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# Love and Structure

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## **Love and Structure**

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In this paper <sup>i</sup> I intend to consider a question that has been little discussed by sociologists; that is, how culturally and historically specific is the experience of romantic love. As Bertilsson (1986) has shown, social theorists writing about love have generally considered romantic involvement as a variable connected to the modernization process. Weber and Habermas on the one side, and Parsons, Simmel and Luhmann on the other, have presented romantic love either as an instrumental aid to the maintenance of an ever more rationalized society or as a functional resource for increasing social integration and communication in a social universe that is fragmented and atomistic. An exception is Sartre, for whom love has an absolute existential reality as a powerful expression of the unrealizable desire to absorb the freedom of the Other.

Whatever the moral perspective taken, (and apart from Sartre), romantic love has usually been perceived by social theorists to be a relatively modern and particularly Western phenomenon; a direct consequence of the evolution of an uncertain 'risk society' which has liberated individuals from the moorings of kinship, social status and religion without offering any alternative points of attachment or security (Beck 1995). As Robert Solomon writes, 'We should expect to find romantic love arise in precisely those epochs and cultures where self-identity is in question, when traditional roles and relationships fail to tell a person "Who I am"' (1981: 57). The

appearance of romantic love is also thought to coincide with the advent of a leisure culture, where self-cultivation is possible; it has been linked with the modern 'invention of motherhood', smaller family size, and a greater emphasis on the emotional tie between husband and wife that occurred in response to the industrial revolution.

In this context, the romantic dream of an erotic bonding to an idealized and unique beloved is understood to serve as a substitute for outmoded loci for identity, offering an experience of self transformation, personal choice, a meaningful future, and sensual expansion. It also simultaneously buttresses some of the central premises of modern culture, including individualism, autonomy, and the hope of personal salvation through the 'meeting of souls'. As the basis of marriage and the family, romantic love, the most intimate of relationships, is at the heart of the mechanism by which contemporary society reproduces itself.

According to Giddens, this new ideal reached its pinnacle in nineteenth century Europe, as 'notions of romantic love, first of all having their main hold over bourgeois groups, were diffused through much of the social order' - a diffusion indicated and promoted by the hugely popular literature that provided a new 'narrative form' for love relationships (1992: 26, 40). A number of historians, the most famous being Stone (1988), Flandrin (1979) and Shorter (1975), have validated this depiction of the history of romantic love through their influential portraits of the origin of the modern family in the

social and spatial mobility and the disruption of kin networks that marked the beginnings of the industrial age <sup>ii</sup>.

For these writers, romantic love is essentially a kind of culturally constructed eroticism remarkable for its idealization and etherialization of the desired other. As Giddens writes: 'Romantic love made of amour passion a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence' (1992: 45); while Stone, in blunt fashion, defines falling in love quite simply as 'an urgent desire for sexual intercourse with a particular individual' (1988: 16).

Most authors agree that it is precisely the erotic aspect of romantic love that gradually takes center stage in modern intimate relations, overwhelming elements of idealization, which are taken to be sublimations of the sexual drive behind the romantic impulse. This is because eroticism is, in Weber's words, 'the most irrational and thereby real kernel of life, as compared with the mechanisms of rationalization' (1946: 345). As Bertilsson notes, the supposed shift toward heightened sensuality in personal relationships was greeted with trepidation by functional theorists, who feared the unleashing of the erotic would undermine social bonds; Weber too worried about the brutality of purely sexual relations. Others have been more sanguine about the demise of sexual inhibition, following Marcuse, who hoped the liberation of eroticism would energize social emancipation. Similarly, but in a less apocalyptic vein, Giddens looks forward to the replacement of romantic fantasy by freely and frankly negotiated 'pure

relationships' based on the utilitarian exchange of 'reciprocal sexual pleasure' and terminated at will when the relationship ceases to offer sufficient erotic satisfaction to either partner (1992: 62).

The supposed sexual nature of romance has provided the basis for the most radical challenge to modern social theory about romantic love, which has been offered not by sociologists but by sociobiologists. Taking their cue from contemporary evolutionary theory on inclusive fitness, they have argued that romantic attraction to an idealized other is a mechanism genetically encoded in human beings as a consequence of the inexorable efforts of nature to optimize reproduction and the nurturing of offspring <sup>iii</sup>. From this point of view, romantic attraction is an adaptation serving to negate the human male's innate predisposition to maximize his genetic potential by engaging in sexual promiscuity. Instead, romantic idealization keeps him tied to his beloved, where his labor and protection are required for the necessary task of childraising. Unlike the social scientists, sociobiologists understand romantic attraction as a universal phenomenon, though most would admit that cultural and historical factors may intensify or lessen the idealizing impulse.

Neither sociologists nor sociobiologists make significant recourse to ethnographic case studies or cross-cultural material that could help to validate or refute their basic assumptions. Instead, Western history is invoked to verify the uniqueness and modernity of romantic love, or else reference is made to the sex

lives of simians. Unfortunately, the absence of cross-cultural material is not simply due to the researcher's unwillingness to make use of ethnography (though that may indeed be the case). It is also a result of the general disinterest of anthropologists in the topic. Indeed, most ethnographers have tended to agree with the famous anthropologist Ralph Linton, who wrote the following lines in his influential early textbook:

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" (1936:175).

In Linton's version, romantic love is nothing but a self-delusion, derived from the arts, that allows lovers to persuade themselves that their sexual desires are actually ethereal and transcendent <sup>iv</sup>. It has no cross-cultural analogues, and, in fact, does not actually exist even in the West except in fantasy emulation of novels and movies.

The general anthropological acceptance of Linton's debunking perspective meant that ethnographers, who have freely investigated such distasteful subjects as cannibalism and incest, have had, to this point, very little to say about the seemingly more appealing topic of romance. Exceptions to the ensuing silence have generally been influenced by social theory and have tended to be efforts to demonstrate that romantic love

is an exclusively Western phenomenon (c.f. Hsu 1983; Endelman 1989) <sup>v</sup>, or else have fallen into either the instrumentalist or functionalist camp of social theory. For instance, Yehudi Cohen followed the instrumentalist line as he attempted to show that incorporative state systems favor romantic love as a means to undermining the solidarity of local lineages unified by arranged marriages (1969) <sup>vi</sup>, while a series of articles and counter-articles inconclusively discussed the possible functional relationship between 'love marriage' and various residence patterns (Coppinger and Rosenblatt 1968; Rosenblatt 1967, 1978; Mukhopadhyay 1979) <sup>vii</sup>. Some authors, such as Berndt (1976) and Abu Lughod (1990) have been content to translate the love poetry recited in their respective field sites, and others, such as Jankowiak and Fischer (1992), have surveyed ethnographic material to make a sociobiological case for the universality of passionate experiences of 'falling in love'.

But in general Linton's self-assured dismissal of the possibility of romantic love in other cultures has had large repercussions for our understanding of the history and cultural specificity of romance and idealization. For example, Hunt, in his popular study of romantic culture in the past, cites anthropological research to back his claim that 'by and large the clanship structure and social life of most primitive societies provide a wholesale intimacy and broad distribution of affection; Western love, with its especially close and valued ties between two isolated individuals is neither possible nor needed' (1959:10).

## **The Nature of Romance**

Is this really the case, or does anything analogous to romantic love exist in societies that are non-Western, and even 'primitive'? Is romantic love, in fact, universal, as the sociobiologists claim? In the following pages, I want to argue for the first proposition, against the second. But to begin to make this case we first need to distinguish sexual attraction, which is more or less omnipresent (though sexual desire too is more culturally constructed than is generally admitted), from romantic love, which is, as Giddens writes, 'much more culturally specific' (1992:38).

A basic error of the sociobiologists has been to assume that a strong sexual desire and romantic love are essentially the same thing: love is simply a genetic mechanism for directing sexuality toward one particular other individual in order to maximize the production and nurturing of children. However, in cross-cultural examples, the beloved is very rarely the person one marries, and reproduction and romantic attraction usually do not coincide. For example, in my own fieldwork site in Northern Pakistan, the patrilineal Pukhtun organized marriages to cement alliances between clans, while individual men pursued romances clandestinely. Prostitutes and adolescent boys were the objects of their romantic idealization, and neither of these ever produced children <sup>viii</sup>. It is also difficult for sociobiologists to account for the fact that in Europe, where romantic love has prevailed in marriage, birth rates are much lower than in societies where marriages are arranged.

Social theorists and historians, as we have seen, also understand romantic idealization as a veneer over eroticism, though they believe the production of this veneer is a particularly modern social construction coinciding with the breakdown of traditional society. However, this link is also challenged when we consider material from other cultures where romantic idealization is elaborated yet chastity is enjoined between the lovers. For example, consider the southern European expressions of courtly love in the Medieval period. Here, in a transformation of the cult of the virgin Mary, the courtier explicitly denied any carnal feelings for his beloved, who was worshipped as an angel above the realm of earthly lust, not to be sullied in thought or deed. These courtiers singing of fin amor were often married men with active sex lives and children, and the lady herself was always a married woman, with husband and children of her own. However, romantic love was not to be found in these legitimized sexual relations, but only in adulation of the lady. To assume this chaste and idealizing ideology was simply a mask disguising sexual desire is taking for granted what one wishes to prove; rather, we should take at face value the truth of the courtier's song: that is, that the lady was, for the poet, beloved as a creature of sanctified innocence and virtue <sup>ix</sup>.

If this example seems too exotic, we need look no further than our own Victorian forbearers. The familiar split between whore and virgin was a reality for the Victorians, and sexual desire was, as much as possible, divorced from middle-class

marriage, since women of culture were assumed not to have demeaning sexual impulses. Men demanded virginal purity in the women they married, while wives appear, from their own accounts, often actually managed to live up to the ideal. Sexual contact between a husband and his beloved wife was regarded as an unfortunate necessity of marriage, engaged in as a duty; men overcome by sexual passion were expected to spend themselves in the company of prostitutes, whom they certainly did not love. This characteristic Victorian division between love and sexuality is a mode of feeling that must be taken on its own terms.

If romantic love is not to be understood as a kind of gloss over sexual desire, what is it? As Alberoni has remarked, talking about romantic love has been hampered by the absence of an adequate ordinary language to discuss the topic. The dominant epistemes for romantic love which are generally recognized as conventionally appropriate are those of poetry or obscenity, both of which remove the experience from rational discourse (Alberoni 1983). Poetry renders love ineffable, obscenity reduces it to the comic, so that any study of romantic love appears either to be missing the point altogether, or else to be doing keyhole peeking under the guise of research. But sticking to the utilitarian and causal language of science is no solution. As we have seen, this language tends strongly to reduce romantic attraction to something else, i.e., sexual desire, the exchange of pleasure, maximization of the gene pool, etc. These utilitarian images do not do justice to the

subjective idealization of the other that is reported by lovers at the core of romantic involvement. The striking problem of achieving an adequate discourse once again directs our attention to the crucial and ambiguous place that romantic love occupies in our thought; in fact, it is precisely the elaboration of a special language of love that can be taken to indicate the existence of what Goode (1959) has called a 'romantic love complex' within any culture. To define romantic love, then, we ought to begin by listening to the words and examining the actions of people who believe romantic relationships to be of ultimate importance to their lives. By this means, we may be capable of escaping the restrictions of technical language and achieve a picture of romance that has the ring of truth in it, yet is not purely novelistic or poetic.

Within our own culture, what these words and deeds tell us is that romantic love is not necessarily sexual, though it is thought to lead to sexual involvement. Rather, it is more akin to a religious experience - a vision of the beloved other as a unique, transcendent and transformative being who can 'complete' one's own life. From this alternative perspective, love is not motivated by the desire to reproduce, or lust, or the ideal of beauty; rather, the beloved other is adulated in themselves as the fountainhead of all that is beautiful, good and desirable. As Francesco Alberoni puts it, when we fall in love 'the possible opens before us and the pure object of eros appears, the unambivalent object, in which duty and pleasure coincide, in which all alienation is extinguished.' (1983: 23).

It is crucial to note that this adulation is offered in spite of the beloved's actual characteristics; in other words, falling in love is an act of imagination in which the other is invested with absolute value; the beloved can even be loved for their very faults. Singer calls this idealistic form of love the 'bestowal tradition' to stress the lover's creativity in manufacturing the perfection of the beloved <sup>x</sup>.

From within this framework, any overt or covert calculated appraisal of the other as a good provider, a useful ally, a potential mate, a vehicle for sexual enjoyment, or even as an avenue to God, is felt to be a sin against the very nature of romantic love, which is defined and experienced as spontaneous, total and boundless in its devotion to the actual person of the other - to love 'for a reason' is not to love at all <sup>xi</sup>. We love because we love, and not because of anything that the beloved other has to offer us beyond themselves <sup>xii</sup>.

In Singer's account, this alternative notion of unqualified love has deep intellectual and spiritual roots in the West: its heritage includes the Jewish concepts of nomos, transformed into Christian notions of God's unconditional, unreserved and undeserved love for humanity (agape) as expressed in the sacrifice of Jesus <sup>xiii</sup>. The notion of God's boundless love of humanity made love itself a value in Western culture, while simultaneously devaluing sexuality. Love was further humanized in the cult of Mary, and, as we have seen, afterwards was secularized in the courtly love that bound the courtier to his lady. As Singer writes: 'Henceforth the Christian could hold

not only that God is Love but also that Love is God' (1984: 340).

In this context, and over time, 'the idea that love is the unmerited sanctification of the sinner degenerated into the notion that sinners become sanctified through any love whatsoever. God disappeared, but there remained the holiness of indiscriminate love binding one worthless person to another' (1984: 341). Love became reciprocal and individualized, as it was secularized and institutionalized into the romantic experience that is the expected prelude to marriage in contemporary culture in the West and, increasingly, everywhere in the world.

It is this secularized form of romantic love that has been portrayed in songs, poems, novels and films as an ultimate value in itself: compelling, overwhelming, ecstatic, uniquely blissful - indeed, the most powerful emotional event of one's life. This is the love in which, as the young Hegel writes, 'consciousness of a separate self disappears, and all distinction between the lovers is annulled' (1948: 307); it is the love apostrophized by the philosopher Roberto Unger as 'the most influential mode of moral vision in our culture' (1984: 29). It is the love which Giddens (1992) sees vanishing under the influence of a reflexive social world of plastic sexuality, replaced by the 'confluent love' of utilitarian individualists engaged in pragmatic 'pure relationships.' xiv

## **Romance and Structure**

Is this experience of falling in love as a way of imagining and experiencing transcendence through a relationship of communion in selfless and fervent merger with an idealized other a peculiarly Western one? Despite the paucity of ethnographic data, we can say that it is not. Ample literary evidence indicates that an ideology of romantic love was well developed, at least among the literate elite, in several large scale non-Western state systems of the past. For example, the love suicide plays of Japan's Tokugawa period give powerful dramatic evidence of a pervasive and irresolvable conflict between the desire for an idealized other and social obligations. And in an earlier era, Lady Murasaki's Tale of Genji portrays the transforming power of love in the Japanese court of the tenth century. In India, the myths of Krishna as a lover, the ancient legend of Pururavas and Urvashi, the stories of the Mahabharata (especially of Ruru and Pramadvara), and the poetry of Bhartrihari and Bilhana, all show aspects of the compulsive, idealizing and transcendent power of love <sup>xv</sup>.

Romance also does not require a cultivated leisure class, and it was not necessarily associated with erotic relationships - as we discover in the literary tradition that inspired the troubadours, that is, the poetry of the Middle East, which always stresses the sexual purity of the lovers. According to Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200), who was the most prolific Medieval writer on romantic love, the convention of chastity derived from the early Bedouin, who 'loved passionately but spurned physical

union, believing that it destroys love. As for the pleasure resulting from union, it is the affair of animals, not of man'. His portrait is validated by the philologist al-Asmai (d. 828) who did research among the remote tribes. He writes: 'I said to a Bedouin woman: "What do you consider love to be among you?" "Hugging, embracing, winks, and conversation," she replied. Then she asked: "How is it among you, city-dweller?" "He sits amidst her four limbs and presses her to the limit," I answered. "Nephew," she cried, "this is no lover, but a man after a child!"' (quoted in Bell 1979: 33-4, 134).

Massignon tells us that the high evaluation of chaste love (hubb udhri) may be traced to the seventh century Bedouin Yemeni tribe of the Banu Udhra, who believed that 'to die of love is a sweet and noble death'. According to Massignon, udhritic love was linked to a deep notion of the 'election to a religious and sacrificial life by the unexpected appearance of a `kindred soul'' (1982: 348, 349). The transcendent other who inspired this elevated state was believed above all to be a spirit embodied in a human being, and the relationship was not to be soiled by physical contact. Instead, the beloved was regarded as pure and was internalized through avid contemplation, so that eventually the two became one <sup>xvi</sup>.

What sort of society is likely to favor this kind of idealizing and chaste relationship? We know very little about the ancient Bedouin, but we do have an ethnography of a group who live in an analogous environment and who have a similar stated belief in chaste love: these are the nomadic Marri Baluch

of the rugged Southeastern deserts of Iran, as described in a classic work by Robert Pehrson.

The Marri inhabit in 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' (1966:65), 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 which 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' (1966: 62). 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 adultery 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 camp site 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 defence 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 <sup>xvii</sup>. 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 which 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. As one woman says: 'You know what rights a woman has among us Marri. She has the right to eat crap - that's all' (1966: 59).

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 the ancient Bedouin, the Marri also 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 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. Though on a different scale, the Marri pattern resembles that found in many centralized, highly stratified traditional state systems, where love also opposes the web of manipulation predominating in daily life. In these systems, group membership is determined by lineage, and certain traditional obligations and standards of behavior provide identity markers and a degree of solidity. But, as among the Marri, these systems also involve intense internal rivalry and an ubiquitous pursuit of status validation. Marriage relationships function solely for the public end of achieving social mobility and prestige. Far from being a haven, marriage is a political act in a politicized world.

The Court society of Louis XIV is a case in point. In his brilliant work, Elias (1983) shows how the nobility, struggling

within itself for favor from the king, burdened by traditional obligations and standards, and pressed from below by the ambitions of the newly rich, elaborated a fantasy of romance and a cult of gallantry and service to women that belied the courtier's public posture of complete emotional control and the calculating character of all interactions <sup>xviii</sup>. The cult emphasized romantic love as a relationship outside of ordinary life. As among the Baluch, sexuality was devalued in the romantic myth, which poetically stressed the feelings of ecstasy and longing experienced by pure lovers.

In this context, we find the image of the courtesan as friend and confidant, with whom a nobleman could interact freely and without constraint, who was treated with the utmost respect in society, and to whom the highly controlled nobleman sometimes lost his heart in a most uncontrolled way. The pattern is, of course, a familiar one in many traditional state systems, where inequalities of power, the traditions and obligations of noble identity, a continual jockeying for prestige, and a politicization of marriage combine to make the appeal of the courtesan's love very great.

In another example, Grimal (1986) and Elias (1987) document the evolution of male-female relationships in imperial Rome. Traditionally, conjugal love between husband and wife was considered ridiculous and impossible; as Seneca writes, 'to love one's wife with an ardent passion is to commit adultery' (quoted in Grimal 1986: 252). Rather, lineages were tied together through sacred marriage bonds based on Roman virtues of

austerity and piety. But the expansion of the imperial society, the increase in state domination and its capacity to codify and enforce civil law, the vast multiplication of wealth, and the growth of slavery all coincided with a greater independence for women and gradual loosening of the ties of duty binding husband and wife. Divorce, formerly not thought of, became common, while fines, child marriage, and tax incentives were required to induce matrimony among patricians. Noble women, often wealthy property owners because of inheritances passed down from their elderly husbands and their own fathers and brothers, could become players in imperial power games and rivals with men, and marriage became, at least among the elite, a contractual tie between equals.

At the same time, slave women (or boys) without honor filled the brothels of imperial Rome. Patrician men, escaping from their political responsibilities and struggles with their wives, frequented these houses and sometimes found themselves falling deeply and hopelessly in love with the concubines installed there. This love was a release from relations of obligation and rivalry found in arranged marriages and in the intrigues of the court. However, love with a slave led noblemen inexorably into relationships where uncertainty about the sincerity of one's mistress became obsessive. The noble lover often enough found himself the dupe of a manipulative courtesan. Tibullus, an embittered lover, thus names his beloved 'Nemesis' - the sister of tenderness and deceit (quoted in Grimal 1986: 164).

This characteristic configuration favoring romantic idealization apparently exists within objective conditions of extreme pressure, ecological or social, so that human life is experienced as involving struggle, mistrust, and pervasive and intense interpersonal rivalry of competing individuals. But the world in which the individuals act is not fluid and formless as is the case in modern society. There is a legitimate social identity above that of the isolated free agent - be it the minimal lineage of the Marri, or the noble's position in the court. Romantic engagement does not make the world go around in such a system. Instead, it stands opposed to the more formal structures that provide a high degree of social integration. Furthermore, rigidity and closure of the social structure is marked in these systems, as is the continual manipulation for power within the constraining moral order. Where the European or American lover is seeking a secure identity in an untrustworthy world, the Marri nomad, French courtier or Roman aristocrat, though also living in a world that is untrustworthy, knows quite well that he is looking for status and recognition, and knows exactly how to get it. The ceaseless quest for power within a closed social world intrudes into the marriage contract, meaning that romantic love is found only secretly, outside of marriage.

Such societies also have elaborate notions of the complementarity of lover relations, which often reverse the actual sexual asymmetry of the public world. This complementarity can coincide with an exaggerated idealization of

the female, leading to the idolatry of women in Medieval romance or of courtesans in the French court. Similarly, Roman poets idealized their beloved slave prostitutes as domina - literally reversing the role of master and slave. This is, I believe, related to the increased inequality of the sexes and classes in centralized social systems, and to the degree of fantasizing that these stratified systems promote <sup>xix</sup>.

From these cases, it is evident that under the conditions of strong social constraint, well-formed primordial identities, and intense rivalry for power that are 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 may offer a way of imagining a different and more fulfilling life. But because of the objective reality of the social world, romance can never form the base for actually constructing the family, as it has in Western society. It must instead stand against and outside of the central social formation, and will in consequence be more fantastic and unrealistic in its imagery, more dangerous in its enactment, than in the flexible, egalitarian and atomistic cultures of the modern world.

### **Romance in Fluid Societies**

However, all instances of romantic love in the non-Western context are not so markedly different from the Western model. In fact, it is precisely in some of the most 'primitive' of social formations, where people do not have complex kinship structures or central authority, and live by means of hunting

and gathering, that we find romantic idealization taking a form remarkably similar to that characteristic of the West. This is because the fluid, competitive, insecure, and risky social formation of the modern world resembles, in essential ways, the lifestyles of hunting and gathering societies operating under especially harsh ecological conditions.

Although a comparison between the emotional life characteristic of our modern and extremely complex society and a society of great simplicity seems absurd, important structural and emotional correspondences can be found at the level of ordinary social interaction. For instance, the exigencies of the environment in both cases make individual self-reliance and isolation a necessity, so that all persons may believe themselves to be standing alone, acting out of self-interest in order to survive. And even though in small scale traditional societies identity markers may be clear enough, difficult ecologies and internally hostile social structures make life itself dreadfully insecure and other people unreliable. These are truly societies in which risk and danger is pervasive, and where the nuclear family and the reciprocal affection of husband and wife are the only source of solace and refuge.

Perhaps the clearest example of a romantic love complex resembling that of the modern West to be found in the ethnographic record is among the hunting and gathering Ojibway Indians of the Northern Great Lakes region <sup>xx</sup>. As the ethnographer Ruth Landes writes, for the Ojibway:

lovers have a completely romantic attitude that counts the world well lost for love (1969:56).

Sentimental and romantic love are valued tremendously and marriage is supposed to be the fulfillment of this attraction (1937:104).

What is essential is to have a loved person who can be idealized; and often this is realized in unions that are externally drab (1969:120).

Love is described by the Ojibway themselves as an experience of great intensity, valued in itself, focused on one idealized and beloved other, and worth the ultimate self-sacrifice. Nor is this simply an ideal. The life histories recorded in Landes's Ojibway Woman show that romantic love was a central experience in people's lives; an experience which often went against their rational best interests and exposed them to great suffering and peril, and even to suicide should their lover be unapproachable. The similarity of their concept of love to that of the West was recognized by the Ojibway themselves, who quickly adapted American love stories and songs into their own language.

Along with their belief in love, the Ojibway are like modern Western society in other crucial ways. Their society was characterized by extremes of competitive individualism, coupled with a highly developed concept of personal property, which was held even within the nuclear family. According to Landes, 'individuals may grumble, especially close relatives, and there is a weak notion of fair play; but these are as nothing compared with the valuation placed on ruthless individualism' (1937:87).

There were also few, if any, primordial groups or ties among the Ojibway providing a sense of solidarity and identity. There were no ascribed positions of authority, no stable structures of hierarchy. Even the social roles of men and women were not highly articulated, and each could do the work of the other. Clans, though perhaps cohesive in the past, had long since ceased to have any importance, and the only significant kinship structure was a vague division between parallel cousins and marriageable cross cousins. Easy divorce made the family itself insecure.

Nor did residence provide coherence, since families lived in isolation during the harsh winters, and shifted residence regularly in the summer. Constant mobility was partly an effort to find better hunting grounds, but also partly a result of a pervasive distrust of those nearby, combined with a readiness to take insult at minor slights, and a deep fear of treachery from neighbors. This fear was not unrealistic, as Hallowell notes, quoting an Ojibway: 'When I meet (my enemy) face to face I will give no evidence of my hostility by gesture, word or deed' (1940:400). Aggressive sorcery was also commonly practiced in secret, destroying the health of an unsuspecting enemy. In Ojibway society then a smiling face could not be trusted, as it might easily be masking rankling hatred.

The Ojibway social world was evidently quite like the modern 'risk society' of possessive individualists, with its blurring of differentiating ascribed boundaries, its mobility, its competitiveness, and its pervasive sense of mistrust and

insecurity. The Ojibway also lived in an extremely harsh physical environment; one in which starvation was a very real possibility, leading to an intensification of pressure on individuals in a way analogous to the pressure caused by adaption to the constant technological change in the modern world <sup>xxi</sup>.

For comparative purposes, it would be valuable to discover what the Ojibway share with other societies who also have a similar ideology and experience of romance. Unfortunately, as I have noted, the ethnographic record concerning romantic love is weak, since love was not considered a topic worth discussing by serious anthropologists. It is significant, then, that in the few cases where we find indications of romantic idealization coincident with marriage <sup>xxii</sup>, they indeed tend to occur in simple dispersed hunting and gathering societies under conditions of considerable ecological stress. These cultures include the Murngin, the Ainu, the Ona, the Yahgan, the Ite, the !Kung, the Western Apache, and the Hottentot. From these admittedly fragmentary findings we can postulate that it is likely that 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.

## **Sexual Freedom and Romance**

There is, finally, another case very different type of social formation I can mention only in passing which seems to favor romantic love. These societies are neither centralized and 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; a freedom that often leads to powerful romantic attachments and idealizations. Examples of this type are found in tribal India, Southeast Asia and in the Oceanic cultures where romantic love seems to occur. In these cultures, the young people live together in clubhouses, which offer a private and separate enclave away from the responsible world of adulthood. Here they can pursue sexual encounters, but only with those partners whom they can never actually marry. Within the clubhouse there is a free and easy atmosphere of equality and reciprocity between the sexes. But eventually couples form and are faithful to each other. Sometimes this relationship develops into one of deep involvement that is felt to be the most powerful emotional tie in a person's life. This doomed romance is also regarded as the highest possible cultural and aesthetic value, and is celebrated in song and story.

The clubhouse, with its equality and dyadic love, is considered to be a kind of paradise that everyone experiences in adolescence, and which the rest of life cannot match, for in

adulthood men and women are unequal and unloving, and life is a series of responsibilities and obligations, revolving around duties to one's extended lineage. Romantic attachment stands in radical contrast to adult husband and wife relations, and in each of these societies stories are common of lovers committing suicide out of despair at the inevitable separation that is entailed by marriage.

Most of these societies appear to have an elementary marriage pattern of generalized exchange (mother's brother's daughter marriage) which Lévi-Strauss long ago realized entail considerable stress and risk (1969). Furthermore, they are unusual in that they are disharmonic in their residence and kinship reckoning (i.e., matrilineal and patrilocal, or vice versa), so that the resident core are not lineage mates. It seems plausible that this marriage form, which obliges insecure long-distance exchanges of women, often in an internally contradictory social organization of disharmonic residence and kinship, may be one relevant variable in the elaboration of romantic love in such cultures. Romance, confined to unmarried members of the group through the establishment of the club house, is a powerful binding mechanism, affirming the intimacy, reciprocity and transcendent quality of life and love in the group prior to the necessary relationships with outsiders. In providing an emotional glue, binding people to the memory of the paradise of their youth, romantic love helps to integrate a social formation that has serious centrifugal qualities. As in the modern world, romance, while centered on the dyad, makes the

group possible, but only as a nostalgic memory, not as the foundation of the family.

We then have three sorts of social configuration in which an elaboration and idealization of romantic love occurs; the West appears to be a subtype of fluid social organization, having evolved from a more hierarchical and rigid system in the past <sup>xxiii</sup>. Because of the paucity of data, it is impossible to 'fill in the boxes' as to what kinds of societies will not have an elaborated belief in romantic love, although from the ethnographic record, it appears that such beliefs are rare indeed (we discovered only 21 possibilities out of 248 cases); but this may well be a fault of the record-keepers. It does seem likely that relatively stable societies with solidified extended families, age-sets, and other encompassing social networks that offer alternative forms of belonging and experiences of personal transcendence through participation in group rituals are not prone to valuing romantic involvement. Hunt's formulation that the intimacy of clan life precludes the development of romantic dyads seems to be more or less correct - but his formula simply does not account for some crucial variations where the social order is fragmented and perilous, or where internal rivalry eats away at solidarity, or where intense adolescent sexual dyads are broken apart by long-distance marriage exchange.

To conclude, Western expectations and beliefs about romantic love clearly develop out of our unique historical trajectory and cultural background. But this obvious truth should not blind us to deeper correspondences between our

emotional lives and the emotional lives of people in cultures different from our own, who, like lovers in our society, report an intense idealization of a loved person, feelings of exaltation in their presence, and suicidal despair when they are absent. These instances show us that romantic love is not necessarily the prerogative of a leisured class or a complex society; it is not solely heterosexual, nor does it always lead to marriage; it is not intrinsically linked to capitalism, small families, sexual oppression, a cult of motherhood, or a quest for identity, and is not simply a disguise for lust or evidence of the unseen hand of evolution at work. The extraordinary phenomenon of romantic attraction ought to be understood as a peculiarly human response to characteristic social contradictions and tensions that people seek to escape through the love of another individual.

### **Endnotes:**

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i I would like to thank Owen Lynch, William Jankowiak, Laurie Hart-McGrath, Cherry Lindholm, Mike Featherstone and the anonymous reviewers of Theory, Culture and Society for their suggestions, which have improved this paper immeasurably. I especially want to express my deep gratitude to Andrew Buckser and Susan Buckser (ne{ Rofman) for their invaluable help in the original research and analysis.

ii This claim is much disputed by other researchers studying the early family, as summarized in MacFarlane (1986, 1987), but strong (and, to my

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mind, convincing) opposition has not had much success in dislodging the dominant paradigm.

iii For a good account of modern sociobiological theories on love, see Jankowiak (1995). The sociobiological argument was first proposed by Schopenhauer, who believed romantic love to be the means by which the Will created the future. 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' (1966: 557). Simmel makes the same case, with greater subtlety, arguing that the tragic dimension of romance derives precisely from the contrast between the subjective sense of the uniqueness of the beloved and the objective reality of the impersonal force of nature (1984).

iv In philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre has taken a similar view of love in a famous section in Being and Nothingness (1956), where he 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.

v This argument has been countered by Jankowiak (1992).

vi Cohen's pioneering comparative work was partially vitiated by the fact that in the cases cited romantic love was not correlated with marriage at all, but (as is usual cross-culturally) with extramarital affairs, and therefore did not necessarily interfere with lineage solidarity.

vii Much of this debate was rendered meaningless by a confused definition of love and the assumption that marriage by choice was marriage for love.

viii See Lindholm (1981, 1982) for more on romantic love in this society.

ix See Boase (1977) for a comprehensive review of this literature.

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x Singer (1987) also rightly notes that in fact both appraisal and bestowal are necessarily intermingled in modern romantic love - we idealize others partly for what their characteristics are. But what is important from my perspective is that it is analytically possible and necessary to distinguish the idealizing aspect of love from purely erotic aspects.

xi In this sense, Giddens 'confluent love' based on the exchange of pleasures is the antithesis of romantic love.

xii As Singer puts it: 'Love supplements the human search for value with a capacity for bestowing it gratuitously' (1984: 14). Giddens (1992) argues that this form of love is necessarily asymmetrical and gender specific but this is not inherently the case, as further examples will show.

xiii As Anders Nygren writes: 'Eros recognizes value in its object, and loves it - Agape loves, and creates value in its object' (1958: 210). Bertilsson laments that 'in the social theories of love, its passionate (solitary and extraordinary) side needs the countervailing force of reciprocal love' which she links to agape (1986: 33). I agree with her as to the narcissistic narrowness of social theories of love, but when we look at personal accounts, we often find expressions of selfless devotion.

xiv Whether romance is vanishing or not, and what will replace it if it does, is a question that I cannot consider here, but refer the interested reader to Lindholm (1988a, 1990) for my point of view.

xv Cohen (1969) makes a strong case for the ubiquity of some form of romantic idealization in centralized state systems - see note six.

xvi This ideal of sexless merging later degenerated into an esoteric practice among some Sufis who sought mystical communion by gazing at beautiful boys. The notion that romantic love must be heterosexual is not a

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part of the Middle Eastern view of love, and some of the great classics of Medieval romantic literature concern love between men - the most famous being the love of King Mahmud of Ghazna for his Turkish slave Ayaz.

xvii 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.

xviii See Lindholm (1988b) for more on the cultural correlates of emotional masking.

xix In this context, it is worth noting Scheff and Mahlendorf's argument that the idealized love of young Werther for Lotte in Goethe's classic is associated with Werther's inferior position in a rigid status hierarchy. As they write: 'infatuation and hero-worship are both manifestations of unacknowledged shame' (1988: 78).

xx Andrew Buckser's undergraduate thesis on love among the Ojibway (1986) deserves recognition here as the inspiration for this section.

xxi It is significant that the Ojibway's greatest terror is of possession by a cannibal spirit, the windigo, which will drive them to devour their fellows.

xxii This research was done by two students (Andrew Buckser and Susan Rofman) who read through the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), focusing especially on small-scale societies and on the categories 'basis of marriage' (581), 'suicide' (762), and 'ideas about sex' (831).

The 'basis of marriage' category was chosen because cultures with romantic love often link love and marriage. However, I tried to correct for the assumption that love and marriage go together and also get at the intensity of the romantic love ideology in the culture by using the category

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of 'suicide'. Since romantic love, by definition, means that life without the beloved is not worth living, my reasoning was that suicide, stemming from rejection, grief at a lover's death, or frustrated marriage plans would be a good indicator of romantic idealization. Excluded here were suicides from hurt pride or as revenge. The final category, 'ideas about sex', turned out to be the file that yielded love stories and myths, which I assumed to reveal underlying beliefs about idealized relationships. The relationship between image and act is, of course, neither simple nor direct; but for my purposes even the discovery of pervasive romantic imagery was regarded as significant.

In doing their ratings, the researchers worked independently, selecting cases that they believed might warrant further study based on frequency and directness of the data, and scoring them on the degree to which romantic love appeared to exist in the society, both as ideal and as action. These cases were then compared by the researchers, who found that they were in general agreement in their ratings. A final list of societies where romantic love might be found was then made up, along with references and representative quotes. In 248 cultures researched in the HRAF, twenty-one societies were rated highly likely to have such a complex. Five were in Oceania (Murngin, !Kung, Tikopia, Tonga, Trobriands), three in Africa (Ashanti, Hottentot, Ife), five in Asia (Marri, Ainu, Gond, Miao, Semang), five in North America (Blackfoot, Commanche, Crow, Ojibwa, Western Apache) and three in South America (Mataco, Ona, Yahgan).

xxiii Though see MacFarlane (1986) on the fluidity of early English and Northern European society, which he sees as conducive to a romantic love

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complex among the poor quite different from that later elaborated among the elite.