

Love as a Hollow: Merleau-Ponty's Promise of Queer Love

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This article argues that Maurice Merleau-Ponty advances a queer notion of love. In particular, I argue that his notion of love as an institution, as a hollow fueled by the imaginary dimension of existence, shows that love unhinges petrified ideals of gender. I suggest that the crucial insight to be found in Merleau-Ponty's account of love is that love is a lived openness that invites us to seek out new ways of being.

The theme of love plays a central role in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's lectures on institution and passivity (Merleau-Ponty 2010). In contrast to both Jean Paul Sartre and Marcel Proust, Merleau-Ponty seeks to establish the reality of love, though a reality that is deeply bound to an imaginary dimension.¹ This understanding of reality resonates with his claims in "Eye and Mind" where we learn that reality is intertwined with rather than opposed to the imaginary, which means that existence is always instituted through "an imaginary texture of the real" (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 126).² Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty affirms the reality of love, but only and always *through* its imaginary dimension. Acknowledging real love to be imaginary is, however, a development in his thinking on love when read in relation to his distinction between false love and true love in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this text, Merleau-Ponty suggests true love is realized through authentic emotions, whereas false love is an inauthentic experience that is infected by the dominant values of one's situation. But in *Institution and Passivity*, he claims true love to be instituted through an imaginary dimension, making love not so much real, but "imaginareal" (Dufourcq 2015, 47). We learn here that love is a quest with no end, or a continual series of "questions and answers" actualized by imagination (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 39). It is an institution that creates an opening out of which a creative existence springs.

Interestingly, in "The Woman in Love" chapter in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir also takes up a consideration of love's relation to the imaginary domain, suggesting that women's subordination is created and maintained through

heteronormative fantasies and ideals of love. In Beauvoir's view, women often become absorbed by and are encouraged to be immersed in a misogynist imaginary of heterosexual love as a way of giving life meaning. As a result, women paradoxically lose and find themselves through love, a love that is inauthentic because of this paradoxical character. Importantly, inauthentic love becomes an affect, perhaps *the* affect that actualizes a woman's relative existence insofar as she becomes hopelessly infatuated with being loved by a man. For Beauvoir, then, the imaginary dimension of love conspires against women, producing and reifying gender subordination. Though if, as Merleau-Ponty claims, the imaginary dimension of love is a creative opening in existence, rather than a dreadful closure, then what might we understand about the relation between love and the disruption of heteronormative genders by turning to his account of love? How might Merleau-Ponty's notion of love exceed gender subordination and pursue the disruption of dominant norms of gender? How might Merleau-Ponty's account of the institution of love be a promise of queer love?³

In this article, I examine these questions by drawing attention to Merleau-Ponty's later understanding of love as an institution. I argue that his account discloses how love can unhinge petrified ideals of gender and thus can also institute an existence that falls "out of line" (Ahmed 2006, 66). That is, his notion of love as an institution facilitates a queer undermining of normative genders. Ultimately, my reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of love shows how his phenomenology of love contains a promise of queer love, which allows us to rethink what it means to love queerly.

To account for these claims, I first provide a reading of Beauvoir's notion of inauthentic love to underscore the intimate relationship between the lived experience of love and normative genders. Given that Merleau-Ponty says little about gender in relation to love, I turn to Beauvoir as a way to consider how love institutes gendered existence.

In the second section, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's distinction between false and true loves and their relationship to the imaginary domain as a way to thoroughly think through what Beauvoir does not: how to live gender nonnormatively through love. Although imagination might turn into a nightmare, which is the case for Beauvoir's "woman in love," Merleau-Ponty shows us that imagination is actually much more wonderful. Consequently, in the third section, I develop a queer account of Merleau-Ponty's notion of love. I suggest that the crucial insight to be found in Merleau-Ponty is that true love is a *lived* openness that invites us to seek out new ways of being.

Queer reflections on love generally emphasize nonnormative expressions or repressions of sexuality and pleasure, including, though not exclusively, same-sex desire (De Lauretis 1994; Sedgwick 1993; Butler 1997; Berlant 2001; Muñoz 2009).⁴ Furthermore, queer theorists have often underscored the unfixed or excessive character of the imaginary domain as liberatory or as a domain of potential disruption (Butler 1993; Berlant 2001; Muñoz 2009). So what, then, can Merleau-Ponty's account of love as instituted through the imaginary dimension of existence contribute to queer scholarship? In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed suggests that phenomenology is a vital but rare resource for queer scholarship. For Ahmed, Merleau-Ponty's

phenomenology in particular is replete with moments of disorientation that disclose how one's situation or embodied existence might move away from or beyond a straight line. In contrast to the more prevalent poststructural or psychoanalytic approaches to queer theory, queering phenomenology considers how the lived, bodily experience of "departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible" (Ahmed 2006, 21).⁵ In making *lived*, embodied experience central, a queer phenomenology is thus a way to understand how corporeal existence becomes queer or how it straightens out. Following Ahmed's unlikely marriage of phenomenology and queer theory, my task is to consider how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reflection on love discloses the relation between love and the institution of queer existence.

INAUTHENTIC LOVE AND GENDERED EXISTENCE

Throughout volume II of *The Second Sex*, especially in "The Woman in Love" chapter, Beauvoir's phenomenological reflections on love disclose the way in which love, as a lived experience, shapes gendered existence (Beauvoir 2010). Although she does not account for all experiences of love, Beauvoir's account is instructive in regard to the way in which love is often an instrument of gender subordination and a way in which one comes to follow what Ahmed calls "a straight line" (Ahmed 2006, 70).⁶ When reading Beauvoir, we learn that love is not a mere feeling, but is, rather, what binds a subject to a world. In particular, Beauvoir considers how one becomes a woman, as a subject confined to immanence, through a relentless pursuit of fairytales and dreams of a great, but inauthentic love "with man in general" (Beauvoir 2010, 684). She is thus concerned with the way in which a particular fantasy of heterosexual love permeates and deeply constrains a woman's situation and severs her claim to freedom.

Beginning in childhood, Beauvoir claims, women learn that their future depends on men. They are taught to resign their world-making capacities and are, instead, offered a fantasy of heterosexual love. When a woman assumes such love, normative femininity is also assumed and lived as a melodrama of heterosexual love. This, in turn, gives a woman the impression that her existential value and her freedom are realized by becoming a man's beloved. As Bonnie Mann points out in her reading of Beauvoir, what a woman "is offered in exchange for her world-making capacities is the love, if she is lucky and pretty enough, of one of the world-makers" (Mann 2009, 135). In fact, Beauvoir suggests that women experience this exchange as *the* way to freedom. It is "the only way out" of a woman's relegation to the realm of necessity (Beauvoir 2010, 684–85). That is, since a woman cannot make her world or live her own freedom, she is resigned to live it through a man and thus love becomes a solution to her situation.

As Beauvoir shows, such love is actually a way that women realize their enslavement to men, but paradoxically, since a woman's existential justification relies on this love, she becomes nothing without it.

On the contrary, a man never gives himself up to loving a woman. His situation does not require that love manifest as a search for recognition or as the realization of freedom. When in love, a man always experiences himself as himself, whereas a woman experiences herself as for her lover. He never abdicates his life and freedom for love, which means that a man never exists as “a man in love.” Importantly, however, this neither means that love is useless to a man’s existence, nor that he does not participate in a woman’s obsessions of love. A man gains a lot from her renunciation: a servant, a devotee, and an embellishment of his freedom. His situation is made through her love. In this way, a woman in love becomes an object for a man, a thing that supports and produces his freedom. Consequently, love becomes a practice that not only exemplifies, but also creates normatively gendered subjects.

For Beauvoir this love is utterly inauthentic. Most obviously, it is a way to trap women in immanence insofar as women give up their own hold on the world through love and assume an existence that has meaning only in relation to a man. Accordingly, love’s inauthenticity is defined by its capacity to open or close a woman’s existence. When a love is lived through a misogynistic imaginary that promises an illusion of freedom, a woman becomes a relative being and her freedom is denied. For a love to be authentic and true it has to be “founded on the reciprocal recognition of two freedoms” wherein “each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other; neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world” (Beauvoir 2010, 706). Both lovers intend and extend out into the world toward their own ends such that it is a situation in which women exist for themselves. Whereas inauthentic love thrives off of a dream of freedom and the lived experience of an illusion of freedom, authentic love supports the actual freedom of the lovers.

In spite of this positive account of love, it seems that what is most crucial for Beauvoir is that the demand to pursue inauthentic love is an ontologically heavy burden on women. Beauvoir certainly highlights how love can damage women’s existence, but key questions remain about the possibility of authentic love. Thus, Beauvoir’s emphasis on inauthentic love does not fully examine in what way love might eclipse the subordination of women or the institution of normative genders. If inauthentic love plays such a central role in becoming a woman, if a woman’s situation is laden with inauthentic love, then how might authentic love be realized? Insofar as inauthentic love materializes through fantasy and illusion, is authentic love beyond the imaginary domain? And what, in particular, happens to gendered existence when authentic love is lived? In the following section, I address these questions by turning to Merleau-Ponty, which will allow us to begin to think through the queerness of Merleau-Ponty’s account.

LOVE AS A HOLLOW IN US

Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on love suggest that love is of the utmost significance to how our world takes shape as our world. Throughout his work, most striking is his

fixation on the way love is tempered by sedimentation or is precisely that which can tear us apart from a habitual world. Importantly, we see love's existential grip to be a result of its imaginary dimension. For Merleau-Ponty, the reality of love is always intertwined with imagination, making love opaque in subjective experience, but nonetheless present and real. In fact, it is this "imaginareal" character of love that makes love possible. As we will see, the imaginary dimension of love is generative of an authentic love that is lived as an openness, an intensification of creativity capable of distempering habitual experience. This sense of love is what makes it a rich resistance to the generation of Beauvoir's inauthentic love and its correlative gendered subjects.⁷

It is important, however, first to acknowledge the development of Merleau-Ponty's notion of true love. Annabelle Dufourcq accounts for the shift in Merleau-Ponty's reflections on love as a development in his account of the relationship between the imaginary and love (Dufourcq 2005). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty upholds a rather Sartrean conception of the imagination that introduces a distinction between reality, presence, and subjective perception and illusion, fantasy, and the unreal, but it is in his later work, *Institution and Passivity*, that Merleau-Ponty advances the necessarily imaginary character of love. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty refuses to deny the reality of love, but only by accounting for love as an institution, a quest that is indeterminate and in need of arousal by the imagination.

To understand this change in Merleau-Ponty's thinking about love, it is necessary to turn to the distinction between false love and true love in *Phenomenology of Perception*, since it is here that he begins to outline the possibility of a reality of love.

Importantly, this distinction also turns out, at least initially, to be a distinction between imagination and real, subjective perception. More specifically, he understands false love to be a product of a misleading imagination. False love is the love of "certain qualities," which reduces the beloved to a thing, a moment, or a characteristic (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 398). In false love it is not the lover as herself who is loved, but a part, feature, or character that is loved. For Merleau-Ponty, false love is not necessarily unreal, but it affects only the periphery of one's existence such that it is not wholly real. This feature of false love is best understood through Merleau-Ponty's reference to "fictional emotions and imaginary feelings" or what he, by way of reference to Scheler, calls "poetic phantoms" (399). We learn that poetic phantoms are lived feelings in a present moment that materialize through a narrative that is not of one's own making. False love is generated in the factual domain of everyday life, the domain that is replete with what Merleau-Ponty calls "situational values" (398). Since these "imaginary feelings" are generated by values of one's social and political world, they envelop and establish one's reality and therefore cannot be understood as mere unconscious representations of the world (399). Instead, they are much more akin to habits insofar as they constitute the subject and her world on the fringes of experience. Imaginary feelings are thus habitual or sedimented affects produced within a given situation. We might, for instance, understand Beauvoir's inauthentic love as an imaginary feeling insofar as it is an affect comprised of the sediment of values of a sexist milieu. Though what matters most for Merleau-Ponty is

not that these imaginary feelings are unreal, but that they create a love of some *thing*, rather than a love of someone. A false lover is thus fascinated with a caricature and comes to mistake it for reality.

In contrast, true love is lived when a lover sees “the singular manner of being that is” the beloved (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 397). It occurs when one is “fully caught” up in the whole being of the beloved (397). Moreover, he claims, true love is generated by “real emotions” that are at the center of existence and that are disillusioned. They are present, rather than phantasmatic. As such, true love is distinct from the imaginary. Whereas false love is a vain production of the imagination, true love is a genuine relation between lovers created by a lucid perception and awareness of one’s real emotions.

Yet these distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and false love and true love, are compromised by Merleau-Ponty’s account of the cogito.⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, “we do not possess our reality at each moment” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 399). “If we are situated,” Merleau-Ponty says, “then we are surrounded and cannot be transparent to ourselves,” and so, we can only realize love in ambiguity (401). He thus affirms that there is no way to know that we are experiencing real emotions or the entirety of the singular being of a beloved. It turns out that we can never fully and transparently comprehend, for instance, whether we love according to a redundant, misogynistic fairy tale or whether we are grasping love or reaching out toward the beloved idiosyncratically. Since consciousness has no direct access to itself, there is an original opacity to love. How we love and who we understand the beloved to be are both realities that are always partially concealed, which suggests that we are always, in some way, immersed in poetic phantoms. Thus, Merleau-Ponty underscores that we are cocooned by phenomena that we do not have direct access to and it is such enrapture that makes “illusion possible” (398). This is why, simultaneously with his assertion of the distinction between false love as imaginary and true love as real, Merleau-Ponty also affirms that “ambiguity remains” and that the imaginary can be taken for reality.

Accordingly, it seems that there is, in fact, a connection between false love and true love. This connection is precisely the fact that our experience of love is always, in some way, opaque. There is no transparency to true love, so we do not and cannot have direct access to the reality of our emotions. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty is adamant about the distinction between true and false love. So how, then, do we reconcile the distinction between the imaginary and the real dimensions of true love?

The answer lies most explicitly in *Institution and Passivity* where Merleau-Ponty suggests that the engine of true love is the imagination. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty seems to give up on the sharp distinction between false love and true love, though he nevertheless advances the reality of love, not as false or true, but as a lived reality generated by the imaginary. He does so through an interrogation of Proust’s narrative of love in *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to Merleau-Ponty, although Proust fails to affirm the reality of love, his narrative reveals to us that love is an institution, a creative opening. In general, Merleau-Ponty understands this institution to be an operation that generates new meaning not by an active constitution or a constituting consciousness. Instead, love generates meaning through “events in an experience

which endow the experience with durable dimensions," which are "the demand of a future" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 77). As an institution, then, love is understood to be an inventive force, pregnant with future potential.

More specifically, Merleau-Ponty suggests that love is "created before anything else by imagining *another* being," which is what makes love an unreality as much as a reality (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 33). By imagining a beloved, a lover never possesses love, but is continually in search of love. Love is thus lived as an absence. In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, the beloved is always an absence, which is precisely what makes love a quest. Because I do not experience my beloved as a presence, there is always an emptiness I seek to be filled. Consequently, this absence or negative reality of love is a fecund opening up of the world and the beloved. The absence becomes an unexpected presence, not in the sense of a possession, but as an amorous yearning. As such, love, Merleau-Ponty says, is "a hollow in us" (37). This hollow is not emptiness, but an openness that creates space and time for play or variation. It is a "lake of non-being" out of which seeing and feeling endlessly flow (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 201). In the hollow that love is, "something more slips in . . . not exactly what we were seeking, but something else that is interesting" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 39). This makes love an "open sense," or a sense that is not yet given. Importantly, the imaginary is crucial to this hollowing out. For Merleau-Ponty, the imaginary beginning of love must remain if love is to become real. The imaginary is what generates the openness inasmuch as it is the well of infinite richness in existence. It is thus the imaginary that ultimately makes the openness possible.

We can better elaborate on the fecundity of this imaginary dimension of love by thinking through the role of the imaginary in Merleau-Ponty's ontology more broadly. Martin C. Dillon accounts for Merleau-Ponty's ontology as "a radical rejection of dualism" that makes the lived body central as a corporeal reflexivity or what Merleau-Ponty later refers to as the reversibility of the flesh of the world (Dillon 1997, 106). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty accounts for the lived body as both anonymous and personal, which develops into the chiasmic touching-touched relation in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the former, we understand that a particular subject is constituted only in relation to a tacit cogito, or an anonymous, phantom-like unfolding of the world, and in the latter, the chiasm discloses the constitutive relation between the visible and the invisible and embodied existence. But, as Dufourcq underscores, the overlapping of these two dimensions of the lived body and flesh of the world can also be understood in terms of the intertwining of the real and the imaginary. For instance, in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty shows how paintings are not mere imaginary representations of reality but are, rather, imaginative gestures that open up and generate reality. The painter extends the existence of reality and perhaps even institutes an experience that was not previously present. The visible world that became a painting elicits echoes in different individuals that suggest a different way of looking at the world. This suggestion may open up what was previously invisible in the visible. It is this opening that blurs the line between the real and the imaginary inasmuch as the imaginary field draws on the real and vice versa. What is real is present only insofar as it exists in relation to and is even generated by

imaginative variations of the real. In this way, the imaginary field makes “an enlarged and polymorphous ‘reality’” (Dufourcq 2015, 42). Insofar as the imaginary envelops the real, there is always much more to reality than what is present at hand. The imaginary opens up the real.

Thus the imaginary dimension of the real is always contained within the real, just as the anonymous is with the personal and the invisible within the visible. In fact, Alia Al-Saji’s commentary on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of anonymity underscores the relation between the imaginary and anonymous dimension of existence. Anonymity, Al-Saji writes, is “an opening onto the rhythmic differences of the world . . . a dynamic and dialogical affectivity that modulates its openness in response to the world” (Al-Saji 2008, 53). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, we learn that the anonymous “layer” of our existence is our sensing or our embodied communication of the world that “appears around personal existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 86). As Al-Saji makes clear, this bodily sense is the invisible, phantasmatic, generative force that allows one to build meanings and a world, which suggests that the imaginary dimension of existence is anonymous.⁹ Or, as Dufourcq more explicitly states, the imaginary is “an anonymous source of images, schemes and reveries” (Dufourcq 2014, 711). An anonymous imaginary is thus what allows love to be a hollow in existence. It is the opening from which not only love, but also an inventive and imaginative existence springs.

In *Institution and Passivity*, the imagination is a series of questions and answers, a mode of engagement with a beloved, which makes love a dynamic or creative opacity that contains an immeasurable richness of limitless variation. Given that lovers, as absences to each other, are always at some distance, this engagement is central to the institution of love. Indeed, as Dillon remarks in his phenomenological reflection on love, “If I stop sensing you, stop questioning you, you will become someone I no longer know. If I stop growing and start decaying, and you are paying attention, you will cease to affirm me erotically” (Dillon 2001, 128). Hence this mode of engagement fuels and expands the imagination, which allows the anonymous source to rush through existence. As a hollow, love is an openness fueled by the dynamism of the anonymous imaginary.

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty contrasts this institution of love to the institution of habit.¹⁰ What we learn by reading Proust is that love is false when it is “the institution of a habit” or the transference of “a way of loving learned elsewhere or in childhood” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 77). In this transference, love becomes nothing but a mere echo of a past love such that love is already possessed. Here, although the imaginary beginning of love is still present, the future of love is closed. The sediment of a past comes to predetermine what the future of love will be. The difficulty is that we are always vulnerable to the institution of habit. Love’s imaginary beginning may take shape as a former imagining, thus closing the hollow and thereby instituting habit instead of love. This means the ambiguity and opacity of love and existence never guarantee love as a hollow. The Beauvoirian nightmare of inauthentic love that threatens the reality of love always lurks at one’s side.¹¹

Yet it would be an error to believe love is fixed or forever stifled by habit. For Merleau-Ponty, the imaginary is indeterminate. There is always a dehiscence, a

splitting of existence, such that there is no certainty as to what love will become. So Merleau-Ponty's affirmation of love relies less on its guarantee than on the inevitability that habit does not always succeed. Hence we are not left to despair the ambiguity and opacity of love. The capacity of the imaginary to transform affirms the institution of love as an imagining that can rescue imagination from habit.¹² The splitting open of the imaginary, an opening that is love itself, is what allows love to entice and inspire new situations. Merleau-Ponty thus persuades us to see that love's great promise is that it arouses possibility. Although this does not resolve the haunting nightmare of false love or normatively gendered love, it does promise the possibility of weaving new experiences that are, in reality, love. For Merleau-Ponty, then, love is not that which we can fully and lucidly grasp or perceive, but it is the possibility that exists when the imaginary is robust. This possibility would still be phantasmatic insofar as it is anonymous, but rather than a frightening redundancy, it would be an ingenious realization.

If we bring ourselves back to Beauvoir's account we might understand "the woman in love" and inauthentic love to be a product of an impoverished imaginary.

From this perspective, the problem with inauthentic love is that it is determined by dominant values and imagery of gender. Although inauthentic love creates a world for "the woman in love," this is, as Beauvoir emphasizes, not an opening up of the world, but a foreclosure of the world and existence. But, importantly, from Merleau-Ponty's account we know that this is not really love after all. From his perspective, love is only and always a hollow or opening in us. Thus, authentic love would be a product of the institution of love, of a transformation in the imaginary field. This would suspend the influx of gendered ideals or the institution of habit. In turn, the institution of love would necessitate, through its very rich imaginary, a creative variation of gender within love.¹³ Whereas Beauvoir underscores the constraints on authentic love, Merleau-Ponty's account impresses on us the rich possibility of the reality of love as that which undoes the constraint of ideals of gender. It is this, in particular, that makes the institution of love quite queer.

THE INSTITUTION OF LOVE AS A QUEER PROMISE

In "Love, A Queer Feeling," Lauren Berlant argues that love is a site of transformation that is remarkably queer. She writes, "Love approximates a space to which people return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a scene of optimism for change" (Berlant 2001, 448). Berlant contrasts this transformative space opened up by love to the absorption of love by normativity, an absorption that turns love into repetitions of normality or convention that preclude change.¹⁴ For Berlant, the queerness of love is that it is a placeholder, a relational space to turn to, which disrupts intimate conventions or what she more explicitly calls "a comforting intelligibility of conventional form" (448).

This sense of queerness resonates with the queer aesthetic advanced by José Esteban Muñoz. For Muñoz, queerness is "the rejection of normal love that keeps a

repressive social order in place” (Muñoz 2009, 134). Although he does not explicitly thematize love, Muñoz sees queerness to be a desiring that is contrary to conventional love.¹⁵ Queerness is, then, some other kind of love. It “is more than just sexuality” (135). And though it can envelop “gay and lesbian sexualities,” it is, for Muñoz, more an embrace of “experimental modes of love, sex, and relationality” (136).¹⁶ Thus queerness is about *how* one engages, not necessarily whom one engages. This rejection, or what Muñoz calls a great refusal, is an aesthetic dimension that, similar to Berlant, allows us entry into a new space. It is a style of refusal to allow “for new horizons and a vastness of potentiality” that points toward a future that is not yet and may never be reached (Muñoz 2009, 141).

In many ways, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the institution of love resonates with the ethos of nonnormativity and the disruption of amorous conventions forwarded by Berlant and Muñoz. If the institution of love is an opening of the closure generated by habit or the nightmarish side of the imaginary, then love is, for Merleau-Ponty, a disruption of convention. More specifically, the institution of love is, by necessity, a rejection of situational values. Insofar as love is an indeterminate opening, an endless creativity, it cannot be realized through pre-established norms or narratives of gender, sexuality, and pleasure. From this perspective, we can understand the institution of love to be a rather queer event.

However, Merleau-Ponty’s account of love also offers a different way to think about queer love. Whereas Berlant emphasizes love as a space for realizing queerness and Muñoz sees queerness as a refusal of normal love, we learn from Merleau-Ponty that the institution of love is a lived experience of openness and indeterminacy. It is not so much a refusal or placeholder, but precisely that which maintains existence as an open question. Although there is not a guarantee of love—indeed there is an inherent instability in its possibility—what the institution of love promises is the flexibility of one’s reality, of one’s existence, an institution and arousal of new variations. This promise, however, does not make love impossible, although it does, as Merleau-Ponty shows, make love a quest.

The value of this institution is that it is a *lived* pursuit, a *lived* opening. It is not a utopian future (Muñoz 2009) or an optimistic political project (Berlant 2001), but is, instead, that which can and does take shape in and through the living, bodily subject. Although its reality is opaque, the institution of love is an opening up of a future that envelops lovers in their concreteness. As Ahmed underscores in her queer account of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, when we focus on lived experience it is possible to see how embodied existence becomes oriented or disoriented. In fact, that we can see how bodies become disoriented in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is what leads Ahmed to claim that it is, in fact, queer. For her, its queerness is most explicitly disclosed in his account of embodied existence or the living body. His writing shows that “bodies are already rather queer” insofar as they are always touched and touching in ways that can throw them out of line or propel them into disorientation (Ahmed 2006, 106).¹⁷ But, the institution of love suggests that this disorientation is actually a deep opening that allows the instability of existence, what Ahmed calls disorientation, to be lived. Indeed, the opening itself might be the means to

disorientation. In this way, the institution of love is a way in which existence is nourished by abundance and in turn becomes an indeterminate quest, rather than a fulfillment of convention.

Merleau-Ponty himself never understands the institution of love as queer. Still if by queerness, following Berlant and Muñoz, we mean that which refuses established orders and seeks new horizons, then Merleau-Ponty's account of the institution of love can be understood as a queer institution. We can, in fact, refer back to the reading of "the woman in love" to underscore the way in which nonnormative genders and sexualities are not only instituted through love, but also crucial to love's institution. That is, Merleau-Ponty convinces us to see that what is normal or habitual is precisely that which seals up the imaginary field necessary for love. This advances a notion of queer as an expansive openness that suspends the route to normalcy. From this perspective, the impetus of queer love insists on an indeterminacy and flexibility of lovers. Inasmuch as it requires a rejection of habit, conventions of gender and sexuality must elide those who love and how they do so. As Beauvoir shows us, ideals and expectations of gender are like a suture to the imagination such that if love is to be lived, it must be torn apart.

Consequently, an open imaginary field is central to all love, which is by its nature queer. If love is instituted only through a breaking apart of the habitual, which is simultaneously a fecund opening, the imaginary field that institutes existence must be robust. Because Merleau-Ponty understands existence to be immersed in the imaginary, the hollow of love is a way to live inventive, though challenging lives. The institution of love destabilizes our existence, puts the normal out of play, providing opportunity to create new styles of existence, but insofar as it does this, it demands us to build, invent, and be comfortable with instability of the hollow that is love. It requires that lovers not impose norms or ideals on one another and instead, it is an invitation to always imagine different ways to engage. This suggests the institution of love is not a queer feeling, but, perhaps more significantly, the institution of a queer existence.

The queerness of our existence realized in love is, though, that which we cannot readily perceive. If we recall the anonymous character of the imaginary, we are reminded that love is not that which the personal "I" realizes, but that which flows through existence. It is a generative undercurrent of what I perceive, a present-absence that cannot be grasped, but nevertheless, it is the dynamic sensibility of my concrete existence. Since this invisibility of imagination is invested with the power to move us, we can be moved at any moment, and the meanings present at hand may become obscured. That Merleau-Ponty demands us to see love as bound to this power of the imagination is crucial. It means that it is in love that people become what is least expected of them.

Ultimately, that we can live this opening is the queer promise of Merleau-Ponty's institution of love. He demands us to take seriously that love offers us a way to unsettle the nightmares that seek to fix and pre-establish our realities. His account of love encourages us to accept that our existence is flexible and inventive and that love is one of the most effective ways to realize this. Although the institution of love is a

vulnerable endeavor, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty does not deny its possibility. In fact, it is the very instability of love that enlivens and opens the abundant variations that come within every situation. His affirmation of love as a creative force is an invitation to acknowledge that love nourishes the flexibility of our existence that proves not to be terrifying, but is precisely what offers us a way to create or queer, rather than conform.

NOTES

1. Annabelle Dufourcq provides an insightful discussion of how Merleau-Ponty's account of love challenges Sartre's account and confronts, but is also inspired by, Proust's (Dufourcq 2005).

2. I consider this notion of the imaginary in more detail later on in the article.

3. The word *queer* is complicated and its meaning debatable. It can be described as sexual activism, a response to mainstream gay and lesbian politics, an identity, a site of collective contestation, theory, or commentary and critique of heteronormativity (Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1993; Berlant and Warner 1995; Jagose 1996; Cohen 1997; Turner 2000). Thus, it is important to specify that I am using *queer love* to mean a rejection and disruption of heteronormative love that may be heterosexual or lesbian, gay, or bisexual love that mimics heteronormative conventions. This use is one important but not exhaustive sense of the word *queer*, which resonates with other uses of *queer* (Sedgwick 1993; Ahmed 2006; Muñoz 2009). I take up this discussion more thoroughly in the final section. It is also important to note that I focus more explicitly on conventions of (hetero) genders, which, as Butler makes clear, are formative to sexuality (Butler 1997). (To me, it also seems that Beauvoir suggests something quite similar.)

4. Lauren Berlant suggests that love has not been taken seriously "as an analytic concept and project for elaboration" in queer theory (Berlant 2001, 437). In some ways, I agree with her. Although one can find commentary on love in queer theory, it is less explicit that love is ever thematized as a queer resource itself.

5. My intent, however, is not to create a strict divide between phenomenology and these other approaches. In fact, there are important dialogues to be had between them and in ways relevant to this article. Edward Casey's "The Unconscious Mind and the Prereflective Body" is a prime example of the overlaps between Merleau-Ponty and Freudian psychoanalysis in relation to the imaginary domain and corporeality (Casey 1999). But, at the same time, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the lived dimension of the imaginary and the imaginary character of corporeality are important and unique in their own right, which will be explored in this article. Importantly, even Casey recognizes this in one of his earlier texts when he says, "Even the psychoanalysis of Freud, for all of its brilliant insight into phantasy, tends to equate imagining with daydreaming" (Casey 1974, 4).

6. Beauvoir's account of feminine existence in *The Second Sex* is not universalizable. Beauvoir scholars and critics have, importantly, pointed out that Beauvoir's description of women is a particular description of white, bourgeois, heterosexual women. Her account of love is thus also situated within this context. I am not, however, turning to Beauvoir to give *the* account of gendered love, but as an important and relevant account of the

insidious ways in which love, heterosexuality, and gender are entangled. For an insightful piece on the relevance of Beauvoir's account, see Mann 2009.

7. In fact, Merleau-Ponty takes up Beauvoir's analysis of "the phenomenon of the 'battle of the sexes'" in regard to love (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 103). In *The Primacy of Perception* he points out that the social dichotomization of men and women and the individual uptake of "established myths as well as certain tendencies of their own physiological constitutions" most often results in "a sort of tacit agreement" where "men and women ... live side by side, in a love that is hate, a hate that is love" (104). It is thus all the more interesting to consider what Merleau-Ponty's account of true love does to the "battle of the sexes," especially since this battle produces hate and not love.

8. The placement of the discussion of false love and true love in "The *Cogito*" chapter makes this compromise all the more necessary to think through.

9. As generative of the personal "I," anonymity might very well be habitual too. Merleau-Ponty makes this explicit when he accounts for "two distinct layers" of the body as "the habitual body and ... the actual body" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 84). However, as Al-Saji points out, the anonymous is also excessive, our senses are always dynamic such that the world can flow through me in ways contrary to habit.

10. This distinction between the institution of love and the institution of habit might allow us to reconsider the distinction between false love and true love found in *Phenomenology of Perception*. More specifically, it seems quite plausible that the "situational values" generative of false love are precisely the institution of habit.

11. I borrow this language of the nightmare from Dufourcq, who contrasts it to the other, creative and magical, side of the imaginary domain (Dufourcq 2014). Given the effects of inauthentic love on a woman's existence, it seems appropriate to understand it as a nightmare.

12. In fact Merleau-Ponty claims "imagination can save imagination": "*Les grecs ont créé une raison qui sait qu'en n'étant qu'elle-même elle ne serait pas la raison, qui laisse parler tout le reste de l'homme, qui consent même au mythe, à condition qu'il soit l'imagination sauvant de l'imagination*" (Merleau-Ponty 2000, 204, translation mine).

13. Similarly, we might consider the centrality of freedom in Beauvoir's authentic love to be necessary to Merleau-Ponty's account of the institution of love. Given that true love is never a possession of the lover, mutual recognition of freedom seems pertinent to sustaining such dispossession.

14. In this piece, Berlant never specifies her concern with normativity or conventionality as heteronormativity, but she does contrast nonheteronormative accounts of desire to normativity. Her other work, however, makes more explicit that her understanding of normativity presumes heteronormativity. For instance, she, along with Michael Warner, accounts for heteronormativity as *the* normal social institution of sexuality (Berlant and Warner 1998).

15. Love, though, does play a central role in his queer aesthetic. The great refusal that characterizes the aesthetic is based on the loves lived by Eros and Narcissus in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.

16. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick captures a similar notion of *queer* in her essay "Queer and Now" (Sedgwick 1993). For Sedgwick, queer is a relationality and practices that do

not neatly line up with given conventions of sexuality and gender or that fail to move in expected directions.

17. For Ahmed, Merleau-Ponty shows that embodied existence has a propensity toward being thrown into disorientation, which she understands as a queer deviation from compulsory heterosexuality.

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