

## **Love and the City**

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What I want to discuss is love and its location in the city, but I am going to do so through a slightly circuitous route. I'm going to begin by touching on the relationship between love and space, framing the question of love and the city in terms of how lovers create a common world between them. After discussing the primacy of some spatial concepts to the concept of love, I want to explore love's location in the city in the spaces and places of leisure, a sphere that straddles both the public and private. I then want to suggest that love's productive location in the sphere of leisure both troubles love and problematizes the public/private divide.

It could be argued that if love is understood as an entity unto itself, separate from the vicissitudes of culture, then in no way should love and space be implicated with each other. However, what I want to argue is that space is actually constitutive of the love relationship. By this I mean that we cannot think about love apart from thinking about space. For example many of the metaphors that we use in English describe the love experience in spatial terms. We imply a movement through space when we "fall in love," when we talk about "merging" with another, when our relationship "moves forward," or when our relationship "breaks up."

There are countless metaphors of love that specifically draw on the language of the *world*. Frequently in the love literature, there are references to a shared cosmos, an affective universe, or, as the title of one article put it, “Really Being in Love Means Wanting to Live in a Different World.” As Helene Cixous writes,

“We must realize that to love is not of this world, but of another planet...  
[W]hen we love, we are subject to a double regime: that of the ordinary world with its economy and its common laws, and simultaneously that of the singular planet where everything is different. And what is impossible in this world is at the same moment possible in the sphere of love...” (Cixous, 111).

We use this language of the world so easily that it frequently goes uninterrogated; instead, the language appears to be completely natural.

Another powerful spatial image found in both popular and intellectual texts is that of the sphere. Everything from Hegel’s *Early Christian Writings* to bell hooks’ *All About Love* is highly evocative of spherical images. But the most famous example is the tale related by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. In that tale, all humans were spherical with four arms and four legs poking out of us. We moved by rolling along, doing cartwheels. Commentators such as Bruce Fink have argued that the love fantasy of unity, harmony and one-ness can be traced back precisely to that speech. Moreover, in ancient scientific thought, the sphere was exalted as the “shape that was considered most perfect, most harmonious, lacking in nothing” (Fink, 29).

However, despite attempts that have made to subvert the powerful imagery of the sphere (Lacan’s “Klein bottle” and Mobius strip, as noted by Fink; Deleuze and Guattari’s fondness for the rhizome), in dominant discourses of love, the sphere reigns

supreme. This is of course, in part because of the fantasy of one-ness and unity. But it is also because love is clearly a process and a problem of inclusion and exclusion, *which is precisely what makes love a political problem*. Underpinning the spatial images, metaphors and concepts that are embedded in various love discourses is the exclusionary and exclusive configuration of the love relationship. Thus these spatial images are, as I have argued, constitutive of the love relationship.

Now, this inherent problem of love is not exclusive to the relationship that is a “community of two.” However, the love literature almost always conceptualizes romantic love strictly in terms of the community of two, and this is the literature I’m focussing on. The political problem of the community of two is not exactly a new one. Freud, for example, conceptualized love strictly in terms of two people and identified this as precisely a problem for civilization. In a love relationship, “no *room* is left for any interest in the surrounding world” (Freud, 37). Thus, there is clear a tension between the love of two and the love of community (Freud, 67).

The point must be raised here that part of what makes the image of the sphere so dominant in both popular and scholarly love texts is that the sphere arouses the image of gender complementarity, a concept that informs institutional heterosexuality. A significant problem found in historical and contemporary discourses is that “love” usually signifies a monogamous, adult, heterosexual, couple relationship. Frequently, the underpinning assumptions about appropriate masculinity and femininity go un-problematized. This problem is so extensive that, just as Cheshire Calhoun argues that the term “woman” excludes the lesbian subject, it could easily be argued that the unqualified term “love” actually excludes the queer subject. Calhoun, who is riffing on Wittig’s claim

that “Lesbians are not women,” argues that this is indeed the case because the category “woman” is the result of institutionalized heterosexuality (Calhoun, 205). Similarly, throughout most mainstream discourses and modes of representation, “love” always actually means “heterosexual love.” Of course, in the post-gay 90s, we now have niche markets that support all kinds of representations of queer love, and the space of the gay ghetto marks out a space where expressions of queer love are freely made. But in the vast majority of popular and scholarly texts, the unqualified term “love” itself signifies heterosexuality.

In my own work, I have begun to use Giddens’ model of “confluent” love, rather than romantic love. It differs from romantic love in that it presumes equality, it does not rely on notions of “forever and always,” it may be monogamous, but only to the extent that it serves the needs of both partners, and it has no specific connection to heterosexuality (Giddens, 61-63). However, because I am working with those very texts whose default position is “heterosexual, romantic love,” I find myself having to go back and forth between Giddens’ notion of love relationships, which in many ways better describes many contemporary love relationships, and the ideas of romantic love which imbue contemporary love texts.

Having said that, I want to argue, following Eva Illouz, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, straight and queer love is located firmly in the realm of leisure, which straddles both the public and private spheres. Moreover, romance has become to be associated with affluence, and so the meaning of romance has changed historically to reflect an atmosphere and a setting that is “conducive to certain feelings. The possibility of

romance came to depend on the correct, external mise-en-scene: theaters, dance halls, restaurants, settings seen in movies and advertising images” (Illouz, 1997, 77).

According to Illouz, romance is a secular behaviour that is full of ritual. The boundary formed around and the world created by the community of two is produced by certain rituals enacted by the lovers. An interaction is “romantic” when temporal, emotional, spatial, and artifactual boundaries are in place (113). Romantic time is usually, “on the margins of the productive and reproductive workday” (114). The time boundaries coincide with the spatial ones: they mark out seclusion and typically move away from domestic space. “Even when lovers find themselves in the midst of a crowd of people (as, for example, on the street or in a restaurant), they symbolically construct their space as private and isolated from the surrounding people” (115). Artifactual boundaries include objects that are different from those used in everyday life, such as champagne, flowers and candlelight. Finally, emotional boundaries include the idea that “the romantic feeling is expected to be different, unique”; otherwise, the feeling of love itself is jeopardized (117). All of these things indicate that the signifier “romance” is opposed to dailiness, routine, effort and practicality. Romance is, then, a “staged reality,” a staged space that is demarcated by the use of artifacts, self-contained units of space and time, and the exchange of ritual words of love (120).

Lovers, then, form boundaries around themselves, create their separate world, through various devices and discursive strategies. Part of this discursive strategy takes place in what Murphy refers to as “micropublics,” public places where lovers create spaces of privacy--the restaurant, the café, the park, the cinema, the drive-in. (Murphy, 73). In his “Surrealism” essay, Walter Benjamin laments “that most uncomprehended

room in the old Princess Café. It was the back room on the first floor, with couples in the blue light. We called it the ‘anatomy school’; it was the last restaurant designed for love” (Benjamin, 183).

By suggesting that love is produced and located in the city’s spaces of consumption, I do not want to suggest that love is not or cannot be produced in the domestic sphere. The invaluable work feminist theorists have done on caring labour in the home, identifying the emotional work women do as loving work proves this beyond a doubt. The point here is in the era of late capitalism, the idea of romance—gay and straight—is spatialized into the sphere of leisure.

The ironic part is that history of heterosexual dating practices in North America reveals that the commercialization of romance actually began with the working class. This is because the working class could not follow the dating pattern set out by the urban middle and upper classes of the late nineteenth century. Rather than hosting “gentleman callers” in their cramped homes, young working class people would literally “go out.” Dates would occur in relatively inexpensive and accessible places, like the movie theatre—places that would provide privacy and intimacy, which the home could not (Illouz, 1997, 59). By the 1930s, the middle class had softened its position on films being immoral, and middle class youth began to follow this dating pattern as well. Thus the romantic encounter moved from the home to public, anonymous locales. This made “consumption an inherent element of any romantic encounter” (54). Thus begins the “commodification of romance,” where these changing conceptions of intimacy and sex were defined by business and technologies of leisure (the car, the movie theatre) (54).

Modern definitions of love rendered it a public interaction at the same time that they suffused its inner experience with privateness. By relocating the couple to the public realm of consumption, the new dating system restructured the boundaries between private and public spaces by creating ‘islands of privacy’ in the midst of the public realm. And these islands were consolidated by new technologies of leisure. (Illouz, 56).

However, love’s straddling of public and private spheres is not always easy. Peter Murphy argues that the paradox of love is that it is precisely an intimate relationship occurring in public. “Love makes its presence felt at the intersection of the public and the private. It is the most public dimension of intimate life...Love, unlike the purely sexual liaison, cannot keep itself secret” (80). Paradoxically, love requires a public expression. Without this, lovers cannot produce a common world between them (82). The public character of love is inherent in love; while lovers’ expressions are private, “the force of their union is public. This is why lovers come to public places: the dancehall, the park, the café and the promenade. Love is a private relation that has a public face” (84).

However, in some sense, Murphy’s take on love in the public realm is naïve. He argues that the boundary created around the lovers is supported by the general public around them. Lovers create an exclusive, “common world” between the two of them; onlookers who do not wish to trespass in that world have an instinct to “protect lovers, and we do so by protecting their private world” (85). To do so, onlookers avert their gaze. “They respect the intimacy of those whose drama nonetheless unfolds on a public stage” (Murphy, 85). At the same time, Murphy insists that acts of love involve risk because love “circles around the prohibited” (Murphy, 70). As a result, “Love always risks

generating social disapproval or social anxiety, and yet it courts such risks because love's acts are public. They have a public form" (70).

What Murphy fails to take into account is that love is more dangerous for some than others. Outside of the gay ghetto, the boundaries of romantic gestures are firmly policed by public eyes. As geographer David Bell argues, public space is "heterosexualised" (305). The public gaze is meted out much more harshly for those lovers who are not heterosexual or conforming to appropriate gender norms. No eyes are averted there, just the desire to push the boundary of this love back into the private, hidden sphere.

Taking the opposite tack from Murphy is Hannah Arendt, who has a very particular notion in mind when she refers to "the public." For Arendt, love cannot exist in the public sphere (which to her is equated to the political sphere, in the manner of the Greek *polis*). This is not because love is irrelevant, but because love is "killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public." Without her identification of the ever-shrinking public sphere with politics, she would not be able to argue that, "Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world" (Arendt, 51-2). Love can't exist in the political, public sphere because it is "unworldly, and it is for this reason...that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces" (242).

Where Murphy and Arendt do agree, however, is that love has a world-making quality. In a line of thinking that seems similar to Hegel's, Arendt suggests that the child born as a result of a love relationship, is "love's product," and is representative of the

world that the lovers create. She refers to this as the “world-creating faculty of love.” The heterosexism here is obvious. But Murphy also refers to the world-making capacity of love. He holds the common world as “the third element that stands between two lovers” (86), which is reminiscent of Irigaray’s idea of “I love-to-you,” an expression which maintains the space between two lovers, thereby maintaining the subjectivity of each. For Murphy, the social element that is world making is the dance between lovers which takes place in public spaces.

Now, whether we agree with Murphy that “lovers come to love each other” through the public medium (84), or whether we agree with Arendt that love is killed when it enters the public sphere, what I would like to suggest is that love problematizes the public/private divide, precisely because it brings intimacy and sentiment into the public sphere. I am aligning the figure of love with David Bell’s figure of the pervert who blurs the public/private distinction. To Bell, the pervert—specifically “the practitioner of public (homo)sex and the same-sex sadomasochist” is situated “exactly on the slash of this public/private split, irreducible to either domain” (312). I would like to suggest that the figure of love is also situated on the slash of the public/private split. The figure of love is an otherwise empty signifier, with no fixed identity; it is a temporary identity that any one of us can take on at any point in our (adult) lives. The figure of love appears outside of formal state regulation; that is, there is no marriage or legal intervention involved to appear on the city street as a figure of love. However, the figure of love is subject to vectors of power, prohibition, moral regulation, rude stares, etc. And while I cannot claim that love threatens the collapse of both domains, as Bell’s pervert does, love certainly troubles the slash between them. Love’s messy bleeding into the public sphere,

exemplified through the overwhelming volume of romance-based reality TV shows, causes horror among certain segments of our society. What is perhaps more horrifying is the state reaching into what we think of as the private sphere—perhaps best exemplified through the Bush administration’s decision to devote 1.5 billion dollars to an initiative to promote marriage, particularly among working class couples.

In drawing this comparison between the pervert and the figure of love, I do not intend to exclude the pervert from the sphere of love, or to suggest that love is incompatible with perversion. As Bell coyly notes, “there’s more love, more gunderstanding, in many a men’s toilet than in half the marriage beds” (Quoted in Bell, 314). And, he suggests, there are “lessons in love that could be learnt from the pervert” (315).

To sum up, I first advanced the argument that concepts of space inhere in our concepts of love. Second, I suggest that both lovers and the public contribute to the production (and destruction) of boundaries around lovers, contributing to their establishment of a separate world. Third, love’s productive location in the sphere of leisure, straddling the private and public spheres, is a troubling and troubled location for both queer and straight love. I wanted to offer the idea of the figure of love in order to start thinking about that. Ultimately, I hope I have shown a couple of ways in which we can think about the close relationship between love’s worlds and the spaces and places of the city.

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