

## The Return of Romantic Love

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Number of words: 5090

*[A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the American Anthropological Association meeting in San Francisco, November 2008. The paper explores issues, in a preliminary way, that will be treated in greater depth in a forthcoming book on the history of romantic love. Comments welcome.]*

In a number of European countries, as in North America, romantic love has made a “comeback” since the 1980s. In the initial phase of the sexual revolution, this emotion was frequently criticized as a sublimation of desire or as an ideology that mystified male domination. The healthy fulfillment of uninhibited desire, blocked by a repressive social order, was praised as a communitarian ideal that would help bring society back into harmony with human nature. Communal living arrangements emerged as a replacement for the traditional family in the late 1960s, in the U.S., France, Germany, and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Erica Jong’s international bestseller, *Fear of Flying* (1974), celebrated the “zipless fuck” as, if not an ideal, at least an important form of self-fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Marriage rates declined sharply, and divorce rates rose. By the middle of the 1970s, *Bride’s* magazine, founded in

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<sup>1</sup> David Allyn, *Make Love Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History* (New York: Routledge, 2001); on France, see Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *La femme seule et le prince charmant: Enquête sur la vie en solo* (Paris: Nathan, 1999), 75; on Germany, see Herrad Schenck, *Freie Liebe – wilde Ehe: Über die allmähliche Auflösung der Ehe durch die Liebe* (Munich: Beck, 1987); Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> “The zipless fuck was more than a fuck. It was a platonic ideal. Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. Tongues intertwined and became liquid. Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover.

“For the true, ultimate zipless A-1 fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well.” Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Signet, 1974), 11.

1934, was near bankruptcy; its editor complained, “People would laugh at me at parties.” The French wedding-dress chain Pronuptia went bankrupt in 1985.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the decline of marriage, however, the utopian dream of communitarian sexual fulfillment tended to lose its luster within a few years. Dagmar Herzog reports that a general disillusionment over the sexual revolution spread in Germany in the late 1970s. There were countless reports that promiscuity was not working. Yet those in stable couples complained of reliving their parents’ “creepy dramas.”<sup>4</sup> Plays, movies, and novels of the late 1970s such as Neil Simon’s *The Goodbye Girl* (film version, 1977), Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977), François Truffaut’s *L’homme qui aimait les femmes* (1977), and Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1978) offered sharp, if usually compassionate, criticisms of persons who were unable to commit sexually or emotionally to a single partner.

Then, in the late 1980s, the rising generation began to marry in growing numbers, often as an afterthought, formalizing longstanding mutual commitments. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases reinforced the trend. This return to marriage launched the spectacular resurgence of the wedding industry, and coincided with a revival of romantic themes in Hollywood as well as among European filmmakers. The 1993 British hit film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* humorously explored the postwar generation’s dramatic shift from sexual promiscuity to fidelity and marriage; it also eloquently supported the right of same-sex couples to marry, an idea that was still very new at that time. Marriage rates, after a long decline, recovered substantially in the mid 1990s, and have held

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<sup>3</sup> Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 49. Pascale Wattier and Olivier Picard, *Mariage, sexe, et tradition* (Paris: Plon, 2002), 231.

<sup>4</sup> Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, 235.

relatively steady in most countries since then. Today, romantic films like *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), *Clara et Moi* (2004), *Hitch* (2005), *Failure to Launch* (2006), or *Why Did I Get Married* (2007) are dependable money-makers. In the United States, spending on weddings rose, on average, from about \$4,000 in 1984, to \$26,000 in 2005.<sup>5</sup> In Britain the average cost of a wedding was £16,000 by 2004.<sup>6</sup> The average French wedding today costs 10,000 Euros; half involve over one hundred guests.<sup>7</sup>

The revival of romantic love and renewed interest in marriage at first took demographers and sociologists by surprise.<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1987, Francesca Cancian defended the trend against criticisms by both sociologists and feminists, arguing that the gender stereotypes at work in the lives of many couples did not always prevent closeness; and that enduring romantic love could be a route to growth and self-realization.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Giddens, writing in 1992, saw the emergence of what he called the “pure relationship,” pursued within the context of a new “plastic sexuality.”<sup>10</sup> Self-fulfilling, the pure relationship was also prone to instability and therefore potentially destabilizing for the individual.

In 1990 German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim offered one of the most influential interpretations to date of the new romantic love.<sup>11</sup> They saw a direct relationship between the new trend toward romantic sexual commitments, both

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<sup>5</sup> Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 2. For the 2005 figure, see “Weddings Are More Personalized,” *Baltimore Sun*, 13 February 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Emma Allen, “Wedding Sells,” *The Times of London*, 2 June 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Figures from Wattier and Picard, *Mariage, sexe, et tradition*, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Irène Théry, *Couple, filiation et parenté aujourd'hui: Le droit face aux mutations de la famille et de la vie privée* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998), 14: “Les ‘surprises du démographe’ (Roussel 1985) ont incité à la précaution, et il s'est bien écoulé une dizaine d' années entre les premiers reverses des courbes démographiques et la conscience, dans l'opinion, d'un changement très profond.”

<sup>9</sup> Francesca M. Cancian, *Love in America: Gender and Self-Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990).

within and outside of marriage, on the one hand, and the emergence of what they called a “society of risk,” on the other. Deregulation and the reduction of barriers to international trade and international movements of labor and capital, in North America and the European Union, were creating a new society of risk in their view. In this context, women’s liberation, sexual liberation, and the rising participation of women in the paid labor force contributed to the formation of societies in which every individual is obliged to pursue a career marked by high uncertainty and unpredictable change. The stakes of career success rose, in addition, with every new wave of layoffs and restructurings, with every roll-back in welfare benefits, unemployment benefits, and public healthcare spending. A period of unprecedented sexual freedom for the individual thus coincided with a period of decreased economic security and a deteriorating safety net.

In this context, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim found that many individuals devoted themselves to romantic love relationships as if love were an “earthly religion,” as they put it. Amid the hazards and disjunctures of life in the society of risk, intense commitment to a romantic partner offered a rare island of continuity and predictability. At the same time, the high expectations that were attached to love relationships, and the difficulties of negotiating career choices involving both jobs and aspirations to bear and raise children, ensured that unresolvable disagreements could easily arise and lead to the breakdown of the couple. Thus divorce rates rose not because of a weakening of commitment, but because the hopes attached to marriage relationships were rising. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim expressed a certain awe with respect to the emergent “earthly religion” of romantic love. The new romantic love appeared to them to be a kind of religion for those who have no religion, a last refuge of transcendent values in a market-

driven, advantage maximizing world. Neoliberal reform and romantic love, therefore, were closely associated in the countries examined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim.

Eva Illouz's study of 1997 argued that the resurgence of romantic love reflected a continuing search for "the experience of utopia"; but in postmodern capitalism this search had been deeply influenced both by a capitalist work ethic and by consumerism.<sup>12</sup> "Commodities have now penetrated the romantic bond so deeply that they have become the invisible and unacknowledged spirit reigning over romantic encounters," she claimed. She found that, among her informants, "Self-interest was disavowed in favor of the implicit model of a disinterested, organic, and gratuitous bond. Belief in romantic love is apparently sustained by a belief in its disinterestedness."<sup>13</sup> But she found that, in reality, relationship decisions alternated between "agapic" and "self-interested."<sup>14</sup>

Many European and North American observers have noted, with dismay, the extremely high expectations that romantic couples, married or not, now bring to their relationships. There is general agreement that these expectations contribute to rising divorce rates. American marriage counsellor, Michael Vincent Miller, in 1995, put it this way:

What *heroic performances* the partners in a couple must feel they have to turn in! They have to be sexual athletes, parents to the child in each other, perfect friends, therapists to one another's symptoms. Carried to this extreme, the romance of marriage becomes a mode of salvation, almost a substitute for traditional religion. No relationship can carry so profound a burden. Couples who need so much from

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<sup>12</sup> Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

each other are bound to go under, uttering bitter cries of accusation at one another as things fall apart. [Emphasis added.]<sup>15</sup>

French sociologist Bernadette Bawin-Legros echoed Miller's dismay in 2003:

The modern couple must offer to each other at once love, passion, tenderness, friendship, well-matched habits of mind, the sharing of work, the education of children. ... [the] partner must fulfill all roles and provide all responses. Yet ... a spouse this perfect becomes stifling.<sup>16</sup>

"Today," said another French sociologist, Laurence Charton, in 2006, "in the name of love, we demand everything of our partner. He or she must be lover, friend, spouse, father or mother of our children, educator, worker, collaborator, without forgetting the equal sharing of household tasks."<sup>17</sup> Journalist Amy Bloom, writing in *O, The Oprah Magazine* in February 2004, expressed the same concern: "To be a real partner requires the best of friendship, parenting, and lover, in such a combination and quantity that we can hardly bear to expect it of Him or Her for fear of being disappointed, and we certainly hope that no one will expect it of us."<sup>18</sup>

Gunter Schmidt and his associates, reporting in 2006 on a large survey study carried out in Hamburg and Leipzig, found that 95 percent of men and women in all age groups saw life in a loving couple as the ideal.<sup>19</sup> But they also found that 38 percent of persons in their sample had separated from a spouse or partner while children were

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Vincent Miller, *Intimate Terrorism: The Deterioration of Erotic Life* (New York: Norton, 1995), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Bernadette Bawin-Legros, *Le Nouvel ordre sentimental* (Paris: Payot, 2003), 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> "Aujourd'hui, au nom de l'amour, nous demandons tout à notre partenaire. Il, elle, doit être amant(e)-ami(e)-époux(se)- père-mère de nos enfants, éducateur(trice)- travailleur(se)-collaborateur(trice), sans oublier le partage des tâches domestiques." Laurence Charton, *Familles contemporaines et temporalités* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 91.

<sup>18</sup> *O, The Oprah Magazine*, February 2004, p. 162.

<sup>19</sup> Gunter Schmidt, Silja Matthiesen, Arne Dekker, and Kurt Starke, *Spätmoderne Beziehungswelten: Report über Partnerschaft und Sexualität in drei Generationen* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 31, 108.

present in the household. The most common cause for these separations was the decline of emotional intensity (44 percent for men, 49 percent for women). Jean-Claude Kaufmann, in his study of women living alone, found that “It is in fact just because [their] hopes have become so wild that the couple has become difficult to construct.”<sup>20</sup>

The movement in favor of the right to marry for same-sex couples has won notable victories in recent years, but research suggests that, while many same-sex relationships follow the same romantic patterns as heterosexual ones, a significant number in gay and lesbian communities do not attach the same intense significance to finding a single life partner, and that gay men, in particular, often prefer open relationships.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, heterosexual norms seem to have shifted rapidly in the late 1980s toward moral condemnation of infidelity.<sup>22</sup> For many heterosexuals, the current ideal of exclusive, intense, enduring sexual partnerships is also normative; infidelities, separations, and divorces are experienced as breakdowns, crises, breaches of the proper order of things.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, such breakdowns, insofar as they result from a decline of emotional intensity or involvement, are regarded as unavoidable. For partners to remain faithful to loveless relationships is just as much a breach of the norm. In recent decades, then, millions of men and women have been willing to plunge their lives into turmoil in pursuit of an intense romantic connection.

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *La femme seule et le prince charmant: Enquête sur la vie en solo* (Paris: Nathan, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Jamieson, “Intimacy, Negotiated Nonmonogamy, and the Limits of the Couple,” in *The State of Affairs: Explorations in Infidelity and Commitment*, edited by Jean Duncombe, Kaeren Harrison, Graham Allan, Dennis Marsden (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004), 35-57; Lynn Jamieson, “Intimacy Transformed? A Critical Look at the ‘Pure Relationship,’” *Sociology* 33(1999):477-494; Lawrence A. Kurdek, “Are Gay and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples Really Different From Heterosexual Married Couples?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66(2004):880-900.

<sup>22</sup> For international comparisons, see Jean Duncombe, Kaeren Harrison, Graham Allan, Dennis Marsden, eds., *The State of Affairs: Explorations in Infidelity and Commitment*, (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004), 141-165. See also François de Singly, *Le soi, le couple, et la famille* (Paris: Nathan, 1996), 85.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann, *La femme seule*.

Certainly, these choices are supported by a steady diet of glamorous mass-media images—romantic films, magazine and TV coverage of stars’ love lives, tell-all talk shows, and a flood of advice literature and romantic novels. Closely tied to this circulation of images are advertisements that link products and services with romance. But the fit between romantic love and consumerism is not as neat as it is sometimes claimed to be.

Some researchers have pointed, for example, to the high frequency of elaborate white wedding ceremonies in Hollywood movies as advertisements for the elaborate wedding. But if one takes a closer look, most of these films are anything but favorable to the wedding industry. Weddings are consistently treated as moments of extreme instability. In many films featuring weddings—for example, *Moonstruck* (1987), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1993), *Only You* (1994), *Forces of Nature* (1999), *Serendipity* (2001), *The Wedding Planner* (2001)—a wedding is called off because bride or groom is drawn into heroic pursuit of a true love. In *Runaway Bride* (1999), a woman flees four successive weddings because she gets cold feet at the last moment. In two films—*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *Sideways* (2004)—a wedding is celebrated that the audience knows to be a sham because bride or groom feels no love. In *The Bachelor* (2002), getting the wedding celebrated becomes a mad race against the clock, that almost doesn’t succeed. In movies, couples who marry are treated as displaying exemplary bravery, overcoming obstacles, facing up to the odds. As the character Charles in the film *Four Weddings* puts it, “I am, as ever, in bewildered awe of anyone who makes this kind of commitment that Angus and Laura have made today. I know I couldn’t do it, and I think it’s wonderful they can.”

Sociologist Jean-Paul Kaufmann characterizes the thinking of his French informants when confronting marriage as follows: “Would not living life as a single be the best way to realize the dream of the sovereign individual, sole master of his destiny?”<sup>24</sup> Marriage offers advantages, to be sure. But “the existence of an alternative identity pushes toward critical evaluation of the engagement with the conjugal partner. Marry? Why not? But not at any price. If the union is disappointing, divorce at once.”<sup>25</sup> In a recent study, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that poor women of various ethnicities in Philadelphia strongly preferred to delay marriage until life and career were in order, and they were sure of their partners’ commitment.<sup>26</sup> As Deena, one of Edin and Kefalas’s informants, put it: “Why get married? There’s too much stuff that happens to all of those relationships. Honestly, my experience ... I was with somebody for four years, engaged, had a kid, and then I wasn’t with him. I’m not gonna do nothing, like make any promises that I’m not gonna be able to keep.” Both this woman and her current partner fear a premature marriage could strain the relationship. She says: “I don’t want my son and daughter to go through see[ing] us split up. I want them to have a very good childhood.”<sup>27</sup> This woman, like many other informants, hesitates to marry precisely because her ideal vision of marriage is so important to her and at the same time appears so difficult to achieve. Part of the difficulty lies in the amassing of the appropriate career benchmarks and commodities: secure job, house, car, furniture, and enough money for what she calls a “real wedding.” But the deeper difficulty lies with the very liberty that each partner retains, no matter what pledges or promises they make. Deena says to her

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<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann, *La femme seule*, 161.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

partner, “You might fall in love with somebody walking down the street and not even know it ... things happen—there’s people that might alter your relationships.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the reasons individuals resist the decision to commit to a single partner, in cohabitation or marriage, is their dissatisfaction with the gender-specific roles that usually come to prevail in the partnerships of stable couples. This is a concern which particularly affects women.<sup>29</sup> In one recent study, French women in domestic partnerships performed 80 percent of the menial household tasks, devoting 25 hours per week to them, while men devoted only 12 hours per week to the household.<sup>30</sup> Younger couples in Schmidt and associates’ German study of 2006 were equal, or nearly equal, in educational attainment, and in taking sexual initiative. But young men tended to earn more than their female partners, to do less childcare, and, above all, to do less housework.<sup>31</sup> Edin and Kefalas’s Philadelphia informants, relatively poor single mothers, were particularly fearful that, after a marriage ceremony, their partners’ true character would come out. “He’s gonna say he owns me,” said one. “[T]hey think they in control ...” said another. The husband will want to be waited on, warned a third, “...like trying to be my boss or something.” “Some mothers are so firmly convinced that marriage corrupts men’s behavior,” remarked Edin and Kefalas, “that they believe a marriage will almost inevitably ruin a relationship.”<sup>32</sup> Silent alienation over the specific configuration of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>29</sup> Jamieson, “Intimacy Transformed?”; Kaufmann, *La femme seule*.

<sup>30</sup> Results summarized in Jacques-Antoine Malarewicz, *Repenser le couple: Hommes et femmes, comment vivre à deux aujourd’hui?* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2001), 59.

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt et al., *Spätmoderne Beziehungswelten*, 98-99.

<sup>32</sup> Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*, 117-118.

gender roles in couples, including gender-specific communication styles, is by far the most common presenting problem for couples seeking therapy.<sup>33</sup>

Although marriage has been “deinstitutionalized,” and although couples often pursue intimacy and intensity in close relationships in a manner reminiscent of Giddens’s “pure relationship,” nonetheless stable cohabiting couples commonly accept certain inequalities, a certain gendered division of labor. Some do pursue equality self-consciously as an ideal, through constant negotiation and re-negotiation. But there is no evidence that such self-consciously pursued equality correlates with greater intimacy or stability. To be sure, more women than men experience disaffection at their greater burden of home and family duties, but it is also the case that many women embrace such arrangements in mutual agreement with their partners.<sup>34</sup>

In the context of unprecedented sexual liberty, partners often understand the question of the mutual commitment in terms of a dichotomy between love and lust, between emotional bond and sexual appetite. However, so far scholars have had little or nothing to say about the role of the love-lust dichotomy in the resurgence of the “earthly religion” of love. But I argue that this dichotomy is both central to, and characteristic of, certain Western contexts. Properly appreciated, it can account for the peculiar features of romantic love as currently practiced in those contexts.

Lust and love are sometimes seen today as appropriate to different developmental stages. Late teens and early adulthood are now widely understood as a period of sexual

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques-Antoine Malarewicz, *Repenser le couple: Hommes et femmes, comment vivre à deux aujourd’hui?* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2001). For a review of U.S. literature, see Richard E. Heyman, “Observation of Couple Conflicts: Clinical Assessment Applications, Stubborn Truths, and Shaky Foundations,” *Psychological Assessment* 13(2001):5-35.

<sup>34</sup> Jamieson, “Intimacy Transformed?” reviews these findings.

experimentation and exploration.<sup>35</sup> Cohabitation is regarded by some partners as a temporary convenience within this period of experimentation, by others as a more permanent connection, a prelude to marriage, that signals the end of experimentation. Some strongly resist permanent connection in favor of choice and change. As Shante explained to Edin and Kefalas, “I’m only seventeen! I shouldn’t be wanting to settle down with nobody. I mean I’m still young!”<sup>36</sup> Others find that a constant string of sexual partners becomes boring and alienating. As one of Kaufmann’s informants put it, her “adventures” had become uniformly “disappointing.”<sup>37</sup> At such a moment, the dream of Prince Charming, Mr Right, the Dream Girl, can become more intense, more insistent. This developmental framing cannot be pushed too far, however. In the US, 69 percent of eighteen-year-old men and 76 percent of eighteen-year-old women report having had a romantic relationship in the previous eighteen months.<sup>38</sup>

The widespread acceptance of gendered complementarity or reciprocity in couples may be compared to the continued embrace of highly gendered forms of dress and self presentation in public. Young women, in particular, often devote considerable time, effort, and money to being well turned out. A recent study of Duke University undergraduates found, for example, that many women felt relentless pressure to achieve an ideal of so-called “effortless perfection” that included high grades, good looks, perfect

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<sup>35</sup> Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*, 124; Gunter Schmidt, "Zur sozialgeschichte jugendlichen Sexualverhaltens in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts," in *Von Lust und Schmerz: Eine Historische Anthropologie der Sexualität*, edited by Claudia Bruns and Tilmann Walter (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2004), 311-325; R. Kelly Raley, Sarah Crissey, and Chandra Muller, "Of Sex and Romance: Late Adolescent Relationships and Young Adult Union Formation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(2007):1210-1226; Shannon E. Cavanagh, Sarah R. Crissey, R. Kelly Raley, "Family Structure History and Adolescent Romance," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70(2008):698-714.

<sup>36</sup> Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*, check page number.

<sup>37</sup> Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Raley, et al., "Of Sex and Romance," 1211.

grooming, stylish clothing, and a casual, open manner. Some critics have insisted that the pressure is not so great as the study suggested, and that it is not difficult to opt out.<sup>39</sup>

But it is not sufficiently appreciated that present-day dress, grooming, and body-language codes can signal a great deal about the individual's sexual preferences and openness to various kinds of sexual and emotional contact. Heterosexual female dress and manner can easily signal a range of availabilities for sexual activity, from abstention to promiscuity, as well as a range of emotional orientations from sensitive and empathetic to self-interested and hedonistic, that is, from love to lust. One of the reasons romantic love continues to rely on sharply distinct gendered images may be that, only within these repertoires of gendered images can one find adequate symbols of that particular character of love interests, or that particular relation between love and lust, that one finds most engaging. Men's dress and manner are often more ambiguous, but one can as well, if one wishes, select among a host of male-gendered relevant cues.

The continued salience of the figure of the "slut" among adolescents has surprised many researchers. In a Danish study of early adolescence by Dorthe Staunaes, one informant, Bettina, was categorized by her classmates as among the so-called "cheap ones." "The dominating discourse" notes Staunaes, "is that Bettina has 'too blond hair', 'too large a bust', 'too large hips'. This bodily 'too-much-ness' is emphasized by the strappy T-shirts, low-necked shirts, miniskirts, and tight, hipster trousers she wears. These components are all 'just too much', and her figure is viewed as close to the icon of potential promiscuity."<sup>40</sup> Bettina was therefore unable to aspire to the category of

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Lipka, "Feminine Critique: A Study of Women at Duke Has Sparked a Debate About the Pressures of Pursuing 'Perfection,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 May 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Dorthe Staunaes, "From Culturally Avant-garde to Sexually Promiscuous: Troubling Subjectivities and Intersections in the Social Transition from Childhood into Youth," *Feminism and Psychology* 15(2005):149-167, quote from p. 159.

“perfect ones,” whose dress and whose interest in sexual activity were regarded as more moderate. Many North American women have provided personal testimony about being categorized as “sluts” by classmates in their high-school years. The combination of early sexual maturity, alluring dress, and sexual activity that is regarded as too precocious by classmates commonly attracts this label, and earns the victim an enduring stigma that leaves emotional scars.<sup>41</sup>

The informal survival of a sexual double standard marks behaviors of older heterosexual men and women in more subtle ways. Even in contexts such as college-age hookup practices, women are understood as objects of male interest, are often victimized, and, even when willing participants, often feel, according to Elizabeth Paul and Kristen Hayes, “shame and self-blame” afterwards “for engaging in sexual behaviors in the context of a hookup. Not knowing their partners and the lack of further contact with the partner seemed to compound their regret and anger at themselves.”<sup>42</sup> The hookup, in principle brief and anonymous, a quintessential enactment of sexual appetite, often sharpens participants’ longing for a romantic love partnership.

The double standard’s continued vitality and the persistence of distinct gender roles within couples both reflect the larger, unchallenged common sense view that love and lust are different, and in some respects opposite, motivations for sexual partnerships. While extramarital sex is now common, women who do not restrict their sexual availability to partners for whom they feel love, or might come to feel love, risk moral

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<sup>41</sup> Delores D. Liston and Regina E. Moore-Rahimi, “Disputation of a Bad Reputation: Adverse Sexual Labels and Southern Women,” in *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, edited by Pamela Bettis and Natalie G. Adams (Mawah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004), 211-229; Leora Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999); Emily White, *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Michael Bamberg, “Form and Functions of ‘Slut Bashing’ in Male Identity Constructions in 15-Year-Olds,” *Human Development* 47(2004):331-353.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth L. Paul and Kristen A. Hayes, “The Casualties of ‘Casual’ Sex: A Qualitative Exploration of the Phenomenology of College Students’ Hookups,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19(2002):639-661, quote from p. 655.

condemnation, even in contexts in which sexual freedom is claimed to prevail. As Kaufmann notes of his French informants, women often feel enormous pressure to establish enduring partnerships in adulthood, and if they do not, many find it difficult to resist blaming themselves.<sup>43</sup> Men may also feel they are judged for such a failure, but with less consistency and intensity.

The love-lust polarity was unknown in ancient times. In a study of ancient Greek romance novels, David Konstan concludes that, “The Greek novels as a genre are not articulated around the opposition between a purely carnal or libidinous passion and a devotion honored by the name of love. There is thus no reason for introducing a division into the concept of eros that would discriminate the feelings of the pirates for the hero and heroine from those that attracted [the hero and heroine] to one another in the first place.”<sup>44</sup> A similar observation could be made about the elegiac poets, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, and the others. In works such as Plutarch’s *Life of Antony* or Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the love felt by a male citizen (Antony for Cleopatra, Virgil for Dido) constitutes a character flaw, a threat to dutiful action, potentially emasculating.

It was only in the twelfth century that love and lust came to be sharply distinguished, first by the troubairitz and troubadours of southern France. They offered an implicit critique of Christian theology. A reforming church at that time condemned all sexual activity as sinful with unprecedented stridency. They taught that the sexual appetite, *concupiscentia*—a bodily drive strengthened by original sin—was the single

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<sup>43</sup> Kaufmann, *La femme seule*; for a similar observation, see Singly, *Le soi, le couple et la famille*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), [check page number]; see also Simon Goldhill, who, remarking on the powerful figures of Romeo and Juliet, states “In classical Greece there is no equivalent story of the perfect or even the star-crossed young lovers. Classical Greece just doesn’t *do* love like that. Even the couple who become the paragons of fidelity for later generations, Odysseus and Penelope, in Homer’s *Odyssey* never say ‘I love you,’ or ‘I want you,’ or even ‘I have missed you,’ or any other of the doting expressions a modern audience would demand when a long-lost husband returns from the war.” Simon Goldhill, *Love, Sex and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 48.

greatest threat to the soul's salvation. Trobairitz and troubadours insisted that sexual partnerships inspired by love—by what they called *fin'amor*, “refined love”—were an exception. They were, not sinful, but uplifting, spiritual, innocent.<sup>45</sup> The trobairitz and troubadours' conception of love was peculiar and paradoxical; love broke with sexuality while, at the same time, embracing it and rendering it innocent.<sup>46</sup> Key to their conception was a vision of the beloved (whether male or female) as a spiritualized, and also gendered, ideal, the very embodiment of the ideal of the opposite gender. This ideal inspired the lover to heroically embrace his or her own gender's ideals, which included military prowess, fidelity, and courtesy for men; and beauty, self-denial, fidelity, courtesy for women. In the most general sense, their solution—treating love as a spiritual duty that flows from recognition of the beloved's gendered perfections—is still with us.

This enduring contrast between love and lust cannot be found in other traditions. It is notably lacking in, for example, the Bollywood film. The plots of many Bollywood films turn around the conflict between love and parental authority. The tradition of the arranged marriage is either challenged or accommodated. A common concern of Hollywood romances, in contrast, is, How to know if love is true, that is, how to know if love is more than lust in disguise—a theme the trobairitz and troubadours first explored. This issue simply does not come up in many Bollywood films, where love at first sight is common, and the drama only begins when it is settled that the two main characters love

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<sup>45</sup> This is a synopsis of a draft paper, William M. Reddy, “Heroism and Desire: Trobairitz, Troubadours, and the Medieval Origins of Romantic Love.”

<sup>46</sup> “In romantic love attachments,” remarks Anthony Giddens, the element of sublime love tends to predominate over that of sexual ardor. The importance of this point can hardly be overstressed. The romantic love complex is in this respect as historically unusual as traits Max Weber found combined in the protestant ethic. Love breaks with sexuality while embracing it ...” See Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy*, 40.

each other.<sup>47</sup> This is precisely the point where drama ends in many Hollywood films, because what is at issue is the domestication and purification of lust by love.

Hollywood romances constantly play with the problem of the one and the many, the one true love versus the many potential partners of appetitive sexual satisfaction. In the film *Serendipity* (2001), for example, Sara Thomas, a therapist, tells a client who is agonizing over a lost love, “If your therapy stays on track, I think there are many, many people out there you could easily be happy with.” Here, the Freudian and therapeutic notion comes into play, that even intense feelings of love are only sublimated manifestations of the sexual appetite. But soon afterwards, Sara herself, on an impulse, drops her life plans, cancels a wedding, and flies across the country in search of a man she met only briefly seven years before. The man in question, Jonathan Trager, has become strangely obsessed with finding her as well and abandons his fiancé at the altar, to look for her. In a moment of despair, he is reassured by an admiring friend: “You’re my hero,” claims the friend, and credits Jonathan with inspiring him to save his own marriage from the destructive effects of complacency.

Romantic love in many Western stories derives its character from its contrast with lust as sexual appetite. Just as any glass of water will satisfy thirst, so any appropriate sexual object will satisfy lust. Romantic love is therefore focused on a single, unique person; discovery of that person is a question of fate. Romantic love lives on in the present, in a context very different from that of the twelfth century because it resonates in the space opened up by the currently imagined architecture of the “sovereign individual,”

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<sup>47</sup> Noteworthy examples include *Devdas* (multiple versions, including a 1955 version starring Dilip Kumar, and a 2002 version with Shahrukh Khan and Madhuri Dixit), *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995). On Bollywood film, see Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Steve Darné, *Movies, Masculinity, and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men’s Filmgoing in India* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000).

who is (1) a dual being made up of mind and body, and (2) overburdened with freedoms and risks by the neoliberal state. Such an individual may see many reasons to commit to an enduring partnership—increased economic security, consolidation of an identity, conformity to social pressures and social ideals. However these are not reasons to commit to any given partner. Thus the individual who seeks a partner must be prepared to persuade a beloved that he or she is the right one. This is where the love-lust dichotomy comes into play. Since the twelfth century romantic love has been consistently portrayed as heroic. Heroism, fidelity, self-denial prove that the individual is motivated by something higher than mere appetite. In the medieval fiction, as in practice, love's heroism was often displayed in the arrangement of secret, adulterous meetings, in resisting abduction by a third party, in daring rescues. Today, heroism is displayed simply in being willing to commit to an enduring partnership, to a marriage, to the sharply different gendered roles of life as a couple, to the expense, anxiety, and hard work of raising children. Well into the twentieth century, it was often necessary to accept all these burdens as a precondition of satisfying one's sexual appetite in a legitimate manner. This is no longer the case. The resurgence of romantic love, and of the elaborate wedding, has provided a partial, voluntary, replacement to the earlier constraints of convention. The heroism of romantic commitment motivates the sovereign individual to surrender her or his liberty and embrace the burdensome gendered roles of the couple.

In a fuller discussion, it would be necessary to review not only the many Western contexts in which romantic love does not operate in this fashion, but also the history of

romantic love practices in colonial and postcolonial social formations.<sup>48</sup> Variation and heterogeneity are significant issues that, for lack of time, I can only allude to here.

Romantic love, and elaborate weddings, are becoming increasingly popular in a number of non-Western contexts in recent years, for example. Men and women of urban Africa, for example, are claiming new freedoms in the choice of partner, and drawing on both Western and local practices to shape their understandings of sexual love.<sup>49</sup> For India, Jyoti Puri has examined the remarkable popularity of Harlequin and Mills and Boon romance novels among educated Indian women.<sup>50</sup> Both Bollywood film audiences and Harlequin readers associate romantic love with modernity.<sup>51</sup> According to a way of talking in certain Indian milieux, “modern” parents grant their children a significant role in the choice of spouse, although, in practice, some pay only lipservice to this idea.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, many educated women hope for husbands who will offer them genuine affection within marriage.<sup>53</sup> Laura Ahearn’s study of love letters in a Nepalese village shows a similar pattern; election of one’s own love partner is a prestigious sign of modernity.<sup>54</sup>

However, in many Western contexts, romantic love is regarded as something extremely old-fashioned, ill-suited to the modern world, ultimately irrational, as Beck and

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<sup>48</sup> For further discussion, see William M. Reddy, “The Anti-Empire of General de Boigne: Sentimentalism, Love, and Cultural Difference in the Eighteenth Century,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 34(2008):4-25; see also Matt Matsuda, *Empires of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, eds., *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Jyoti Puri, “Reading Romance Novels in Postcolonial India,” *Gender and Society* 11(1997):434-452.

<sup>51</sup> Steve Derné, *Culture in Action: Family Life, Emotion, and Male Dominance in Banaras, India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> Susan Seymour, *Women, Family, and Child Care in India: A World in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Puri, “Reading Romance.”

<sup>54</sup> Laura Ahearn, *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

Beck-Gernsheim have noted. This is an odd way of talking about an emotion that has become, for a substantial proportion of the population in several countries, the normative foundation of family life, an emotion routinely experienced by large majorities of surveyed individuals. However, this view is at least partly explained by the commonplace acceptance within Western social science that sexual appetite is the real drive behind sexual partnerships and that love is a more-or-less effective sublimation, or hegemonic cultural formation, that partially occludes the harsh reality of self-interest underlying all human behavior.

Within certain strata of popular culture, including highly commercialized mass media, in some countries, romantic love practices function as a pointed denial of this social scientific common sense. The over-the-top intensity, the idealization of gendered visions of perfection, the heroic gestures of self-sacrifice, celebrated in lavish weddings more focused on a ritualized recognition of nobility than on conspicuous consumption—these elements function as practical refutations of the reductionistic claims of experts. This structure is precisely parallel to that which pitted trobairitz and troubadours against the reductionistic claims of Christian theology in the twelfth century. As with many modern experts today, so Christian preachers then simply denied that love could be anything but lust in disguise. Within the enduring Western belief in a mind-body dualism, the claim that romantic love is truly spiritual, and not merely a delusion of libido, has become today a solution for millions of “sovereign individuals” looking for meaning in a private life saturated with risk.