

Love as Emotion and Social Practice: A Feminist Perspective

Brook J. SADLER

University of South Florida

brooksadler@usf.edu

Abstract: I argue that love is both an emotion and a social practice. First, I observe that erotic or romantic love is often thought to be a passive, overwhelming, physically intense, a-rational, and individual experience. In opposition to these assumptions, I sketch a view of emotions that reveals their rational, willful, and social nature. Seen in this way, the emotion of love is something that can be re-invented through attention to social norms and institutions. Next, I advance the idea that emotions can be social practices. How we think about love, the norms for love, and our ideas about love, including popular ideas about love as an emotion, constitute the social practice of love. Looking at the contemporary American context, I argue that the social practice of love provides a bolster for patriarchy. Because romantic love is closely linked to marriage, it participates in limiting women's choices about family, career, and civic and political engagement. The preeminent place of romantic love in women's lives diverts women's attention from other forms of love, including female friendship and love of meaningful work. Discourses of love, which emphasize love as an overwhelming emotion beyond our control, function to foreclose feminist scrutiny of patriarchal practices. Without rejecting the positive nature of erotic love, I recommend a feminist reinvention of the practice of love. My argument draws upon varied resources from philosophy and cultural studies.

Keywords: love, emotion, social practice, patriarchy, marriage.



Introduction

We must reinvent love.

I offer this as a statement of fact, not an imperative: we must reinvent love because we cannot but help reinventing it. Love is a social practice and as such will be reinvented as society changes. The question is not *whether* love will be reinvented, but *how*, and *who* will have a say in its design.

I say that love is a social practice, but it is also an emotion, and several common ideas about emotions may make it difficult to see how an emotion can be a social practice, how love can be a social practice, and therefore how a reinvention could be necessitated. So, I begin by dispelling a few claims about emotions in order to clear the way for us to consider love as a social practice and to critically examine the current practice of love. My aim is to bring into view a picture of how love functions in the United States today. I hope to enable us to see that this practice of love reflects deep cultural tensions—specifically an unresolved conflict over the status of women in a liberal democracy. By learning to see (romantic or erotic) love as a social practice, we can reveal ways in which women under patriarchy are diverted from full participation in civic, social, economic, and political life.

Common Assumptions about Emotion

Love is often thought to be an emotion, a matter of feeling rather than reason, of the heart rather than the head. As such, it is commonly believed that love is a passion, an experience in which one is essentially *passive*: one falls in love, rather than striding toward it. Love is imagined to be beyond our control, non-voluntary, even a mystery or a force that exceeds human comprehension. Such notions are not limited to folk understandings or romantic comedies; many philosophers embrace some subset of these ideas: that love defies explanation, accountability, or prediction, that it lies beyond the reach of the human will, or that it is exempt from rational scrutiny. Moreover, this particular emotion, love, is often believed to be especially powerful, exerting tremendous motivational influence, with the capacity to overtake many aspects of thought and feeling, deeply affecting deliberation and decision-making.

This powerful emotion is, in its intensity and particularity, described as a kind of a-rational excess visited upon an individual. The lover's focus on her or his beloved cannot be fully explained

by the properties of the beloved; no matter how wonderful the beloved person really is, her or his *wonderfulness* is not sufficient reason to command the love and attention the lover bestows upon the beloved.¹ In other words, the lover's emotional response to the beloved is not a rational or objective matter, which others could come to share on the basis of the same evidence (the beloved's *wonderfulness*). Love is subjective, and as such it is an experience of the *individual*--it is the *individual* who is steeped in love.

The lover's experience is also physical: perhaps he cannot eat or sleep normally; his heart races at the sight of the beloved; he walks with a new spring in his step; his body is enlivened with a vital energy—part lust, but more than this, a yearning and vibrancy that shows in spontaneous gestures, unexpected outbursts of song, or a sudden impulse to jump, leap over park benches, or bound across open space, playful and infused with an unaccountable vitality. (Like one of those drug advertisements on TV, I should say of love that results may vary. Side effects may include nausea, upset stomach, loss of appetite, increase in appetite, profuse sweating, dilated pupils... and on and on.) This picture of love as emotion surely rings true: love is individual, physical, and intense, often overwhelming and sudden, and it feels like it just happens, as if one has slipped, like Alice in Wonderland, down the rabbit hole.

If love *qua* emotion is like this—an intensely personal experience—how can it be a social practice? I would like to call upon two different kinds of argument to make my case that love is both emotion and social practice. The first challenges the theory of emotions that underwrites the above portrait of love. Accordingly, I will argue that emotions are bound up with reason, socially mediated, physically indeterminate, and more willful than we like to think. Emotions are thus deceptive: they seem like they are entirely personal, spontaneous, and non-voluntary, but really they are socially constructed experiences in which we are active participants (or social actors). The second kind of argument pulls in a different direction. Here, I do not try to undermine the popular portrait of love as a-rational, deeply felt, physically conspicuous, and non-voluntary. Instead, I argue that we must try to understand how such beliefs about love function in American society; we must consider the significance of their perpetuation and how they contribute to social organization. In other words, we must think about why Americans, as a society, see love the way we do.

¹ See Troy Jollimore's *Love's Vision* (2011) for discussion of the role of reason and reasons in love.

I shouldn't go any further without saying that I am going to focus on erotic or romantic love—the kind of love that transpires between partners or spouses, girlfriends and boyfriends, the kind that includes sex (or the expectation of sex). As I hope will become clear, ultimately, the fact that we make a sharp distinction between erotic love and other kinds of love is part of our social practice. Specifically, we are invested in ensuring that friendship is not as central to our social organization as erotic affiliation is. We invest heavily in erotic love at the expense of other valuable forms of love. We tend to see erotic love as the defining pursuit of adult life and as central to individual identity, relegating love of community and love of meaningful work to the margins. So long as we see love only as an emotion, and see emotion as a passive and overwhelming experience, we will fail to take responsibility for how society constructs love, and women, in particular, will continue to be disserved by love.

A Different Theory of Emotions

Let's start with feelings. What does it *feel* like to be in love? One perfectly reasonable answer is that it feels good. Well, maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. But what if you are pressed to be more specific, to give a precise accounting of this feeling, love? Perhaps you will say that it is soothing and peaceful, as you imagine or recall the quiet intimacy that follows sex with the beloved. You may be thinking of slow breathing and bodily relaxation. Or you may say that love feels wild, charged with anticipation, as you imagine or recall hours occupied in soul-baring conversation or flirtatious play with a new lover. You may think of a racing heart and a feeling of levity, as if you could lift right up out of your own shoes. Maybe you will think of a time when your mouth felt dry and you were tongue-tied and verbally clumsy, trying to impress your new lover. Maybe you will recall feeling flush with anger or jealousy when your beloved turned her attention elsewhere or perhaps flush with embarrassment as you are revealed to be ignorant in the presence of your lover. Or maybe you'll remember a time when the loss of your beloved left you deadened to stimuli, as if you were wearing a heavy, leaden cloak that blocked your normal sensitivity to the world. The point is that there is no single or necessary feeling that defines being in love, and there is no set of bodily symptoms or physiological changes that is constitutive of love.

Although our bodies are registers of emotion, alerting us to shifts in our emotional lives, these states of feeling are not themselves emotions.² Any given bodily sensation or physiological symptom is compatible with more than one emotion. For example, you may be flush with *anger* or with *embarrassment*. Your heart may race with *anxiety* or with *joy*. Your stomach may churn from consuming spoiled seafood or from *grief*. Dry mouth? Could be thirst, or *fear*, or *shyness*. Slow breathing could be *boredom* or *contentment*. Our emotions are not determined by our sensations. But this is not to say that emotions occur without bodily sensation; it is only to say that emotions cannot be reduced to bodily sensations alone. When we attend to our bodily experiences, we learn to give meaning to them and to align them with emotion words.³ In so doing, we *decide* what they mean for us, and we do this with the interpretive guidance of our parents, friends, and trusted others, as well as under the influence of representations of emotion in popular media and in literature.⁴ We learn from others what various emotions feel like. Thus, the physical aspect of our emotional lives—the feelings we suffer or enjoy—are in an important way a product of our sociality.

An example may help. I will not forget the first time my young son described to me a feeling that was new to him on the morning of a much-anticipated performance at his school. He didn't quite feel like eating breakfast and said he had an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. He thought maybe he was sick and going to vomit. I told him, using the common idiom, that he had “butterflies in his stomach” –an expression that he, at age six, found both charming and curious. I told him he was *excited* about the performance. Understanding the sensation, the feeling, as “excitement” and relating it to delicate and harmless butterflies gave meaning and direction to his experience. Our chosen language participates in shaping our feelings, our emotions: Just think how different it would be if we said that this feeling was “worms in your stomach” or “spiders”! Either one seems just as apt a description as butterflies, but I, for one, would feel decidedly more unsettled by spiders in my stomach! Calling his feeling “excitement” shaped how he thought about the day

² William James argued in an influential essay that the bodily excitation just *is* the emotion (1884). Recent accounts of emotion in neurological terms represent more contemporary attempts to reduce emotion to physiology.

³ Martha Nussbaum (2004) has emphasized the way in which the upheaval of emotion is simultaneously physical and cognitive and how the agent gives meaning to her experience through her emotional understanding.

⁴ Recent studies suggest that reading literary fiction is an aid to emotional understanding. (See for example, Kidd and Castano, 2013; and Oatley, 2012.) I suggest that this is due to the fact that 1) literary fiction is narrative, and emotional understanding is fundamental to narrative; 2) literary fiction is linguistic in form (as opposed to visual media or music, for example) and emotional understanding gains acuity from linguistic expression; 3) literary fiction represents social and cultural values, which are also constitutive of emotions; and 4) specifically *literary* fiction employs sophisticated vocabulary and subtle social and psychological observations that exemplify emotional intelligence.

and about himself. It meant that the school performance was indeed a special event, an occasion that rose above the ordinary; it meant that the occasion was positive and worthwhile, not unwanted or unpleasant; it meant that it would be fun, not scary or dangerous; it meant that he could take pride in his participation and that doing well in the performance mattered to him.⁵

I have found that a large part of my role as parent consists in just this sort of emotional interpretation and structuring. I have to think about my son's experiences, his expectations, what he cares for and about, what he knows and what he does not know, and help him to perceive the contours of his own emotions and to make the right sorts of connections between feelings and emotions. I try to guide him toward good decisions about how to feel. In addressing myself to this parental work, I must make decisions, too, about what things mean, how important they are, and what kinds of emotions are appropriate. For example, I have to determine whether the event really is exciting or is actually nerve-wracking, an occasion for warranted anxiety.⁶ In making my own decisions and judgments, I draw upon the evaluative guidance of others, sometimes through direct discussion of my son's situation or concerns, but just as much through the ongoing process of trying to understand my own life and its concerns. A network of meaning-giving activities is engaged to shape the interpretation of my son's sensations and experiences. As I hope the example demonstrates, an extended web of sociality is required for each of us to name our emotions and to define their roles in our lives. Emotions are radically under-determined by feelings or sensations. And they are deeply informed by a process of socialization, whether or not deliberate and thoughtful. Sometimes we are lucky to have the emotional guidance of people with intelligence and goodwill; but sometimes we are shaped passively, through cultural osmosis, as we take in emotional representations from movies, journalism, photographs, and other media.⁷

⁵ If my suggested analysis of "excitement" seems incorrect, that simply highlights the fact that emotions are identified and understood through a social process of definition, application, and revision. What it means to be excited (as opposed to scared, anxious, or apprehensive, for example) and what kinds of occasion count as apt for excitement is open to public contestation, discussion, and refinement. My point is only that to name something "excitement" requires one to enter this field of discussion, to try to sort out what is at stake here. The same holds true for "love."

⁶ It remains open, on my view, to judge that *no* occasion warrants anxiety. That is, my view that judgment is involved in determining the appropriateness of emotions is compatible with a limited, quasi-Stoical judgment that some emotions are always unwarranted or that all emotions must be controlled. But I do not think that a severe sort of Stoical denial of the aptness of *all* emotions is consistent with my view because I do not think that social life can be understood without recourse to emotional explanation. Emotions are shorthand for a complex array of socially-constructed beliefs and ideas which provide information that is vital to understanding what is happening in social life, which is most of our lives.

⁷ Importantly, these representations have gendered and racialized aspects. For instance, in the United States, anger is represented differently when it is expressed by a woman of color, by a white woman, or by a man. Given my view

I've just been arguing that emotions are not reducible to feelings and that, moreover, feelings are themselves open to interpretation, which shows them to be socially malleable. But I've relied upon a conception of feelings as primarily physical sensations. It might be objected that when we talk about what it "feels like" to be in love (or indeed to have any other feeling), we are referring to something more than just physical sensations. And, the objection continues, it is this more robust understanding of a "feeling" that is intended when one talks about being in love. Love, it is argued, has a particular feel to it, and that feel is more than just bodily. That's why people so often say that if you are in love you'll know it: it has its own, unique and unmistakable feeling. I have been in love, and I feel (--there it is! "I *feel*") the pull of this objection. Nonetheless, I think that examination of the objection actually helps to prove my point. If a feeling is more than just bodily sensation, if love *qua* feeling is more than physiological changes, we must ask, what is this "more"? What "more" is added onto the bodily that then makes the feeling that is constitutive of love?⁸ The answer can only be that the feeling refers to some set of ideas, beliefs, and social facts that are particular to love. If I feel myself to be in love, it must be because I have ideas about love, which obtain in my present circumstances. For example, one idea may be that love strikes suddenly, and I see that my feeling has arisen quickly, unexpectedly. Seeing that the conditions for love obtain, I am in a position to interpret my feeling as love. Were my ideas about love different, my interpretation of my feeling might well be different; I might *not* find that I am in love under just these circumstances. So, my ideas contribute to my own sense of what it is that I feel. This explains why, in part, people can sometimes not know that they are in love until someone else points it out to them: they haven't realized that the conditions of love have been met, that the circumstances of love obtain here.

As with ideas, so too, do my beliefs contribute to my own sense of what it is that I feel. Perhaps my idea of being in love is that love is only real when it is established over the long run. If I believe that my feelings about another are untested by time, then I may well find their sudden appearance to be cause of doubt or suspicion; I may interpret my feelings as mere infatuation, or

that emotions are socially constructed, it is not surprising that there is a connection to the social-construction of gender and race.

⁸ The idea that something "more" is "added onto" the bodily is already misleading; emotion is not summative in the way this suggests. It is not as if there is one thing (bodily feeling) that operates independently of the other thing (belief, idea, judgment, evaluation). Both the physical and the cognitive aspects of emotion are already shaped by prior experience, cultural values, social cues and norms, memory, expectation, etc. They exist simultaneously as an unfolding dynamic.

lust, or believe I am in thrall to an especially charismatic person—not that I am in love.⁹ Nothing hinges on drawing a sharp distinction between ideas and beliefs. The point is that both are operative in one’s identification of feelings.

Both one’s ideas about love and one’s beliefs about oneself and one’s circumstances are embedded in a larger set of social facts that delimit emotional possibilities. One’s ideas and beliefs are formed within a social context in which there are established norms for emotional experience and forms of relationship and intimacy. Acting within this social context, our own ideas and beliefs are responsive to those that are already in social circulation. We respond to the social cues of others and form expectations about their behavior and about *their* emotions, which in turn affects our own emotions, which then again seeds the possibilities for the emotional experiences of others. One reason why it can be so easy to find ourselves swept away by an emotion, or locked into it, is that the experience comes to us in iterative loops of social feedback; it gathers momentum through its social definition as others observe interactions, interpret speech acts, evaluate relationships, classify feelings, name emotions, and respond accordingly, in concert with culturally prevalent ideas and norms. The more complicated the emotion, the more room there is for this interpretive and evaluative work, and love is among our more complicated emotions.

I have suggested that both ideas and beliefs may be thought to contribute to our conception of “feelings,” but if they do, then feelings are shown to be more complex than they at first seemed. They are partly constituted by social and cognitive structures—and this is just the view of emotions that I am driving at. In fact, the more carefully we look, the harder it is to draw a firm distinction between feelings and emotions. The best we might do is say that feelings are typically a little less complicated than emotions. But I’m not sure even that will do. Remember my son’s butterflies: even so simple and common an experience turns out to be shaped by all sorts of ideas, beliefs, and (though I’ve only gestured at it until now) values.

Some emotions are surely more complex than others, though. To take one case: I have (an admittedly irrational) fear of large spiders. The sight of a large spider typically gives me chills and

⁹ I have alluded to two, opposing ideas about romantic love: that it happens suddenly and that it arises slowly over time. These two ideas correspond, roughly, with the difference between cultures in which marriages are voluntary and those in which marriages are arranged. Voluntary marriage relies upon individual choice and allows for spontaneity in love. Arranged marriage fosters the idea that spouses will learn to love each other in time. There is no evidence to suggest that either view is more correct than the other. In American society, many voluntary marriages (but not all) end in divorce when couples decide they no longer love each other, just as in other societies, many arranged marriages (but not all) do result in lasting love.

goosebumps. I freeze in my tracks. I believe the spider is hideous and loathsome, making something like aesthetic and moral judgments about it—but remember, I admitted my fear is irrational! My response is complete avoidance, a common fear response. As intense as this emotional response to a spider is for me, it is not an especially complicated or important emotion. For one thing, it is short-lived: remove the spider, and within minutes, the fear will have evaporated. But more significantly, this fear has a very limited effect on my life and relationships. We should not conclude, on the basis of this example, that *fear* is not a complicated or important emotion in general. Fear of terrorists or Muslims or women’s bodies are also fears and they are socially and relationally important (and also irrational). But the importance and complexity of fear as an emotion in these cases is a matter of the emotion’s *object*. It is because terrorists, and Muslims, and women’s bodies are socially and politically important that fear of them becomes complex and important.

But some emotions have an importance and complexity that is not attributable to the emotion’s object, but to its social structure—to the role that the emotion plays in society. Love is like this. Given the broad array of beliefs and ideas that are constitutive of love, love has a complexity that means it is manifest in variable states over time. What love feels like will depend on the circumstances in which the lover finds herself moment to moment or day to day. Recall the possibilities mentioned earlier: in love, you may feel calm, energized, lustful, angry, jealous, aggrieved, embarrassed, or happy—and that’s a dramatically incomplete list. Given this variety, it is a mistake to conceive of love as any particular feeling; it may not even be properly counted as a single *emotion* (let alone a single *feeling*). Love is constituted by too many ideas and beliefs, too many values, to be captured by a simple statement or described in parallel to my fear of spiders. The spider is the object of my fear, and my beloved is the object of my love, and both might be described as intense emotions, but what I feel in the latter case is different in kind.

Rejecting the idea that emotions are mere feelings, Robert Solomon describes love as a “process,” emphasizing the dynamic nature of the emotion.¹⁰ I’m not convinced that “process” is the right idea here, as it connotes something procedural, organized into steps, or progressing according to an established order. But Solomon is surely right that love is too complex to be

¹⁰ Robert Solomon, *About Love* (1994).

accurately captured in terms of a transient feeling. And he is right to think that love’s timeframe typically means that many changes in feeling and emotion are forthcoming.

We might be tempted to say that love is a disposition: a state in which one is disposed to certain sorts of emotional experiences.¹¹ For example, the lover is disposed to feel sadness when the beloved is hurt, joy when the beloved is happy. The attraction of a dispositional account is that it allows for love’s variability over time and emphasizes the way in which emotional experience is contingent upon circumstance. On the downside, a dispositional account of love may not be able to distinguish it from other complex emotional states that might also engender the same responses. For example, I may feel sadness when my friend is hurt and joy when my friend is happy, but, as we all know, friendship is different than erotic love. (However, as I’ve hinted already, this firm knowledge of the distinction between erotic love and friendship is itself a part of our social practice, serving social functions that I will bring up later.) A dispositionalist view may seem a rather vacuous account: to be in love is to be in a state in which one experiences the emotions of love and behaves as lovers do. That doesn’t tell us very much. Another disadvantage to a dispositionalist account is that it puts the emphasis on the individual—the person in love is in a particular mental or behavioral state—rather than on the inter-personal dynamic and the way it is informed by larger social norms and structures. In fact, in order to give substance to a dispositionalist account, we’d have to call upon the social norms and prevalent ideas about love in order to identify which sorts of behavior or emotion the person in love is disposed to.

As far as the complexity of love as an emotion goes, Annette Baier comes closest to the mark, arguing that “love is as much [the] coordination of emotions between lovers, as itself a special emotion.”¹² On her view, love “makes us more aware of the emotions of the loved one” and enjoins us to a heightened emotional responsiveness to the beloved. When one’s beloved suffers a disappointment, one shares in her let-down; when she achieves a hard-won goal, one shares in her pride and joy. But love is more than sympathetic duplication of feeling, Baier explains. Love does not simply demand that lovers share in the same feelings; it expands the occasions for emotional involvement and the range of emotions that are possible. Baier’s point is that love is an “activator” of other emotions in the individual and a “communicator” of emotions

¹¹ Bedford (1957) fended off simplistic behaviorist accounts of emotion (which align with dispositionalist thinking) and defended the idea that emotions involve judgments of value.

¹² Baier, “Unsafe Loves” (1991), p. 442.

from person to person. For example, love may mean that one partner's thrilling connection to a new friend incites the other partner's jealous rage; that one's grief becomes the other's impatience; that one's despondency fuels the other to defiant cheerfulness. There are no strict formulas here, though some forms of emotional interaction are more common than others, some dynamics more typical than others, which is just what we would expect given the fact that emotional responses are learned according to social norms and cultural values.

The view of emotions I have been presenting has dispelled the idea that emotions are reducible to physical sensations or feelings that simply befall us as individuals. Instead, I have said that, while emotions have a physical component, they are physically underdetermined. I have said that they are socially mediated insofar as the ability to identify particular emotional experiences is both a product of socialization and a matter of social interpretation by self and by others.¹³ I have hinted at the kind of willfulness that is possible in our emotional lives, discrediting the idea that we are (or must be) merely passive with respect to our emotions. In deciding how to think about what we feel and what others feel, and in enacting the commensurate behavioral responses that we do, we are active participants in shaping our emotional lives and those of others. We are not completely in control of our emotions no more than we are completely in control of anything else in life. But not being able to control outcomes or effects, nor being able to summon feelings instantaneously, does not amount to a forfeiture of the will.¹⁴ We can and do (we must!) nonetheless exert our wills in the course of shaping our emotional experiences. If these ideas about emotion are credible, then love is far less individual, spontaneous, and accidental than we like to think.

Before saying something about love as a social practice, there is one more idea about emotions that we need to tuck into briefly. In relating the common view of love as an emotion, I said that it is viewed, like perhaps all emotions, as a-rational. There is a long history of philosophers glossing emotions as the "opposite" of reason, as pulling against reason, defiling the

¹³ Scheman (1983) argues for the idea that emotion is essentially tied to social dynamics.

¹⁴ The idea that emotions are a-rational because we cannot summon them instantaneously is spurious. We cannot summon instantaneously most of the cognitive achievements centrally associated with reason, but we do not therefore dismiss them as beyond our reach or as a-rational. Instrumental reasoning, drawing inferences, adducing evidence—these are all skills that are learned over time and enacted only with attention and concentration, and often difficulty. The more practiced we are with reasoning, the more seemingly spontaneous becomes the display of one's faculty of reason; likewise, the more practiced one becomes with emotional evaluation and attention, the more seemingly spontaneous will be the display of one's emotional faculty.

purity of reason, or undermining reason's efficacy.¹⁵ Some of the philosophers charged with this oppositional view are wrongly accused; the error often lies more with the interpreter than with the figure himself (--I'm thinking of both Plato and Kant here). I'm not going to undertake to adjudicate these interpretive issues here. I won't rehearse all the reasons people have had for insisting on the dichotomous split between reason and emotion. Instead, I want to point to some of the ways in which emotions are implicated in reason and vice versa. I think I can be both brief and effective. There are just two things I want to say.

I have already gestured at the first point: much of our emotional experience has reason at its core. In the act of feeling, we exercise long-tutored judgments about what to feel and how to interpret our circumstances. For example, we must adduce reasons to determine whether anger is appropriate here, whether an injury truly has been inflicted, whether it was intentional, whether the injury is serious or minor, and much more. Getting emotions off the ground requires the exercise of reason. In my observation, one of the most common responses to the question, "How do you feel about that?" is hesitation, often followed by multiplication. First, we are stopped short, considering just what we do feel. We have to *think* about it. Then we attempt to answer: "I am angry... and disappointed... and worried... and embarrassed." We rarely feel just one thing. In the effort to figure out what we feel, we employ concepts, we think, we make inferences, we make judgments, we evaluate the situation at hand. Of course, we don't always reason *well*, and hence we don't always fare well emotionally. But the having of emotions requires us to perceive the world in certain ways and such perception is framed by capacities centrally associated with the faculty of reason.¹⁶ So it goes with love. The act of falling in love involves one in thinking about the beloved's qualities, about the excitement, novelty, interest, or opportunity he or she brings to one's life, and about one's own desires, aims, outlook, and other relationships. How we think about such things, how we evaluate them, is an experience framed by reason-giving activity.

Second, much of what we reason about in ordinary life has emotion at its core. In understanding our personal relationships as well as the larger social world, our emotions are central navigational instruments. Love, fear, shame, embarrassment, anger, guilt, joy, anxiety, disgust, sadness... these are integral to our understanding of what is happening around us; they provide us

¹⁵ See Lloyd (1984) for a discussion of the opposition of reason and emotion and the parallel construction of the opposition between male and female in Western philosophy. Hall (2005) contends that passion and reason are interconnected, perhaps even "effectively indistinguishable" (p. 15).

¹⁶ See Nussbaum, *op. cit.*

with information about motivations, behaviors, and the nature of events. But the world does not come to us pre-labeled; we must reason our way to an understanding of which emotions are in play or should be. We deliberate about how to understand our social situations, how to interpret others' behaviors, what to do with our lives, or what to do on a Sunday afternoon. These deliberations involve us in thinking about how we feel and how we ought to feel about what other people say and do, about what we have said and done, about what all that means for the future and for our understanding of the past, which informs our outlook on the future. We believe, as we deliberate, ruminate, and reason, that there are better and worse ways of understanding all of this, more and less appropriate or accurate or precise "takes" to have on the events or the situation, better and worse decisions to be made, and more and less reasonable outlooks to sustain. We are really *reasoning* about how to feel, which emotions to sustain, or foster, or own up to. Our reasoning is not just *about* our emotions, it also *affects* our emotions: it propels us toward certain emotions and away from others. Though many philosophers have said that reason is motivationally inert, I think this is all wrong.¹⁷ Thinking about what we feel, reasoning about emotions, often changes our motivational psychology. I will not go so far as to say that reason and emotion are the same thing, but neither are they opposites. Rather, the picture I recommend sees reason and emotion as interlaced faculties.

It's time to summarize the view I've been defending. Emotions are more than mere feelings to which we are passively subjected. Emotions are constructed through rational processes of perception, judgment, and evaluation. Further, reason is often directly employed in the service of defining emotions, narrating their role in our lives and relationships, and interpreting the nature of social events. Though they feel intensely personal, they are also inherently social: the contours of particular emotions are shaped by cultural norms and expectations; emotional experience arises through dynamic feedback from other people; and which emotions we are susceptible to is a matter of the possibilities delimited by the cultural context we live in.¹⁸ Given these ideas about emotions in general, let us think now about how we as a society view erotic love.

¹⁷ David Hume is usually cited as offering support for the idea that reason is motivationally inert, being incapable of choosing or preferring without the support of passion. See Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II.

¹⁸ This last point is perhaps best supported by the anthropologist Catherine Lutz (1988), whose work explains how an emotion can be articulated and specified through cultural practices, including linguistic practice.

Love as Contemporary Social Practice

To understand love as a social practice, we have to look at how love functions in society. We have to ask what love *does*, what it effects or accomplishes, how it directs our energies and attention, how it contributes to the organization of society. To see love as a social practice, we do not have to quit thinking about it as an emotion. Instead, we have to learn to see emotions *as* social practices; we have to see how emotions function in our discourses, institutions, associations, politics, and economics. To see love as a social practice is not to say that there was a time before love, but to think of it as an emotion that operates differently in different socio-historical contexts.¹⁹ We have to think about how individual experiences of love are part of larger social designs and how the ideas we have about love as an emotion play into these designs. A thoroughgoing cultural analysis of love as social practice could fill volumes. Here, I will introduce a few features of the contemporary social practice of love in America, centered on marriage. I focus the discussion on marriage because marriage is widely considered to be the destination of erotic love.

Erotic love holds a central place in the lives of most people in our society. Most people aspire to marry, most do, and love is the most-often cited reason for marriage and considered the most important reason for marriage today.²⁰ The connection between love and marriage represents a sea-change in attitudes when compared to the 18th and 19th centuries, when marriage was sought primarily as a means for women to achieve financial and material security. Laws of coverture forbade their ownership of property or custody of their own children, and access to education and the professions was prohibited or greatly restricted for women.²¹ For men, marriage offered access to free and licit sex and to unpaid domestic labor, and the opportunity to create legal heirs to their property. Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Margaret Fuller all had to *argue* for the idea,

¹⁹ The view I am adopting is influenced by Lutz (1988) and by Foucault, who is also a crucial theoretical resource in Lutz's work. Accordingly, the emotion, love, alters with its social context, taking on new meanings, promulgating new norms, and functioning differently as discourses change over time. Thus, love as a social practice has a genealogy. Others have done some of this genealogical work. See for example, Denis De Rougemont (1940) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949).

²⁰ In the U.S., eighty-eight percent of the general public said that love is a "very important reason to get married." This is a larger percentage than any other reason for marrying, putting love above such considerations as having children (49%), financial stability (28%), and legal rights and benefits (23%). Half of adults aged 18 or older were married in the U.S. in 2016. See Geiger and Livingston (2018).

²¹ Stephanie Coontz provides a comprehensive history of changes in marriage in the West in her book *Marriage, A History* (2006).

then considered rather radical, that marriage should be based on love and equality.²² Importantly, they believed that genuine love required equality, a view still in need of greater specification and defense. If there was love in marriage in the 18th or 19th centuries, it was a happy accident, not an expected outcome let alone a motivating reason.

Today, Americans marry for love—or so they think. Arguably, they really marry for much the same reasons that people did in the 18th and 19th centuries. We are stuck with the legacy of this earlier form of marriage: Women still do more domestic work than men no matter how many hours they work outside the home or what their income²³, making marriage attractive to men who benefit from women’s housekeeping, childcare, and eldercare services. Women earn less than men²⁴ and are still, therefore, in positions of relative dependency on their male partners, especially for child-support, making marriage more-or-less compulsory. Women are still discriminated against in hiring and promotion²⁵, limiting their opportunities for professional advancement, meaning that marriage provides both an economic bolster for women and a potential source of personal fulfillment, which they are often denied at work. Women have less property and smaller assets to leave to their children and are more likely to live in poverty than men; again, for women there is a clear economic incentive to marry. Today, most Americans still believe that a man’s primary responsibility as a husband is providing financial support, and there is abiding cultural ambivalence about women with young children working outside the home. Last but not least, though pornography has replaced prostitution as the primary alternative to marital sex for men, marriage remains the site of free and licit sex. (As with men’s use of prostitution in the 19th century, women today generally look the other way, denying the full extent of men’s use of pornography and its effects on their sexuality.²⁶) In other words, the gender roles of earlier centuries continue to inform our current expectations of married life.

²² See Wollstonecraft (1792), Mill (1869), and Fuller (1845).

²³ For some relevant data, see Parker and Wang (2013) and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 27, 2017.

²⁴ See Graf, et al. (2018)

²⁵ Studies and data about gender discrimination abound. For some useful information, see Kim Parker and Funk (2017).

²⁶ Although the numbers vary with various studies of pornography use, the basic picture that emerges is this: a large percentage (possibly a majority) of American men look at pornography; more men use pornography than women, by a significant margin; men look at porn more frequently than women; women underestimate the extent of their husbands’ or boyfriends’ consumption of pornography; most women who do use pornography use it with a male partner, not alone; men begin looking at pornography very young (average age of first use is 11 years old); and many people look at pornography while at work. For related discussions of porn, see Gail Dines (2010) and Carroll and Willoughby (2017). Evidence, as well as common sense, suggests that men’s attitudes and expectations about sex and

Although the laws of coverture have been repealed, their effects linger. As late as the 1980s in the United States, married women needed their husband's agreement (or name) to obtain a credit card, open a bank account, get a loan, and obtain a mortgage or a passport. The impact of such practices on women's material and psychological independence should not be underestimated; they have lasting effects on women's ability to fund their own education or business ventures and to construct lives of their own. In addition, they have significant generational effects on family dynamics. The laws of coverture have not been replaced with laws or social policies that address women's needs. Negative restrictions were removed, but few positive policies were generated to assist women or to redress gender-based inequalities. In the U.S. (unlike many other Western nations) there is no legally-mandated, paid maternity leave or paternity leave; affordable childcare is practically non-existent; we do not have universal healthcare to ensure the welfare of infants and children. Eldercare is a serious problem that falls largely on the shoulders of women, and workplace policies do little to remove obstacles to women's equal participation and advancement. Even the organization of the public-school schedule has shifted very little in response to women's greater participation in the workforce. It is still assumed that one parent, typically the mother (because her job doesn't pay as much or offer as much opportunity for advancement), will be available at 2:30 in the afternoon to look after the children when they return from school.

In sum, the material and structural incentives to marry have remained largely the same as they were the 19th century; but as women gained greater legal equality and economic opportunity, these incentives went underground and were replaced by the simple monolith of love: we marry for love. What used to be mandated by law, now wears the guise of love. Though the law no longer requires it, most American women (about 80%) take their husband's name when they marry.²⁷ They say they do it for love (or for convenience). Notably, men say they see it as a symbol, even a proof, of a wife's love. But apparently it is a one-way gesture: it is extremely rare for a man to take a woman's name as a symbol or proof of *his* love, or for any other reason. The "convenience" women see in adopting their husband's name is apparently a convenience mostly for him.

women are influenced by their consumption of porn. Men's consumption of porn while at work has important implications for women at work (see Tara Price 2013). There is not space in this paper to do justice to the various ways in which men's pornography consumption affects erotic love and the social practice of love. However, I speculate that it contributes to the hostility women encounter at work and to the sexual and marital dissatisfaction of spouses.

²⁷ Miller and Willis, (2015).

Love also functions as the rationale for other aspects of gender division and inequality. Given the social and economic realities, when women “choose” to work part-time instead of full-time, to devote themselves to childcare and eldercare, and to find personal fulfillment in family life, these choices are often represented as an exercise of individual liberty (the bedrock of American political discourse). They are further justified as practical and sensible. However, their being practical is a function of the restricted options available to women under conditions of inequality and inadequate social policies. Women who focus on family may well love what they do and embrace the life they have. The better part of wisdom and personal happiness may reside in just this ability to make the most of what you’ve got and to learn to love what you have rather than pine for what is not possible. Nevertheless (she persisted)²⁸, there is a social practice here that is defining our possibilities. And part of this practice goes by the name love. Women may say it is because they love being mothers that they choose to curtail their careers or that it is because they love their families that they choose to devote more of their resources to the security and well-being of their loved ones. In a world that was not structured by gender inequality, the reasons provided by love might be noble and fully justifying. But in our world, the association between love and gender roles is highly suspect. Men’s love and devotion to their wives and children is rarely offered as a reason for *them* to choose part-time work, forego a career, or recede from civic engagement in favor of full-time homemaking and caregiving. *Their* love is not perceived as incompatible with a wide array of career choices. In fact, their economic prospects have, historically, benefitted from marriage: American “breadwinner” laws gave men higher wages than women on the assumption that they had wives and children to support. There is no cultural ambivalence (in the United States) about *fathers* working full-time. Love becomes a rationale for a way of organizing social and economic life that works to the economic and political detriment of women. And because gender is absolutely not a zero-sum game, if it works to the detriment of women, it also works to the detriment of men, albeit in different ways. Men suffer from the deprivation of time spent with their children and aging parents, missing out on the personal rewards that often accompany caretaking experiences.

²⁸ “Nevertheless, she persisted” was famously uttered by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in 2017, referring to Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren’s unwillingness to be silenced while giving a speech critical of the Republican nominee for Attorney General. McConnell’s remark was intended to defame Warren, but instead became a feminist slogan, which I happily employ here.

Men and women entering marriage may not be thinking openly about these reasons for getting married, but no matter how much they profess that love is their motive, they are responding to social norms and cultural ideals in which marriage functions in the ways I have described. Arguably, our gender roles are geared primarily toward this end: boys and girls must become men and women, masculine and feminine, so that they can fall in love, marry, and perpetuate patriarchal and capitalist social and economic arrangements. (Let's not overlook the way the patriarchal history of marriage has worked in concert with capitalism: marriage, laws of coverture, and numerous labor laws and social policies, have restricted women's participation in the paid workforce, allowing men to accrue economic and social capital at the expense of women. The economy depends upon a supply of workers, who must be birthed, nourished, and educated before being eligible for work. However, the women who birth and care for children are given paltry economic support and little chance to participate in public policy-making. The more women invest in the labors of love, the less chance they have to accrue capital let alone to participate in civic labor, in the work of making a just polity.)

As Cheshire Calhoun has remarked, marriage is not just one, but "*the* normative ideal for how sexuality, companionship, affection, personal economics, and child rearing should be organized".²⁹ Everywhere we look, marriage is held up as the ultimate expression of love: real love culminates in marriage. Importantly, this idea was central to the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 case that established the legal right of same-sex couples to marry.³⁰ The cultural preeminence of love, modeled on heterosexual marriage, became—somewhat surprisingly—the rallying point for gay and lesbian activists. To be left out of marriage was to be left out of socially-sanctioned love. Clearly, gays and lesbians fell in love and felt love, as an emotion, but without full access to the social practice of love via marriage, their love was believed to be inferior, incomplete, or invisible. Love, as an emotion, is given direction through its participation in the social, economic, and material arrangements of modern marriage. To fall in love is generally taken to be a movement toward marriage; love thus participates in sustaining a particular form of social organization.

²⁹ Calhoun (2000): 110.

³⁰ The Court's majority opinion claims marriage is uniquely valuable: "The right to marry is fundamental because it supports a two-person union unlike any other in its importance to the committed individuals." It further links marriage to lofty ideals: "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family." And in case these exalted sentiments were not enough, the opinion closes with the suggestion that unmarried persons are "condemned to live in loneliness." *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015): 13, 28.

Thinking of erotic love as an overwhelming passion that just happens to a person seems to leave individual agency out of the picture. Seeing love as a natural force, rather than a socially-mediated and culturally-defined experience, exempts it from both personal and political scrutiny. Yet a rather astonishing amount of cultural energy goes into propagating our ideas about love: films with action heroes motivated by love or heroines seeking love; romance novels (34% of the overall fiction market³¹); sitcoms; reality TV programs showcasing bachelors or bachelorettes; countless self-help books devoted to helping people become loveable or be receptive to love; tens of thousands of marriage counselors and psychotherapists devoted to sustaining marriage as we know it; politicians and think-tanks invested in perpetually revitalizing the heterosexual, monogamous, nuclear family unit, etc. The cultural scripts are clear that, especially for women, love is *the* defining storyline of one's life.³²

I've emphasized the fact that erotic love propels lovers into marriage, which is conceived as the natural destination of love, and that this trajectory has important social, political, and economic consequences as it structures family and work. Our acceptance of love as a motivating force blinds us to these consequences. We do not stop to ask why marriage ought to be love's destination or if there are alternative ways of enacting love that might produce more egalitarian and just social arrangements. Erotic love is held far above friendship, community, meaningful citizenship, and, for women, above productive work. One might think the evident failures of erotic love would disillusion us. But, we are in the grip of a romanticized notion of love. Despite the prevalence of divorce, adultery, and domestic violence, not to mention ordinary forms of spousal dissatisfaction, including sexual dissatisfaction, we insist that love walk down the aisle: serial marriage is now the norm. Our romanticized view of love is promoted on the basis of the idea that love, as an emotion, is spontaneous, powerful, natural, a-rational, individual, and beyond our control. Thus, when we fall in love, we feel ourselves to be powerless and the direction forward is inevitable.

³¹ Romance fiction sells primarily to women, who are 82% of the readership. Source: Romance Writers of America (2018).

³² Shulamith Firestone (1970) argued, rather trenchantly, that love was a distraction for women. As women devoted themselves to finding husbands, marrying, and sustaining families, they used their vital intellectual, creative, and political resources to support men rather than their own initiatives and projects. Simone de Beauvoir, among others, also saw romantic love, under conditions of gender inequality, as an obstacle to women's agency and autonomy. De Beauvoir, *op. cit.* More recently, Laura Kipnis (2003) has denounced monogamous relationships as stultifying for both men and women.

I do not believe we ought to forsake the experience of erotic love as an emotion. In a culture more and more mediated by technology, structured by large-scale bureaucratic institutions, and built upon the capitalist exploitation of workers, and yet insistent on individualism and liberty, it is no wonder that we seek, in love, a reprieve from the alienation and anonymity we experience on a daily basis. In romantic love, we find the potential for genuine connection, understanding, and ethical engagement, in addition to the exhilarating passion that can lift us out of the mundane frustrations of modern life. Romantic love is often experienced as a kind of balm and consolation—and for good reason. Yet, I think that the more we emphasize the centrality of erotic love (especially the dyadic relationship of spouses), the more we weaken the opportunities for other kinds of loving connection and community. We would need romantic love less if we invested more, as a society, in bonds of loving friendship, loving work, and loving civic engagement.³³ These other forms of love would be especially useful for women in breaking through the barriers of patriarchy; for, the more women’s attention is glued to their (male) partners and children, the less they understand the situation of women and the less opportunity they have for creating constructive relationships with other women, which have the potential to change social structures, law, policy, and workplace norms.

I’ve tried to build, rather quickly, the scaffolding that is needed to see how love has become a modern masquerade for old gender norms and social arrangements, especially linked to marriage. When women make decisions about marriage, childcare, and career in the name of love, they call upon an apparently unassailable motive: love is good, love is personal, love is politically innocent. Seeing love *only* as emotional attachment and not as social practice makes it difficult to understand women’s choices as circumscribed by larger political, economic, and institutional policies. Once we see love as a social practice, we can begin to take personal and political action to change the ways in which we love and the expectations we have for love. The question is not whether love is good or bad, but rather how we might best configure love in order to achieve human flourishing and how love can participate in constructing justice. We must reinvent love; I hope we will revolutionize it.

³³ bell hooks (2001) remarks, “Awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination. Culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations—should and could have as their foundation a love ethic” (p. 87). Like hooks, I see positive potential for love to reshape social practices.

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