

—— Catherine Vulliamy, »Contradiction and Radical Hope: Utopia as Method in the Lived Experience of Love«

—— A B S T R A C T ——

In this article, I explore the contradictions, tensions and hopefulness of love. Participants in my research shared accounts of love that acknowledged the anguish, loss and pain of love in uneven political worlds marked by patriarchal power structures and heteronormative assumption. At the same time as confronting the difficulty of negotiating love in this context, the accounts continued to express a determined sense of hope about love. I employ a dialectical approach in order to apprehend the paradoxes and tensions inherent to the lived experience of love. As I investigate the meanings and implications of both the contradictions of love, and the hope in love's potential to transform, I use Ruth Levitas' concept of utopia as method to show how the radical hope of love emerges directly from the contradictions of love as a means of imagining and creating new social worlds.

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■—CONTRADICTION AND RADICAL HOPE: Utopia
as Method in the Lived Experience of Love

■—INTRODUCTION:
THE PERSISTENT QUESTION OF LOVE —■

For centuries, thinkers, writers, artists and scientists from many diverse schools of thought have been poring over the topic of love in its various forms. In more recent decades, we have seen the development of social theory that makes connections between sexuality and marriage and an ideology of romantic love, or romantic love as a new cultural innovation underpinning marriage and family.¹ The last few years have also seen the emergence of what might be termed feminist love studies, in which love takes centre stage as an object of analysis in its own right, as well as recent philosophical work which specifically addresses love.²

From a feminist perspective, the relationship between sexuality and love is complex, not least because romantic love has been understood as a mechanism by which socially constructed links between gender and sexuality are reproduced, and therefore by which male power and female subordination are maintained. It has been noted that feminist theory has tended to be reticent to address love on its own terms, rather than reducible to its relationships to, for example, care or labour. Despite this, however, feminist thinking on love reaches back at least two hundred years.³ Simone de Beauvoir understood that love has different meanings for men than it does for women, so that under patriarchy, for woman, »to love is to relinquish everything for the benefit of a master«. ⁴ In heterosexual love then, woman becomes complicit in her own subordination, renouncing her own subjectivity and abandoning her self in love so that she can only be made complete through the attention of her lover. This understanding of heterosexual love as a kind of false consciousness which ensures female subordination and submission to men has been a key theme in second wave feminist theory on love, sexuality and relationship.⁵ It is on the basis of subjectivities constituted through subordination that Firestone argues that »love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today«. ⁶ Like de Beauvoir, Firestone recognises that women invest more in love than men, and in so doing, shackle themselves to their own subordination, and undermine their potential for other achievements.

It is important to note that, while feminist theorists have highlighted understandings of love as a source of women's subjugation, love is also understood, at least potentially, as a source of liberation. Douglas charts diverse feminist approaches to love, and explores the tension between interpretations of love as a foundation of gender oppression, and its possibility as liberation.⁷ She points out that, having described love as a foundation of the subordination of women, both de Beauvoir and Firestone identify a potential for non-oppressive love, albeit with differing preconditions.⁸ Lowe discusses the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Emma Goldman, to highlight that while these writers expose the oppression of women that appears inherent to love and gendered relations, they also look towards a new vision of love and relationship that is rooted in mutual respect, freedom and comradeship.⁹ They describe a world in which love might become an enjoyable enrichment of life, rather than the sole aim of being.¹⁰ Lowe argues that these theorists have succeeded in »politicizing love to strip it of its oppressive character«, and have thereby demonstrated that, despite love's historic position as a source of oppression, it can also be »the necessary condition for women's liberation.«¹¹

Within contemporary sociological research, love is understood in the context of social structures and relations and the cultural and social contradictions shape social life today. Giddens grasps issues of difference, inequality and potential in relation to love to argue that we are in an emergent world of the »transformation of intimacy«.¹² He sees this world as heralded by the »pure relationship«; rooted in a presumption of relationship equality and emotional and sexual give-and-take, and not restricted to either heterosexuality or monogamy.¹³ Beck and Beck-Gernsheim similarly pick up on notions of the potential that love appears to promise, arguing that, perhaps particularly in the context of increasing individualisation in late modernity, it is the potentials of love which secures people's deep and long-standing attachment to the idea of love.¹⁴ They suggest that in Post-Christian modern societies, love may seem to offer a necessary sense of meaning; where religion told us that there is life after death; love tells us that there is love before death.¹⁵ The question now is whether attachment to love and the human search for meaning can be understood outside of the friction between conceptions of love as oppression and as emancipatory potential. While some feminist writers have articulated a clear understanding of the potential for love to generate conditions of increased equality, they might still consider Giddens' presumption of equality in relationships as premature at best. For example, Illouz argues that »in conditions of modernity, men have far more sexual and emotional choice than women, and it is this imbalance that

creates emotional domination«. ¹⁶ She notes feminist critiques of love, and argues that the sociological significance of love lies in the promotion of intense romantic love and heterosexual marriage as desirable models for adult life and the ways that these ideals shape »not only our behaviour but also our aspirations, hopes, and dreams for happiness«. ¹⁷ She also suggests that feminist theory has failed to adequately grapple with the reasons behind love's powerful influence on women and men. ¹⁸ Part of Illouz's understanding of inequality in relation to love concerns the use of biologically essentialist arguments to explain away and naturalise what are in fact culturally engineered differences between women and men, which reinforce assumptions about men as emotionally inept and women as inherently over-emotional. ¹⁹ Gunnarsson attempts to bridge the contradictions between the ways in which women are subordinated to men through love, and the ways in which love might function as an important source of power for women. Employing a dialectical approach to explore why women tend to give more love to men than men give to women, she argues that the creation of a different kind of future relies upon identifying both the possibilities and the limits of the conditions of our social existence. In this respect, she argues that we need to recognise both the reality of women's sociosexual needs, and the ways in which these needs are currently involved in women's subordination to men, in order that women might generate new understandings of how their needs might be met without dependency upon men. ²⁰ Both Illouz and Gunnarsson make a compelling challenge to Giddens' prematurely optimistic pure relationship, however, his analysis might serve as a valuable invitation for women and men to take steps towards the creation of democratic intimacy.

We can see how the contradictions and tensions between theoretical conceptions of love as liberation and as oppression persist in late modernity. These frictions continue to emerge in recent work on love's political possibilities. Illouz notes love's capacity to »subvert from within patriarchy« and the political potential of love to transform is present in much recent literature on love, though these arguments have also been subject to critique. ²¹ Despite de Beauvoir's bleak analysis, she also describes the possibility of »authentic love« which demands a reversal of the narrative she initially described, so that instead of functioning as a vehicle for a perpetual relation of domination and oppression, love becomes a recognition of and commitment to the integrity and freedom of each person. ²²

This radical potential of love is taken up by Badiou with his defence of love against the sanitising and rationalising discourse of securitization and his understanding of love as a »minimal communism«. Making connections with the »great explosion of experiments in new takes on sexuality and love«

that were part of the events of May '68, Badiou argues that revolution is always »met with obsessive reaction« and it is this reactionary response against which love must be defended.²³ For Badiou, it is »love of what is different, is unique, is unrepeatable, unstable and foreign« that can challenge the reactionary »identity cult of repetition«. ²⁴ Horvat takes the connection between love and revolutionary politics further, charting a history of revolutionary events in order to argue that we might understand love as revolution itself. Following Badiou, Horvat describes a »revolutionary duty« to reinvent love and identifies both love and revolution as a kind of dialectics »between dynamism (this constant re-invention) and fidelity (to this fatal and unexpected *crack in the world*)«. ²⁵ It is easy to see the ways in which this attachment of love to a hopeful revolutionary potential could be seen as embodying the principles of Lauren Berlant's »cruel optimism«, where individuals make their lives liveable by maintaining attachments that sustain the fantasy of 'a good life' even when life has become unliveable; maintaining an attachment to desires or fantasies which are in fact obstacles to flourishing. ²⁶ Berlant asks whether it is possible know for certain the »truth« of a love relation; to know if love is real or if it is »really something else, a passing fancy or a trick someone plays (on herself, on another) in order to sustain a fantasy«? ²⁷ For her, the fantasy stories woven about love provide a heady mix of »utopianism and amnesia« that enables heterosexuality to be understood as a desire which expresses people's »true feelings« without ever addressing the institutions and ideologies that police it. ²⁸ However, in keeping with an understanding of the contrary nature of love, and the value, therefore, of a dialectical perspective, we might consider Levitas' understanding of utopia as method as another way of approaching these questions of »truth«. ²⁹ Levitas argues that utopia is a »provisional, reflexive and dialogic process«;

— always suspended between the present and the future, always under revision, at the meeting point of the darkness of the lived moment and the flickering light of a better world, for the moment accessible only through an act of imagination. ³⁰

As Levitas conceives of it, utopia is not an end point, but a movement towards imagining and creating a new and better world. ³¹ In this sense, utopia involves a processual dialogue in which lack involves a drive to meet that lack, so that absence, lack or longing are not simply passive states, but simultaneously include an impulse to relieve the absence through a process of creating and articulating imagined alternative futures. ³² Berlant's question of truth or fantasy is

salient, particularly in relation to the failure to address the ideological underpinning of heterosexuality in relation to love, but it may also distract from the questions of what might be generated through an act of fantasy or imagination. Is the enduring attachment to love a fantasy that prevents optimal flourishing? Or could the tension between the fantasy of love and the longing for it function as an energy of *radical hope* that might drive the utopian method of creating new and better worlds?

— 'DOING' LOVE AND IMAGINING TRANSFORMATIONS —

This article sets out to explore some of these tensions in love. I am interested here in the two related questions of *whether* and *how* love might generate political transformation. Can we accept the suggestion of Illouz and others that love might have a capacity to »subvert from within«, and if so, what are the mechanisms by which such a transformation might be achieved? Using a dialectical approach, I seek to address and reconcile some of the tensions that emerge within the data between an awareness of love as a mechanism of oppression and a hope for love's potential as an initiator of political transformation. We might understand how an aspiring hope for love maintains a status quo in which women remain enslaved by patriarchal power structures in which their own subjectivities are consumed in relation to the beloved. In de Beauvoir's discussion, the love relationship is structured and policed by »the relation of subject/Other and essential/inessential«, establishing a »relation of perpetual female servitude that is fundamentally oppressive to both women and men«. ³³ However, we can also understand hopefulness in love as a generative action rather than a passive anticipation. Levitas refers to Unger's notion of the »anticipatory power of hope« in which hope is a »predisposition to action« rather than simply an expectation of pleasure to come; hope »instantiates a conceived future rather than merely looking to it«. ³⁴ In this respect, I show how positions which appear contradictory or oppositional, may yet emerge in balance, and that in fact we might understand that the oppositions themselves can function as a harmonising and creative force in the lives of people living, experiencing and 'doing' love.

— THE STUDY —

The material discussed here is drawn from a combination of individual semi-structured interviews and small group discussions. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty one participants, and three small group discussions involved a total of seventeen people. A breakdown of gender identity, sexuality, age and education of participations can be found in *Appendix 1*. With just four exceptions, participants were white

and British.³⁵ Seven participants identified themselves as poly-amorous, though others described simultaneous romantic/passionate relationships.

Interview participants were recruited via notices shared with a number of local LGBT organisations and community groups, a local network of relationship therapists, various online forums and message boards around sex, sexuality, relationships and polyamory, and via a Facebook page created specifically for the project. In practice, recruitment happened frequently by word of mouth. Group discussions were recruited via existing networks; a local LGBT society, my university department, and a local voluntary sector resource centre for young unemployed people. Participation was not restricted to any particular group, beyond the stipulation that participants should be over the age of eighteen.

My analysis was rooted in the participants' own narratives; the content of the stories they chose to tell and the particular shapes and trajectories the stories took. The dual themes of love's capacity to maintain and reinforce normative formulations of gender, sexuality and their relationship; and hope for love's transformative potential ran powerfully throughout the data. This was both compelling and something of a surprise; while I might have expected a hope for love, I did not anticipate hearing hope in quite the political, structural and social terms I did. The appearance of inconsistency between these themes invited a dialectical approach to my analysis.

— SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITIES —

The sexual and love stories shared with me by participants in my research highlighted a shift away from talking in terms of fixed categories of sexual identities and towards thinking about sexual subjectivities as orientation, desire, sexual practice and love. Sherry Ortner argues that subjectivity means not only »the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects« but also the »cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on.«³⁶ Ortner is concerned with the political significance of subjectivity, insisting that the question of subjectivity must be restored to social theory:

— I see subjectivity as the basis of 'agency', a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constructed) feelings, thoughts, and meanings.³⁷

Participants in my research talked in terms of shared inner worlds of desire, thought and emotion in their talk of love and

sexuality. This created space to describe love and sexuality as a flexible range of responsive, relational practices of affect, perception, desire and experience, as well as body and relationship practices.

The shift in thinking about sexuality in terms that were neither fixed nor necessarily conforming to any particular identity labels is significant. There has been a growing body of work in recent years, particularly in the field of psychology, exploring the notion of sexual fluidity. Although there has been a tendency for this work to focus on female sexuality, there have also been studies which include male sexual fluidity.³⁸ Diamond's longitudinal study on female sexual fluidity generated significant media coverage on publication, particularly in the United States, that frequently assumed her work implied sexual fluidity as a twenty-first-century phenomenon.³⁹ However Leila Rupp cautions against this assumption, asking how we might think about sexual fluidity »before sex«; that is, before a formal conceptualisation of sexual identity.⁴⁰ Rupp argues that global and historical exploration of sexual behaviour and desire draws attention to the ways in which the various classifications of sexuality have served to create sexual identities; makes conceptual links between male and female same-sex sexualities; and connects homosexuality with the so-called West, thereby »obscuring the reality of sexual fluidity«.⁴¹ While these explorations of sexual fluidity are valuable and welcome, Rupp's concern about the obfuscation of the lived realities of sexualities and the concealment of the multifarious experiences of desires, orientations and practices, both globally and over time, is well-founded.

In asking participants to describe their sexuality to me in whatever way they chose, it quickly became apparent that this was not necessarily a simple task. As shown in *Appendix 1*, a number of participants were unwilling or unable to describe their sexuality in a definite way at all. Those who did attach a particular description to their sexuality very often expressed unease about categorizing their sexuality in a finite way; many qualified the label they used, applying limits such as »well, mostly straight«, or explaining disparities or contradictions between identity, desire and sexual practice. Creating a space in which participants could think and talk about their sexuality in terms beyond identity allowed them to describe their sexuality and sexual lives in ways that considered sexuality in broader terms. This made it possible to describe discontinuities in sexual and relationship practices, as well as to express desire as a sexual *and/or* affective drive. Beyond identity, sexuality was discussed with me in terms of orientations, desire, emotion, and sexual and relationship practices. Participants described sexual subjectivities in terms of Holland and Leander's definition of subjectivities as »actors' thoughts, sentiments and

embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations«.42 Through this wide frame of reference, participants employed a range of experience, feeling, reflection, memory and cultural reference to express their sexualities. The inclusion of an emotional aspect to sexuality made it easier for participants to explore the connections between their experiences of their sexuality and love. Here follows just a few examples of some of these connections.

Howard, forty one, described his sexuality, without hesitation, as straight, but later talked about sexual and intimately affective experiences with other men. He told me he had felt surprised by the strength of desire he had experienced in a sexual encounter with another man a decade previously; he understood his desire in terms of his lover's »hairless and feminine body and energy«, though it was never unclear that his lover was male, and Howard therefore understood it as a homosexual encounter. Howard's sexual feelings are not dependent upon an explicitly sexual context; »it can be a delicious sexual connection when there's no kissing and we have our clothes on«. Similarly, his experiences of sexual desire and love may or may not be connected; he told me that desire »can happen with somebody that I don't feel love for ... and vice versa I could fall in love with someone without having that sexual edge«. He described a primary orientation, both sexually and relationally, towards women, but also told me that he did not want his heterosexuality to be a rigidly defining identity that left him closed to the possibility of sexual or loving connection with other human beings. Howard recognised, in the abstract, a contradiction between his (hetero)sexual identity and his desire and sexual practise, however he did not experience this as a contradiction. This could be viewed in terms of Howard's vested interest in his attachment to a heterosexual identity as a means to continue benefitting from women's love while denying both women and himself the full extent of his sexual self. However, the tension of the inconsistency could also be understood as a foundation for the hope he expresses for a future in which both sex and love are neither dependent upon each other, nor on a particular configuration of bodies and identities.

Sarah, a forty nine year old lesbian, told me that emotional intimacy is an essential part of her sexual experience, and that love and sexuality are not things that she can easily separate because she experiences them as mutually reproductive. Although she had occasionally enjoyed sexual encounters with men, she could not imagine experiencing the same level of emotional intensity with a man that she experiences in her relationships with women. Sarah's capacity to experience emotional intimacy, and therefore sexual desire, is strongly regulated by the sex of her lover. Intense emotional intimacy

– love – is the primary source of her sexual desire, however, the emotional trigger for Sarah’s desire and sexual response was not confined to actual experiences; simply thinking and talking abstractly about emotional intensity between women was enough to activate a very physical, sexual response:

— That’s what I love about love between women; it’s so intense ... I love it, it’s like food for me ... So, so deep and so connected and I’m turning myself on now just thinking about it!

In a world in which love and sex are understood as related but distinct, and thought and emotion, the mind and the body are constructed as opposing binaries, Sarah’s experience and practise of love and desire seems to function in a way that bridges and unites these aspects, and yet is simultaneously structured in relation to sex and gender.

Louise, twenty-six, told me that her first experience of both sex and romantic love, when she was fifteen, was with another woman. The experience did not direct her to identify herself as a lesbian. Rather, Louise identified her desire and love for her partner as something that was unconnected to, or transcended, categories of either sexuality or gender; »I think it was more about the person, it just happened ... I just thought I’m with this person because I get on with them ...« Later, Louise told me that, while she has continued to have sex with women sometimes, she could not imagine seeking a love relationship with a woman. Her current, secure and happy relationship with a man made it hard to conceive of another intimate relationship with anybody else, however she also stressed that a significant factor in her inclination not to enter romantic relationships with women was rooted in her sense that relationships with men were, socially and politically, just easier:

— It sounds really bad, but ... my family ... they’d disown me if I said I was with a woman ... I just think it’s not something that I’d be prepared to do, or, I don’t think I’d be emotionally strong enough to take all the shit that comes with being in a gay relationship.

Louise was quite comfortable describing a sexuality that included desire for and sexual practices with women as well as men, however, she made a distinction between sexual encounters and romantic love relationships in a way that aligns with the norms of heterosexuality. She makes a pragmatic choice to confine her romantic relationships to men, and keep her sexual encounters with women under the radar in order to make life liveable in a world that remains structured in ways that are oppressive for people who do not conform to heteronormative

standards. However, at the same time as Louise suppresses her sexual and love expression so that she appears to conform, she also describes her sexuality as pansexual. Louise's sexuality is hidden in plain sight: she relies on heteronormative assumptions about her sexuality to feel safe in the world, particularly in relation to her family; but also makes a point of openly and publicly identifying her sexuality outside of the heteronormative ideal. At the same time, her identification with a sexuality that transcends sex and gender might serve to obscure heteronormative conformity.

Thirty six year old Andrea had identified as exclusively lesbian for most of her adult life. In recent years, however, she has had a number of sexual experiences with men in which she had felt strengths of physical desire that had been shocking to her. Although her sense of herself as a lesbian has powerful political pertinence, inextricably tied to her feminism, she was unable to describe her sexuality in definite terms – when I asked her how she would describe her sexuality, she laughed and said: »Fuck knows!« Andrea's sexuality emerged through her narrative; a complex web of experience, response and feeling in which sexuality could not possibly be reduced to a single descriptive word. Her experience defied her political and analytical understanding of sexuality, to appear as an experience that was deeply responsive to changing physical, political and emotional worlds. Equally though, regardless of how she might express her sexuality now, or in the future, her sense of herself remained profoundly shaped by a long experience of living as a lesbian in a world shaped by patriarchal and heteronormative power structures.

— LOVE STORIES: PAIN AND HOPE —

One of the striking things in the accounts of love has been their hopefulness for the possibilities that love might generate for human relating. This is not to suggest that participants talked in terms which ignore the complex difficulties of human relationships, or the unequal power structures that frame experiences of them. Quite the opposite; the politics of gender, patriarchy and heteronormativity were often sharply present. Yet even as women and men have shared experiences of love in which they or their partners have been – physically or metaphorically – violated, abused, hurt or abandoned by their beloveds, they have almost all retained a hopefulness about the possibility of love to generate new ways of relating. It is hope that does not presume the rosy glow of Giddens' intimate equality and democracy, but which dares to imagine relations that are rooted in freedom, integrity and a sense of transformative potential.⁴³ The love stories communicate an intimate understanding of a deeply unequal political world in which love must be negotiated alongside a host of risks and threats

posed by the practical experience of systematic inequality including, but not limited to gender inequality; and the wide-reaching implications for women and men of patriarchal power structures. The oppressive, painful and exploitative nature of love sits alongside a hope for the positive transformational potential it seems to hold, individually and collectively. Many participants articulated a clear need to be an autonomous subject in love; one who is not consumed, dependent, or diminished within the context of a loving union, but who enters love as complete-in-oneself, and retains that integrity whilst simultaneously supporting the integrity of the beloved. To return to Levitas and her determination that utopia is a generative method, rather than a blueprint or outcome, I suggest that employing utopia as method is exactly what participants were doing as they told me their stories.

Thirty-three year old Aiden is the partner of Louise, who I interviewed separately, and his story illustrates the contradictory position of men in heterosexuality. Gunnarsson argues that »patriarchal sociosexual structure can be theorized as constituted by dialectical contradictions that create dilemmas not only for the exploited, but for the exploiters too«. ⁴⁴ As Aiden's story unfolds, so too does the dialectical contradiction between heterosexual men's exploitation of women, and the ways in which this exploitation simultaneously inhibits the possibility of men's empowerment and emancipation through love. Aiden described a moment, some years previously, in which he became aware that he had been exploiting women's love and desire as a means of validating his fragile sense of himself and his own masculinity. He made a particular connection to his being, at the time, in the »incredibly macho« environment of the armed forces, in which »you have to prove that you are strong all the time and that you are alpha male«. Part of the army culture about how a man might verify his strength and masculinity – to his colleagues and to himself – was through being very promiscuous, and being seen to treat women badly. Aiden told me:

— I think at that time sleeping with someone ... proved [to me] that I was wanted or I was desirable or something like that ... And then when I left [the armed forces] I think I had a sort of epiphany and it was, I very much looked at what I was doing and my actions and asked who was I really hurting in all that?

Within this recognition Aiden was also confronted with his denial of his own dependence upon women; while he exploited women's willingness to offer their desire and love, he was also reliant upon them to achieve integrity and acceptability. In mistreating and exploiting women, Aiden was damaging

himself and preventing his attainment of the evidence he so needed of his »manliness« and the possibility that he could be loveable. He was utterly dependent upon women to give him that sense of himself. Here we can see what Gunnarsson describes as the »ontological fragility« of men's power as it is produced within patriarchal sociosexuality.⁴⁵ We can also see the ways in which tension and contradiction in love have a potential to generate new harmony: in confronting this contradiction between his exploitation of women and his dependence upon them, Aiden was able to come to a new understanding about the importance of integrity in love, not only for himself, but for those he loves. This new awareness represents a shift towards Badiou's understanding of love as being essentially about the Two – the creation of a new shared view of the world from the perspective of Two, rather than One.⁴⁶ Badiou's »Two-Scene« is only possible if the individuals are complete in themselves; a person who only exists as a reflection in the eyes of their lover cannot hope to build a shared world. This is not to suggest that the negotiation of contradictions and the building of shared worlds are simple; Aiden needed time, practice and the loss of a marriage before he was able to enter a relationship in which both he and his current partner feel they are *Two* complete subjects creating a shared view.

Aiden's understood the ending of his marriage as resulting from an insurmountable contradiction between his former wife's view of love and his own. As he saw it, his wife understood love *as itself* marriage, parenthood and a shared home. His marriage collapsed as he realised that

— it could have been anyone in that role [of husband and father] ... You know, it wasn't me as a person in that role, it was just that the role needed to be filled.

We can understand this as a simple extension, despite his epiphany, of Aiden's exploitation of his wife's love; that she failed to deliver her love as an exploitable resource that could (re)constitute Aiden. In choosing marriage, parenting and a shared home as the receiving objects of her love power, she withdrew an exploitable resource from Aiden. This introduces a further contradiction insofar as it illustrates how the exploitation of women in love relies on women's freedom to attract, choose, and reject.⁴⁷ However, we can also see Aiden in a process of growth in which he was complicit in the collapse of his marriage through his failure to attend to his prior lesson about the strength and power that is generated in the meeting of the Two. Aiden's marriage was not a shared world, but one in which he was an available body to slot into a pre-imagined role. Neither his need to be loved, nor his wife's need for a husband, home and children could be fulfilled. However, the exposed

contradictions of love, along with his losses and his longing for love, enable Aiden to imagine love in new terms, and try once again to create love based on his own and Louise's individual integrity as they meet and build a world in common. So we might understand Badiou's assertion of love's power to »slice diagonally through the most powerful oppositions and radical separations«; if love is essentially about *the Two*, it can cut through the *powerful opposition and radical separation* of two distinct beings, not to render them one and the same, but to enable their coming together to create a new worldview.⁴⁸

The hope of love was not boundless; it did not assume that love alone has a capacity to eradicate power differences. It was hope in the possibility that love might enable new ways of living side by side. This hope might be extended to imagining ways in which the political world could be transformed through the interpersonal opportunities that love can enable, but this kind of utopian and large-scale structural change was not presumed. I do not read this as a hopefulness that contradicts itself by lacking ambition, not least because of the ways in which participants talked knowingly and critically of the structural inequalities that frame human lives and the impact on attempts to form relationships, romantic and otherwise. In many ways, hope here was deeply pragmatic; a bottom-up hope that love might make possible the kinds of relationships that make life liveable in an unequal world, alongside hope for the creation of something new and »other«. The radicalism of this hope lies primarily in its determination to create a liveable space beyond the closely-policed (and sometimes legislated) norms around sexuality and sexual expressions, gender expressions, relationship and family structures. In order to achieve such a thing, there is a need to imagine what *good love* might mean, and then to imagine what needs to be in place to enable it. Learning how to use the energy of contradiction as a creative and unifying force requires skill and practise, but learning how to imagine and *do* love better is essential to finding a balance between love's potentials for both exploitation and emancipation.

The stories I heard describe unequal distributions of power in the social world, the realities of disharmony, inequality, and abuse within relationships, and an understanding that love frequently ends. During a discussion group, a young woman described a prior relationship which had been violently abusive and was challenged by another participant asking whether this relationship was »really love«. The young woman replied:

— I would like to be able to say that ... It would be easier to say 'now I realise that wasn't *really* love', but I can't do that. I did love him. It was real, even if it was all wrong ... And it's part of my story ... Now, I hope that

when I love again it will be different – I hope that I’ve learned enough to know that love doesn’t have to allow getting battered! ... But I’d be a liar if I said I never really loved him.

She was unwilling to dismiss her emotional experience as counterfeit because of the context of domination and abuse, yet also retained hope for new kinds of future love; using her experience to help reform love. Her hope needed to include her experience; it did not require a dismissal of prior feelings as inauthentic, and did not assume that her experience would – or would not – be repeated. Her prior experience was part of her way forward and her hope for the future. Men were also aware of the context of domination in which their relationships occurred, describing a passionate desire to meet their partners (male and female) »as equals«. However some, particularly heterosexual men, also recognised the difficulty of meeting as equals in such an uneven social world.

Michael, sixty-five, described how love had sustained him when he and his (female) partner had ceased to be sexual after their first four years together. The couple’s persistence, supportiveness and determination to behave in demonstrably loving ways towards one another enabled them to continue their relationship for a further decade despite Michael’s pain and sadness at the »failure« of their sexual relationship. In a similar way to Aiden, Michael described to me the ways in which feeling loved enables him to feel »real«; »If nobody showed any love for me ... that’s sort of like ... it’d be like not existing«. In this respect, Michael too was both seeking to exploit his partner’s love, and dependent upon her in order to »make him real«. In the context of the cessation of a sexual relationship with his partner he explained:

— This becomes a story about what parts of me are acceptable, which parts aren’t. It’s like somebody could have a conversation with me but if they’re not touching me I can still believe that my body is not properly welcome ... So now my mind might be welcome and my body not.

In an apparent about-turn on Jónasdóttir’s argument that men tend to channel their sociosexuality through sex and women through care, Michael’s response to his partner’s withdrawal from expressing her love sexually was a conscious determination that he wanted to continue to love her in ways that helped her to »feel welcome« and »real« regardless.⁴⁹ This could be taken as an indication of Michael’s need for affection and validation, and his partner’s willingness to continue offering her love to him, but distinct from Gunnarsson’s outline of the contradictions of heterosexual love, Michael does not lack

awareness of his own need, and nor is his subjectivity constituted on the basis of a denial of that need. Rather Michael strives towards a profound kind of consciousness and self-awareness, without which he can neither be fully present to his lover, nor in himself. In understanding his quest to experience his whole self as loveable, Michael likewise seeks to extend that *welcoming* to the whole self of his lover. In this way, Michael's hope is that love might be the mechanism by which both he and his lover might be granted an experience of their own integrity; that being loved gives an assurance that we are welcome in the world on our own terms and as complete beings.

Alice who identified as bisexual and polyamorous, described a hope for love in more political terms. Twenty-six year old Alice talked of the cultural assumptions about, and constructions of, love and relationships that surround us, and the impact of these, particularly on girls and young women:

— I mean, I... think about the fairy-tale weddings and you know, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast and things like that ... and it [becomes] kinda horrifying when you look at those stories – you know, Cinderella can just be forced to do whatever her family wants; Beauty and the Beast – I'm in love with this abusive man so I'll stay with him.«

For Alice, polyamorous love offers new possibilities for relationship and sexual freedom in which she does not have to be constrained by imposed norms or expectations of behaviour; it is an aspirational form of loving in which she is able to exchange romantic and sexual affection with many partners, or with a single partner according to her own desires and wishes. Alice felt that the possibility of loving multiple partners was, for her, a more realistic way of loving. It offers a space in which she can move beyond conventional expectations of monogamy and marriage (which she described as the »Disneyfication« of love); beyond compulsory heterosexuality, and towards multiple loves in which she might express a fuller range of her sexual and affective desires and practices. Monogamous, heteronormative love is not something that appears to be either desirable or achievable for Alice. Her hope in love is that it can have meaning and expression that feels realistic in the terms of her personal and political desires, rather than requiring her to conform to a particular set of ideological norms. Her hope acknowledges both the potentials for »failure« and the positive possibilities. She hopes for love to generate the freedom for her to move beyond, or to live outside of, conventional norms and expectations of what love, relationship and sexuality »ought« to look like. It is a hope that is

rooted in her own desire and experience, but which also extends beyond herself in hoping that love might ultimately create opportunities for a world in which love and desire are less confining for all people.

Lesbian-identified Elly, thirty-four, had a slightly different take on a similar view to Alice's. While Elly was interested in her love relationships being generally monogamous, she shared Alice's determination for a realistic view of love. Elly was frustrated with the idea that love ought to hope for longevity, and that if it does not, it is somehow a »failure«; she wanted love to make room for growth and change, but also for separation without the notion of »failure« attached:

— You know as much as like sexuality is fluid, your relationships are fluid. It's a period of time where that is the right thing for you [both] at that time, but people grow, people move on, circumstances change and I think that's ... that's what's really difficult; to be with somebody and to grow as a person with that other person and ... staying parallel with them.

Like other participants, Elly described the ways that lovers might grow and change in the context of a relationship, alongside a more internal, personal growth. For her, this spelled the potential for love to be finite, but without implying a lack of authenticity:

— I don't think [lifetime love] is the be all and end all. I think you can love somebody for a period of time, maybe you [continue to] love them after a relationship has finished ... It's like ... there are people I can connect with at different times and in different places and feel that love from them and give love to them for that period of time ... And that's ok.

The examples here give an account of the loss, pain and contradictions that are involved in love. At the same time, the broad hopefulness of the accounts is unmistakable, particularly in imagining future love. I will move forward now to consider how we might read this hope for love, and what its implications might be.

— CONCLUSION: THE RADICAL HOPE OF LOVE

If we can be certain of nothing else in relation to love, we know that it is paradoxical. Riddled with tension and contradiction, pain and loss, love still retains a powerful hold on the human imagination in contemporary Western society. Lovers and thinkers alike see powerful potential in love, whether that be

to entrench and maintain subordination, to pave a way for liberation, or trigger the risk and opportunity of revolution. What I want to suggest is that it is inside the contradictions of love that we might find its radical hope. It is from the pain and horror of the love de Beauvoir describes initially in *The Second Sex* that an alternative model of love is born, arguably rooted in the same kind of hope for a radical new way of being, loving and relating as I read in my participants' accounts. De Beauvoir models authentic love as a fundamental equality between the lovers, in which their freedom and their subjectivity are recognised and valued. With freedom as a necessary prerequisite for authentic love, de Beauvoir shows how love might be revolutionized in order to become more compatible with a political and social ideal, enabling the coming-together of two individual, autonomous subjects to form a mutually enriching union.⁵⁰ She explains:

— Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms ... they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world. For each of them, love would be the revelation of self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe.⁵¹

Though hope looms large in the stories I have heard, they understand both the harshly unequal political worlds in which love seeks to flourish, and the pain and discomfort that can be inherent to love. They echo both de Beauvoir's critical account of the oppressive mechanism of love in gendered relations and her hopeful and radical vision of authentic love; describing the radical hope of love's capacity to propel the invention of new ways of being, relating and living.

Badiou suggests that love might be conceived of as a »minimal communism«:

— By »communist« I understand that which makes the held-in-common prevail over selfishness, the collective achievement over private self-interest ... we can also say that love is communist in that sense, if one accepts, as I do, that the real subject of love is the becoming of the couple and not the mere satisfaction of the individuals that are its component parts.⁵²

The hope expressed in my research seeks a reinvention for love and its dynamics that marries Badiou's understanding of the collective achievement over private self-interest and de Beauvoir's concerns with freedom, integrity and authenticity. The accounts are conscious of world-worn ideas about love and the ways it operates, particularly in relation to gender inequality,

hetero- and homo-normativity, and related issues around the presumption of monogamy. In this sense, the focus is on love as a potential generative force, rather than as an internal emotion; the question is not what love is, or how love feels, but what love does – or could do. Keeping in mind Levitas' insistence that utopia is not a map, blueprint or goal, but a method, we can understand the hope here in terms of an attempt to imagine a world in which love connections are forged and lived freely between human beings. In particular, they imagine a transformation in which love, desire and relationship are not expected to be constrained in relation to particular formations of identity, conventions of practise, or configurations of bodies. It is a hope about the potential for love to support a transformation of social relations that emphasises human connection and collectivism rather than opposition and individualism; freedom and flexibility over constraint and rigidity, and which seeks to incorporate conflict and contradiction rather than engage in a perpetual war of either-or.

Persistent inequalities that are played out in both theoretical descriptions and lived experiences of love do not erase the fundamental significance and driving power of love in peoples' lives; in fact many are actively seeking ways to reform love to take greater account of issues around difference and inequality that render some lovers subjects and others objects in the face of love. Despite love's potential to deceive (as suggested by Berlant's notion of cruel optimism), and for it to be understood in terms of the individualising and de-politicising discourse of neoliberalism, I read these accounts as a hope that, unconfined, love might take new forms, be deployed in new ways, and make space for flexible subjects in radical new ways. It is not a giddy optimism that we already inhabit the world of Giddens' democratized love, but an assertion of the importance of love in human life and a buoyant imagining of a template that can acknowledge love's many contradictions and use them to drive a generative utopian imagination of possibility.⁵³ It is a hope for the integrity of subjects, acknowledging the confines of uneven political worlds and, after Ortner, the struggle of being actors in the world even as we are acted upon.⁵⁴ It is a radical hope that we can love, as de Beauvoir imagined, not in weakness but in strength, not to escape but to find ourselves, not to abase but to assert ourselves, so that love can become, instead of a mortal danger, a source of vibrancy and life.⁵⁵ —■

— Appendix 1: Breakdown of gender, sexuality, age and education of participants

	Interview	Discussion Group	Total
Total Participants	21	17	38
Gender (self-defined)			
Female	13	10	23
Male	7	3	10
Trans male	0	3	3
Gender non-conforming	1	1	2
Sexuality (self-defined)			
Not Labelled	4	2	6
Heterosexual	4	6	10
Bisexual	4	5	9
Gay (male)	1	0	1
Lesbian	3	1	4
Gay (female)	1	1	2
Queer	1	0	1
Pansexual	1	1	2
Bi-curious	1	0	1
Gynophilic	1	0	1
Demi-sexual	0	1	1
Age			
<19	0	1	1
20-29	5	14	19
30-39	7	2	9
40-49	8	0	8
50-59	0	0	0
60-69	1	0	1
Education			
Level 1, 2	2	2	4
Level 3, 4	1	3	4
Undergrad Student	2	5	7
Undergrad Degree	6	1	7
Postgrad Student	4	3	7
Postgrad Certificate	2	1	3
Postgrad Degree	4	2	6

■ — ENDNOTES —

1 See, for example, Chris Ingraham: *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (London, 1999); Chris Ingraham (ed.): *Thinking Straight: the Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality* (London, 2005); Ann Swidler: *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago, 2001); Scott Coltrane and Michelle Adams: *Gender and Families* (New York, 2008); Stephanie Coontz: *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, 2006).

2 See, for example, Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds.): *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-first Century* (London, 2014); Lena Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-realist Ontology of Sociosexuality* (London, 2014); Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong: *In Praise of Love*, (tr.) Peter Bush (London, 2012 [2009]); Srečko Horvat: *The Radicality of Love* (Cambridge, 2016).

3 See, for example, bell hooks: *Feminism is for Everybody* (Cambridge, 2000); 102; Anna G. Jónasdóttir: «Love studies: a (re)new(ed) field of knowledge interests» in Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds.): *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-first Century* (London, 2014); Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 5. For example, the works of Victoria C. Woodhull and Emma Goldman, writing in the late eighteen hundreds and early nineteen hundreds respectively.

4 Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (London, 1997 [1949]), 653.

5 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 3.

6 Shulamith Firestone: *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London, 1972), 121.

7 Carol Anne Douglas: *Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories* (San Francisco, 1990).

8 Douglas: *Love and Politics*, 109.

9 Leyna Lowe: «Feminism, love and the transformative politics of freedom in the works of Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, and Goldman» in Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds.): *Love: a Question for Feminism in the Twenty-first Century* (London, 2013).

10 Lowe: «Feminism, love and the transformative politics of freedom in the works of Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, and Goldman», 204.

11 Lowe: «Feminism, love and the transformative politics of freedom in the works of Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, and Goldman», 204, 205.

12 Anthony Giddens: *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Oxford, 1992).

13 Giddens: *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 62.

14 Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim: *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge, 1995 [1990]).

- 15 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim: *The Normal Chaos of Love*, 176.
- 16 Eva Illouz: *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (London, 2012), 240–241.
- 17 Illouz: *Why Love Hurts*, 13.
- 18 Illouz: *Why Love Hurts*, 5.
- 19 Illouz: *Why Love Hurts*, 245.
- 20 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 100, 167.
- 21 Illouz: *Why Love Hurts*, 5. See, for example, Ann Ferguson: »Feminist love politics: Romance, care, and solidarity« in Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds.) *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-first Century* (London, 2014); Rosemary Hennessy: »Bread and roses in the common« in Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson (eds.): *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-first Century* (London, 2014); bell hooks: *All About Love* (New York, 2000); bell hooks: *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York, 2001); bell hooks: *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (New York, 2004); Greg Wharton (ed.): *The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name: Essays on Queer Desire and Sexuality* (Michigan, 2003). See, for example, Sara Ahmed: »In the name of love« in *Borderlands 2:3* (2003); Heather Love: *Feeling Backward: The Politics of Loss in Queer History* (Cambridge, 2007); Eleanor Wilkinson: »The emotions least relevant to politics? Queering autonomous activism« in *Emotion, Space and Society 2:1* (2009).
- 22 de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*.
- 23 Badiou: *In Praise of Love*, 97, 96.
- 24 Badiou: *In Praise of Love*, 98.
- 25 Horvat: *The Radicality of Love*, 3, 4 (original emphasis).
- 26 Lauren Berlant: *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London, 2011), 1.
- 27 Lauren Berlant: *Desire/Love*, (Brooklyn NY, 2012), 7.
- 28 Berlant: *Desire/Love*, 92.
- 29 Ruth Levitas: *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke, 2013).
- 30 Levitas: *Utopia as Method*, 149.
- 31 Levitas: *Utopia as Method*, xiii.
- 32 Levitas: *Utopia as Method*, 181.
- 33 Simone de Beauvoir in Lowe: »Feminism, love and the transformative politics of freedom in the works of Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, and Goldman«, 198.
- 34 Levitas: *Utopia as Method*, 188–189.
- 35 I believe that this is at least in part a reflection of the demographics of the local area in which I was working (Hull, in the north-east of England). Although some interviews were conducted further afield, via Skype, the significant majority of participants were based in or very near the city of Hull, which has a long history of minimal racial/ethnic diversity by comparison to similar-sized British cities.

- 36 Sherry Ortner: »Subjectivity and cultural critique« in *Anthropological Theory* 5:1 (2005), 31.
- 37 Ortner: »Subjectivity and cultural critique«, 34.
- 38 See, for example, Lisa M. Diamond: *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (London, 2009); Sabra L. Katz-Wise: »Sexual fluidity in young adult women and men: associations with sexual orientation and sexual identity development« in *Psychology and Sexuality* 6:2 (2014); Ritch C. Savin-Williams: »An exploratory study of the categorical versus spectrum nature of sexual orientation« in *The Journal of Sex Research* 54:4 (2014).
- 39 Diamond: *Sexual Fluidity*.
- 40 Leila J. Rupp: »Sexual fluidity 'before sex'« in *Signs* 37:4 (2012), 849.
- 41 Rupp: »Sexual fluidity 'before sex'«, 855.
- 42 T.M. Luhrmann: »Subjectivity« in *Anthropology Today*, 6:3 (2006), 345.
- 43 Giddens: *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 44 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 131.
- 45 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 133.
- 46 Badiou: *In Praise of Love*, 29.
- 47 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 135.
- 48 Badiou: *In Praise of Love*, 29.
- 49 Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love*, 140.
- 50 de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 678.
- 51 de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 677.
- 52 Badiou: *In Praise of Love*, 90.
- 53 Giddens: *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 54 Ortner: *Subjectivity and Cultural Critique*.
- 55 de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 679.
-