

Killing Mothers: Feminisms, Love Power, and Critique

Gunnarsson, Lena *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-Realist Ontology of Sociosexuality*. London and New York: Routledge 2014 (184 pages)

GENDER STUDIES IS such a fantastically broad field and while this is exactly as it should be, it inevitably also engenders a number of interrelated but also sometimes contradictory perspectives emerging, not only in terms of conviction and experience, but also in terms of disciplinary training. Even if many feminist and gender theories cut across disciplinary boundaries, scholars based in different disciplines are likely to find different sets of theories useful. This is all part of the richness of the field and by means of its interdisciplinary nature theoretical investments can be tested against each other and developed in productive ways. At the same time, of course, we need to acknowledge that different theoretical oeuvres do different theoretical jobs. While it is certainly worth testing theories against each other in search for productive meetings, there is little point in critiquing theories that are clearly not well suited to our particular project, especially not if they have no pretensions of being so.

In her book, *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-Realist Ontology of Sociosexuality*, Lena Gunnarsson dedicates a considerable amount of space to a critical reading of Judith Butler. Gunnarsson is deeply dissatisfied with Butler and her response to Butler's work is characterized by a vehemently critical stance. In fact, a substantial part of the book is devoted to this matricide which is colored by sharp phrases that describe Butler's work as "intellectually perplexing" and rid of

"political potential" (Gunnarsson 2014, 30), her account of sexuality as "deeply non-substantial" (35) and "fragmented and inconsistent" and her strategy of "warding off critique" as "scientifically dishonest" (41). Although Butler is the main mother to be killed in this process, Gunnarsson also quite consistently critiques other feminist predecessors in equally strong words. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Grosz "fails to make" crucial distinctions (68), Chandra Talpade Mohanty's interpretations are "sometimes rather dubious" (82), Myra Hird and Celia Roberts "fail" to discriminate between difference and dualism (73), and New Materialist feminist theory is "unfortunate that it seems to imply a neglect of *human nature*" (69).

Although it makes perfect sense, of course, to situate your work in relation to previous criticism, as well as to clarify how it differs from it, Gunnarsson's persistent criticism is unfortunate because it creates what I cannot help seeing as an unnecessary antagonism. It may be correct that some of these theories are not up to the job that she wants to achieve but it is also correct that they are not necessarily trying to achieve it. Many of the feminist theorists Gunnarsson criticizes are straw (wo)men either because there are more affinities than Gunnarsson recognizes (for example, few would argue that "the categories of 'women' and 'men' do not represent real groupings in the world" [167]) or because they simply do not target the same problems as she does. Thus, for example, Gunnarsson's stance that feminism "after all, is primarily a matter of the future of human beings" (69) positions it in a different tradition from feminists who believe that feminism is about much more than that or who insist that "human beings" is a concept that need to be analyzed in the first place. Similarly, some of us might struggle to take on the quite radical conflation of (socio)sexuality and love that Gunnarsson embraces. Some of us may also find it odd to pursue questions of love and sexuality and their relation to power without theorizing each of these in relation to a theoretical tradition we recognize. This does not mean, however, that we have to find Gunnarsson's own work as "failing" or "dubious." Quite on the contrary, as a researcher trained in the poststructuralist feminist theory that Gunnarsson denounces I welcome what is a different but

not necessarily antagonistic perspective on questions of love, sexuality, and gender.

Building on Anna G. Jónasdóttir's notion of "love power" and Roy Bhaskar's work on Critical Realism, Gunnarsson's project is to offer a reading of how men exploit women's "love power" and to offer a solution of how to approach this gender inequality. Once we get to the third and last part of the book, and especially its final sections, Gunnarsson puts her own standpoint at play by referring to sociological studies of patterns in how women and men experience love and power. Basically, these studies suggest a deep-seated inequality in how women and men love. Put simply, "[w]omen tend to give more love to men than they get in return" (109) and this is an entrenched pattern by means of which men are consistently more confirmed while women, not getting the same validation as persons, continue to be subordinated and dependent on men despite their relative economic independence. This way, love becomes an "exploitable power" that perpetuates gender inequalities more generally.

Because love cannot be negotiated in the way equal pay or legal rights can, Gunnarsson notes, we have to look elsewhere for the measures for coming to terms with this inequality. The solution she offers is that women practice "a relative withdrawal of their caring and erotic energies from men" (150) and "direct more of their caring and erotic energies toward one another" (151). This can but does not have to take the form of radical lesbianism, as there are other ways for women to engage with each other and break with the male-centeredness conditions of love. Picking these strategies up from what is essentially a feminist tradition of the 1970s and 1980s (Adrienne Rich, Catharine MacKinnon, Luce Irigaray, etc.), Gunnarsson argues that the sociosexual struggle "by means of demands and complaints" of the past decades have proved inadequate and that alternative strategies are demanded. Importantly, the relative withdrawal proposed does not constitute a final solution but rather a step toward breaking with the entrenched exploitation of women's "love power" that would ultimately benefit both women and men as a greater equality would give birth to more genuine and thereby more equal loving.

It is hard to imagine a project like Gunnarsson's written from a Butlerian or a poststructuralist feminist perspective. There are so many categories to explore, question, and dissect before such a perspective could possibly engage with "women" and "men" the way she does, not to mention "love" and "sexuality." This does not mean that these different perspectives are irreconcilable but rather that they are pursuing the feminist project(s) on different levels. A positive side effect of Gunnarsson's work is that it despite, or maybe because, of its vehement rejection of poststructuralist feminists, reminds us of the question of how we may reconcile questions of difference and desire with those of categories and stratified love. My take would be radically different than Gunnarsson's. That women and men constitute "real groupings in the world" does not mean that other, less conventional assemblages do not. At any rate, Gunnarsson seems confident in offering "a new paradigm of spiritual-political structure" (169). And we need such confidence, especially in the light of a study that suggests that inequality sits at the heart of matters quite literally. This insight brings an important perspective to feminist theory. But do we really have to kill so many mothers getting there?

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