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler challenges the notion that ontology precedes epistemology, i.e. that having a particular sex is causally related to one's gender. Gender and

sex (bodies) cannot be conceptualized as different ontological categories; this distinction rather essentializes the concept of gender itself, making the physical body to appear as a stable, cultural foundation (2007 [1990], pp. 93 – 94). Gender is *performative*, Butler writes, i.e. it is a mere repetition of bodily acts that imitate pre-existing conventions (ibid., p. 85). In other words, gender precedes the body, meaning that we can have no coherent understanding of the body without gender (ibid., pp. 56 – 57). Therefore, by performing gender in ways that diverge from and break with pre-existing conventions, gender as such can be dissolved, i.e. *subverted* (ibid., p. 231). Gendered categorizations, Butler writes, are maintained as ‘intelligible’ through a cultural regulation of desire (ibid., p. 68). Our cultural ideas of sex, gender and desire are interdependent, and as such a coherence and continuity between them is necessary, meaning that gendered differentiations become actualized through the practices of heterosexual desire (ibid., p. 75). Gender, she argues, becomes culturally unintelligible (i.e. potentially subverted) if *the heterosexual matrix* somewhere is challenged. In other words, “if gender does not follow from sex, or if practices of desire do not ‘follow’ either sex or gender” (2007 [1990], p. 69, my translation).

In *Bodies That Matter* (2011 [1993]), Butler further elaborates on her concept of performativity, i.e. that gender is mere discourse confirmed through repetition of bodily acts (2011 [1993], p. 171; 2007 [1990], p. 85). She asserts that such acts are *acts of speech*, i.e. ways of communicating, and therefore establishing, gendered identities. Using Derrida’s concept of *iteration*, i.e. the notion that language can acquire infinite meanings (see e.g. Derrida, 1988), gender as such becomes arbitrary. However, as bodily acts constitute the meaning of gender, Butler argues, its contingency is concealed and naturalized through repetition, i.e. reiteration. A deconstruction of gender, as such, means detaching it from the body, i.e. disclosing the possibility that bodies can acquire endless of meanings (2011 [1993], pp. 5 – 6; 172 – 175).

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008 [1990]), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s primary concern is the deconstruction of the hetero/homo-binary. Binary oppositions, she writes, carry with them a hierarchy (p. 10), and in the context of sexuality this means that an epistemology of the closet follows: heterosexual desires and expressions become defined as superior to homosexual ditto, making the latter suppressed and beyond the culturally intelligible. As such, being homosexual, one needs to ‘come out of the closet’ (ibid., pp. 67ff.). In deconstructing the hetero/homo opposition, and as such resisting its intrinsic hierarchy, Sedgwick asserts that the cultural idea of gender being determinant for sexual desires also need to be deconstructed (ibid., pp. 27ff.).

Sara Ahmed (2006) suggests a queer approach to phenomenology, i.e. the study of the world as it appears in experience. Through the concept of *orientation*, she argues, one can

situate bodily experiences in space and time and thus reveal the spatiality and temporality (i.e. contingency) of social relations (pp. 6; 20 – 21). Being orientated, you intuitively know how to direct yourself in space and time. As such, being familiar ('feeling at home') is a condition that precedes orientation, it is what is 'given' to certain bodies in certain contexts (ibid., p. 7). Henceforth, being disoriented is the experience of feeling 'out of place':

Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects 'point' somewhere else or they make what is 'here' become strange (ibid., p. 160).

In being 'straight' (i.e. having a heterosexual 'orientation'), Ahmed writes: "one's desire follows a straight line, which is presumed to lead toward 'the other sex', as if that is the 'point' of the line" (ibid., p. 70; see also Butler, 1990, on the heterosexual matrix). In other words, the subject's relation to space and time is constructed through a heteronormative discourse, meaning that in the queer experience, one becomes 'disoriented', i.e. does not 'follow' a 'straight line' (ibid.).⁸ Ahmed thus suggests a queer politics of disorientation, that disturbs how social relations are spatially and temporally ordered (ibid., p. 161). In other words, making objects, subjects and places that are (discursively) out of reach, within reach (ibid. p. 178).

Summary

Within ontological theories, the common theme is that *gender follows sex*, i.e. that from having a particular body follows that one has a particular kind of gendered existence. This means that one, in different ways, contextualizes female oppression in their material reality as sexed beings. (Male) power is viewed as structural, meaning it has causal effects irreducible to subjectivity. From this it follows that resistance must facilitate a structural condition in which women, at least, acquire sexual and bodily autonomy.

In epistemological theories, the common theme is to reduce gender and sexuality to mere discourse and language that precede and structure any experience of the world. Gender and sexuality are here viewed as discursively interconnected, however due to their linguistic nature, their interconnectedness is arbitrary. Power is discursive and therefore *produces* gendered

⁸The concepts of space, time and lines are also used in Ahmed's framework to illustrate the phenomenological experience of being a racialized subject in a hegemony of whiteness (see also Ahmed, 2011).

subjects (cf. Foucault, 1991 [1975]), meaning that a deconstruction and disturbance of gendered categories is an act of resistance that works to disclose how such categories become naturalized through a heterosexual norm.

Theory III: Feminists on Love

Here, I will make an account for feminist works on love that constitute the main locus of the analysis. All of the following are, more or less, positioned in relation to the theories introduced in *Theory II*, by either referring directly to their works or employing, transcending and/or extending their key concepts. Furthermore, all of the following do, more or less, contextualize their theories within a social mode of organization where ‘love’ has become ‘free’, i.e. an individual project (see Luhmann, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012), asking specifically what this implies for gendered subjectivities and gendered relations of power.⁹ In general, the social condition of individualization is viewed in the literature as a defining aspect of contemporary, Western societies.

I will divide this section into two parts according to the axis of the epistemic doxa of the field that concerns its meta-theoretical tensions regarding how gender should be defined: (1) materialist/realist/ontological literature theorizing the patriarchal dynamics of love, and (2) queer/epistemological literature theorizing the heteronormative boundaries of love.

Love’s Patriarchal Dynamics

In order to grasp the key themes in feminist-materialist/realist literature on love, I believe it is fruitful to divide this section according to what level of analysis is the main focus. First, I will account for theorizations on *the micro-sociology of love*, i.e. how patriarchal structures become embodied on a micro-level; second, I will account for theories on *the ontological foundations of love*, which aim to establish a basic ontology of male dominance.

The Micro-Sociology of Love

Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1988) investigates the intersubjective processes through which gender identity develops, and how such processes culminate in relations of domination

⁹As noted in *Selecting the Literature*, Burke’s (2017) account serves somewhat as an exception to this rule.

and submission.¹⁰ She takes as her vantage point the insight of Beauvoir (1949) that ‘woman’ is the other sex, the object to the male subject (1988, p. 7).

Benjamin argues that the subject’s development is characterized by *the paradox of recognition*. In order to differentiate oneself as a subject, i.e. an independent, asserted self, one needs recognition from an *other*, who also needs to be recognized as a subject. As such, the other exhibit a paradoxical role; being the only thing that guarantees one’s own subjectivity, the other becomes the only threat to its existence. If this tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition breaks down, relations of domination (denial of the other as subject) and submission (denial of the self as subject) follow (1988, p. 12; see also Hegel, 1977 [1807]; Beauvoir, 1949). Hence, the condition for an independent self is, paradoxically, the recognition of the other as a subject. In other words, if this condition is refused, a relation of domination and submission will follow (*ibid.*, p. 53). And in the context of individualization, this is according to Benjamin exactly the case, facilitating specific gendered subjectivities (*ibid.*, pp. 183ff.).

Benjamin argues that love serves a key role in the development of gender identity. The infant’s first love objects, the mother and the father, are the first distinct symbolic hallmarks for identity. The mother becomes the symbol of recognition, i.e. dependence, whereas the father embodies self-assertion, i.e. independence and desire (marked through the phallus). Therefore, as the boy realizes he cannot become her mother (she lacks the phallus), he, instead identifying with his father, recognizes her merely as a means to recognition, i.e. as an *object* for self-assertion—that is, for gratified desires (Benjamin, 1988, pp. 74 – 75; 94). A girl, on the other hand, has no symbolic means to disidentify with her mother; to her, desire will equate submission (*ibid.*, pp. 78 – 80; 99 – 100). As such, the gendered psyche becomes within the present social conditions denied the paradox of recognition, resulting in ‘twisted’ bonds of love in adulthood. In other words, as the desiring individual innately lacks the tension between recognition and self-assertion (by embodying exclusively either one of them), their idealized object of desire will represent that which upholds this necessary tension (as it otherwise would be self-defeating), resulting in male domination and female submission in loving, heterosexual relationships (*ibid.*, pp. 219ff.).

Psychoanalyst Wendy Langford (1999) argues that love is a site of power, through which women become particularly ‘governed’ in contemporary, Western societies. She asserts that there is a gap between the ideal of romantic, heterosexual love as a means to freedom, and the

¹⁰Psychoanalysis is the study of the subconscious, i.e. the study of the development of the self over time.

realization of this ideal in practice; a gap which is particularly present in women's lives, more so than men's (pp. 5 – 15; cf. Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970).

Through love, Langford argues, the subject searches for a 'complete' and integrated sense of self, which reflects how one as an infant "who, in terrified apprehension of a changing, frustrating world and its own insubstantiality, takes refuge in the blissful illusion of a perfect and all-powerful parent" (1999, p. 62). This search for a reconsolidated self has, she argues, a particular gendered dynamic. For men, 'falling in love' entails the possibility to reconsolidate the differentiation from their mothers in early childhood. However, reflecting the painful experiences of this differentiation, the man will at some point emotionally withdraw from his loving relationship, i.e. refuse to become 'mummy's boy'. As such, he leaves the woman to the practices of maintaining the relationship (1999, pp. 87 – 88). For women, the realization in childhood that one is 'castrated' (i.e. lacks the phallus) is followed by a painful process in which she has to accept that she cannot (sexually) satisfy her mother, while at the same time becoming differentiated from her father. 'Falling in love' with a man, then, enables women to 'compensate' for their lack, and thus "'achieve' narcissistic perfection" (ibid., p. 108). As such, as the man ('the father') emotionally withdraws, the woman ('daddy's girl') places the guilt in her own intrinsic lack, resulting in continuing attempts of reconsolidation, i.e. submitting herself to the relationship (ibid., p. 112).

Because of the gendered subjectivities that emerge in early childhood, love is, according to Langford, in contemporary, Western societies a form of *delusion*; it carries with it a promise of freedom that cannot be fulfilled. In other words, in order to maintain a sense of a complete self, men withdraw emotionally from their relationships, while women work to maintain them. And this, in turn, can lead to a destructive dialectic of domination and submission among loving subjects, which risks culminating in violence (1999, p. 140; cf. Benjamin, 1988).

The Ontological Foundations of Love

Political scientist Anna G. Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) suggests, from a historical-materialist approach, that sexuality is a distinct basic human material need and capacity, and as such a necessary feature in social organization. Through sexuality, men and women meet as dependent beings, meaning that if the aim is to understand the particular conditions of existence as sexed/gendered beings, the locus of analysis necessarily has to be the production of life (existence) itself, i.e. the sociosexual (cf. MacKinnon, 1989) relations of dependence men and women have to each other by virtue of being particular sexual beings in a particular socio-

historical context (p. 42).¹¹ In contemporary, Western societies, Jónasdóttir argues, there is a socio-historically specific mode of the production of life:

The economic, political, judicial and other bonds/dependencies that have connected men and women personally through history have become fewer and weaker. What remains is a relatively isolated and clear-cut bond of nature (socially formed, of course): the dependency of love; of *care and erotic ecstasy* (ibid., p. 63, my translation, emphasis added).

In a context of individualization, the ability to be a confident, desiring individual is a central feature in the production of the life process; and receiving care is necessary for the desiring individual to be *recognized as* an individual. As such, when women and men meet as sociosexual beings, Jónasdóttir argues, women are ‘forced’ to practice loving care, giving men the ability to experience erotic ecstasy. In this meeting, however, women lack the legitimacy to practice erotic ecstasy on their own terms; men’s structural position pressures them to a limitless desire for erotic ecstasy, as a means to self-assertion, meaning that practices of care directed towards women generally are experienced by men as a burden (2003 [1991], pp. 119 – 120). This particular process, Jónasdóttir conceptualizes as men’s exploitation of women’s *love power*, i.e. the specific creative and transformative human need and capacity that produces life, both in the sense of the literal reproduction of ‘our kind’, but also in the sense of maintaining relationships and creating individuated and personified human beings (2003 [1991], p. 235; see also Jónasdóttir, 2009; 2011). This exploitation gives men a ‘gendered surplus dignity’, i.e. social authority and legitimacy to operate in society as self-asserted individuals at the expense of women, who in turn become alienated from love’s transformative capacities (ibid., p. 58). As such, Jónasdóttir suggests there is a need for a ‘*womanish*’-*feminist continuum*, i.e. that women should politically organize by the principle of solidarity, in modes appropriate relative to a particular society or a particular section of society (ibid., pp. 252 – 253).

Lena Gunnarsson (2013) elaborates on Jónasdóttir’s notion of love power, using the meta-theoretical framework of critical realism. She argues that some elements in the world are necessary conditions for existence (basic, material needs) that pre-exist contingent structures of (gendered) power. Reality, is, as such, a stratified, dialectical totality, meaning that necessity precedes, and therefore is distinct from, contingency on the level of emergence—however they

¹¹Jónasdóttir argues that MacKinnon’s use of the Marxist method in theorizing sociosexuality is insufficient as it leads to a dead-end; although theorizing sexuality as an exploitative social relation, she does not account for the necessary relations of dependence women and men have to each other, i.e. *why* male dominance is rooted in sexuality (2003 [1991], pp. 24 – 27).

still are complexly intertwined (ibid., pp. 30 – 31; see also Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Sayer, 2000). Following this, Gunnarsson rejects MacKinnon’s (1989) and Butler’s (1990; 2011 [1993]) theoretical frameworks on sexuality. By claiming that sexuality merely is a social construction, she argues, they cannot explain why sexuality, as a human necessity within a particular mode of social organization, is a site of oppression (ibid., p. 239; cf. Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]).

Following Roy Bhaskar’s notion of *metaReality*, i.e. that there is a primary, non-dual level of reality from which other levels of reality emerge (see Bhaskar, 2002), Gunnarsson argues that love is an inexhaustible necessity which in itself transcends oppositions (2013, p. 178). As such, within the emergent levels of reality, in which women’s sociosexual resources (i.e. love power) are exploited, this basic necessity is suppressed and alienated from loving subjects, meaning love becomes inherently contradictory. In contrast to Jónasdóttir, then, Gunnarsson asserts that if love is practiced under exploitative conditions, “women’s love of men is in a fundamental sense as poor as men’s love of women” (ibid., p. 201), as the love men receive is brought about by women’s sociosexual poverty and dependency (ibid., p. 242). As such, the feminist struggle needs to involve that women collectively redirect their sociosexual energy, i.e. love, from men to one another and themselves. Only by such means, one can change the social conditions for the practices of love, facilitating a situation in which men and women can love each other freely—in a deeper sense (ibid., pp. 235 – 238).

Love’s Heteronormative Boundaries

In reading the queer literature on love, the concept rendered ambiguous. Love is on one hand, a site of endless imagination and possibilities; on the other hand, it can serve as a normative, discursive constraint that legitimizes particular practices of intimacy—rendering a scepticism towards the democratization and individualization of love. In the following sections, my aim is to illustrate this ambiguity in queer conceptualizations of love.

Queer Optimism

In her essay *Desire/Love* (2012), Lauren Berlant discusses the ambiguities and contradictions of desire and love in modern, Western societies. *Desire*, Berlant defines as a state of attachment which appears to come from within (p. 6). *Love*, in difference from desire, “provides an image of an expanded self”, meaning that it contains an idealized story that the desired object will

reciprocate (ibid.). As such, there cannot be love without ‘fantasy’ (ibid., p. 8); imagination facilitates a continuity to “the flux of intensities and attachments” that you encounter (ibid., p. 75). In modern, Western societies, however, desire has been equated with love, as something to be achieved as a (closed) end in itself. Through a therapeutic discourse—manifested in psychoanalytic theory and practice by putting desire (as love) at the core of subjectivity—‘feelings’ are viewed as the essential and universal truths of individuals, idealized as something that can transcend differences and hierarchies (ibid., p. 110). This romantic story, i.e. reiteration (cf. Butler 2011 [1993]; Derrida, 1988), has placed love at the centre of our lives and, as such, has produced a range of paradoxes for the subject. In other words, an individualized notion of love means that it becomes both the problem and solution to individuality (ibid., p. 13). Following this, the modern promise of love to overcome and neutralize differences and hierarchies conceals that it is a part of a discourse, an ideology, which serves to maintain relations of domination (ibid., 112). Love in this conception is the promise of normative, i.e. heterosexual, monogamous and child-producing, forms of intimacy, generating different gendered subjectivities, making women submissive to men (ibid., pp. 99 – 100).¹²

Despite this sceptic depiction of desire as love, Berlant maintains that love in itself, being characterized by ‘fantasy’, always bears with it the possibility of opening up ‘utopian promises’ (2012, p. 112). In “Love, (A Queer Feeling)” (2001), she writes:

Love approximates a space to which people can return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a scene of optimism for change, for a transformational environment (p. 448).

Megan M. Burke (2017) makes a queer reading of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of love as something that is actualized in the lived experience through imagination (see e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1993 [1964]). This imaginary dimension of love, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes as *the institution of love* (Burke, 2017, p. 55). Burke argues that such a notion of love, experienced as real yet imaginary, “discloses how love can unhinge petrified ideals of gender and thus can also institute an existence that ‘falls out of line’” (ibid.; cf. Ahmed, 2006). In other words, love is ‘hollow’, meaning that it is indeterminate and can contain endless of meanings (ibid., p. 61). However, Burke argues, as long as love is a site where normatively gendered subjects emerge, facilitating the subordination of women, love

¹²Berlant also suggests that these processes are interconnected with race, postcolonial relations, bourgeois ideology and religious oppression (see Berlant, 2012, p. 112).

will remain inauthentic (*ibid.*, p. 57; see Beauvoir, 1949). As such, a recognition of the institution of love is bound up with queer possibilities that can generate an authentic love, i.e. love as a site of transcendence and freedom. In other words, authentic love "cannot be realized through pre-established norms or narratives of gender, sexuality and pleasure" (*ibid.*, p. 63).

Sasha Roseneil (2007) examines the individualization thesis of personal life, i.e. the notion that "relationships [have] become increasingly a matter of individual choice and negotiation" (p. 84; see also Luhmann, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012). Roseneil argues that the individualized self, in relation to love and intimacy, is "experienced as in conflict, fractured and dislocated, sometimes in relation to its past, sometimes from a sense of futurity" (*ibid.*, p. 91). As such, she directs attention to the creative solutions one may make use of to deal with these issues, as many of these practices can be understood as counter-heteronormative in that they challenge (i.e. queer) heterosexuality as the normative framework for intimacy and love. Such practices involve "the prioritizing of friendship, the de-centring of sexual/love relationships, and the forming of non-conventional relationships" (*ibid.*, p. 93) and serve to reduce risks of disappointment that inherently follow from individualized notions of love and intimacy (*ibid.*, p. 95; cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). In other words, queer acts of intimacy and love cannot be reduced to homosexuality (cf. Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]), rather, as individualization intensifies, the fractured self may reach toward practical solutions that destabilize the heteronormative regime (*ibid.*, p. 94).

Queer Scepticism

Ulrika Dahl (2014) investigates the affective dimensions of how kinship is defined. She argues that, specifically, the contemporary concept of (romantic) love is "the taken for granted starting point for family and thus for (queer) futurity" (p. 144). In LGBTQ studies, the narratives of queer love usually come with a happy ending; either by forming conventional family forms, or rejecting these, the outcome appears to be the same. But when "queers fail to make each other happy in/through love, the failure is at once ordinary and double; it is the failure of living both queerly and conventionally" (*ibid.*, pp. 146 – 147). This, Dahl suggests, begs the question of what queer 'failures' of kinship can teach us. The concept of love in LGBTQ studies, she writes, is often naturalized as something universal to human existence, making queer desires culturally intelligible (cf. Butler, 1990); queers love 'just like anybody else' (or, perhaps even better) (*ibid.*, p. 150). This conceptualization, however, legitimates a particular family form that is conventionally heterosexual, i.e. characterized by monogamy, marriage and child-production

(ibid, p. 152). As such, making ‘failure’ as the locus of analysis, Dahl argues that one can disclose “a whole range of cultural investments in the very idealization of kinship as constituted through love” (ibid., p. 153). In other words, ‘failures’ disrupt the temporal dimensions (cf. Ahmed, 2006; 2010) of love, and can as such reveal how love becomes a central feature in ideas of belonging (ibid., p. 164).

Paul Johnson (2005) argues that love, as a discursive construction, is particularly interconnected with and legitimizes heterosexual practices (p. 6). He asserts that while some feminists have effectively criticized heterosexuality (e.g. Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989), he renders their “implicit belief in the axiomatic biological principle of sex difference” (p. 8) as an essentialization of gender. Similarly, Johnson is sceptical about any notion of a basic ontology of love (cf. Gunnarsson, 2013; Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]; 2009; 2011); the capacity to *perform* (cf. Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]) love, he argues, is dependent upon the discursive processes through which love regulates human practices; and this is a particular concern in contemporary, Western societies where love appears as being democratized (ibid., pp. 1; 24).

In conceptualizing specific (gendered) bodily experiences and sensations as ‘love’, Johnson argues, one is dependent upon specific discourses through which one can render such experiences intelligible (2005, p. 30). The ‘natural’ and ‘powerful’ force of ‘love’, he suggests, “often underwrite[s] naturalized conceptions of sexuality” (ibid., p. 36):

I am arguing that the social construction of love serves a legitimating purpose for heterosexuality because it connects the modern construction of heterosexuality to historical ideas of innateness and essentialism which are then experienced as a unique set of ‘feelings’ ./. ./. [Love] is compelling precisely because it ‘works’ in such a fundamentally ‘natural’ way (ibid., pp. 45 – 46).

These processes are also, according to Johnson, contingent upon an analytic separation of ‘sex as love’ and ‘sex as desire’, i.e. that the discursive notion of sex for the sake of desire is marked with an idea that it is distinct from ‘true love’.¹³ Because of this separation, he argues, sex can ‘make love’ when it is practiced in a particular intimate setting, i.e. ‘love’ makes particular (hetero)sexual practices intelligible (2005, pp. 49 – 53).

Love is furthermore, Johnson suggests, a contradictory concept, in that it promises to consolidate gendered differences through the fusion of ‘two into one’. Gendered differentiation

¹³Johnson himself uses the concept of ‘sex as lust’ in order to illustrate that it involves a notion of pleasure. My choice of rephrasing it as ‘sex as desire’ is to illustrate the analogy to Berlant’s (2012) analysis of desire as love in modern, Western societies.

is however produced through heterosexuality, meaning that the heterosexual matrix (cf. Butler, 1990) precedes gendered differences and operationalizes through ‘love’ (2005, pp. 77; 81; 118). Similarly, he argues, heterosexuality conceptually relies on homosexuality (cf. Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]). In other words, homosexuality forms a ‘nodal point’ through which heterosexual subjects disidentify themselves; it is what one is *not* (ibid., p. 106). Such disidentification requires continual reiterations and negotiations, i.e. linguistic practices which naturalize heterosexual attraction and love as something pre-determined (ibid., pp. 116 – 117).

Johnson concludes that heterosexuality is an ambiguous (hence, unstable) activity; it requires agency and choice, while at the same time being characterized by normative compulsions and constraints (2005, p. 136). Therefore, he argues, the political project surrounding sexuality should be based on the deconstruction of heterosexuality as the normative framework for practices of love (ibid., p. 137).

Summary

Above, I first of all outlined how materialist and/or realist feminists have theorized on love. In this body of works, by virtue of theorizing explicitly on the relationship between men and women, love becomes, through heterosexuality, a site of power, exploitation and alienation. In theorizing the micro-sociology of love, one aims to explicate *how* these processes become embodied by subjects (Benjamin, 1988; Langford, 1999; see also Holmberg, 1993), whereas Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) and Gunnarsson (2013) account for the basic ontological conditions of these processes.

Secondly, I made an outline of queer-theoretical notions of love. While Berlant (2001; 2012), Burke (2017) and Roseneil (2007) provide an optimism regarding the queer possibilities of love, i.e. love as something imaginary or as a solution to a fragmented self, Dahl (2014) and Johnson (2005) highlight how love, as discourse, becomes a strategy for inclusion and exclusion that legitimizes particular practices of intimacy, especially in a context where there are no other (legal-formal) obstacles to queer practices of desire. These are not, in themselves, contradictory notions; deconstructing love as discourse means disclosing the possibility that it can exhibit endless of meanings (cf. Derrida, 1988). The main difference is rather the ontological status assigned to love—the former ones prescribe a positive (in an epistemological sense) ontology, while the latter maintain a sceptic notion.

Theory: Summary

Illustrated in *Theory I*, the concept of gender has within feminist theorizing rendered problematic. On one hand, by virtue of theorizing on gendered relations of power, gendered categorizations are necessary features in feminist theory (Smith, 1974; Hartsock, 2004 [1983]; Hartmann, 1979; Harding, 1997; Collins, 1997; Gunnarsson, 2011; Mussell, 2016). Some theorists have also acknowledged the necessity of ontology, but have instead highlighted how the ‘reality’ (ontology) and ‘language’ (epistemology) of gender are co-constitutive (Hekman & Alaimo, 2008; Hemmings, 2012; see also Haraway, 1990 [1985]; Barad, 1998; Hekman, 2008). On the other hand, unitary definitions of gender can be viewed as a limited epistemological tool, meaning that ontological categories such as ‘women’ or ‘men’ are viewed as failing to encompass differences in gendered experiences (in terms of e.g. race and sexual orientation), and therefore merely conform to (or reverse) gendered hierarchies (Scott, 1988; Hekman, 1997a).

In *Theory II*, the focus shifted from the meta-theoretical inquiries on gender to how gender may be conceptualized within feminist theory in relation to sexuality, power and resistance. Departing from a materialist/realist/ontological approach, gender as a social category is the consequence of having a particular body, meaning that sexuality is the locus of female oppression, resulting in structural male dominance (Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989). Departing from an epistemological approach, queer theorists have on the other hand highlighted the linguistic boundaries of gender and sexuality, i.e. the discursive processes of how gender and heterosexuality become naturalized (Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]; Ahmed, 2006).

Finally, in *Theory III*, I illustrated how the concept of love within feminist theory may be theorized depending on the ontological status assigned to gender, and as such which relationship this conceptualization has to notions of sexuality, power and resistance. Accepting the categories of ‘women’ and ‘men’ as the basis of epistemological inquiries, feminist-materialist/realist theorists have emphasised how heterosexual love in contemporary, Western societies is a site of domination, exploitation and alienation (Benjamin, 1988; Langford, 1999; Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]; Gunnarsson, 2013). Queer conceptualizations of love, on the other hand, render ambiguous—it can be a site of endless possibilities and/or a normative, discursive constraint (Berlant, 2001; 2012; Burke, 2017; Roseneil, 2007; Dahl, 2014; Johnson, 2005).

Analysis I: Theoretical-Ontological Tensions

Here, I will make explicit the theoretical-ontological tensions between the works accounted for in *Theory III*. I will break down the analysis by investigating how the concepts of gender, sexuality, power and resistance are articulated respectively. As such, I will also examine the relative positioning of the literature in relation to the theories introduced in *Theory II*, by virtue of that the latter provide frameworks where the internal relationship between these concepts is explicitly articulated, and as such here have been applied, transcended and/or extended. Furthermore, I will compare the different accounts, comment on the shortcomings and benefits of the theories, and also assert my own position.

Gender: An Open-Ended Contradiction?

Both Benjamin (1988) and Langford (1999), as well as Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) and Gunnarsson (2013) use gendered categorizations in binary terms. This way of conceptualizing gender is particularly illuminated in Benjamin's account. Here, 'man' is the subject, the 'first', self-asserted, independent and dominating gender; whereas 'woman' is the object, the 'second', recognizing, dependent and submissive gender (cf. Beauvoir, 1949). Such subjectivities to Benjamin are not, however, the starting-point for the self, rather, they are the outcome of a particular mode of social organization, generating a particular symbolic (non-)hallmark for gender identity, i.e. the phallus. In a context where self-assertion and independence is a goal in itself, the internal tension between self-assertion and recognition in the subject breaks down, resulting in particular gendered subjectivities. As such, that which symbolizes the breakdown of this tension, i.e. the phallus, becomes the only hallmark of gender identity, meaning that women become the second sex, the object to the male subject. Women's otherness, or 'lack of phallus', is therefore not something innate, but, as a product of social organization, can change.

In contrast to Benjamin, Langford's account focuses more on the intra-psychic development of the gendered individual, instead of taking on an intersubjective approach. In other words, gender identity appears as an inevitable result of the ego searching for a complete, narcissistic sense of self, symbolized by the phallus; resulting in women's perceived lack.

However, Langford does not provide any reason as to why the phallus is the (non-)symbol of gender identity, making it appear as something intrinsic.

Jónasdóttir has sociosexuality as the defining aspect of gendered relations and identities. Proposing a basic ontology of the gendered existence, she argues that the starting point one needs to take is the relations of dependence women and men have with each other by virtue of being particular sociosexual beings in a particular socio-historical context. Gender is, as such, a consequence of a particular mode of social organization, characterized by a relation of exploitation and alienation. Therefore, to Jónasdóttir, ‘women’ and ‘men’ are political categories, meaning that they are constructed to have opposing interests in the current mode of organization of sexual relations. Similarly, Gunnarsson argues that sexuality is a human necessity, and as such becomes a site for exploitation and alienation, i.e. that ‘men’ and ‘women’ are political, sociosexual categories. To Gunnarsson, contradiction and dialectics are the very foundations of reality, meaning that sociosexuality is a contingent, emergent feature of reality, and as such can be re-organized.

Gender is therefore in the realist/materialist literature understood in generally binary terms that aim to illuminate a structural relation of power between men and women. Hence, there are obvious conceptual and theoretical continuities between the realist/materialist literature on love and the ‘ontological’ theories introduced in *Theory II*. Understanding gender in terms of a duality characterized by contradiction is already present in Beauvoir’s (1949) and Firestone’s (1970) accounts, whereas the concept of sociosexuality as introduced by MacKinnon (1989) here has been expanded.

In queer theorizations, heteronormativity is the locus for inquiries, and not gender in itself; this is particularly the case for Roseneil (2007) and Dahl (2014). As Sedgwick (2008 [1990]) has suggested, the queer task is to deconstruct gender as being determinant for sexuality. This does not mean that conceptualizations of gender in this body of works are completely absent; indeed, they are the very prerequisite for conceptualizing heteronormativity. As such, however, gendered categorizations have in the queer literature an equal role in reinforcing heterosexuality as a normative framework. This is especially present in Johnson’s (2005) line of argumentation, rejecting any basic ontology of gender as an ‘essentialization’; to him, using the framework of Butler (1990; 2011 [1993]), gender is subsequent to heteronormativity. Of the queer theorists on love, it is merely in Burke’s (2017) and Berlant’s (2012) accounts that the category ‘woman’ works as a way of illustrating a relation of gendered power. However, they only assert that women are normatively subordinated, and do not provide a basic ontological foundation as to why this is the case. Here, it is through heteronormativity gendered subjects emerge, facilitating

women's submission. This is, however, a theory of discursive processes, answering the question of 'how', and not a theory of subordination in itself, answering the question of 'why'.

In order to theorize on any gendered power relation, the categories of 'women' and 'men' are necessary if one is to investigate as well as where domination and submission are located, as well as to why this occurs in the first place. In the queer literature, one theorizes on discursive processes that always set the boundaries for epistemological assumptions, requiring any notion of gender to be open-ended. As such, Berlant's and Burke's theorizations appear contradictory, but they are very much in line with the poststructuralist claim that binary oppositions are hierarchical (see Scott, 1988; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]), meaning that discourses maintain gendered relations in a hierarchical manner.

It appears in many ways that a realist/materialist ontology contradicts the indeterminacy of gendered categorizations in the queer-theoretical framework. To me, this is mere optics that only illustrates the key insufficiency of queer theories: they lack explanatory value. Heteronormativity appears to exist only in and off itself, resulting in a tautology—heteronormativity equates gendered binaries, which equate heteronormativity, and so on; there seems no way out of discourse. In other words, one collapses different strata of reality, i.e. the epistemology and ontology of gender respectively, into one single totality (cf. Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Sayer, 2000). As Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson have pointed out, do the same problem occur in MacKinnon's account—male dominance is here an over-arching discourse, exhaustive of women's subjectivity. Similarly, Langford does not provide an analysis of as to why the phallus is the (non-)hallmark of gender identity. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to consider a basic ontology of the gendered existence, as suggested by Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson, in which contingency emerges from necessary, material relations of dependence (cf. Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000). Gender is, indeed, not a necessary feature in social organization, and is therefore open-ended; however, 'women' and 'men' are, for now, 'out there' as sociosexual categories, i.e. as a structural, material base of social life (cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845]). As such, it seems more accurate to claim that heteronormativity is an emergent discourse (or, superstructure), facilitating, however not determining, gendered subjectivities, meaning that empirical differences and variations in gendered existences in terms of e.g. class, sexual orientation and/or race do not undermine gendered concepts in themselves.

Sexuality: Necessity or Discourse?

In the realist/materialist literature, the main inquiry when it comes to sexuality is heterosexuality, i.e. the site where women and men meet as different sexual beings and as such the particular site where gendered power is actualized. Hence, there are here apparent continuities with Beauvoir (1949), Firestone (1970), Rich (1996 [1980]) and MacKinnon (1989). Benjamin (1988) and Langford (1999) theorize on gender differentiation in terms of *sex difference*. In other words, as one develops one's gender identity, one reaches towards the symbol that manifests a (non-)identity with one's own sex, i.e. the phallus. The phallus becomes here a symbol for desire, for self-assertion, meaning that women's 'lack' results in submission in heterosexual relationships (cf. Beauvoir, 1949).

Sexuality is, to Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) and Gunnarsson (2013) a basic feature, a necessity, in social organization. Employing the historical-materialist method, Jónasdóttir argues that, in the production of the life process, it is through sociosexuality that men acquire a 'surplus dignity' at the expense of women. Similarly, Gunnarsson argues that sociosexuality is a contingent mode of organization of sexuality, that emerges from necessary relations of dependence. The historical-materialist method is present in both Firestone's and MacKinnon's accounts, arguing that sexuality is a material need and therefore an exploitable resource. Here, again, there is the problem of 'why'. In Firestone's trans-historical theory, patriarchy is biologically destined, meaning that the freedom of women lies within freedom from biology itself. As such, also noted by Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991], pp. 79ff.), she fails to theorize on the sexual dependency women and men have to each other, i.e. why such dependency manifests itself in a particular way in a particular socio-historical context. Similarly, as also noted before, MacKinnon's concept of sociosexuality seem to be all-exhaustive of women's subjectivity, meaning there is no 'why' and therefore no way out.

In the queer literature, instead of stipulating any notion of what sexuality *is*, it, like gender, remains open-ended. Heteronormativity is understood as the over-arching discourse through which sexual subjects dis/identify themselves, meaning it is not through sexuality in itself that such subjectivities emerge (as with materialist/realist theories), but rather sexuality as discourse (see Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]; Ahmed, 2006). In Johnson's (2005) theorization, Butler's and Sedgwick's frameworks are particularly present; he rejects any notion of 'sex difference' present in ontological theories, arguing that the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) precedes any gendered categorization. He further suggests that sexuality is constituted

through processes of reiteration, producing a hetero/homo-binary (cf. Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]). As such, sexuality is to Johnson inherently ambiguous, something that at the same time requires agency and constraint.

To Berlant (2001; 2012), sexuality is a discourse, i.e. a reiteration (see Butler, 2011 [1993]), which in modern, Western societies has been put at the heart of subjectivity. Therefore, there is here a scepticism towards psychoanalytic theory; it need not be the case that gender identity develops as a result of unconscious desires (cf. Benjamin, 1988; Langford, 1999). In other words, similarly manifested in Butler's framework, it is through sexuality as discourse that gendered subjectivities emerge. What is peculiar about Berlant's assumptions on sexuality, however, is that she makes explicit the relations of power in which these processes take place. In other words, she argues that heteronormativity facilitates women's subordination and the suppression of queer desires; not very much different from Rich's (1996 [1980]) notion of compulsory, female heterosexuality.

In Burke's (2017) and Roseneil's (2007) accounts, sexuality is something indeterminate, meaning that if recognized as such, it can become possible for the subject to transcend the pre-established norm of heterosexuality and the gendered relations it entails. This is very much in line with Sedgwick's (2008 [1990]) deconstruction of the hetero/homo-binary and Ahmed's (2006) theorization of the spatiality and temporality of heteronormativity; such a deconstruction is 'disruptive' of heteronormativity, meaning it opens up the spatial and temporal possibility that gender need not be determinate of sexuality. A similar theme is present in Dahl's (2014) account, who suggests that queer 'failures' disrupt the temporal dimensions of heterosexuality.

I noted in the introduction that when evaluating feminist theory, a criterion for the strength of such a theory is how the relationship between gender and sexuality is articulated. In all the literature accounted for above, the common theme is that sexuality, however conceptualized as necessity or discourse, precedes gender in the sense that without sexuality, there would be no gender. In psychoanalytic theory, here manifested through Benjamin and Langford, sexuality is a key drive in the development of the self. To Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson, sexuality is an ontological necessity, meaning that gender becomes defined through the social mode of organization of sexuality, facilitating specific sociosexual groups, i.e. women and men. In other words, in the realist/materialist literature, sexuality is a necessary, material feature in the development of the self and in the organization of society, something that ontologically precedes gender (cf. Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989). In the queer view, sexuality is a discourse through which gendered subjectivities emerge, meaning that no 'sex difference' (Johnson, 2005) ontologically precedes gender. Sexuality is,

as such, indeterminate, meaning that gender has no necessary relation to sexuality, making possible epistemological inquiries where sexuality is investigated as a relatively independent concept. In other words, here sexuality *epistemologically* precedes gender (cf. Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]).

I argue that, as with the concept of gender, the tensions outlined above need not be contradictory. In the queer conceptualization of sexuality, necessity is manifested as oppositional to discourse. This is, I believe, a false dichotomy that denies the basic condition of human existence in general and social life in particular; it is not contradictory to claim that it is human beings who necessarily embody discourses (cf. Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000). This does not mean that sexuality has a necessary relationship with gender, merely that this relation is ‘here and now’ as an emergent, material reality which facilitates particular, gendered subjectivities. As also pointed out by Benjamin, the phallus being the symbolic (non-)hallmark of gender identity is contingent upon social organization.

I suggest that sexuality is a necessary, material feature in the human existence, organized in socio-historically specific, structural modes of contingency, which are maintained through an emergent heteronormative discourse/superstructure. This means that both women and queer subjects have an interest in rejecting ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1996 [1980]). As such, one resolves a false contradiction; reality is, indeed, contradictory in itself.

Power: Inequality and the Production of the Subject

In the realist/materialist literature, being that gender is defined in binary, oppositional terms, relations of gendered power are seen as realized in contradiction, illuminated through the metaphor of dialectics. This way of conceptualizing gendered power can be traced back, as suggested earlier, to Beauvoir’s (1949) analysis of women’s ‘otherness’, Firestone’s (1970) account of the trans-historical dialectic of the sexes and MacKinnon’s (1989) notion of sexuality as an exploitative social relation. As such, power is here something structural (‘out there’), and although being embodied by subjects, cannot be reduced to subjectivity.

In Benjamin’s (1988) and Langford’s (1999) accounts, relations of gendered power are manifested through subconscious narratives the subject. To Benjamin, using explicitly Beauvoir’s conceptualization as her starting point, gendered power is realized when contradictions break down, i.e. when there is no balance between self-assertion and mutual

recognition, resulting in a dialectic of male domination and female submission. In other words, when self-assertion is equated with desire, gendered power is manifested when women and men meet through 'love' as desiring beings. Similarly, Langford suggests that love is a site of gendered power, meaning that, as gendered subjects 'voluntarily' enters loving relationships, power must be a result of unconscious motivations.

In Jónasdóttir's (2003 [1991]) account, by virtue of employing the historical-materialist method, relations of power occur as a result of exploitation of material resources. Within a patriarchal mode of sociosexual relations, the particular exploited resource is women's love power, which, through a dialectical process of practices of care and erotic ecstasy, facilitates men's 'surplus dignity' and women's subordination. To women, then, this resource becomes within the present socio-historical context alienated in the sense that women cannot practice love on their own terms. Similarly, Gunnarsson (2013) suggests that powers are causal forces inherent in contingent modes of social organization. To Gunnarsson, gendered relations of power are as such an emergent reality, which result in contradiction, meaning that this emergent reality suppresses the basic non-dual, transcendent level of reality, i.e. metaReality. Therefore, when women's love power is exploited by men, this is a contradiction that is realized both in terms of gendered power, but also in terms of suppression of the metaReal character of love. This means that, in contrast to Jónasdóttir, both women and men bear an alienated relationship to love, in the sense of that its intrinsic transcendent character is denied.

The most apparent theme in the accounts above is that (heterosexual) love is the site where gendered relations of power are actualized. As such, there is an apparent continuity here with early ontological theories; Beauvoir asserted that heterosexual love is 'inauthentic', and Firestone suggested that heterosexual practices of 'love' are tools of male dominance. While Benjamin and Langford theorize on how this becomes embodied by subjects, Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson expand and elaborate on this conceptualization of power in the present socio-historical context.

In the queer literature on love, power is, quite literally, discourse, meaning that discourse itself is the locus of analysis. Here, there is an apparent analogy to Michel Foucault's (1991 [1975]) notion of power as being *productive*, in the sense that it produces subjects who act in particular ways. To Roseneil (2007), sexuality is a 'regime', according to which subjects practice particular forms of intimacy; to Dahl (2014), discourses on belonging produce particular kinds of kinships in relation to time (cf. Ahmed, 2006).

Berlant's (2012) and Burke's (2017) notions of discourse as maintaining the subordination of women can be seen as exceptions, in that they stipulate relations of power as irreducible to

discourse. They are however in line with the other queer theorists on love, in the sense that discourse, i.e. heteronormativity, produces particular gendered subjectivities (cf. Butler, 1990). Johnson (2005), in particular, extends Butler's (1990; 2011 [1993]) conceptual framework, suggesting that heteronormativity operationalizes through love, generating different gendered subjects. Therefore, 'power' is here something that requires both agency and constraint, i.e. it sets boundaries for the subject that are expressed through 'voluntary' acts of conformity.

In the queer works, 'love' is not a particular location for the realization of gendered power relations. Being that love here is viewed as discursive, it carries power with it in itself, in the sense of that it produces subjects who act in the world. As such, in the realist/materialist literature, power is manifested *at the realization of* love, whereas in the queer literature, power is manifested *through ideas of* love. In other words, when power is located 'out there' as a structural set of relations, one can identify those relations and as such make inquiries regarding why relations of power are realized between particular subjects in a particular context. When power is, on the other hand, reduced to discourse, the epistemological tools to identify structural sets of relations between subjects become insufficient, as one merely theorizes on the relationship between subject and discourse, i.e. how the subject emerges through discourse. In other words, because of the epistemological reductionism in queer theories, they lack explanatory value.

Again, as with the concepts of gender and sexuality, the theoretical tensions that here seem apparent need not be contradictory. This is particularly manifested in Berlant's and Burke's theorizations, accounting for how discursive processes operate to maintain structural relations of power. Similarly, the structural relations of power as identified among Benjamin, Langford, Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson do produce particular subjects; psychoanalysis is especially a theoretical framework of how the subject develops over time. The difference from the queer body of work in general is, however, that they account for a particular set of relations between particular subjects where such development takes place. As such, we need to ask: *why* do particular subjects emerge in particular contexts? In other words, how come 'power' produces 'women' and 'men' and the conditions those subjectivities entail?

Following this, I find myself again resonating with the concept of necessity (cf. Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000). From conceptualizing sexuality in terms of a material necessity, i.e. that gendered categorizations constitute an emergent, socio-structural reality, follows that gendered relations of power are contingent upon the social organization of that particular necessity. This does not contradict a notion of power as being productive, as subjects necessarily maintain structures of power by acting in particular ways. Such acts cannot,

however, be reduced to subjectivity, as *how* power is maintained is relative to the structural sets of relations *between* subjects. Therefore, I argue, should epistemological inquiries of gendered power be concerned with structural relations that cannot be realized independently from subjects, but, however, are irreducible to subjectivity.

Resistance: Solidarity in the Name of Deconstruction?

As with earlier ontological theories (Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989), Benjamin (1988), Langford (1999), Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) and Gunnarsson (2013) all theorize on women's particular interest in resisting gendered relations of power. In Benjamin's account, the breakdown of the tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition is a product of social organization and the intersubjective relations that follow. As women generally embody recognition, and men generally embody self-assertion, the gendered subject will have no hallmark of identity beyond these subjectivities, meaning that resisting this condition entails embracing the paradox of recognition. In other words, women can be said to have a particular collective interest in the re-organization of gender identities, by claiming access to means for self-assertion and thereby 'forcing' men to also embody recognition. Similarly, Langford argues that as gendered relations are realized in a context of individualization, they manifest themselves as relations of power. In other words, when heterosexual love serves as a means to individuality, resistance entails the disclosure of this 'delusion' and the particular conditions it entails for women.

Jónasdóttir explicitly argues that 'women' and 'men' are political concepts. In other words, although there are empirical variances and differences in how gender becomes realized, women have, by virtue of being particular sociosexual beings in a particular socio-historical context, a collective, political interest in asserting their legitimacy and authority to operate in society on their own terms. Therefore, Jónasdóttir suggests a 'womanish'-feminist continuum, i.e. that the resistance against the particular condition of women needs to be done in terms of solidarity, however it should be realized relative to what is appropriate in a particular context. Similarly, Gunnarsson argues for a notion of resistance that involves collective action, however in a contradictory sense; in order for love to have its transcendent character, she argues, the subject needs to love freely, meaning that women collectively need to redirect their love from men both 'inwards' to themselves *and* to other women. As such, men would not be able to rely on

women's love as a means for self-assertion; the individual woman would be able to love on her own conditions, and women as a group would 'force' men to attribute them with authority and legitimacy. Hence, what is peculiar about Gunnarsson's account is that while all realist/materialist literature, following e.g. Beauvoir (1949) or Firestone (1970), has love as a site of power, merely Gunnarsson explicitly articulates love as a possible site of resistance, as something to particularly embrace.

When it comes to the concept of resistance in the queer body of works, the overarching theme is deconstruction. In other words, if gender (and sexuality) are products of language, the tools of resistance also need to be those of language. The theme of deconstruction is very much in line with Butler's (1990; 2011 [1993]) notion of subversion, i.e. the idea that subjects who do not performatively conform to the heterosexual matrix challenge this matrix in the sense of extending possible meanings that bodies can acquire. Similarly, Sedgwick (2008 [1990]) has suggested that the deconstruction of the hetero/homo binary also implies a deconstruction of the idea that gender is determinant for sexuality. Johnson (2005) particularly employs the conceptual frameworks of Butler and Sedgwick, suggesting that the political project surrounding love should be a deconstruction of heteronormativity, i.e. disclose how heteronormativity operationalizes through love. Dahl (2014) extends Ahmed's (2006) notion of a 'queer politics of disorientation', suggesting that queer 'failures' of love disrupts, i.e. deconstructs, its temporal dimensions, i.e. the ideas of futurity it brings (see also Ahmed, 2010).

As briefly noted before, what is peculiar about the queer literature on love is that love is here depicted in quite an ambiguous matter; as a possibility and as a constraint. This has some consequences for how one articulates the notion of resistance. While Johnson and Dahl provide a scepticism to love as such, Berlant (2001; 2012) suggests that if love is characterized by imagination, it carries with it the possibility that one can re-open its 'utopian promises', i.e. deconstructing the present discourse on love makes it possible for love to become a site for transformation. Similarly, Burke (2017) has suggested that recognizing 'the institution of love', i.e. that love is imaginary, bears with it the possibility that through love, one need not follow a particular 'line' of gender, sexuality and intimacy (cf. Ahmed, 2006), making love potentially transformative, i.e. authentic (cf. Beauvoir, 1949). Roseneil (2007) has a peculiar position here; she does not provide a normative account of resistance, but merely provides an analysis of individualization, suggesting it has counter-heteronormative potentials for love and intimacy.

As noted before, how to resist gendered relations of power depends on how the concepts of gender, sexuality and power are defined, and what relationship is articulated between them. If feminist theory is to be understood as a political epistemology, in the sense of disclosing

gendered relations of power in order to facilitate political transformation, this begs the question of what forms of resistance different ontological assumptions entail. As with the tensions that have been present in feminist theorizing over time, this fundamentally concerns the enabling of collective solidarity and the deconstruction of gender itself. Through the notion of collective solidarity, the realist/materialist literature concerns itself with a *positive* concept of resistance, in the sense of politically unifying through the gendered existence. Through the notion of deconstruction, the queer literature, in general, concerns itself with a *negative* concept of resistance, in the sense of rejecting gendered categorizations.

Viewing resistance in positive and negative terms respectively, has its basis in how one conceptualizes the workings of power. If power is defined as a result of a structural sets of relations between gendered subjects, resulting in an asymmetry, acts of resistance necessarily have to be targeted against those relations. If power is reduced to discourse, acts of resistance necessarily have to be targeted against particular discourses. I would argue that the latter is insufficient, for two reasons. First of all, on a basic epistemological level, deconstruction in itself cannot disclose the relative efficiency that acts of subversion/disruption have in different contexts. In other words, by rendering gendered concepts merely as open-ended, one cannot articulate the structural relations in which gendered subjects meet *as* genders. Second of all, this epistemological foundation entails a scepticism towards any politically unifying concepts, in the sense that differences and variances in the gendered realities are seen as undermining such concepts, resulting in fragmentation of political interest groups, i.e. that all (gendered) individuals have an equal interest in resisting discursive constraints. The latter, I believe, is particularly illuminated in Roseneil's account that individualization, as opposed to unifying social ties, bears with it queer possibilities.

Only by identifying particular sets of (material) relations of power, I argue, one can facilitate effective, political collective resistance (cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1848]; Bhaskar, 1986; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000). Through the concept of necessity, i.e. that human beings have basic material needs and capacities, one can disclose the sets of relations in which these needs and capacities are organized. From this follows that a deconstruction of gender actually can be an effective political-epistemological tool (gender is indeed contingent), but the efficiency will be relative to the structural sets of relations in which gender is organized, i.e. how it facilitates a change in a particular mode of social organization of material needs. As such, I believe, resonating with Gunnarsson, that if women collectively redirect their love power, i.e. transform social organization, one also facilitates an effective deconstruction of gender and love in the sense of extending the meanings and possibilities attached to them. This

requires a notion of gender as an open-ended contradiction and, as Berlant, Burke and Roseneil also suggest, love as a possible site for transformation.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have argued for a basic ontology of the gendered existence, meaning that ‘women’ and ‘men’ are emergent, socio-political categories that are constructed through the social organization of the material necessity that is sexuality, and thus stand in a mutual contradiction in the sense of that women are subordinated to men. Being that such categories constitute an emergent reality, bearing a contingent, structural relation to one another, they are necessarily open-ended and thus manifest themselves as tendencies. Thus, on the emergent and contingent level of reality, the structural, sociosexual relations between women and men are maintained through a heteronormative discourse/superstructure. Relations of gendered power thus, I argue, have their basis in these structural sets of relations, meaning that women have a particular, collective interest in resisting these. This does not mean I reject the queer-theoretical epistemological tools; they are indeed effectively illustrating the discursive processes of heteronormativity and how gendered categories become naturalized in these processes. They are however insufficient as political-epistemological tools, by virtue of lacking explanatory value, i.e. philosophical prerequisites for an explicit articulation of the particular, emergent subjects who stand in a structural, material relation to one another.

Theories accounting for the patriarchal dynamics of love generally expand and elaborate on the frameworks of earlier ontological thought, while theories accounting for the heteronormative boundaries of love expand and elaborate on queer-theoretical thought. Of the realist/materialist authors, however, merely Gunnarsson (2013) makes a distinct break from earlier ontological theories by suggesting that love can be a site for transformation. Similarly, queer theorists Berlant (2001; 2012), Burke (2017) and Roseneil (2007) break with the epistemological scepticism generally present in queer thought, rendering it as something that potentially can be a site where normative assumptions of gender and sexuality are challenged. In the following chapter, I will further examine the axis of the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa of feminist love studies that specifically regards which role ‘love’ should exhibit in feminist inquiries.

Analysis II: On Feminist Love

What is the interconnection between love and gender? It seems like love's peculiar shape in contemporary, individualized societies has rendered it a particular site for the realization of gendered power relations (Benjamin, 1988; Langford, 1999; Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]; Gunnarsson, 2013), and as a particular discourse to legitimize practices of desires that, however accessible to many queer subjects, generally conforms to heteronormative gender relations (Johnson, 2005) and a heterosexual norm of monogamy, marriage and/or child-production (Berlant, 2012; Dahl, 2014). Is it really possible for love, in this context, to be a site of transcendence and freedom?

In the following, I will further elaborate on which role the concept of love has in the literature. As noted before, in the realist/materialist body of works, gendered relations of power are understood as being manifested *at the realization of* love, while in the queer-theoretical body of works, gendered subjects emerge *through ideas of* love. The story is, however, more complex; love is an ambiguous concept in feminist theory. As such, I have divided the following into two sections: (1) ontological and epistemological scepticism regarding the possibilities of love, i.e. notions that merely maintain love as a site for women's immanence/oppression or rendering it indistinguishable from discursive constraints, and (2) ontological and epistemological optimism regarding the possibilities of love, i.e. notions that maintain love as a possible site for transcendence and/or freedom from discursive constraints. Regarding the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa of feminist love studies, I argue that the tension between scepticism and optimism is the defining aspect of the axis that regards which role love should exhibit in epistemic inquiries. Finally, I will also assess the different conceptualizations.

Immanence and Constraints

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) rendered heterosexual love as inauthentic, meaning it could serve as no means to freedom and transcendence for women; rather, she argued, it deprives them of creativity and bodily autonomy, i.e. it is a part of the woman's present destiny of immanence. Shulamith Firestone (1970) suggested that what is disguised as 'love', i.e. the reproduction of

the biological family, merely facilitates the exploitation of women. As I commented before, these themes are reoccurring in the realist/materialist literature on love. According to Benjamin (1988), in contemporary, Western societies, the paradox of recognition, i.e. that the recognition of the other as a subject is a prerequisite for a relatively independent self, is denied. To love, then, Benjamin argues, entails for women to recognize men as desiring, independent beings, while denying their own subjectivity; to men, being loved entails being fully recognized as subjects, while denying women their desires and independence. Heterosexual love is thus here the site for the realization of gendered power relations, that has its basis in a social condition where self-assertion is a goal in itself.

Similarly, Langford (1999) argues that because of different (non-)symbolic hallmarks of gender identity in early childhood development, heterosexual love can serve as a means to a 'complete', narcissistic sense of self, i.e. reconsolidating the differentiation from the other-gendered parent. However, this differentiation becomes, again, realized in heterosexual relationships. As such, love is in contemporary, Western societies a delusion particularly present in women's lives; it carries with it a promise of freedom but results in submission. In other words, in a context where love serves as a means to self-assertion, women become 'governed by love', meaning this delusion needs to be revealed and rejected.

Jónasdóttir (2003 [199]) stipulates 'love power' as a human need and transformative capacity, that produces individuated and personified human beings, meaning that in an individualized society, women's love power become exploited and alienated, giving men a 'surplus dignity'. Again, this a dialectical process similarly outlined by Benjamin and Langford; as men receive care, i.e. recognition, from women in their loving relationships, they can legitimately experience erotic ecstasy, giving them the authority and confidence to operate in society as self-asserted individuals at women's expense. As such, love is to Jónasdóttir inherently political, meaning that, through a 'womanish'-feminist continuum, one could generate a 'redistribution' of love power, that would 'force' men to recognize women as legitimate social actors.

In the above accounts, heterosexual love is a site of power. In other words, it is through heterosexuality that women and men meet *as* genders, meaning that women have a collective interest in rejecting the social conditions of love by targeting the present social organization of sexuality where love serves as a means to self-assertion, which, in turn, generates particular gendered subjectivities. Here, a notion love as a particular, possible site of transcendence is absent.

While Benjamin, Langford and Jónasdóttir provide an ontological scepticism regarding love, Dahl (2014) and Johnson (2005) provide an *epistemological* scepticism, meaning that ‘love’ is a discourse which maintains normative constraints on sexuality and gender. ‘Love’, Dahl suggests, has a discursive-temporal dimension, i.e. brings a sense of futurity to the subject (cf. Ahmed, 2006; 2010). When love, then, becomes naturalized as universal to human existence, one can render certain kinships culturally intelligible, i.e. those who conform to conventional, heteronormative family forms. As such, ‘failing’ to love in this sense, breaks with the temporal dimensions of love, i.e. the promise of love as leading to a happy, conventional ending. Similarly, Johnson argues that ‘love’, as discourse, in particular maintains heteronormativity. In a context where love is democratized, in the sense of not being formally-legally regulated, love becomes regulatory in itself, i.e. the particular social mechanism that can maintain gendered subjectivities and identities through discursive processes of inclusion and exclusion.

I have earlier argued for a feminist epistemology in which gendered relations of power constitute an emergent, structural reality/material base, which is maintained through a heteronormative discourse/superstructure. If synthesizing the above accounts, a feminist-sceptic notion of love would entail an ontology of love as the site of the realization of gendered power relations, that produces particular gendered subjects which in turn are maintained through a heteronormative discourse, where ‘love’ conceptually renders such subjectivities culturally intelligible. In other words, similarly noted in *Analysis I*, it is not contradictory to claim that power, at once, can be realized ‘at’ *and* through love—given that, of course, a basic ontology of love is articulated.

Transcendence and Freedom

Echoing earlier ontological theories and the realist/materialist literature on love, Gunnarsson (2013) argues that, indeed, love is a site of patriarchal exploitation of women. She, however, suggests that this is not the whole story; on a deeper ontological level, love is inherently transcendent of dualities, i.e. it is metaReal. As such, love is according Gunnarsson contradictory—we all need to love and to be loved in a true, deeper sense, but this need becomes suppressed within a patriarchal mode of sociosexual relations. By virtue of stipulating love as such, she argues that love can be a site of transcendence and therefore a part of the feminist

struggle—if women collectively redirect their love to themselves and one another, one can facilitate a social condition in which heterosexual love actually can be free, and where women can operate in society on their own terms.

On an ontological level, some queer theorists, as noted before, carry a positive notion of love. As such, Berlant (2001; 2012), Burke (2017) and Roseneil (2007) have an apparent continuity with Gunnarsson's reasoning. Berlant suggests that love is characterized by 'fantasy', i.e. imaginations of an expanded self, which in contemporary, Western societies has been obscured as both a problem and solution to individuality, generating conflicted subjects and as such maintains relations of domination. However, she argues, if love would be allowed to be an open fantasy, it could be a transformational environment, queering pre-established narratives of gender, sexuality and intimacy. Similarly, Burke argues that by recognizing love as real yet imaginary (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1993 [1964]), one can disclose its queer possibilities, generating conditions for an authentic love (cf. Beauvoir, 1949) that transcends the present gender categorizations and heteronormativity. Roseneil has a peculiar position in these discussions, arguing that individualization brings with it queer possibilities as fractured selves reach toward counter-heteronormative practices of love and intimacy.

If synthesizing the above accounts, a feminist-optimist notion of love would be that love is a basic necessity that has been suppressed on the emergent levels of reality, facilitating gendered power relations and particular gendered subjectivities, which are maintained through discursive processes where the intimate relationships between different-gendered subjects become naturalized as 'true love'. As I have similarly argued before, I believe that in order to get a sufficient political-epistemological concept of love, one needs to articulate *which* particular subjects enter loving relationships and their socio-structural positions, i.e. *why* love becomes suppressed/alienated/inauthentic in the first place. As such, while I accept Berlant's and Burke's accounts as effectively illustrating how the present discourse of love rejects its potentially transcendent character, merely disclosing this discourse is insufficient. When articulating why love becomes suppressed, one can facilitate collective solidarity and transform the present social organization of love, i.e. making love 'truly' queer in the sense of generating conditions for it to go beyond dualisms. Therefore, I also reject Roseneil's optimism regarding how individualization bears with it queer possibilities for love and intimacy: which subjects actually carry the social means to reach towards counter-heteronormative solutions to the fractured self in the first place? Only through the principle of collective solidarity, I argue, can one facilitate a social condition where love can be truly counter-heteronormative, i.e. queer.

However, while I agree with Gunnarsson that love can potentially become transcendent depending on how it is realized, on a metaphysical level I find the notion of metaReality contradictory and redundant. The concept implies an ontological dualism that contradicts the non-reductive view on reality generally present in realist frameworks (see Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Sayer, 2000). In other words, what is transcendent is viewed as being beyond what is real, as an immaterial force decontextualized from the necessary materiality of being (cf. Creaven, 2000; Ferguson, 2018; see also Creaven, 2009). Whilst loving and being loved indeed are necessary in order to operate as an active subject, the concept of metaReality is redundant in order to grasp what is necessary, and therefore contingent, about love. I therefore argue for a properly sociological concept of love, i.e. that love cannot be ontologically understood beyond its social materiality. What makes love potentially transcendent, I argue, is therefore not because of any metaphysical force, but because social life can be potentially transcendent, i.e. that our material necessities need not be organized in terms of contradictions, dualisms, exploitation etc. The contradictions of love therefore do not depend on that love's metaphysical force, but rather social life's distinct contingent character, i.e. that the materialization of love is relative to context—contingency does, indeed, mean potential transcendence. In other words, love can only be realized between subjects who love, meaning that love is a social transference that generates a sense of subjectivity, and as such can be socially transformative if women and queers can love on their own terms. In other words, emphasizing love's social materiality, loving subjects become alienated, i.e. estranged from, love's *socially transformative potential*, and not love as a metaphysical phenomenon. As such, when men receive love from women merely because of their unearned social authority (Gunnarsson, 2013), such love is poor because it is fragile. Therefore, the love men receive from women in the present conditions is not poor in the same sense as the love women receive from men is, but rather in the sense that the character of such a love also is the very threat to men's unearned social authority, meaning that loving relationships between men and women risk resulting in a destructive dialectic where the woman becomes deprived of subjectivity and social authority, and in which men lack socio-structural prerequisites for empathizing with their female partner. When men, thus, try to maintain their unearned power, heterosexual relationships risk culminating in violence (cf. Benjamin, 1988; Langford, 1999).

I argue that love indeed is a site where gendered relations of power are realized, which in turn are maintained through a heteronormative discourse on love. However, this is not the whole story—everybody, feminists included, need *to love* and *to be loved* in order to act in the world as subjects, as personified human beings. The fact that love is a means to self-assertion need

not imply that it should be rejected; the task is rather, as Benjamin (1988) similarly has suggested, to embrace the paradox of recognition—to facilitate a condition where the subject both can love and be loved in a deeper sense, i.e. to embody both self-assertion and mutual recognition, making love authentic, i.e. a transformative space that can transcend dualisms (cf. Berlant, 2001; 2012; Burke, 2017). Therefore, I believe that love should not be merely rejected in the feminist-political project as a site of immanence and constraints, but also embraced as a possible site for transcendence and freedom.

Conclusion

In the field of feminist love studies, the concept of love has quite an ambiguous role. On one hand, there are sceptic notions rendering it ontologically oppressive and epistemologically constraining; on the other hand, there are optimistic notions rendering it ontologically and epistemologically as possibly transcendent and a site of freedom. As such, within the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa of the field, the axis that specifically regards which role love should exhibit in epistemic inquiries is not structured according to a tension between ontology and epistemology, but rather a tension between scepticism and optimism. In other words, epistemological and ontological theories on love and gender, respectively, merely locate their analyses of love in different aspects, or strata, of reality. I argue, however, that it is only by articulating a basic ontology of love and gender that one can get a sense of as to why love, in a social context of individualization, becomes alienated through gendered relations of power *and* interrelated heteronormative discourses. In a divergence from Gunnarsson (2013), however, I suggest an ontology of love that emphasizes its social materiality, meaning it is not love as a metaphysical phenomenon that becomes alienated from loving subjects, but rather love's socially transformative potential.

Indeed, human beings have necessary relations of dependence grounded in sexuality (Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]), but in theorizing social life, i.e. what subjects do and the relationship(s) between them, love can always be something else, if we allow it to. This is not contradicting any claim that love is a human necessity (cf. Gunnarsson, 2013). In other words, only if love is recognized as such, one can appropriately articulate the feminist task in a context where love serves as a means to self-assertion (which in turn facilitates women's subordination and the suppression of queer desires). That is, the reclaiming of love as a site for transformation

through the principle of collective solidarity; generating spaces where women and queer subjects can love on their own terms, 'forcing' men to recognize women as subjects and, consequentially, disrupt heteronormative discourses.

Analysis III: Ontologies at the Heart of Feminist Epistemology

By virtue of having politically transformative aspirations, feminist theory necessarily theorizes about what *is*, i.e. what one aims to transform. Through ontological inquiries, one therefore specifies the task of the feminist project. Having examined ontological assumptions in feminist literature on love, I therefore now turn back to the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa of feminist theorizing, i.e. that which explicitly regards how gender, and thus the feminist-epistemological task, should be defined. In other words, I will contextualize the different conceptualizations in the literature within the basic tensions regarding the ontological status of gender in feminist epistemology.

Epistemological Reductionism

Needless to say, feminist theorizing has been heavily influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thought, such as the Foucauldian notions of knowledge/power and discourse (see e.g. Foucault, 1978), and Derrida's (see e.g. 1988) notion of deconstruction. Indeed, a key characteristic of feminist epistemology is to question prevailing conceptual frameworks and how knowledge is necessarily bound up with relations of power. As noted, feminist standpoint theory departs from the sociological notion that knowledge is always socially located, i.e. embodied by subjects who will always have particular social presuppositions for thought. Following this, the fundamental questions for feminist epistemology regard how relations of power should be defined, and, interrelated, how one should articulate the particular realities of subjects who stand in relations of power to one another; and this is a rather problematic enterprise. On one hand, there can be no view from nowhere (cf. Nietzsche, 1994 [1887]; Haraway, 1988), meaning that ontological inquiries always are partial, i.e. that any claim about an objective reality 'out there' always carries a subjective dimension. On the other hand, such claims are necessary in order to articulate the feminist-epistemological task.

The solution for poststructuralist-feminist theories has been to reject the very possibility of making specific, ontological articulations of gendered realities. From the notion that language

necessarily sets boundaries for one's access to the world, one has deduced that one cannot grasp any reality beyond languages (cf. Scott, 1988). Hekman (1997) argued that the very notion of differences in women's standpoints undermines gendered categorizations. In queer theories, one therefore reduces gender and gendered relations of power to the language and discourses of sexuality (Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]; Ahmed, 2006), meaning that gender, here, need not be the specific locus for epistemic inquiries. In the literature on love, this is particularly manifested in Roseneil's (2007) and Dahl's (2014) accounts, in which a *distinct* analysis of gendered subjectivity and gendered relations of power is absent. In Johnson's (2005) account, gendered categories are the very prerequisite for his theorizing, but all gendered subjects here have an equal interest in deconstructing the heterosexual matrix. Furthermore, similarly noted before, poststructuralist theories tend to collapse different aspects of reality into one single totality. In poststructuralist-feminist theory, this generally becomes manifested through the idea that gender equates language/discourse, which equates power, and so on. In inquiries on love, this epistemological reductionism may further extend into sceptic notions of love as equating gender, which equates language/discourse, etc. (Johnson, 2005; Dahl, 2014).

The poststructuralist critiques need to be taken seriously. If one is concerned with epistemology, the tools at hand are, quite literally, those of language. However, from the notion that language sets boundaries for one's access to the world, it does not follow that reality quite literally *is* language. In other words, the premise simply does not justify the conclusion; it is based upon the self-destructive notion that the boundaries of language undermine any articulation of what is real beyond language, i.e. claiming that one cannot access any reality beyond language, is indeed a claim about a reality that is referenced beyond language. Any poststructuralist ontology is therefore always logically incoherent and politically insufficient; what is needed for feminist theory is philosophical tools that allow for a critical examination of language without losing a notion of what is particularly real, i.e. irreducible to language, about gendered existences (see Collins, 1997; Harding, 1997).

Deconstructing Ontology-versus-Epistemology

As an attempt to deal with the problems that follow a poststructuralist ontology of gender, Hekman has later on rejected its language/reality-dualism, by deconstructing that very dualism, i.e. bridging the gap between ontology and epistemology. Together with Alaimo, she has

particularly argued that matter needs to be ascribed with transformative capacities and agency equal to that of language and discourse (Hekman & Alaimo, 2008; see also Hekman, 2008). In other words, ontology and epistemology are here, conceptually and empirically, indistinguishable in that matter (what is) and language/discourse (what is known/knowable) are equally transformative and ‘intra-act’ (see also Haraway, 1990 [1985]; Barad, 1998; Hekman, 2008). At first glance, this may seem plausible from a sociological point of view; being and knowing are the very prerequisites for subjectivity—because one is, one knows, and because one knows, one is (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]; Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]). The problem is, however, that the solution suggested by Hekman and Alaimo is not a theory about subjectivity, but rather a metaphysical speculation about the transformative capacities and agencies of matter through a poststructuralist framework that emphasizes the indeterminacy of being. In other words, matter and language/discourse are rendered indistinguishable by virtue of that they are assigned equal agency and transformative capacities, and not by virtue of that they are co-constitutive of human action, i.e. *prerequisites for* agency and transformation.

In Hemming’s (2012) view, the experience of affective dissonance can generate a sense of affective solidarity among those who are marginalized, meaning that the feminist strategy need not rely on identity politics, i.e. solidarity in terms of social identities (e.g. gender, race etc.). While I agree with the premises, I do not find the conclusion satisfactory. There are two problems; first of all, political transformation cannot rely on subjective experiences, as subjects who occupy powerful positions in social life may still experience affective dissonance; second of all, it does not provide any basic guidelines to what the feminist task should strive for, as it lacks an articulation of which groups have a particular interest in political transformation.

When evaluating the literature on love, I have argued that many notions in feminist theory are not so contradictory as they first appear to be, and this specifically regards the relationship between ontology and epistemology. Berlant (2001; 2012) and Burke (2017) argue that normative ideas of gender, sexuality and intimacy maintain women’s subordination, and as such deny the queer character of love. This is both an articulation of the ontological and epistemological status of gender. Here, however, ontology and epistemology are held *distinct* yet intertwined. While I have criticized their mere discursive and conceptual analyses of women’s particular condition as insufficient, they point to something important; first of all, the need for a basic ontology of women’s subordination, which is articulated as distinct from its ideal strata (however the two mutually reinforce one another); secondly, that such an ontology is conceptually held as socio-historically contingent and allows for substantial investigations of

its relative realizations *and* a notion of collective solidarity. The solution, I believe, lies in the frameworks of critical realism and historical-materialism.

A Material World

Smith (1974) and Hartsock (2004 [1983]) have been prominent figures of early feminist standpoint theory which emphasizes women's structural position in the world, and how the academic enterprise has been obscured through exclusionary mechanisms based upon that very positioning. While they are both correct in their conclusions, I believe that their understanding of women's particular standpoint as grounded in gendered/sexual division of labour is insufficient. If one accepts the premise that women's subordination is based upon the social organization of sexuality (Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]; Gunnarsson, 2013), this does not only affect the division of labour in the domestic sphere, but also women's sexual autonomy, social authority, and so on. In other words, they fail to conceptualize what is particular about the subordination of women. As Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991], pp. 88ff.) similarly has pointed out, the application of Marxist historical-materialism (which is explicitly done in Hartsock's theorization, and furthermore in Hartmann's (1979) dual systems theory) here does not articulate sexuality as a material necessity that is distinct from labour.

The application of the Marxist method constitutes a significant and defining feature of feminist theorizing, and is also present in Firestone's (1970) and MacKinnon's (1989) accounts. What is peculiar about Jónasdóttir's account is that she, as opposed to e.g. Firestone, emphasizes the socio-historical/contextual aspect of women's realities, and furthermore defines sexuality as a distinct material necessity irreducible to labour (cf. Hartmann, 1979; Hartsock, 2004 [1983]) and social constructions surrounding that particular necessity (cf. MacKinnon, 1989).

Gunnarsson (2011) and Mussell (2016) have both suggested a critical realist approach in stipulating gendered categorizations. While Gunnarsson argues for gendered categorizations as relatively independent abstractions, Mussell distinctively claims that critical realism provides a framework that is both compatible with feminist standpoint theory, and provides philosophical grounds for making valid claims about reality via the notion of a privileged standpoint. Needless to say, Gunnarsson's argument is extended in her dissertation (2013), meaning that her theorization is to be viewed as a conceptual tool to grasp particular, structural mechanisms in

social life. As such, if accepting Mussell's premises, women's particular standpoint on reality can be seen as grounded in their sociosexual poverty, i.e. a structural lack of social authority and legitimacy.

Benjamin (1988) and Langford (1999), by virtue of employing psychoanalysis, emphasize the micro-processes through which gender identity develops, and thus which dynamics emerge between subjects. The influence of the psychoanalytic methodology in feminist theorizing should not be underestimated, however a substantial evaluation of the approach is beyond the limitations of this thesis.¹⁴ My specific concern here regards which relationship between ontology and epistemology is articulated. In Benjamin's and Langford's accounts, sexuality serves a key role in the development of the self, or, in realist terms, sexuality is the necessity from which gendered subjectivities, and therefore particular perspectives on the world, emerge. The contingency of gender is, however, distinctively emphasized in Benjamin's account, in the sense of that which symbolizes subjectivity, i.e. the phallus, depends on distinct socio-historically contingent macro-processes, which manifest themselves in micro-level interaction. From a sociological point of view, Langford's account lacks explanatory value of as to why the phallus serves such a key role in the development of the self in the first place.

I argue that critical realism and the historical-materialist method provide substantial guidelines in stipulating gendered categorizations. In the critical realist framework, ontology and epistemology are held distinct yet intertwined (Bhaskar, 2008 [1975]; Sayer, 2000). In other words, being and knowing constitute ontologically distinct strata of reality, in that knowledge emerges from existence. Holding the emergent and contingent character of social life as ontologically distinct from necessary relations of dependence is therefore not contradictory, which it appears to be in poststructuralist theories. Similarly, also noted before, by recognizing our necessary needs and dependencies, one is also provided with a framework that allows for an articulation of why relations of power emerge and thus how they manifest themselves.

If carefully applied, the historical-materialist method is very much compatible with the realist framework. As Sean Creaven (2000) has pointed out, the social organization of material needs is by necessity socio-historically contingent and therefore constitutes an emergent reality. How social life thus manifests itself will therefore be dependent on, but irreducible to, how our material needs are met. In Jónasdóttir's account, sociosexual exploitation therefore results in relations of alienation in that women become denied and estranged from social authority and legitimacy. The materialist framework, however, puts limitations to articulations of what is

¹⁴Freudian psychoanalysis is also present in e.g. Beauvoir's (1949) and Hartsock's (2004 [1983]) accounts, and a Lacanian trace is present in Butler's (1990) account.

beyond the historically contingent material existence. Hence, Gunnarsson employs the concept of metaReality, i.e. the notion that what is truly real goes beyond everything that is. I have earlier argued that such a concept implies an ontological dualism that generally contradicts the non-reductive approach of realist frameworks (see *Analysis II*; cf. Creaven, 2009). If employing a materialist-realist approach, I argue, transcendence can only be achieved in social life if our material needs are socially organized in a manner that does not result in relations characterized by contradictions and dualisms, i.e. transcendence can only be realized in social life when those who are contingently deprived of subjectivity reclaim social and material resources that allow for agency and social transformation. In other words, *because social life is contingent, love can be possibly transcendent*.

I argue that gender is a relatively distinct social structure, an emergent and contingent stratum of reality, which becomes multiply realized in different social and historical contexts and processes. Consequentially, I do not adhere to universal, trans-historical notions of the concept. In other words, gender *is here and now*, but need not be. Hence, only by articulating a basic ontology of gender, can one detect its empirical variances, re-negotiate what it means to be a particular gendered being in a particular context and transform the social conditions that make women oppressed by virtue of being women (cf. Gunnarsson, 2011), and queer subjects suppressed by virtue of not conforming to gendered categorizations. This, I believe, extends the legacy of *The Second Sex* (1949) and the subsequent feminist epistemologies that have emphasized how gendered relations of power obscure our views of what is, and therefore what can potentially be.

Conclusion

The fundamental tension within the epistemic doxa of feminist theorizing and research concerns the relationship between ontology and epistemology when defining the concept of gender. An epistemological reductionism, I argue, is present in the works of Johnson (2005) and Dahl (2014), and takes an expression in Roseneil's (2007) account by virtue of not distinctively theorizing on gender. However, in Berlant's (2001; 2012) and Burke's (2017) accounts, one highlights both ontological and epistemological notions, but with an emphasis on the latter. Finally, Benjamin (1988), Langford (1999), Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) and Gunnarsson (2013) depart from realist/materialist notions in stipulating gendered categorizations, however in

different ways. In the psychoanalytical frameworks of Benjamin and Langford, sexuality is the ontological necessity from which gender identity emerges. Jónasdóttir explicitly articulates a historical-materialist ontology of gender and sexuality, which is then very much extended in Gunnarsson's application of critical realist philosophy.

I have argued that an epistemological reductionism is logically incoherent and politically insufficient, while attempts to deconstruct ontology versus epistemology at best leads to theories on subjectivity, and therefore are insufficient in defining the feminist-epistemological task. Instead, I have suggested that critical realism and historical-materialism here provides complementary and substantial frameworks, and that gender (and, consequentially, love) is most fruitfully investigated if one emphasizes its *socio-historically contingent materiality*.

Final Discussion

In this thesis, I have investigated the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa at the heart of feminist love studies, structured according to two intersecting axes, wherein the relationship between ontology and epistemology in defining gender is one key concern, and love as a relatively independent concept the other. The study is placed in a wider context of individualization, where love has an increasingly independent social, political and ethical significance. The task for feminist love studies is therefore to assign love a particular, relatively independent significance in epistemic inquiries. That is, to ask what these social conditions for love imply for gendered subjectivities and gendered relations of power.

Any feminist theory is a political, i.e. emancipatory, epistemology by virtue of that one theorizes on particular relations of power with the aim of transforming these relations. Interconnected, ontological assumptions on gender, sexuality, power and resistance are innately related in feminist theory, meaning that, specifically, assumptions about gender contain within them notions of sexuality. Following this, investigating gender as a relatively independent concept, I argue, is most fruitfully done in relation to theories where its relationship to sexuality is explicitly articulated.

In the wider history of feminist theorizing, the concept of gender has been rendered problematic, and this fundamentally concerns the tension between deconstructing gender in itself, and enabling collective, political solidarity. In other words, whether one should emphasize the epistemological boundaries of gendered categorizations, or make particular ontological inquiries on gendered dynamics. Hence, in this thesis I have investigated this basic tension and its implications for feminist theories on love.

I have selected a body of feminist literature on love which have undergone a theoretical analysis and assessment. The research questions guiding me in the study concerned the, explicit or implicit, ontological assumptions on gender, sexuality, power and resistance in the works, which role the concept of love has, and the relative positioning of the literature in relation to the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa in the broader field of feminist theorizing. The literature was selected according to the meta-theoretical epistemic doxa in the narrower field of feminist love studies, and has been assessed through the lenses of critical realism and historical-materialism.

In the first part of the analysis, I argued that what appears as contradictory notions in feminist theorizing need not be. In the materialist/realist literature on love, sexuality ontologically precedes gender, meaning that gender is generally understood in binary terms, and as such that gendered relations of power are articulated as structural sets of relations. The feminist task is thus, here, to facilitate resistance in terms of collective solidarity (cf. Beauvoir, 1949; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1996 [1980]; MacKinnon, 1989). In the queer literature on love, sexuality epistemologically precedes gender, meaning that gendered categorizations are held open-ended, and as such gendered power is located in heteronormative discourses on sexuality. Resistance is here, thus, the very deconstruction of gender in itself (cf. Butler, 1990; 2011 [1993]; Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]; Ahmed, 2006). Suggesting a critical realist (cf. Gunnarsson, 2013) and historical-materialist (cf. Jónasdóttir, 2003 [1991]) view, I have argued that gender is an emergent feature of social life, a contingent organization of the basic material need, i.e. necessity, that is sexuality. Because gender is organized in terms of sociosexual relations, such relations are structural, patriarchal relations of power irreducible to subjectivity. Thus, I argue, heteronormative discourses emerge from these structural relations as a distinct stratum, or superstructure in Marxist terms, irreducible to that particular social organization, but nonetheless work to maintain it. In other words, women have a particular interest in resisting gendered relations of power, but this is not contradictory to the poststructuralist indeterminacy of gendered categories, as gender necessarily is contingent. Consequentially, a structural transformation of our sociosexual relations is also disruptive of heteronormative discourses. Therefore, I also reject queer theories as effective political epistemologies, by virtue of lacking explanatory value of as to why heteronormative discourses emerge in the first place.

Next, I investigated love as a relatively independent concept in the literature. In the realist/materialist literature, gendered power is understood as being realized at the realization of love, while in the queer-theoretical body of works, gendered subjects emerge through discourses on love. The more fundamental tension is, however, that between sceptic and optimistic notions on the concept. Here, extending on Gunnarsson's (2013) transcendent notion of love, I argue that love is a material necessity realized through a social transference between loving subjects. I therefore reject the concept of metaReality as contradictory and redundant, instead suggesting a properly sociological notion of love, meaning that in the wider context of individualization, loving subjects become alienated from love's socially transformative potential, and not love in itself as a metaphysical force. Because of the contingent character of social life, love is therefore possibly transcendent if it is allowed to be realized in non-exploitative relations. In other words, if women and queers could love on their own terms, and

thus be allowed to embody subjectivity, patriarchal relations and their emergent heteronormative discourses would be transformed and disrupted.

In the last part of the analysis, I turned back to the basic tension between ontology and epistemology in feminist theorizing. Here, Roseneil's (2007) account has an apparent continuity with the indeterminacy of gender in poststructuralist frameworks, and Johnson (2005) and Dahl (2014) distinctively extend the idea of poststructuralist epistemological reductionism (cf. Scott, 1988; Hekman, 1997), collapsing gender, sexuality, love and power into a discursive totality. I reject this as a self-destructive and politically insufficient notion. There have also been attempts to deconstruct ontological and epistemological notions of gender, but this, I argue, either leads to a metaphysical speculation about the indeterminacy of matter (Hekman & Alaimo, 2008) or, at best, theories on subjectivity (Hemmings, 2012). While the latter is an important notion in its own right, I believe it is necessary to hold ontology and epistemology as distinct when defining the feminist-epistemological task. Something implied, however not substantially articulated, in the accounts of Berlant (2001; 2012) and Burke (2017).

I believe feminist inquiries are most fruitfully done through the frameworks of critical realism and historical-materialism, where gender constitutes a socio-historically contingent stratum of reality, emerging from the social organization of sexuality, in turn defined as an ontological, material necessity. While the Marxist method is a common feature in feminist theories (Hartmann, 1979; Hartsock, 2004 [1983]; Firestone, 1970; MacKinnon, 1989), Jónasdóttir (2003 [1991]) shows that many such theories have been insufficient, by virtue of either under-emphasizing the historical, contextual aspect of gender or not articulating sexuality as an ontologically distinct material need. Gunnarsson (2013) extends Jónasdóttir's reasoning through the framework of critical realism, meaning that women's particular standpoint on reality can be seen as grounded in their sociosexual poverty, i.e. a particular social construction irreducible to subjectivity (cf. Mussell, 2016). Finally, also positioned in this group of theories, the psychoanalytical frameworks of Benjamin (1988) and Langford (1999) articulate sexuality as the ontologically distinct key drive from which gender identity develops.

If the feminist-epistemological task is concerned with emancipatory knowledge, i.e. to reveal how relations of power facilitate particular perspectives on the world, with the aim of transforming these relations (cf. Marx & Engels, 2012 [1845]; Bhaskar, 1986; Creaven, 2000; Sayer, 2000), one needs to articulate why particular relations of power generate particular perspectives, i.e. what one aims to change. Therefore, I argue, a basic ontology of gender is necessary in feminist epistemology, which emphasizes its socio-historically contingent materiality. As such, while I, to a large degree, accept Gunnarsson's (2013) line of

argumentation, the historical-materialist method sets distinct boundaries to what can be articulated about love; love is not a metaphysical force, but a social transference, necessarily embodied, i.e. materialized, by loving subjects. In other words, if properly defined as a sociological concept, love can be socially and politically transformative for women and queers. In a context where love serves as a means to individuality, feminists need to reclaim love and create spaces that allow for the embodiment of unconditional subjectivity and solidarity, and as such making love transcend patriarchal contradictions.

Now, What?

In the field of feminist love studies, I have positioned myself with an optimistic notion of love as possibly transcendent, given that particular social and material conditions are realized. With regards to further research, this has a few key implications. The first is that love's relative materialization in different contexts should be further investigated. As a concept, gender is relatively independent, but it cannot be realized independently in social life. In other words, empirically and theoretically investigating how gender is manifested in women's realities when it intersects with other strata of reality, such as class and race, can extend the frameworks at hand, deepening our understanding of the social conditions for love in a wider context of individualization. While there is no doubt that love, however defined, as care, sexual love or something else, is deeply embedded with intersecting processes of power (see e.g. hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2004; Nash, 2011; Berlant, 2012); it is clear that love as a particular social transference, which becomes materialized by particular subjects in particular socio-structural relations, is undertheorized in such analyses.

Furthermore, I believe that in feminist inquiries on love, the critical realist and historical-materialist frameworks need to be further integrated. In other words, while Gunnarsson (2013) further develops Jónasdóttir's (2003 [1991]) concept of love power through critical realism, I believe a metaphysical notion of love as an immaterial force is contradictory and redundant. As such, it is my view that feminist theorizing can be further developed through a particular Marxist-realist framework (cf. Creaven, 2000), both through explicit conceptual analyses and empirical investigations.

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