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Romantic Love and Anthropology

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If there is anything that modern people in the West seem to take for granted, it is the importance – even the necessity - of falling in love. The songs, movies, and stories of our shared culture endlessly describe variations in the pain and ecstasy of love as it is found, challenged, lost, denied or thwarted, only to flare up again, carrying all before it, or else destroying the lovers in a conflagration of desire. According to the romantic clichés, love is blind, love overwhelms, a life without love is not worth living, marriage should be for love alone, and anything less is worthless and a sham. Romantic love cannot be bought and sold, love cannot be calculated, it is mysterious, true and deep, spontaneous and compelling, it can strike anyone — even the most hardened cynic can be laid low by Cupid. For lovers love provides “a kind of secular salvation... that could redeem their entire existence, even though they might die of it.”ⁱ As the philosopher Roberto Unger has remarked, this ideal is “the most influential mode of moral vision in our culture.”ⁱⁱ Powerful cultural images of romance relentlessly invade, motivate and animate ordinary lives – not only

for those who are in hot pursuit of the dream of love but also for cynics who want to debunk love as a mere mask for sexual desire.

The Western ideal of romantic love has steadily gained more and more currency internationally. Cross-cultural studies show that young people from Pakistan to China, from Polynesia to Malawi, nowadays are likely say they no longer want their marriages to be arranged; instead they hope for a passionate romantic affair that will sweep them off their feet and eventually unite them with an ideal beloved in an idyllic marriage of soul mates. ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, this new mode of desire may simply be a superficial appropriation of Western fashion, an idealization of sexuality promoted by ubiquitous mass media and advertisements, having no more (or no less) importance than the international consumption of Coca Cola (which is often sold by its association with images of romantic couples). For example, in contemporary Trinidad, sexual mores have been hugely influenced by American soap operas, which, in tandem with profound economic transformations, have encouraged women to expect romantic rhetoric from their suitors. Men acquiesce to this demand in hopes of seducing as many women as possible. ^{iv}

In fact, it has been commonly thought by many social scientists that even in the West romantic love is nothing but a thin disguise for lust that is

promoted for profit by the media. This was the view famously taken by Ralph Linton, the pioneering American anthropologist, who wrote:

“The hero of the modern American movie is always a romantic lover, just as the hero of an old Arab epic is always an epileptic. A cynic may suspect that in any ordinary population the percentage of individuals with capacity for romantic love of the Hollywood type was about as large as that of persons able to throw genuine epileptic fits. However, given a little social encouragement, either one can be adequately imitated without the performer admitting even to himself that the performance is not genuine”.^v

Or, as Robert Lowie put it: “practical points of view are foremost in inaugurating and maintaining the conjugal state. They eclipse romance not only among aborigines, but virtually everywhere except in small circles of Western society.” Even in these circles, he remarks, romance is nothing more than “a fiction.”^{vi}

According to some theorists, even the fiction of romance is becoming less and less convincing as a result of its implication in commerce and in response to the increasing individualism, equality and autonomy in the postmodern social world. As Illouz writes, today “romance in real life has become an empty form, acutely conscious of itself as code or cliché.”^{vii} And

Anthony Giddens has argued that in these circumstances, the quest for undying romantic love is being rapidly displaced by a series of confluent relationships each “entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.”^{viii} Terminated without regret or guilt when no longer satisfying, such affairs are valued only insofar as they are ‘comfortable.’ Gone is the passion and idealization of romance; what exists instead are more placid ‘pure relationships’ consisting of the pleasurable reciprocal exchange of fluids and feelings. For Giddens, this is a positive development, leading to “recognizing the other as an independent being, who can be loved for her or his specific traits and qualities; and it also offers the chance of release from an obsessive involvement with a broken or dying relationship.”^{ix}

However, when we look at how ‘pure relationships’ exist in reality across cultures, we find they are likely to reflect and express differences in influence and wealth, without the softening effects of idealism. In such cases, sexual exchange can become simple exploitation, hidden beneath a veneer of free choice. For example, consider Hawa, the African bar girl (*ashawo*), whose adventurous transnational sexual life has been documented by John Chernoff. While her *joie de vivre* and ability to adapt is admirable, the truth is that she is

the product of a world where a single woman's survival often requires catering to the sexual fantasies of the rich and powerful; Hawa's life, devoid of illusion, is also devoid of options and almost devoid of hope. As she says, "There is not any girl who will wake up as a young girl and say, 'As for me, when I grow up I want to be an ashawo.'" ^x

Perhaps, then, the idealization of romantic love ought not be summarily dismissed as a delusion propagated by the movies and propelled by commerce. Perhaps it is a manifestation of existential human needs for transcendence and meaning, transformed and shaped by modernity and rendered even more pressing under conditions of postmodern indeterminacy. If this is the case, then romantic love may not be so easily done away with; and if it is on the wane, then its disappearance will not be without consequences. ^{xi}

Love Among the Anthropologists

At present, we do not know which, or if, either of these possibilities is true, or what the implications of each might be. In fact, until very recently, anthropology has had almost nothing to say about how romantic love is imagined, sought, or experienced, either in the West or in other cultures. Instead, ethnographers have been far more comfortable writing about cannibalism and incest than writing about romance. Until recently, the lack of any professional anthropological interest in romantic love was probably a

product of a vain disciplinary hope to be recognized as objective scientists of culture. To achieve this aim, research on ‘soft’ and ‘feminine’ topics like love, or even emotion, was discouraged in favor of the investigation of more quantifiable aspects of power, social organization, and so on. This became especially characteristic in the 1950s and 60s during the controversy over the culture and personality school of anthropology in the United States, which was discredited due to its over-emphasis on the importance early childhood training (tellingly derided as diaperology) and its use of untrustworthy personality tests for the discovery of the emotions characteristic of other cultures. In the wake of this debacle, the study of emotional life was left to clinical psychologists, who formulated pencil and paper tests that could turn the analysis of personal emotional states into a matter of statistics. ^{xii}

However, with the ‘Geertzian turn’ toward the anthropological interpretation of cultural meaning systems, the study of emotion began to flourish once again. In tune with the times, interest was no longer in childhood socialization, nor in the manner in which universal emotions were culturally selected and expressed. Rather, the focus turned to emotion as ‘embodied cognition’ motivating actors within a coherent and enclosed symbolic system. Even so, romantic love remained understudied. Rather, research on depression, anger and other dysfunctional feelings became a thriving subfield in

anthropology as well as in the psychological and medical community. Why have negative emotions, such as depression and anger, attracted so much academic attention, while research on romantic love has had so little? Perhaps a contrast and comparison can help to reveal some of the hidden causes of this apparent anomaly, and can set the stage for a more serious debate about the anthropology of love.

The first thing to note is that the study of dysfunctional emotional states is supposed to have a practical application. Analysis, it is thought, will lead to a therapeutic understanding and perhaps a return to normality. Love too has often been spoken of in the metaphorical language of insanity. People in love are 'love-sick', lovers are 'crazy for each other', and are expected to be out of touch with ordinary reality, prone to delusions and to heightened states of exaltation and anxiety.^{xiii} Traditionally, the social scientists and marriage counselors who have written about love have taken the illness metaphor quite seriously, portraying romantic entanglement as an unhealthy escape from reality in morbid fantasies, to be discarded for the desirable adult state of settled reasonable companionate marriage.^{xiv}

The imagery of romance as a kind of madness would be quite familiar to classical Greeks and Romans, and to people in premodern Japan, India and China as well, who saw romantic attachment as a dangerous affliction (I'll discuss the

reasons for this later). The residual salience of this historical metaphor in the modern West may have some relevance for the wariness with which the study of love has been approached by social scientists. For if romantic love is understood implicitly to be a mental disorder, it is unique in being a kind of derangement that, according to our belief system, is ardently to be desired. Following the logic of the connection between love and disease, we can see that if falling in love and depression are both regarded as kinds of insanity, and if rational analysis is regarded as therapy for mental disease, then trying to explain and thereby cure depression or rage makes sense, while explaining romance clearly does not. The underlying (and probably unconscious) assumption is that the use of rational reason will destroy irrational feeling. In other words, studying love may cause its absence, and so should be avoided.

Scholarly reluctance is increased by the way romantic love is imagined to be a transcendent experience that, by its very nature, resists any rational analysis. Francesco Alberoni has theorized this opposition in terms of the tension between what he calls nascent states and institutions. "Since the nascent state is the truth of the institution - falling in love is the truth of love - it sees the institution as devoid of truth, as pure power. And since the institution cannot see its own truth in the nascent state - which is precarious, fleeting, pure becoming - it sees that state as irrationality, madness, scandal." ^{xv}

So it appears that intellectuals writing from the position of institutional authority cannot recognize or convey the actual experience of love, while those living within 'love-worlds' cannot translate their reality into the institutional language of the academy.

This radical incommensurability is evident in the two epistemes generally used in ordinary discourse about falling in love. Among lovers and the general public the poetic mode presents love as elevating and sublime, a moral good in itself. In subversive opposition is the joking pornographic mode, which comically unmasks the poetic lover as a sexual predator. But despite their differences, these discourses are alike in that they remove love from the realm of rational discussion.^{xvi} Poetry renders love ineffable; pornography reduces it to the obscene and ridiculous. As a result, any interpretive ethnographic study of love may well appear to be removing the poetry from the experience, while at the same time engaging in a bit of keyhole peeking under the guise of research. Both make the investigator into an absurd figure. And absurdity is one thing that anthropology, which is already nervous of its status as a real social science, can ill afford.

On the other side of the divide are the hard scientists, the psychologists and sociologists trained to cultivate detachment and to administer tests and surveys. Following their disciplinary requirements for quantification and

objectivity, they have ignored the problem of conveying the experience of love and have stuck instead to utilitarian and causal professional language which portrays romantic idealization as a means toward a desired end, usually sexual congress, but also the exchange of goods, the maximization of one's gene pool, etc. From this point of view, the poetic and transcendent quality of love is an illusion that makes the fundamental goal palatable; the scientists in this instance seem to be on the side of the pornographers, though without any of the humor.

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I will discuss some of the implications of the scientific perspective shortly, but for the moment I simply want to reiterate that a quantitative and calculative rationalistic approach does not do justice to the way love is understood and talked about, at least by participants. As a result, scholars wanting to study romantic love are stuck between trying to speak the common language of love, which is either ethereal (to those 'in love') or hypocritical (to cynics), or else speak in the cool and detached language of science, which is incongruously inconsistent with what the lover's heart feels, or is said to feel. ^{xviii}

Calling attention to the striking problem of achieving an adequate discourse for addressing the topic of love is important because it directs our attention to the crucial and complex place that romantic love occupies in Western thought. Awareness of the knot of epistemic contradictions obscuring,

distorting, transforming or denying the experience ought not to frighten us away, but rather should spark an interest in the serious study of romantic love. At the same time, what emerges from even the perfunctory outline I have attempted here is that the study of romance ought to be undertaken with a humbling sense of the inadequacy of our language and the limits of our understanding. So, with that caveat in mind, let me rapidly outline some of the directions taken in the study of romantic love by anthropologists and their allies, providing some illustrations along the way.

Paradigms for Love: Sexual and Sacred

As I have already mentioned, it is very often assumed by Western social scientists and philosophers that the Western ideal of romantic love serves primarily as a socially acceptable reason to engage in sexual intercourse. A famous example occurs in Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness, where the philosopher scathingly imagines the bad faith of a young girl absently permitting her hand to be stroked by a suitor while she simultaneously imagines herself admired solely as a creature of purity and abstract intellect.^{xix} From this perspective, people who say they are "in love" are fooling themselves, disguising their simple human lust under a mask of idealization; other cultures, not burdened by Christian morality, would not need such self-delusions, and so would not develop romantic ideals.

Historians and sociologists have tended to make similar assumptions, though their approaches have been somewhat more wide-ranging. Romantic love, the standard argument goes, was a direct response to the rise of capitalism, and served as a counterweight to the atomism that resulted from the breakup of traditional communal forms of social life. For example, Howard Gadlin writes that "intimate relationships, as we understand them today, emerged during the early decades of the nineteenth century.... with the self-conscious bourgeois individual whose life is torn between the separated worlds of work and home. Individualism and intimacy are the Siamese twins of modernization." ^{xx} According to this theory, isolated modern individuals, alienated by their participation in an impersonal marketplace, sought solace and meaning in the arms of an idealized lover. Love provided what the newly industrialized society had taken away: a feeling of belonging and significance. Without capitalism, then, there would be no love.

However, of late these views of romantic love as uniquely modern and Western have been challenged from two different directions. The first is from anthropological research that focuses on the contextual study of emotion, including the emotion of romantic attraction. The second, derived from sociobiology, envisions romance as an evolutionary mechanism that stimulates long-term sexual attraction, and binds men and women together in the stable

families required to propagate the human species. The agendas of these two new approaches are rather different. Anthropological students of emotion are interested in discovering when and where romantic love occurs, and in correlating its emergence with particular social and psychological preconditions. Those influenced by sociobiology, in contrast, believe love must necessarily appear in all human societies, since it is genetically ingrained; they therefore look for evidence of romantic attraction buried beneath the welter of cultural variation.

My own sympathies are with the former position. I believe that the sociobiological affirmation of the ubiquity of romantic love is unproven, and that the connection between love and sex is problematic (as I'll demonstrate below). But I also believe that Western civilization did not discover love. Other people, in other cultures, both now and in the past, have also known the bittersweet pleasure and anguish of romantic entanglement. For example, a great body of literary evidence clearly indicates that a powerful ideology of romantic love was well developed, at least among the elite, in many premodern non-Western complex societies, such as Japan, China, India, and the Middle East, as well as among our own cultural ancestors in ancient Greece, Rome and elsewhere.^{xxi} In all of these cases there are remarkable similarities to our own modern experience of love, as well as some striking differences.

The most obvious and surprising difference is that in every one of these cultures love and marriage were at odds with one another. As Seneca wrote: "To love one's wife with an ardent passion is to commit adultery." ^{xxii} In fact, in most of the complex societies for which we have records of romantic passion, conjugal love between husband and wife was considered both absurd and impossible. The reason for this seeming paradox becomes evident if we make a comparative analysis of the social structures of these societies. In each case, the most important aspect of personal identity was membership in one's father's clan. These patrilineal ties provided the political and economic affiliations that were crucial for survival and status. Only through membership in a patrilineage could men make claims to property, or assert leadership; women relied on their patrilineage for protection and honor. But lineages did not exist in isolation; they were tied to other lineages through the exchange of women — that is, through marriage. Such alliances were vital to building the strength of a clan or family.

In this context matrimony was too important a matter to be decided by young people swept away by passion. Rather, marriage arrangements were negotiated by powerful elders whose job was to advance the interests of the clan — much as royal marriages are still arranged today. The new wife would enter her husband's extended family as a stranger, under the thumb of her in-

laws. Usually, her life was confined to the home, where she could only gain status by bearing children; meanwhile, her husband was likely to avoid the women's quarters altogether, competing with other men for honor and renown in the public sphere. In these societies, men and women alike viewed marriage as a duty and a necessity; romantic attraction was not a part of the bargain. In fact, affection between husband and wife was generally frowned upon as an indication of potential disloyalty to the larger extended family.

Because love with one's spouse was next to impossible, romantic feelings were directed instead toward individuals one could not marry. This preserved the businesslike atmosphere of the family, but could sometimes have disastrous consequences. In Tokugawa Japan, for example, love dramas always revolved around the conflicts caused by relationships between respectable men and their courtesans. When these relationships drew men away from their duties and toward disgrace, the only answer was suicide. Similarly, in imperial Rome, patrician men sometimes found themselves falling deeply in love with the slaves they met in brothels. This love was a release from the oppressive obligations and rivalries found in arranged marriages and in the intrigues of public life. Roman poets idealized their beloved slave prostitutes as *domina*, literally reversing the role of master and slave. However, a nobleman smitten with a prostitute was likely to become obsessively anxious about the sincerity of her

affections, since it was to her great advantage to convince her clients of her love. In response, he might bankrupt himself in a futile attempt to guarantee her love. One bitterly named the woman who held him in sexual thrall "Nemesis" — the sister of tenderness and deceit. ^{xxiii}

In other societies the dangers of sexual servitude were avoided by expediently stressing the chastity of romantic relationships. The best-known examples are the Medieval Troubadours, who, in a transformation of the cult of the Virgin Mary, renounced physical contact with the women they worshipped. Modern commentators, who assume that love and sexual desire must be united, have been quick to see the hypocrisy in this ideal, and certainly some bards were not as innocent as they pretended to be in their relations with their idealized beloveds. But the assumption that a chaste ideology must be a disguise for sexual desire is assuming what needs to be proven. In fact, the modern Western notion of sex as an absolute good — summed up by Woody Allen's comment that an orgasm is the only thing on earth that's good even when it's bad — is actually quite unusual across cultures. In South Asia, for instance, men dread the debility supposedly caused by semen loss, while in China excessive sexual activity is believed to cause the penis to withdraw into the body, with potentially fatal results. In many other societies sexual

intercourse is regarded as polluting, repellant and risky, and is surrounded by multiple taboos and restrictions.

A deep fear of sexuality often correlates with a social configuration where chastity is inordinately valued, as among the Dugum Dani of New Guinea, who practice almost complete sexual abstinence.^{xxiv} In fact, in Melanesia the sexual act is generally viewed as polluting, dangerous and repellant, to be avoided except under the most extraordinary circumstances. For instance, in Manus, as reported by Margaret Mead, sexual intercourse is a disgusting, perilous and shameful business. When Manus men and women are drawn into extramarital liaisons, these "illicit love affairs, affairs of choice, are, significantly enough, described as situations in which people need not have sex if they do not wish to, but can simply sit and talk and laugh together.... The wonderful thing about lovers is that you don't have to sleep with them."^{xxv}

If this all seems too foreign, we can recall that in our own recent past, proper public Victorian middle-class morality portrayed sexual desire as a degrading intrusion on reason, to be resisted and controlled by men, and denied completely by women. Private accounts of Victorian private lives show that these efforts, while sometimes a struggle, were usually not in vain. For many, sexuality was indeed subdued – at least in the family circle. With this in mind, we should not be so skeptical of the courtier's claim that he saw his lady as a

creature of sanctified innocence and virtue. For him, and for her, sexual relations were appropriate in the household and in the bordello — but not for true lovers.

Chaste Love Among the Marri Baluch

A culturally valued division between true love and sexuality is characteristic of many cultures. For an extended example, let me turn to the Marri Baluch, as described in a classic work by Robert Pehrson.^{xxvi} According to Pehrson, the Marri inhabit a harsh, isolated and unforgiving world. They are highly individualistic, self-interested and competitive, and expect opportunism and manipulation from all social transactions. Their personal lives are dominated by fear, mistrust, and hostility; secrecy and social masking are at a premium, while collective action and cooperation are minimal. Yet among these people, as Pehrson writes, romantic relationships are idealized, and a love affair “is a thing of surpassing beauty and value,” implying absolute trust, mutuality, and loyalty; such a love is to be pursued at all costs. Romance is both the stuff of dreams, and of life. Frustrated lovers among the Marri may commit suicide, and become celebrated in the romantic poems and songs that are the mainstay of Marri art. As one Marri woman tells Pehrson “it is very great, very hard, to be a lover for us Marri.”^{xxvii}

Unlike Western love relationships, romance among the Marri stands absolutely opposed to marriage, which is never for love. It is, in fact, shameful even to show affection for one's spouse. True romance has to be secret, and with a married woman of a distant camp. This is a dangerous matter, since other camps are hostile, and meeting with unguarded women is punishable by death. The striking contrast to the West is a consequence of the social organization of the Marri, who live in small patrilineal, patrilocal campsites ruled lightly by a religiously sanctioned central authority, called the Sardar.

Although political domination does occur, the local units, permeable and shifting as they are, nonetheless have considerable solidity and autonomy, judging their own disputes and controlling their own means of production within a framework of traditional knowledge and local consent. The patrilineal patrilocal ideology means that members of the campsite have absolute rights and duties to one another that are legitimated by close blood ties and co-residence. Participation in blood feuds, payment of fines, rights to pasturage and the punishment of adultery all are incumbent on the minimal lineage group.

However, this minimal group is not one of cooperation and friendship. The camp members, despite their ties, work separately, have their own tents and property, cooperate as little as possible, and are mutually suspicious and rivalrous. If they could, they would separate, but the need for defense and a

varied labor pool keeps the camps together; a need validated by the rights and duties of kinship. Within this inimical but constraining structure, Marri men continually manipulate to get a share of the power and status that derive from the center. By gaining a loyal following among his cohorts, the poor herdsman can make a claim for becoming the local factotum of the Sardar, thereby gaining points over one's nearest, and most disliked, lineage mates and rivals. ^{xxviii}

Marriage in this context is not a matter of personal choice and attraction. Instead, Marri men use marriage in an instrumental fashion to establish relationships that will help them to pursue their political interests, while women are treated as chattel, to be controlled and dominated for the honor and benefit of the patriarch.

In this context, romantic involvement, with all its risk, is the only human relationship in the whole of Marri culture felt to be of value in and for itself, and not simply as a means to the instrumental ends of personal power and prestige. It is understood by the Marri Baluch to be opposed to marriage in every way. Marriage is a public and sanctioned relationship between superior men and inferior women, often within the camp and the lineage, and always among allies; it is preeminently politically motivated, and it is expected to be cold and hostile at best. Romance on the contrary is secretive, private, and conducted with strangers who are actually potential enemies. Its only possible political

consequences are disastrous enmity and feud. Romantic love has the potential for dividing groups while it unites the lovers, while marriage aims to solidify groups, while permitting no attraction within the asymmetrical couple. In marriage, the woman is inferior and despised, while in romance she is honored and revered.

Like other similarly organized societies, the Marri claim that a true romantic relationship, in contrast to marriage, is not sexual. Theoretically, at least, the male lover worships his beloved as a pure being and is worshipped in return; forgoing the connotations of female inferiority and degradation that the Marri (like many patrilineal peoples) believe to be implicit in the sexual act, the romantic couple immerse themselves in mutual gazing, spontaneous recitations of poetry and the reciprocal exchange of confidences and love tokens. Whether all (or any) love affairs are chaste is irrelevant; what is important is that this is the cultural ideal of romantic love the Marri respect, and attempt to enact in their own lives.

For the Marri, then, romance is with a distant and untouchable other, and it is consciously perceived as negating the rivalries of power, the inferiority of women, and the constraints of the marriage tie. It is chaste and highly idealistic. This romantic complex occurs, within a relatively rigidly structured, but characteristically competitive social formation. Far from providing the basis

for reproducing the dominant social configuration, romance in this instance opposes it in every way.

To reiterate, the nomadic Marri Baluch of Iran have an elaborate ideology of romantic love. Men and women who are obliged to marry for political and economic purposes long to participate in secret and highly dangerous love affairs. These passionate relationships are much valued in Marri culture, and become the subject of their greatest poems and songs. According to the Marri, when lovers meet, they exchange tokens of mutual affection, and talk heart to heart, without dissimulation. Like courtly lovers, the Marri, too, claim that love ought to be chaste. How many of these relationships are indeed sexless is of course impossible to say, but chastity is what the Marri believe to be characteristic of the deepest forms of love between men and women. This notion can be found as well in romantic stories told throughout the Middle East, where true lovers must never consummate their passion. In this culture, only a love that remains on the level of profound spiritual yearning is worthy of retelling.

As I mentioned, research indicates that the separation between sexual desire and romantic love is especially common in societies where sexual intercourse is regarded as an act of violence and domination, or where sexuality is associated with pollution and spiritual danger. Such societies may also have

elaborate notions of the complementarity of love relations that reverse the actual sexual asymmetry of male-female relations. Thus the degraded slave prostitute in imperial Rome becomes the *domina* while the downtrodden Marri wife (who, in the words of one Marri woman, is only fit to "eat shit") is worshipped as a goddess by her lover.^{xxix}

Even in our own society, romantic idealization may severely impede sexual desire — which, according to some studies, is far more likely to be aroused by images of degradation and rape than by images of tenderness and affection. We decry the polarization between an idealized virgin and a degraded whore, and try to unite the two by seeking to have sex with the one we adore. But it is evident that in other societies idealization and sexual desire are conceptually and actually separated. Perhaps, then, our demand that love and sex go together is no more "natural" or universal than our equally culture-bound requirement that love should lead to marriage.

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Love?

The cross-cultural study of love is in its infancy. We still do not know why people are drawn to one another with a fervor so compulsive and so overwhelming that it can end in suicide; scholars still debate whether romantic idealization is a human universal, and what sorts of social conditions favor — or disfavor — expressions of love. But it is clear that people in many cultures do

experience powerful emotions that we can recognize as kindred to our own sense of falling in love; just as clearly, those emotions can lead in different directions and have different implications for them than they do for us. Social scientists can no longer pretend that love exists only as a modern delusion.

What then are the possibilities for the study of romantic love? One mode is structural and comparative. Where and under what circumstances are 'romantic love complexes' to be found? Once the existence of such complexes can be established, then we can begin to postulate what social factors promote and which extinguish the possibility of love. For example, I have argued that one characteristic type of romantic idealization appears in societies sharing the relatively rigid and antagonistic social organization found among the Marri as well as in complex 'courtly' societies, such as ancient Rome and Tokugawa Japan. Under the conditions of strong social constraint, well-formed primordial identities, and intense rivalry for power found both in centralized stratified societies and in certain kinds of highly structured and internally competitive simpler social formations, the idealization offered by romantic love offers a way of imagining a different and more fulfilling life. But because of the objective reality of the social environment, romance can never form the base for actually constructing the family, as it has in contemporary Western society. It must instead stand against and outside of the central social formation, and will in

consequence be fantastic and unrealistic in its imagery and dangerous in its enactment, unlike love in the flexible, egalitarian and atomistic cultures of the modern world.

In contrast, societies with extremely fluid social relations marked by mobility and competition, operating according to individualistic worldviews within harsh or otherwise insecure environments may find meaning and emotional warmth in the mutuality of romantic relationships. Romance in these societies is associated with marriage, since the couple is idealized as the ultimate refuge against the hostile world, and functions as the necessary nucleus of the atomized social organization. Societies fitting this description are an odd lot: they include most of the modern developed world, as well as the simplest hunting and gathering groups.

There is, finally, another very different type of social formation, which seems to favor romantic love, though its outlines are less clear. These societies are neither centralized nor rigid, nor are they atomistic, or under any extreme social or ecological pressure. Rather, they are group-oriented, non-individualistic cultures that strictly control marriage, but that offer compensation to their youth by means of an institutionalized premarital sexual freedom, usually within a age-graded clubhouse; sexual relations inside the clubhouse are destined to be ephemeral, since marriage is only with outsiders,

but these early experiences often lead to powerful romantic attachments and idealizations, and even to love suicide. Examples of this type are found in tribal India, Southeast Asia and in the Oceanic cultures where romantic love seems to occur.

A major problem with this sort of analysis is that the data is relatively weak. As I have documented, we know very little so far about romantic love cross-culturally, or even in the West, due to the long-standing reluctance of anthropologists to address and document the emotional experiences of persons, and to take account of the trajectories of love, both in story and in life. Is romance actually wholly intertwined with sexuality, as sociobiologists argue, or, as I have claimed, is it a form of the sacred, to be disentangled from sexuality and traced to its source as one way of transcending the existential limits of the self?

Whichever is correct, in either case, romantic love is not to be confused with or reduced to its commercial expressions, though these are powerful indeed and worth studying. ^{xxx} Rather, commodification is an attempt, quite successful, to cash in on deep human desires. A consequence, well-documented by Ilouz, is the intrusion of calculation and cynicism into the ideal – both of which stand at right angles to idealization, and so render love suspect. In this complicated and ambivalent situation Giddens assumes that romantic love is

likely to vanish in favor of utilitarian pure relationships where idealization is replaced by calculation. Sociobiologists would argue that this is impossible because of a human genetic predisposition for idealization. A more anthropological/psychological approach, which I favor, would affirm that romance can indeed fade, but that the hope for something other than the daily routine and the practical pleasures cannot, and will instead find expression through some other compelling imaginary of the sacred – perhaps in charismatic collectives, perhaps in other, as yet unknown forms. I believe that when we think about “what we talk about when we talk about love” we need to remember that human beings always want to exceed their concrete lives and be more than rational maximizers of cultural goals. This existential desire is the source of the human yearning for the sacred. Romantic love is a modern form that this yearning takes, offering salvation in this world, if only in imagination.

However, that is only my opinion. So far, real answers to what we talk about when we talk about love are yet to be grounded in ethnography. But anthropologists who combine rigor with sympathetic insight may be able to do justice to the complexity, passion and pain of love, while also revealing its cultural limits and historical precedents.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Illouz 1998:176

ⁱⁱ Unger 1984: 29

ⁱⁱⁱ For a counter-example, see Lipset 2004.

^{iv} Birth and Freilich 1995

^v Linton (1936:175).

^{vi} Lowie Social Organization: 220, 95

^{vii} Illouz 293

^{viii} *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Intimacy in Modern Societies* Anthony Giddens Stanford University 1992: 58.

^{ix} Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 93.

^x Chernoff 2003: 203

^{xi} For more, see Lindholm 1998a; 1998b 1995 1988.

^{xii} For more history of the culture and personality controversy, see Lindholm

^{xiii} Freud (1959) specifically pairs romantic love with depression. Both involve subjective senses of being overwhelmed and of self-loss. Classically, depression comes as a result of failure in love, while love is salvation from depression.

^{xiv} See de Rougemont (1956) for the strongest statement of this value judgement, which prevails unabated today among marriage counselors and family sociologists. The distinction between 'falling in love' and 'being in love' is pervasive in Western sociological and psychological literature on the family, with the latter praised and the former devalued as 'adolescent'. In Weberian terms, the equivalent is the distinction between charisma and bureaucracy.

^{xv} Alberoni (1983: 87). The reader may be reminded here of Victor Turner's dialectical opposition between 'structure' and 'antistructure' - and the Weberian opposition between charisma and rationalization which Turner drew upon. The difference is that Turner sees these states as alternating, while Weber saw rationalization as ultimately triumphant over charisma. The same dichotomous vision has impelled romantics to throw themselves passionately into heroically absurd battles against rationality. This struggle is given heightened significance in the modern world because the traditional human claim to uniqueness on the grounds of a capacity for logical thought is no longer tenable, since computers appear able to think more rapidly and accurately than people. In response, popular culture tends instead to locate true humanity in the power of feeling. In anthropology, this same rebellion has been expressed in a concern with the aesthetic rendering of the fieldworker's experience and a concomitant denial of all possibility of comparison or objective knowledge. However, as I argue here, these are unnecessary over-reactions based on a one-sided understanding.

^{xvi} For more on the notion of dominant epistemes, see Alberoni (1983), Foucault (19//).

^{xvii} Schopenhauer was perhaps the first modern philosopher to make this argument. For him, romantic love was necessary to persuade rational individuals to accept the onerous responsibilities of raising children - something they would never do if not bemused by romantic delusions of bliss. As he writes, 'if Petrarch's passion had been satisfied, his song would have been silenced from that moment, just as is that of the bird, as soon as the eggs are laid.' (Schopenhauer 1966: 557).

^{xviii} The prevailing scientific attitude may be one more factor in the historical reluctance of anthropologists to tackle the topic, since, as scientists who are also fieldworkers and empathetic interpreters, they may hesitate to portray a central emotional truth in the economist scientific language of maximization.

^{xix} Sartre (1956).

^{xx} Gadlin 1977: 34; the classic statement is in Parsons 1949.

^{xxi} See Cohen 1969, who goes so far as to argue that "romantic love in general, is an adaption to pressures of life in a state society" 666.

^{xxii} Quoted in Grimal 1986: 252

^{xxiii} Quoted in Grimal 1986: 164.

^{xxiv} See Heider, *The Dugum Dani*.

^{xxv} Mead, *New Lives for Old*, pp. 361, 405.

^{xxvi} Robert Pehrson 1966, *The Social Organization of the Marri Baluch*

^{xxvii} Pehrson (1966: 65, 62).

^{xxviii} The potential for minimal social movement is of crucial importance, not the degree of movement possible. An absolutely rigid structure would not evolve the love complex noted here because social pressure would be absent.

^{xxix} Pehrson op.cit.: 59.

^{xxx} For a good example, see Illouz.