



Gender, Theology and Spirituality

CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

POWER, AUTHORITY, LOVE

Edited by
Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney
and Rebekah Pryor



Contemporary Feminist Theologies

This book explores the issues of power, authority and love with current concerns in the Christian theological exploration of feminism and feminist theology.

It addresses its key themes in three parts: (1) power deals with feminist critiques, (2) authority unpacks feminist methodologies, and (3) love explores feminist ethics. Covering issues such as embodiment, intersectionality, liberation theologies, historiography, queer approaches to hermeneutics, philosophy and more, it provides a multi-layered and nuanced appreciation of this important area of theological thought and practice.

This volume will be vital reading for scholars of feminist theology, queer theology, process theology, practical theology, religion and gender.

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Rebekah Pryor

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	x

Introduction: To speak, to say anything at all	1
REBEKAH PRYOR, CATHRYN MCKINNEY AND KERRIE HANDASYDE	

PART I

Power: Dis/locations and reclamations	7
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1 Speaking Up! Speaking Out! Naming the silences: Women, power, authority and love in the Pacific	9
SEFOROSA CARROLL	
2 Witnessing to what remains, or the power of persisting: Power, authority and love in the interim spaces	21
NICOLA SLEE	
3 From footballs to Matildas? Gender diverse people and theological game change	33
JOSEPHINE INKPIN	
4 Reading and process: Rethinking power	46
BRIAN MACALLAN	
5 The problem with powerlessness: Attending to power and authority in Matthew's Wisdom christology	59
SALLY DOUGLAS	

PART II

Authority: Subversions and contestations 73

- 6 “How could it be otherwise?” Sacramental imagination
and political rites** 75

KATHARINE MASSAM

- 7 Mother, preacher, press: Women ministers and the
negotiation of authority, 1910–1933** 88

KERRIE HANDASYDE

- 8 Reforming women in England and Scotland: Claiming
authority to speak of God** 100

ANN LOADES

- 9 Against and without authority: Writing feminist theology
after the end of history** 117

JANICE MCRANDAL

PART III

Love: Embodiment and practice 131

- 10 Roadsides: Towards an ecological feminist theology
of cross-species compassion** 133

ANNE ELVEY

- 11 Covenantal relationships and queer bodies** 145

ANIKA JENSEN, KATECIA TAYLOR AND STEPHEN BURNS

- 12 Re-visioning (the) love/command: Law, authority and the
logic of love in the philosophy of Pamela Sue Anderson
and Paul’s letter to the Galatians** 158

SEAN WINTER

- 13 Writing the image to forgiveness and love** 168

HELENA KADMOS

14	<i>Thinking, Dancing: Exploring the gaps between ecstasy and distress</i>	178
	REBEKAH PRYOR	
15	<i>Speaking of being heard: Voice and purpose in prison</i>	192
	CATHRYN MCKINNEY	
	<i>Index</i>	203

Figures

14.1	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 1) 2019	183
14.2	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 2) 2019	184
14.3	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 3) 2019	184
14.4	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 4) 2019	185
14.5	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 5) 2019	185
14.6	Rebekah Pryor. <i>Thinking, Dancing</i> (video still 6) 2019	186

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Introduction

To speak, to say anything at all

*Rebekah Pryor, Cathryn McKinney and
Kerrie Handasyde*

To speak, to say anything at all, is already to say something about power, authority and love. Whether through voice sounded from depths or tip of tongue, hands or face gesturing in practised or spontaneous ways, or words crafted in shapes of text on a page, to speak is to take up, or better, open out and onto a space made (and made possible) in relation with others. Speaking (and, indeed, hearing and listening) is a fleshy endeavour. To speak is to claim (with whatever degree of confidence) one's self-declared right to do so; it is to announce with expectation that you will be heard. Alongside others or into silence, speaking can be an act of revelation, defiance or revolution. When projected and encountered with awareness, respect and desire, it might even constitute an act of love.

Power, authority and love are perennial concerns in feminist theological discourse, whatever religious or spiritual tradition they arise from, claim or contest. Emerging out of the Christian tradition, this collection brings together a range of new and familiar voices—each situated and particular, although, as it happens, one way or another connected through the Australian Collaborators in Feminist Theologies, a network emerging out of the University of Divinity, Australia. With origins in Australia, the Pacific and Europe, and reflecting a variety of perspectives across Christian ecclesial and theological spectra, this book and the chapters which comprise it critically articulate something about how power, authority and love are worked out in the flesh; indeed, *on flesh itself*. Remembering what Mayra Rivera so well emphasises, that “words also become flesh”,¹ inscribing the ideals, hierarchies, histories, authorisations and prohibitions of contemporary social systems onto the very material of bodies, we understand that our being is entirely relational and, beyond the singularity of Christ, *intercarnational*.² With flesh defined as “a constitutive relation to the world—a condition for corporeal survival and flourishing as well as the source of its vulnerability,”³ we are thus also compelled to recognise the entanglements of all matter and the dynamic possibilities of our own embodiment (including the thought and speech that overflows from it) in relation with others.

Against scholarly tendencies of abstraction (by which all matter is rendered in ‘subject’ or ‘object’ terms), we do well to follow M. Shawn Copeland who proposes a turning of theology “to the person”⁴: a move that pulls the praxis of theology into close proximity to life itself. “The person,” she writes, “is tangible and solid, flesh and blood, material and embodied; rooted in

space and time, in culture and relationships. The *person* is close—so close she or he can be smelled, heard, touched, seen, even tasted”.⁵ So close, breath can be felt. In ecological terms (expansive enough to include all matter), so close that even the groans of Earth and pull of moon and tides can be sensed. Like a gift offered outwards—with all the risk of rejection and return such a gesture carries⁶—contemporary feminist theologies here articulate critical questions and possibilities for better Christian praxis. They come in the form of autobiographical stories, poems, narratives bearing witness to the experiences of others (including other species) and reflexive expositions of theories and histories, variously calling out and contesting hegemonies and closures in common life and discourse, and pointing to possible openings.

To be useful—that is, liberatory and restorative—contemporary feminist theologies must compel us to recognise and speak emphatically against the denial of First Nations peoples’ lives and agency; the violence brought to bear on bodies, cultures, generations over centuries of sanctioned colonising force; the injustices of war and genocide; the brutal legacies of a western church steeped as it is in symbols and traditions of sexism and racism; the quiet silencing and forgetting of women; the systemic exclusion of gender diverse people; and the relentless capitalist economies that devastate whole ecologies and their “more-than-human” species.⁷ Contemporary feminist theologies must then also compel us to speak creatively and bravely—whether in half-formed utterances or loud proclamations—of new, better, more just and ethical ways to imagine, make and share worlds. Driven by such imperatives, and ever aware that the words we say (or write)—whether in personal stories, communal narratives or doctrinal creeds—all materialise out of the very social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, linguistic and discursive contexts we mean to critique, we must, nevertheless, speak *together* in the hope of making way for the flourishing of all flesh, all matter.

Resisting the hegemony that “[a]ll theologies, including theologies of liberation and of feminism, toy with”,⁸ this collection constitutes collaboration in thinking. It aims to recognise complex entanglements and the subsequent possibility and cultivation of relationships rather than generate more (even new) theoretical abstractions. Power is thus claimed and reclaimed in the everyday, even, as Seforosa Carroll contends, out of histories of colonisation, trauma and silence. It is witnessed in the narrative gaps of worlds ravaged by war, where truths and speech are silenced and power is recovered only through sheer persistence in pursuit of justice, as Nicola Slee writes. According to Josephine Inkpin, power is taken up and proclaimed in celebration of gender diverse people and the possible ‘trans-formation’ of theological discourse itself. For Brian Macallan, it can be critiqued and rethought autoethnographically to expose the many ways in which patriarchal constructions of ‘God’ sustain personal privilege and hegemonic theologies. It is even encountered afresh in christological terms, more fully and for all, as Sally Douglas proposes, neither as ‘power over’ nor ‘power-less’.

Authority, too, is variously subverted, contested and reclaimed through histories, theological reflections, creative writing and sacramental and

political ritual. As Katharine Massam attests, it is imagined, embodied and expressed in the language of ancient wisdom and the creative work of liturgy, orienting hearts and political wills across and between cultures towards justice and *Makarrata*. The authority of women to speak from the pulpit has long been negotiated within ‘the Body of Christ’, and linked to the politics of the state, as Kerrie Handasyde shows. Authority is claimed unapologetically for the purposes of reform, even in the face of rejection and extreme risk, Ann Loades suggests. According to Janice McRandal, it can even be abandoned altogether in light of its political and ecclesiastical origins and abuses, and in favour of feminist methodologies that dare to “write theology without even an idea”.⁹

And love—embodied, disruptive and put to work in thought—returns us to each other again and to renewed, ethical relations. With Christ “demetaphysicised”, we are moved “away from creeds, doctrines and into a place of living documents—back to ourselves—as the ongoing narrative”.¹⁰ We are returned again to all flesh and to the resonant sounds of all matter. From Anne Elvey’s perspective, love revives the collective memory of life beyond the human and orients us towards compassion for species not our own. In its queerness, love resists the prescriptions of heteronormativity and extends beyond institutions such as ‘marriage’ and ‘the family’ to dignify and cultivate “trust, mutuality and community in the context of sexual exchange” and beyond, according to Anika Jensen, Katecia Taylor and Stephen Burns.¹¹ Love is found, deep in familiar Scriptures, to constitute with/out command “the great moral force”,¹² as Sean Winter suggests. For Helena Kadmos, it is a force capable of persisting and enabling forgiveness, even in death. Rebekah Pryor proposes that the love Christian feminist theologies can speak of is ecstatic enough to propel life, even out of gaps and ruptures of distress. More than that, as Cathryn McKinney implies, it is love unafraid enough to sound and listen to voices daring to tell stories of injustice from within the very systems that mean to silence them.

After the divine voice made flesh, we speak the stories our bodies know, from the places and situations of relation in which we find ourselves. Attentive to deep, life- and voice-sustaining breath, we also listen. Becoming aware of our own temporalities, contingencies and hauntings, aware too of the risk to old, even cherished, narratives that different voices and perspectives bring, we do all of this together: opening out and onto the worlds we inhabit with others, ready to meet, speak, hear and listen and, in this way, be transformed. There is no other way to share stories, no other way to recognise wisdom for the flourishing of all.

Notes

- 1 Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.
- 2 Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 32.

4 Rebekah Pryor, Cathryn McKinney and Kerrie Handasyde

- 3 Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 262–263.
- 4 M. Shawn Copeland, “Turning Theology: A Proposal”, *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 753–773 (767).
- 5 Copeland, “Turning Theology”, 768.
- 6 See Catherine Keller’s chapter “Returning God: Gift of Feminist Theology”, in *Intercarnations*, 15–34.
- 7 Anne Elvey, “Roadsides: Toward an Ecological Feminist Theology of Cross-Species Compassion”, in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, edited by Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney and Rebekah Pryor, 133–44. (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 136.
- 8 Copeland, “Turning Theology”, 767.
- 9 Janice McRandal, “Against and Without Authority: Writing Feminist Theology After the End of History”, in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, edited by Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney and Rebekah Pryor, 117–29. (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 125.
- 10 Lisa Isherwood, “The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiralling of Incarnation”, *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 140–156 (150).
- 11 Anika Jensen, Katecia Taylor and Stephen Burns, “Covenantal Relationships and Queer Bodies”, in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, edited by Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney and Rebekah Pryor, 145–57. (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 153.
- 12 Pamela Sue Anderson, “Gendering Love in Philosophy of Religion”, in *Re-Visioning Gender in Philosophy of Religion: Reason, Love and Epistemic Locatedness* (London: Routledge, 2012), 89, quoted in Sean Winter, “Re-visioning (the) Love/Command: Law, Authority, and the Logic of Love in the Philosophy of Pamela Sue Anderson and Paul’s Letter to the Galatians”, in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, edited by Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney and Rebekah Pryor, 158–67. (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 158.

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Part I

Power: Dis/locations and reclamations



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1 Speaking Up! Speaking Out!

Naming the silences

Women, power, authority and
love in the Pacific

Seforosa Carroll

I write about power, authority and love, inspired by and drawing on the experiences I have had in the Pacific, many of which have come about through my work with UnitingWorld. I acknowledge with deep gratitude the land on which I am working, ever mindful of the First Peoples to whom this land belongs and who for times past, present and future continue to tend and care for this place, and whose wisdom we depend on and seek for well-being in the present and future of both human and non-human life on this earth, God's *Oikos*.

My work in the Pacific revolved around two key themes: gender (specifically gender-based violence) and climate change. Both of these themes intersected with interpretations and abuses of power, authority and love in a myriad of ways—for example, the appeal to the authority of scripture to justify the subservient place of women which legitimises the abuse of and violence towards women (and children), the power assigned to men validated by both culture and scripture, the power of the colonial enterprise that continues to shape politics and the imbalance of power between the West and Pacific that impacts livelihoods and cultures, with one of the biggest impacts being the effects of climate change, not only on the slowly disappearing islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati but also on the whole of the Pacific. Climate change affects people disproportionately and differently. Climate change exacerbates poverty and gender inequality. The poor are particularly vulnerable to climate change, and women, who are over-represented among the poor, bear most of the responsibility for the survival and flourishing of communities.¹ Women support communities emotionally and physically: as caregivers and nurturers, as well as providers of household needs, including food, water and sources of heating. Women are continually challenged to gain access to the available resources and to develop the needed skills. On the other hand, women possess practical understanding and coping skills to adapt to changing environmental realities, as well as to contribute to the solution.² Unfortunately, women's perspectives on strategies to deal with climate change are still a largely untapped resource. The intersection between climate change and gender is an important emerging area of research in the Pacific. It is a complex and multifaceted relationship that cannot be explored sufficiently in this chapter. But it is important to acknowledge that