

“Romance In the Time of Coronavirus”

Mary Harrod, Suzanne Leonard and Diane Negra



On May 1, 2020, the editors of the *New York Times* Modern Love column somewhat cheekily revealed that by the end of March, they had already received 78 submissions—on slightly different topics, presumably—entitled “Love in the Time of Coronavirus.”¹ Meanwhile, as the editors of the forthcoming anthology *Imagining ‘We’ in the Age of ‘I’: Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture*, we too have been somewhat obsessively tracking the signs and shape of covid intimacy culture, and toward that end culling articles about the pressures, workarounds, and possibilities presented by a state of forced social distancing/isolation. Enhanced technologization and mediation are of course the key developments with practices such as video first dates and nude selfies drawing notice. Clearly, the question of how to safely but also pleurably engage in romance and sex has (re-)emerged as a matter deserving urgent attention.

Needless to say, long before the virus hit, we had been thinking about the ways that interpersonal and intimate communication were considered to be in crisis. In the early twenty-first century shifts in gender and other roles, work and mobility patterns and especially technology have provoked interest in perceived threats to social bonding on a global scale.

Resultingly, our volume explores the fracturing of couple culture but also its persistence, challenging increasingly latently accepted perceptions of decline. Elements of the social landscape that inform our analysis include the explosion of social media, the diversification of identity norms, and a context of volatility in gender relations post #MeToo in an era of far-right Western populism, with links to dramatically intensified socio-economic inequality, and a rising marriage age.

In the pre-COVID era individualism appeared more entrenched than ever, and social media were widely perceived to have reduced the search for love to little more than contractual exchange, whereas fictional media elevated togetherness to ever loftier heights. The advent of COVID has nuanced this split between solidarity and mutuality imagined through media, on the one hand, contrasted with the realities of atomization, on the other. In that spirit, we want to offer four examples of what we see as emergent shifts in cultures of romance, brought on by the current pandemic.

“Love the One You’re With” Retrenchment

In a moment where crossing state or national borders merits suspicion (and such journeys have been outright prohibited in a number of hotspot countries), we’re being encouraged to stick with the partnerships we have. Newspaper and magazine pieces emphasize that breaking up has become harder, more cumbersome and more high stakes in the coronavirus era. Articles like “When It’s Either Your Ex, or Nobody, for Months,” stress the value of salvaging couple security even if romantic partnership breaks down, in this instance offering a first-person account whose author mourns relationship loss but writes of herself and her ex that “No longer romantic partners, we had become pandemic partners.” Retrenchment has taken on a toxic valence for those in abusive relationships, with global concerns being expressed about the rise in domestic violence during forced isolation.

The Resurgence of the Romantic “We”

Though various media forms have historically privileged both romance and sex, the latter has long had a complex and shifting relationship to romantic discourse. Pandemic conditions might be seen to further destabilize the fluctuating relationship between sex and romance given the new barriers to physical intimacy between all but established and co-housed couples. Themes of separation, reunion and the exigencies of intimate communication, might be expected to take center stage at such a time and the success of recent forms of “pandemic television” such as *Run* and *Normal People* would seem to attest to their resonance. We would note that a deep vein of media coverage highlights the creativity and resourcefulness of couples who’ve found ways to get married during the crisis. As we write, HBO Max is rolling out *Love Life*, an anthology series about romantic encounters promoted with the tag line “explore the journey from first love to lasting love.”

Meanwhile, a related concern has been with the need to inject romance into quotidian household routines: long term partners are encouraged to have “date nights” at home as part of a broader enforcement of separation between work, household chores, and care giving duties. While virtual babysitting might be a new option the greater likelihood is that such new dilemmas carry the expectation for more relationship work by women.

The Promises/Ambivalences of Technology

A core theme in pandemic media is the availability of technology to manage despair, loneliness and loss. Accompanying this has been a migration into intimacy practices that were until recently a little taboo. Betraying an obvious nostalgia for the material body, sexting has nevertheless become newly sanctioned as a way to hook “into our desires,” according to a sexologist quoted in *The Guardian*. At the same time, ambivalences about the mediation of relationships via technology remain: the use of recording technologies has been a source of fascination/consternation in relation to the middle-class marriage in films ranging from *Sex, Lies*

and Videotape (1989) to *Sex Tape* (2014). A related piece of pandemic media which navigates these promises and ambivalences is Sam Mendes' *Dating in Place*, a documentary comprised entirely of participants' first (zoom) dates.

The Construction of Singledom as Problem/Loss

Finally, pandemic media struggle to account for the single person, drawing on a long representational history of the single woman as a social enigma. Singlehood, it is often presumed, heightens the deprivations of lockdown culture and single people, now a majority population in the US, consistently figure as non-normative, disadvantaged, even perverse and abject.

¹ Running for fifteen years, *Modern Love* now comprises a franchise that has extended into book, podcast and tv series forms.