

INTIMATE EXPLORATIONS: READING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Alejandro Cervantes-Carson and Beatriz Oria, eds.

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Published in e-book format and under the auspices of the *Inter-disciplinary. Net*¹, the edited volume *Intimate Explorations: Reading Across Disciplines* is a compilation of papers presented at the 2007 global conference on the *Persons, Intimacy, Love* project, held in Salzburg, Austria. The book has a strongly interdisciplinary character, readily accommodating pieces of research from different fields and with different perspectives, all harmoniously brought together to unravel the multifaceted concept of intimacy. In this sense, it remains faithful to the premises of the *Persons* project, and earns a place in the growing bibliography of interdisciplinary research in Humanities. The volume is divided into four thematic sections, according to the main focus of the papers; there is, however, a strong cohesive tie consisting in recurrent ideas, methods and approaches.

The guiding principle of the papers in the opening section is a theoretical approach to the concept of intimacy, and related notions. Thus, the first two contributions revisit the question of what intimacy is and offer an informed survey of the existing literature. Both Johnson and Mjöberg pursue a redefinition of intimacy taking into account the theoretical pitfalls in recent research and conclude by acknowledging the elusive nature of intimacy as a social concept. Mjöberg's phenomenological approach to the concept of intimacy could have been placed first, serving as a comprehensive introduction to the section. In any case, the next paper by Weaver and Wollard, ties in well with the preceding ones, picking up the discussion on

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intimacy from erotic love, indirectly touched upon by Johnson; the authors then proceed by questioning the widely uncontested value of monogamy through a well-developed rationale, eschewing ideological biases. In a slightly different vein, Cristaudo's chapter offers an interesting review of key figures and shifts in the history of philosophical thinking and analyzes a real-life love story as a narrative about love being stronger than death. On the other hand, Flick's empirical study on self-care and subjectivation of work is a very timely contribution to the ongoing research in industrial sociology—mostly though not exclusively undertaken by German scholars, after the subjective turn in labor—and especially at its interface with gender studies (see for instance Rau 2013; Peitler 2010).

The papers in the second section place the theoretical explorations in context—indispensable for tracing the links between personal experience of intimacy and social structure. The inclusion of diverse contexts (geographical, social or temporal) is very timely and, throughout the papers in this section, crucial factors such as geographical location, cultural tradition, class, economic status and gender engage in a constant interplay on the intimate encounters terrain. In the opening paper, Shuzhen makes insightful observations regarding the changes in the role and identity and the conflicts of Singaporean women, which are probably relevant in other contexts around the world. Drawing on gender studies but this time with the focus shifted to masculinity, Hanlon's contribution explores the ways in which Irish men relate to the “highly gendered practices” (73) of love and care labor. The reference to affective inequality is noteworthy: it is an aspect which has only recently caught scholarly attention (see for instance, Lynch et al. 2009). Two of the remaining papers of the section (Gilfillan, Savage and Mancy), discuss critically the sex education policy in contemporary Scotland, taking into special consideration the actual stakeholders and the empirical evidence available. In Gilfillan's contribution, the reality of inequality (racial, gender, socioeconomic and sexual) comes to the fore, only to further complicate an already thorny matter or, in Fields' words, a “risky but necessary task” (2008: 67). Also focusing on inequality, Castro-Pérez explores the often dramatic experiences of intimacy among Mexican low-income women, in stark opposition to middle-class clichés about romance, love and marriage. The section does not fail to include a most welcome cross-contextual, comparative study of the ways economic transformation affects intimate social values across different societies and generations during eras of transition (Swader). As the author himself acknowledges, further research on the issue should include the gender—and, in our view, class—variable. Finally, Love's cross-cultural exploration of “love laws” in Arab and American couples through the use of scripting theory constitutes an interesting proposal for intercultural communication studies.

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The third section of the volume comprises six studies on the representation of intimacy, with film being the chosen medium in five of them. The sixth paper (White) is a notable exception, since correspondence is the medium chosen and, more importantly, because it offers a fresh perspective on distance in space and time as a defining but also as a favoring condition in relationships. That being said, the choice of cinematic fictions seems appropriate, since they too, just like literary fictions, “inevitably bring into play everyday assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships” (Stam 1992: 218). As a relatively new medium appealing to a mass public, film easily lends itself to sociological and philosophical reflections on human relationships. Once more context becomes central in the analyses and so do essential aspects of identity: gender, class, race and culture. Across the chapters, these recurrent themes become manifestly or subtly intertwined. From Butler’s analysis of contemporary cinematic adaptations of the Bluebeard tale to Oria’s and Pérez-Villalba’s contributions, the concepts of ambiguity, subjectivity and, of course, gender are crucial, whether the focus is on the challenges and frustrations of contemporary heterosexual relationships (Oria) or the interplay between class/power relations and gender in Victorian times (Pérez Villalba). Oria’s conclusions, in particular, serve as an excellent starting point for critically revisiting both Woody Allen’s work and Giddens’ (1992) theory on intimacy (see Jamieson 1999 and Layder 2009 for further discussion on the latter). In Oliete’s analysis, race, national identity and intimacy against a post-colonial background gain protagonism, through the representation of intercultural relationships in Indian and British films. Race and interethnic conflicts, as represented in a multi-protagonist film, are also the focal point in Seco’s contribution; an engaging analysis of the struggles and clashes that persist in today’s multiethnic American society.

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The last section is a fitting peak for the intellectual crescendo built up by the preceding chapters. It justifies the organization of the book and also does justice to the complexity and multifariousness of intimacy in a very conspicuous way. What all the cases studied here have in common is their peculiar nature, oscillating between unconventional and downright deviant. And therein lies the challenge, as it is precisely attributive dichotomies such as normative/normal versus non-normative/deviant/strange that are called into question. The reader then is prompted to reconsider the validity of preconceived assumptions about intimacy, through an assortment of intriguing and, at times, shocking cases in point. Strangeness becomes a negotiating strategy for teacher-student relationships under the cloud of repeated incidents of sexual harassment (Mitsuko) and strangers create family bonds in an unconventional and marginal context (Brown). The latter study builds on previous research on the topic but also provides new insights into the formation of “fictive kin” (Pippert 2007: 128). With a view to defying taboos,

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both Wolf and White bring up animals in the discussion. Wolf's philosophical reflection on intimate behavior among and towards animals, interspersed with personal anecdotes is witty but not at all frivolous; rather, it stimulates a serious reconsideration of the ideas discussed. As potentially provocative and disturbing as it is lucid and rational, White's contribution points to the importance of acknowledging love in paraphilia in order to address it more effectively. Sexuality is also a central issue in the chapter by Yu Ding, where the experiences of *xiaojies* in China reveal alternative, 'deviant' intimate and sexual encounters as means of personal transformation and, ultimately, gender role subversion. Similar interior struggles and uneasy negotiations of intimacy relocate to a different domain in the concluding chapter by Cervantes-Carson, a gripping account of how the uninvited presence of intimacy can give rise to multiple interior crises—subjective, moral and ethical—and how these crises can in turn shed new light on the possible links between evil and intimacy.

Overall, the volume succeeds in its venture to open up new paths for exploring interpersonal intimacy in multiple forms and expressions, as well as to engage in a fruitful dialogue across disciplines and approaches—in line with the current academic trend of interdisciplinarity and its proposed “denaturalization of knowledge” (Moran 2002: 187). Well-structured and engrossing, the book invites readers with different backgrounds to reconsider, question and reflect upon the universal intricacies and complexities of intimacy.

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Note

¹. For more information on the project : <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/> accessed August 31, 2013.

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