

Love and its Contradictions: Feminist Women's Resistance Strategies in their Love Narratives

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Abstract: Love, and its relation to the reproduction and maintenance of women's oppression, have interested feminists since the beginning of the last century. Feminist and critical perspectives have helped to denaturalize love and to highlight its socio-cultural construction. Contemporary feminist approaches to love take into account the complexity of the phenomenon and demonstrate that women are not mere victims of romantic ideology; rather, that they are located among contradictory discourses and power relationships. In this article I aim to further explore the resistance strategies of feminist activist women in response to love narratives. Using Narrative Production methodology, I have identified five different resistance strategies. The first three respond to mainstream narratives of love while the other two respond to feminist narratives of love.

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Introduction

I was first attracted to love as a topic of research because I saw other feminist female friends as well as myself struggling with it. There was something jarring about love and feminists, because we seemed to be spending more time criticizing the stereotyped romantic narratives seen in Hollywood films rather than sharing the positive and transformative elements of our everyday relationships. Even if we had read many books and zines, discussed with our comrades, learned from our previous experiences and from those shared among feminist friends, there was still a huge sense of discontent and failure

present. From first and second wave feminists we learned about the dangers and the traps of love (Beauvoir 1999; Millett 1971; Firestone 1972; Comer 1974). From other feminists and non-feminists alike we learned that love was a complex emotion (Lagarde 1990; Jónasdóttir 1993; Jackson 1993, 1999; Illouz 1997; Langford 1999; Esteban 2011) and also that other kind of relationships were possible (Easton & Hardy 2009; Barker 2012). But feminists still struggle with articulating our experience among so many contradictory narratives. Love is an issue for feminists and I am interested in exploring how feminist women construct their narratives of love in relation to dominant narratives of romantic love and feminist critical narratives of love.

I apply the concept of “nested narratives” proposed by Mary and Kenneth Gergen (1983) to the analysis of love. The Gergens refer to how different narratives available in the social framework are articulated within personal experiences in subjectivity production. Also, for Jackson “[w]e create for ourselves a sense of what our emotions are, of what being in love is, through positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self, drawing on whatever cultural resources are available to us” (1999, 120). Like them, I would contend that we are not passive subjects in these processes, but an active part that assimilates, rejects and subverts those sociocultural contexts in which the narratives are produced (Montenegro & Pujol 2013).

My understanding of love owes much to the work of Stevi Jackson (1993, 1999) and Mari Luz Esteban (2011). They have highlighted that love is a complex emotion that requires serious and critical social research (Jackson 1993; Esteban, Medina & Tavora 2005). Jackson (1993) developed a sociological approach to love as a culturally constructed emotion. In her words, “Far from being just a personal, private phenomenon, love is very much a part of our public culture” (1993, 202). Thus, it cannot be treated as “independent of the social and cultural context within in which it is experienced” (1993, 202). Mari Luz Esteban’s (2011) “amorous thought” refers to emotional, embodied, symbolic, cultural, social and institutional dimensions of love, and also considers that power relations take place in different directions. These theoretical contributions enable us to account for love as both a site of women’s complicity with and resistance against patriarchal relations. In this paper, I aim to explore the resistance strategies of feminist women in order to understand how complicity and resistance work in their narratives about love. On one hand, this could tell us about the experience of women and love in Western societies, while on the other it could shed some light on how feminism works in producing subjectivity.

Resistance Strategies

A Foucauldian perspective on power indicates that power itself permeates every aspect of social life. Power, for Foucault, is not located within but invades all social relations. It is not subordinated to economic structures. Instead of acting by repression, it acts by normalization. In this way, it produces subjects, discourses, knowledges, truths and realities in a positive way. Power is found precisely in that multiplicity of networks in constant transformation. These ideas of power characterise resistance as part of the game: there is no power without resistance (Foucault 1980). Considering these ideas, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) develops her conceptualization of resistance and reflects over the effects resistance studies have had over the theories of power. Since the 1990s, previously

devalued forms of resistance have been re-evaluated: that is, “subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems or even to ideologies of emancipation.” (Abu-Lughod 1990, 41). In pursuing a non-romanticized reading of resistance, she asks: what does resistance tell us about power? For Abu-Lughod (1990), theorizing resistance involves theorizing power. She proposes resistance as a diagnostic of power, a project for which we ought to attend to the complex workings of power rather than ask about those who resist. In other words, which are the implications of the resistance we, as social researchers, locate? The study of different forms of resistance will allow us to trace the different – often contradictory – workings of power intertwined in a specific context. In the narrative productions of this study, contradictions between cultures is key. Abu-Lughod relates this contradiction to glocal cultures, to the tensions arising between the global and the local. She also points out how, within this dynamic, women assume, subvert and/or reappropriate different cultural norms, either global or local. In my research addressing the experiences of feminist women in love, this helps in clarifying the relationship between a dominant culture in which participants are involved (permeated with romantic love discourses) and the feminist counterculture where they take part (where other counter-narratives emerge and gain a notorious significance).

Narrative Productions: articulating feminist narratives on love

The methodology used in this study is inspired by Donna Haraway’s (1991) ideas of situated knowledges, which moves away both from non-critical positivist thinking and extreme relativism. Like Haraway, I assume knowledge is produced from a located, precarious, and partial perspective. It is the result of partial connections. In reference to the empirical research, situated knowledges can be seen as semiotic-material places resulting from the relationship between researcher and participants (Pujol, Montenegro & Balasch 2003). From this view, rather than generalizing or representing, my aim is to collect different positions on the issue.

Narrative Production methodology (Balasch & Montenegro 2003; Pujol, Montenegro & Balasch 2003; Martínez-Guzmán & Montenegro 2014; Gandarias & García 2014; Schongut & Pujol 2015) is based in the collaborative production, between researcher and participants, of a series of narrative texts addressing the topic of study. Once the participants agreed to take part in the study, we carried out one or more sessions addressing love representations, meanings and experiences. Subsequently, I textualized the most meaningful aspects emerging from the participants’ narration in a clear and understandable style. In order to maximize their agency, I sent the participants the manuscript so they could edit it. The writing process finished with their confirmation of the final version of the text. Once I completed the process with each participant, I got a set of narratives that offer different sets of partial knowledge of love on feminist women (Montenegro & Pujol 2013, 35). These texts are called narrative productions or narratives and I will refer to them as narrative productions in this paper.

The challenge with this methodology is to reflect on this set of narrative productions, considering them theoretical starting points (Gandarias & García 2014). As Montenegro & Pujol (2013) propose, narrative productions are not treated as “pure”

empirical material, which means they are not analyzed in the usual sense. The narrative productions are analyzed while being constructed, working *from them* rather than *on them* (Martínez-Guzmán & Montenegro 2010). To this end, I have focused on searching for the tensions and the common grounds emerging from the narrative productions (Fraser 2004).

Resisting Love Narratives

In this section I would like to present seven feminist activist women in order to contextualize the coordinates in which these narrative productions have been realized. Their narrative texts are part of a larger study in which ten feminist activist women participated. I selected these women according to different criteria. While they are all feminist activists living in Barcelona, their sexual identities and situations in reference to love differ considerably. I recruited participants from my own personal and political contacts and also through a variation of the snowball sampling technique, which involves asking participants to recruit new participants. I asked feminist friends to recruit possible participants too.

Libertad is thirty-three years old and comes from a city near Madrid. She moved to Barcelona five years ago. She is a sociologist and works as a researcher in gender-related issues. She has been involved in social movements since she was a teenager. She self-identifies as straight and, after a few years of being single, she is starting a new relationship.

Aram is from Barcelona and thirty-two years old. She also has a job in the field of gender equality. She started joining feminist groups in her early twenties. Her romantic trajectory has been straight until recently. Since the end of her most recent relationship, she has been thinking a lot about love.

Lidia was born in Northern Europe and raised in a Latin American country. She arrived in Barcelona in 2005 to do a Masters degree in documentary filmmaking. Since then she has been working on post-pornography as a visual artist, activist and researcher. Her activist trajectory revolves around non-normative sexual practices and gender representations, while love remains unexplored as a field for her activist work.

Rebeca is twenty-four and from a city near Barcelona. She has identified with punk and anarchism since she was a teenager. Overcoming an abusive relationship with a man led her to seek more liberating ways of establishing relationships with both men and women.

Mariona is also from Barcelona and in her early thirties. She is part of the anarchist and feminist movements. Her sexual and affective relationships have always been with feminist women.

Miriam A. and Miriam D. have been long discussing love. They are friends and met each other years ago during a workshop on romantic love. One is from Barcelona and the other comes from a different city but has lived in different places, including the UK. The first identifies as a lesbian and the other thinks of sexuality as a flexible concept. They have worked together in the prevention of abusive relationships and collaborate in several activist projects.

After the narrative productions that I have co-written with these women, I have identified various resistance strategies. First, I will address those resistance strategies that

respond to mainstream narratives of love, mostly in its romantic form. Next, I will introduce those that respond to specific feminist narratives of love, which mostly are based in the feminist critique of romantic love.

Dismantling the romantic model. In what follows, I will address three resistance strategies that respond to specific imperatives of romantic love: 1) intentional singleness, which questions compulsory coupledness; 2) lover networks, responding to sexual exclusivity and temporary fixed romantic scripts; and 3) falling for the collective, which redefines the object and the “nature” of love.

Intentional singleness. It is not only heterosexuality that is seen as compulsory, as Adrienne Rich (1980) warned, but also long term relationships. Compulsory heterosexuality as a normative prescription operates through the construction and policing of various forms of “otherness” (Reynolds & Wetherell 2003), such as singleness. Furthermore, this regulation operates within a patriarchal set of relationships, meaning that women have historically been more excluded or questioned by their singleness. Thus they have been defined negatively and in terms of what is lacking (Reynolds & Wetherell 2003; Reynolds, Wetherell & Taylor 2007). Feminist research on the topic has highlighted how in the construction of women’s “single” identity, negative and positive discourses are implicated. A discourse of singleness as a lack is present, while also another which redefines it as independence and self-actualization (Reynolds & Wetherell 2003). Perspectives of this kind are echoed in the narrative texts of this study. Some participants explain how they came to wilfully choose singleness after turbulent breakups.

Cuando Héctor me dejó tuve una crisis de autoestima muy fuerte. Estuve revolcándome en el fango durante meses, sintiéndome una mierda. [Más tarde], [e]mpecé a hacer cosas que nunca antes había hecho sola, como ir a conciertos o hacer una estancia en Viena. Mi proceso fue progresivo, poco a poco he ido sintiéndome mejor y sin recaídas.[1] (Libertad, p. 4)

In a similar vein, Aram explains how she happened to find out she could be fine being single:

[D]escubrí que podía estar sin novio y empecé a tener relaciones en otro formato. Amantes y encuentros puntuales. De golpe experimenté el “no-compromiso”. Pasé de pensarme en relación a otro a pensarme por mí misma. No solo descubrí que podía estar sin novio, sino que además así estaba bien.[2] (Aram, p. 3)

Although both came to view singleness as a desired state, we can see some differences in their extracts. Libertad evokes elements of independency and a more extended social life as the capacity to do activities on her own and with other people. This makes her feel good because she is no longer identifying singleness as a lack but as gain. For Aram, on the other hand, wellbeing as a single woman is located in her ability to manage her sexual life and an identity of her own, non-mediated by a partner. However, both extracts share a common base: regardless of their focus (social or sexual life, identity), their achievements relate to overcoming a partner-oriented model. This movement, as Libertad acknowledges, is a long

progressive way, with challenges to face. She points to social pressure as the one of most concern:

Hay mucha presión, vas a una boda y vas sola, o a otras actividades, siempre sola. A veces he tenido la sensación de que la gente me miraba sintiendo pena. Y lo más sorprendente es que yo estaba bien, estaba sola por elección. Hasta los colegas del barrio (con quienes tengo afinidad política) me cuestionaban por estar soltera. [3] (Libertad, p. 8)

In the experience of Libertad, social pressure appears as challenging, although not very constraining. Her awareness of wellbeing is not especially affected, but she finds herself constantly questioned and having to justify herself as being single, a very common experience single women share (Reynolds & Wetherell 2003). Also, it is interesting to note how the pressure comes from different audiences. It is not by chance that Libertad illustrates this questioning through mentioning a wedding. Although in Spain women are less likely to be married than their European counterparts, with those who do marry doing so later in life (INE Spain 2015), heterosexual marriage is still more accepted than other forms of relationships. For women, their early thirties is a stage in life in which friends, relatives and acquaintances may start to get married or to establish other types of long-term relationships with or without cohabitation. The wedding appears here as the ultimate representation, and indeed the ritual form, of our tendency to “couple” or to “partner” one another in an official and public way. But this questioning is not only coming from the most normative audiences, but also from politically radical circles. This is where the contradiction arises: how is it that people with whom she shares a politically radical position, are using heteronormative narratives to read her personal life? I would argue that her relationships are seen as a private issue, thus remaining non-politicized and therefore easier to evoke a dominant view.

In conclusion, I have addressed intentional singleness as a resistance strategy which responds to compulsory coupledness. This strategy consists of the redefinition and re-evaluation of singleness as a possible and acceptable way of being in the world which opens possibilities for a wider social life, an enriching sexual life and a fully completed sense of self. In the quotes from Libertad and Aram, this is not seen as an idealized model; rather, it confirms their everyday experience, a progressive path where they must face the social pressure coming from different audiences.

Lovers networks. Existing in the world necessarily entails relationships with others. Authors such as Judith Butler (2009) and Silvia Gil (2011) have noted our inherently interdependent relationships with others. We are immersed in multifarious networks of relationships with whom we share different forms of intimacy. Lidia frames the issue as such:

[H]aber mantenido relaciones con amantes que se han ido alargando en el tiempo, ha ido modificando mi manera de entender el amor. Estas relaciones, donde a lo mejor follo una vez al año con una persona que conozco desde hace mucho tiempo, me ha permitido ver el amor como un proceso más lento. Quiero a estas personas, y aunque no compartimos una cotidianidad, lo que siento por ellas es amor. Se dan distintos grados de intimidad y

confianza, pero tengo amantes con los que creo que podría estar de amante toda la vida o al menos muchísimos años. Al haber pasado tanto tiempo te vas conociendo más, y se genera una relación de compañerismo que es un amor interesante, que no podría ocurrir si tienes una relación estrictamente monógama. Estas relaciones son como amistades con intimidad y sexo. También son relaciones con las que a veces trabajo en algún proyecto. [4] (Lidia, pp. 6-7)

Based on similar experiences, Rebeca reflects on temporality as the backbone of the dominant understandings of intimate relationships.

[E]n mis relaciones de amistad sexoafectivas sí he podido encontrar más esa espontaneidad y libertad, sin las exigencias propias que devienen en una pareja más “clásica”, y lo que es más importante para mí: esa confianza y complicidad no en todos los casos se ha marchitado, sino que se ha transformado y ha perdurado en el tiempo, volviéndonos así compañeras intermitentes, permanentes, atemporales, eternas. [5] (Rebecca, pp. 2-3)

For both extracts, I would like to focus on how temporality and intimacy are presented in opposition to traditional couple relationships. Dominant love narratives position couples in a linear temporality. This usually begins with a process of “courtship” or flirting when the conditions of the relationship remain to be negotiated until the couple is defined as such. This type of narrative usually ends with either the beginning of a long-term relationship or the end of it. Lidia and Rebeca suggest a different temporality in which the boundaries of beginning and end are unclear. Lidia describes further this kind of temporality in the following fragment:

Son relaciones que entienden que yo puedo estar en un pico amoroso y entonces desaparecen temporalmente y luego reaparecen y eso se produce muy orgánicamente. El grado de exigencia con la otra persona es menor y eso facilita que se adapte a disponibilidades personales y afectivas. Por ejemplo, si un amante me llama para quedar, pero yo estoy en el mundo del corazón [...] y no me apetece... no pasa nada. Son relaciones infrecuentes o de frecuencia variable, una vez al mes o una vez cada tres meses... A veces también he tenido un subidón de amor con alguno de mis amantes... quizás dura una semana, luego decae, pero vuelve la otra persona... sería como un gráfico de ondas.[6] (Lidia, pp. 7-8)

Here intermittence emerges, varying in intensities and availabilities, ranging from very intense moments to periods of absence which are not understood as lack of attachment. In this sense, intimacy is reconfigured at different levels. Not sharing an everyday life is not seen as a lack of intimacy, but the contrary. The connection is not based here in a common everyday life, but in sharing an intensity and sexual intimacy. Although precarious and inconsistent, this kind of love is highly valued by both participants. This may not sound like something new nowadays, where sexual life and intimacy have adopted different forms in Western societies. However, there is a kind of convenience, as opposed to

engagement and commitment, which makes me suspicious. Lovers seem to appear “naturally” when they are needed and in a way that fits individualistic interests. So, from a critical perspective, it is important to ask to what extent this kind of intimacy is mediated by individualized contemporary discourses.

What is interesting about Lidia and Rebeca’s reflections is that, unlike in mainstream society, they recognize these relationships as love, even if it is a love of a different kind. In this sense, these experiences have resulted in a change of their conceptualization of love.

In conclusion, the forming of lover networks appears to be an ambivalent strategy which challenges sexual exclusivity and its temporality by recognizing the intimacy shared with lovers as a valuable kind of love. However, while being liberating for the participants, these practices of intimacy may intertwine with individualistic dominant discourses, an issue in which further research is needed.

Falling for the collective. Miriam A. and Miriam D. describe how they felt about the feminist group in which they were both taking part a few years back:

Miriam D.: Yo estaba todo el día de asamblea en asamblea. Trabajaba en un librería de mujeres, acababa de terminar el Máster de Estudios de las Mujeres [...] ... Okupábamos entre mujeres, hacía autodefensa, [...]... Tenía la vida más feminista que podía tener y luego tenía un novio, que estaba en casa... Estaba enamoradísima de la red, de todas las cosas que sucedían. Todo era como una montaña rusa, me dejaba llevar y me encantaba.

[...]

Miriam A.: Había un discurso muy bonito de lo colectivo y de repente empiezas a ver las fisuras que has estado ignorando.

Miriam D.: Porque nos enamoramos...

Miriam A.: ¡Es muy romántico! Se sustituye la pareja por el colectivo. Te enamoras románticamente del colectivo, ignoras sus fisuras y cuando todo estalla, la ruptura se hace muy difícil.

Miriam D.: Acaban saliendo resentimientos hacia el colectivo...

Miriam A.: Algo no hemos hecho bien que cuando todo se acaba y no nos podemos ni ver... Eso pasa mucho en la pareja.

Miriam D.: Te prometes todo y de repente como no es verdad, la decepción es máxima.

Miriam A.: Creo que deberíamos aceptar que no todo es tan intenso y absoluto, aprender a acabar y acabar mejor. [...] Por otro lado, sin esa energía muchas cosas no saldrían. Por eso en el fondo creo que no puede ser malo. La

energía que desprendemos cuando nos enamoramos de alguien o de algo, que puedes no dormir y empiezas a hacer de todo... A mí me cuesta encontrar esa energía sin el enamoramiento. No creo que sea solo político... ¿esa energía de donde sale? ¿Eso es puramente construido? Esa cosa que no te da nada más... Pienso en algunos grupos que conocí hacía 2009 y desprendían una energía muy potente... Yo me enamoré de todas y de la energía que desprendían, me encantaba... y luego acabó como el rosario de la Aurora. Parece que cuanto más subidón, luego más bajón...[7] (Miriam A & Miriam D, p. 11)

In their story, the expansion of the loving object reaches the collective. So much affection is put into their political projects that they “fall for the collective.” Love here becomes characterized as a force, an energy that is the basis of mobilization and collective action, rather than as the passionate sexual bond associated with romantic love. This move echoes Hardt and Negri’s politics of love (2009). These authors develop a reconfiguration of the notion of love in which they place the common in the center. From this perspective, romantic couple love is seen as narrow, yet the focus goes beyond individualistic practices of intimacy. Rather, it seeks to reclaim the collective. In the narrative productions, however, some romantic features still remain. Romanticizing the collective emerges as a double-edged sword. It has the potential to challenge the legitimate object of love, which moves from being a person or a network of multiple lovers to a specific group of people with whom they share political activism. Some features of the dominant romantic narrative also emerge. The latter part of the quote suggests that in the process of falling for the collective, there are a number of romantic love scripts in play. The naive happy beginning and difficult ending resonate with the romantic temporality revised before. All the passion attached to it also sounds really romantic. In addition, for Alberoni (1996), love is a collective movement of two, which recuperates the idea that there is something about love that is not totally individual. Still, for Miriam A., despite the problematic of the romantic script, the collective fusion has a great destabilizing potential.

In general, this strategy should be considered in its double character: it politicizes the romantic and romanticizes the political. On one hand, the politicization of the romantic appears as a move towards a transformative notion of love, while on the other hand, the romanticization of the political appears as the process by which some elements of the romantic narrative of couple love is assimilated into a narrative about a wider love experienced within a political collective.

Living the contradiction. Contradictions seem to be a part of our subjectivities and have inspired much feminist writing on love and romance (Jackson 1999). These contradictions seem to be more evident in love where very different narratives are in constant play. As Jackson (1999) points out, there is a contradiction between two of the strongest narratives of love in the Western world. Passionate romantic love – as featured in many forms of artistic expression – favours intensity, whereas the lived narrative of heterosexual pair-bonding emphasizes long-term commitment. We are both imbued with the mystery of falling in love as with the routinization of a long-term relationship. The narrative of love as an altruistic emotion is as present as the narrative which identifies romantic love as self-centred and individualistic. Eva Illouz focuses on the contradictions of love in contemporary Western societies (1997). With a focus on love, its practices and their

relation to the economic sphere, she traces how the contradictions of capitalism have reached the sphere of love. When the narratives of the productive sphere crosscut the private, it is inevitable that contradictions emerge. For Illouz (2012), contradictions are an unavoidable part of culture and, in general, most people manage to move among them without struggling, but this scenario changes when the contradictions affect the articulation of experience. In such cases, incorporating the contradictions into everyday life becomes a difficult task. This difficulty becomes evident in many of the narratives productions I have collected. It is clear in this piece by Libertad:

El amor para mí es un gran contradicción. [...] Por una parte pienso en el amor como un sentimiento positivo, pero no puedo evitar que lo primero que se me venga a la cabeza al pensar en el amor sea la negación de la persona. Es cierto que cuando te enamoras estás más contenta, de mejor humor y todo te parece más bonito. Sin embargo, no puedo dejar de relacionar amor con negación individual, sobre todo a partir de la idea generalizada de amor romántico que nos venden y que se reproduce por todas partes. Tengo esa contradicción. Por un lado pienso que el amor es negación de la individualidad, de la autonomía y por otro lado pienso que somos seres sociales y que el amor nos hace creer en los otros y en las otras. [8] (Libertad, p. 1)

Different narratives are interconnected in this fragment. First, love as a positive emotion and its transformative power (it makes us believe in others). Within that positive aspect of love, falling in love is also mentioned. It is interesting how, as Jackson has suggested, “even feminists resort to mystical language to describe it [love]” (1999, 116). Although there is not a mystical language here, there is a positive and magical understanding of falling, as it is seen as a state in which everything seems to be better. On the other hand, there is a strong presence of a negative reading of romantic love more specifically, which evoking the feminist critique which centres on lack of autonomy and individuality as key elements that are denied in the name of love.

The participants in this study incorporate and make their own narratives after the narratives available in their cultural arena (Jackson 1999). As Illouz (2012) explains, culture provides people with different discourses which are often contradictory and which are used, at different moments and circumstances, to account for different aspects of the experiences of love.

In the stories of the participants, many narratives are in play. Besides the mainstream narratives of love, they also incorporate feminist narratives, meaning the contradiction becomes more evident and more difficult to deal with. In the following strategies I will focus on two different ways of dealing with some of the contradictions they struggle with specifically as feminists.

Claiming “romance”. When Lidia and I were constructing her narrative production I was absolutely captivated by this story of her childhood:

[C]on ocho años descubrí las telenovelas. Todas mis compañeras del colegio las veían y a mí me enganchaban mucho. Pero eran tan nefastas ideológicamente que mi mamá me las prohibía y aun así yo me las ingeniaba

para verlas a escondidas. Ella guardaba la tele en la parte alta de un armario y resolví el asunto poniendo un alargo que alcanzara hasta el enchufe. De esa forma podía ver las telenovelas a gusto y antes de que llegara mi mamá ya había quitado el alargo y cerrado el armario como si nada hubiera pasado. En estas telenovelas se reproducían los imaginarios clásicos del amor romántico: enamorarse para siempre, encontrar la pareja indicada, que alguien que te salve... Es como una metáfora divertida que ese imaginario en mi casa fuera el que se tenía que quedar dentro del armario.[9] (Lidia, p. 1)

Lidia's mother was an artist who had lesbian and feminist friends, so as a child Lidia had different reference points beyond the nuclear family. It is interesting to note that from an early age she was resisting her mother's power by watching *telenovelas* secretly. A hugely popular cultural product in Latin America, *telenovelas* were nevertheless forbidden by her mother on account of their reinforcement of patriarchal relations. The consumption of romantic fiction has been largely researched by feminist scholars. Some of these contributions have highlighted how romantic fiction consumers are not merely assimilating a dominant narrative, taking more seriously the pleasures of romance (Jackson 1999; Roach 2010; Frantz & Selinger 2012). In this sense, I see Lidia's secret consumption of *telenovelas* as a site of resistance in which she could fantasize with the narratives that were forbidden in her home. It is interesting here to note how, in this case, what is dominant in mainstream society becomes a site of resistance as the order of Lidia's childhood home works with its own set of norms and values. Later in her story, she refers to a similar strategy in the present time:

Hay perspectivas feministas -que parten de la crítica al amor romántico- que consideran que enamorarse está mal. Aunque comparto la base de esta crítica, no creo que enamorarse esté del todo mal. A veces me da la sensación de que esta crítica se traduce en una negación y/o desintensificación emocional del amor. Yo me resisto a esto, no quiero renunciar a la intensidad del amor, me gusta, soy una yonki. Pero el amor viene en un pack que está muy satanizado: el amor romántico, el sufrimiento... Hay gente que te manda a la mierda por hablar del amor o por enamorarte y creo que este tipo de discursos generan más que ninguna otra cosa, culpa.[10] (Lidia, p. 5)

This illustrates how within our contradictory subjectivities it is possible to maintain a critical view of romantic love and its connection to patriarchal relations while still desiring a romantic fantasy and the passion of falling in love. Moreover, in Lidia's experience, claiming romance has a specific meaning due to the specificity of her context. Two different narratives are in tension here: the romantic narrative of passion and intensity associated with falling in love, and the feminist narrative of the critique of romantic love as an ideological delusion (Beauvoir 1999; Firestone 1972; Rich 1980; Wittig 2006). Lidia seems to be articulating both narratives in her own experience, while in her feminist circles they appear totally differentiated.

Siento que lo que hay es más un discurso de la negación y esto me molesta y me ha llevado a reivindicar públicamente que yo me enamoro mucho, muy

intensamente y todo el tiempo. Reivindicar esta posibilidad en ciertos contextos genera una cierta transgresión de este tabú que es el amor.[11] (Lidia, p. 10)

In this extract, she explicitly reclaims the right to fall in love, a lot and intensely, which calls into question the feminist critique of romantic love as an hegemonic narrative within feminism. Thus, claiming romance here it is not only a resistance that recognizes the many pleasures romance can have for women but is also responding to what has become hegemonic in her feminist networks. Moreover, Lidia is not only critical of the hegemony of the critique of romantic love in her circles, but also includes two understandings of love. The first refers to the way feminism has traditionally understood love – as a patriarchal ideology subordinating women. The second refers to her own understanding – as a biochemical engagement capable of producing a boundless energy. Although her proposal is based in the feminist critique, she remarks that it fails to explain her actual experience. The power she is resisting is the “punishment” of her affinity group and she does it precisely by strengthening its position and pointing to a rupture in the same counter-power.

I argue that, in this specific context, incorporating elements of the dominant romantic narrative results in a form of resistance because 1) it challenges specific power relations within feminist networks, and 2) because the participants do not base their assumptions on an uncritical assimilation of the dominant, but redefine and appropriate it from their own experience and feminist position.

Accepting the contradiction. Lidia is not the only participant with a self-critical view on the rigidity of love’s rejection within feminist environments. Other participants like Mariona and Aram also raise the acceptance of contradictions as a starting point for personal and collective feminist work.

Lo difícil es ser sincera contigo misma, ya no sólo con las demás. Ser capaz de aceptar cosas que salen de una misma, de reconocer que reproducimos. Es muy difícil aceptar mucha mierda dentro y que es fácil decirlo, pero cuando sale es muy doloroso. [...] Es difícil aceptar cosas que son mal vistas en nuestro entorno.[12] (Mariona, p. 4)

Mariona highlights the difficulty in accepting these contradictions as a feminist, both at a subjective and interpersonal levels. First, she refers to her own feelings and emotions dealing with assimilation, then she points to how the rest understand that assimilation. Assimilating here is understood as failure. However, she chooses to accept it. By recognizing herself an active participant in a feminist counter-narrative, which is also part of a dominant narrative (the romantic), she rejects an external position from mainstream society, while still questioning it.

Aram proposes a possible way to address this contradiction:

Nos sabemos la teoría y me parece un buen punto de partida, pero ¿por dónde continuamos? Asumo la distancia entre teoría y práctica y puede dejar de resultarme incómoda. Sin embargo, siento que fuera de los círculos más íntimos de amistad, no se comparten estas contradicciones. Hay muchos

tabús y entre feministas también. Pero el feminismo no tiene que servir para encorsetarnos, sino para lo contrario, para liberarnos, aunque esto implique contar nuestras miserias. Tendríamos que sacar las basuras, rescatarlas y continuar desde ahí.[13] (Aram, p. 5).

Both Mariona and Aram refer to internal processes dealing with pain and contradiction and how these may become invisible among feminist activist circles, but are shared among closer friends. This suggests a division between irrationality and a political rationality and a specific regime of emotions. Contradictory emotions seem not to be accepted at a public level and are thus privately experienced and shared only with the closest friends with whom we feel free to relax. They propose a different dynamic, in which contradictory emotions have a place in political activism. Thus the division of irrationality and rationality is slightly blurred.

In conclusion, this strategy is based on the inclusion of explicit work on the contradictions as part of the emancipatory feminist project. Rather than making contradiction invisible, this could be a starting point from where to accept our cultural and social constraints.

Towards Narrating The Contradictions

In this paper I have identified various resistance strategies in the narrative production of seven feminist activist women in Barcelona. First, I have addressed the resistance strategies that respond to romantic love narratives. Among these, I have included intentional singleness, which questions compulsory coupledness; lover networks, which respond to sexual exclusivity and temporary fixed romantic scripts; and falling for the collective, which redefines the object and the “nature” of love.

Next, I have explored those challenging feminist narratives with a focus on the contradictions of love. Claiming romance incorporated elements of the romantic narrative while challenging specific power relations within feminist networks. Finally, accepting the contradiction suggested that feminist work should start from these contradictions.

Exploring these resistance strategies enables us to think how feminist women construct their love narratives while opening new possibilities of thinking about love. The danger of establishing new hegemonies still remains, but women resist and negotiate their personal love narratives in the context of the meaning of dominant narratives of love and feminist counter-narratives. The Narrative Production methodology provides the opportunity to explore these resistances through the process of co-producing the texts with the participants. This methodology is reminiscent of narrative inquiry and its focus on the importance of people’s lives and how they give meaning to them (Bruner 1991, 2004), but with a special interest on drawing new horizons to understand love experiences within feminist practice, owing to its commitment to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions (Jackson 1998). From this perspective, it posits the generation of different positions – in both researcher and participants – in relation to the topic of study (Balasch & Montenegro 2003, Montenegro & Pujol 2012). The process of co-producing narratives can be seen as a “circle of dialogue” in which the text is negotiated between both parties. Within this “circle of dialogue”, it is possible to unearth hidden or subordinated ideas whose

importance rests in putting established theories in doubt, thus producing new theories that are more closely connected to people's lives (Fraser 2004). Specifically, it has accounted for the contradictions between critical feminist perspectives and personal experiences. This is an opportunity to generate understandings of love which differ not only from those grand love narratives that dominate our everyday lives, but also from the feminist critiques of romantic love to which we have become accustomed. It opens a way to perform critical understandings of love.

[1] For this paper I am using the original extracts in Spanish of the narrative productions. The translations to English, by Michael Stewart and I, are included as footnotes to each fragment. *"When Héctor left me I suffered a real self-esteem crisis. I got totally bogged down in it for months, feeling like shit. [Later] I started to do things that I had never done before on my own, like going out to shows or spending time [on a doctoral trip] in Vienna. It's been gradual for me: little by little I've been feeling better without falling back."*

[2] *"I discovered that I was able to be boyfriend-less, and I started having relationships in a different way. Lovers, hooking up here and there. All of a sudden I had a taste of 'no strings attached'. I moved from thinking about myself in relation to another, to thinking about myself as myself. I didn't just discover that I was capable of not having a boyfriend, but that even more so I was OK that way."*

[3] *"There's a lot of pressure: you go to a wedding and you go alone, or to other social occasions, always on your own. Sometimes I've had the feeling that people are looking at me in pity. And the most surprising thing is that I was fine, I was on my own by choice. Even friends from my neighbourhood (with whom I have a political affinity) have challenged me about being unattached."*

[4] *"Having maintained relationships with lovers that have grown over time has gradually changed my way of understanding love. Those relationships, where maybe I have sex once a year with someone I've known for a long time, have allowed me to see love as a slower process. I love these people, and even though we don't share a day-to-day life, what I feel for them is love. There are various degrees of intimacy and trust, but I have lovers who I could see being life-long lovers, or at least for many, many years. With so much time having passed you get to know yourself better, and a kinship forms that is an interesting kind of love, one that couldn't happen if you had a strictly monogamous relationship. These relationships are like friendships with intimacy and sex. They're also partnerships which I work within at times on certain projects."*

[5] *"In my emotional-sexual friendships I have definitely been able to find more of a certain spontaneity and freedom, without the demands that inherently emerge in a more 'classic' couple. And more importantly for me: that confidence and mutual support hasn't withered away, but instead has been transformed and has held out over time, making us in turn periodic companions, permanent companions, timeless companions, eternal companions."*

[6] *"They're understanding of the fact that I can be head over heels [for someone else] so they take a step back and then come back on the scene and the whole thing plays out very organically. There's less demand on the other person and that helps them to adapt to changing emotional and personal availability. For example, if a lover called me to meet up,*

but my heart's elsewhere...and I don't want to...that's cool. They're infrequent relationships, or of varying frequency, once a month or once every three...Sometimes as well I've been totally smitten with one of my lovers...maybe for a week, then it fades, but someone else comes back...it's like a wave graph."

[7] *"Miriam D : I was spending the whole day going from meeting to meeting. I was working in a women's bookshop, I was just about to finish my Masters in Women's Studies...We were squatting as women, we were practicing self-defense... I had the most feminist life I could have and by the way I had a boyfriend, he was at home...I was completely in love with the network, with everything that was happening. The whole thing was a rollercoaster, I was letting myself get carried away and I loved it.*

Miriam A : The collective had this really beautiful discourse, then all of a sudden you start to see cracks that you've been ignoring.

Miriam D : Because we were in love...

Miriam A : It's very romantic! The couple is replaced by the collective. You fall in love romantically with the group, you ignore the cracks and when it all explodes the break-up becomes really difficult.

Miriam D : Some resentments towards the collective end up coming out...

Miriam A : There's something we haven't done right when everything is over and we can't even face each other...that happens a lot between couples.

Miriam D : You promise everything and then all of sudden, since it's not true, there's this huge disappointment.

Miriam A : I think that we ought to accept that it's not so heavy and final, and to learn to finish and to finish better...Besides, without that energy a lot of things wouldn't come to pass. For that reason I don't think it's inherently bad. The energy we give off when we fall in love with someone or something, where you can stay awake and do everything...for me it takes a lot to find that energy without being in love. I don't think it's just political...where does that energy come from? Is it just a social construct? That thing that nothing else can give you...I'm thinking about some groups that I was familiar with towards 2009, and they gave off this powerful energy...I fell in love with all of them and the energy they were giving off, I loved it...and then it all went to blazes. It's like the bigger the high, the bigger the fall..."

[8] *"Love for me is a huge contradiction...on one hand I think of love as something positive, but I can't hide from the fact that the first thing that comes to my head when thinking about love is the denial of the person. It's true that when you fall in love you're happier, you're in a better mood, and everything seems nicer to you. Nevertheless, I can't stop relating love with self-denial, especially the general idea of romantic love that they sell us and that is played out everywhere. I've got that contradiction. On one hand I think that love is a denial of individuality, of autonomy, and on the other hand I think we're social beings and that love makes us believe in others."*

[9] *"[I] discovered telenovelas when I was eight. All my classmates from school watched them and I was so hooked. But they were so dire ideologically that my mum banned me from watching them and I still managed to do it secretly. She kept the TV on top of a closet and I resolved the matter by using an extension plug. That way I could watch the telenovelas at ease and before my mum was back, I had already removed the extension and closed the closet as if nothing had happened. Those telenovelas reproduced the classic romantic love imaginary: falling in love for ever, finding the right partner, that someone saves you... It is a funny metaphor, that it was this imaginary that had to stay in the closet in my house."*

[10] *"There are feminist perspectives – that start from a critique of romantic love – that hold that to fall in love is bad. Although I agree in principle with this critique, I don't think that falling in love is completely bad. Sometimes I have the feeling that this critique translates into a denial and/or an emotional pairing-down of love. I resist this, I don't want to give up on the intensity of love, I like it, I'm hooked on it. But love comes in a pack that's very sanitized: romantic love, suffering...there are people that would kick you to the gutter for talking about love or falling in love and I think that this kind of discourse creates guilt more than anything."*

[11] *"I feel that what we've got is more of a discourse of denial. That bothers me, and has brought me to assert publicly that I fall in love a lot, passionately, and all the time. Standing up for this possibility in certain contexts sparks a certain transgression of the taboo that is love."*

[12] *"The hard thing is to be honest with yourself, never mind with everyone else. Being capable of accepting things that come from within oneself, of recognising that we reproduce things. It's very hard to accept a lot of the shit we keep inside, albeit that it's easy to say, but when it comes out it's very painful...It's hard to accept things that are frowned upon in our circles."*

[13] *"We know our theory and that seems like a good starting point to me, but where are we headed? I'm coming to terms with the distance between theory and practice and it might stop becoming uncomfortable for me. Yet I feel that outside of those particularly close circles of friendship, these contradictions aren't talked about. There are a lot of taboos, among feminists too. But feminism shouldn't be a straitjacket for us, rather the opposite, something to liberate us, even when that involves talking about our hardships. We ought to take out the garbage, salvage what we need, and continue from there."*

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