

Love Stories: Youth Aspirations & the New Ethics of Intimacy

**A Conference Sponsored by
Boston University Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs: CURA,
the Department of Anthropology & the Henry R. Luce Foundation**

This conference is the product of a graduate seminar, Global Intimacies: Sex, Gender, and Contemporary Sexualities held in the spring of 2016. Papers are based on original research conducted the summer of 2016 and explore shifting conceptualizations of love and romance and their expression in contemporary practices of dating and courtship. Recent studies have documented how in many areas of the world, young people are expressing a new interest in romantic love and companionate relationships different from that associated with their parents and grandparents (cf. Hirsch & Wardlowe 2006, Lipsett 2004, Padilla et al 2007, Zigon 2013). This new interest is reflected in a shift in marriage patterns away from conjugal matches arranged by familial elders to matches involving a greater degree of individual choice. These shifts in marriage patterns have been linked to both demographic as well as socio-cultural transformations – among them the shift away from agricultural production toward wage labor; higher education, urbanization, and the growth of a new middle class; the association of new marital practices with ideas of progress; and a focus on individualized achievement and consumption as markers of success.

The papers in this conference compare the romantic aspirations and dating experiences of educated, middle-class youth in Indonesia, India, Iran, Morocco, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan, as well as those of Iranian students in the US and American “sugar babies,” within the context of globalizing discourses of sexuality, consumption, and ethico-religious self-making. They examine both recent socioeconomic changes that have supported the possibility of higher levels of education and social mobility (especially for young women) as well as the role of modern technologies and new spaces of leisure and consumption such as cell phones, internet cafés, malls, and coffee shops in the transformation of romantic expectations and dating patterns (cf. Hasso 2010, Deeb & Harb 2013).

Against the backdrop of on-going religious and ethical debates, papers take up accompanying shifts in gender roles and expectations and consider to what degree and in what ways young men’s experience might differ from that of young women. Most critically, the papers examine the possibility that the new emphasis on romance and romantic love opens a space for the expression of individual autonomy and increased gender egalitarianism.

Conference Program

9:30 – 9:50 Coffee

9:50 – 10:00 Welcome

Panel I: New Patterns of Courtship & Marriage

10:00 – 10:20 “Too Educated for Love? Women and the Marriage Market in Indonesia”
Nancy J. Smith-Hefner

10:20 – 10:40 “The New Kazakhstani Woman: Balancing Dual Expectations of Family and Career”
Laura Tourtellotte

10:40 – 11:00 “Where Does All that Cynicism Come From? Reasons behind the Pessimistic Attitudes toward Marriage among Emerging Adults in Urban Iran”

11:00 – 11:20 “Between the Mirage of Love & the Burden of Commitment: Courtship and Marriage among Iranian Youth in the US”
Paniz Edjlali

11:20 – 11:50 Discussion moderated by Laura Tourtellotte

12:00 – 12:30 Lunch

Panel II: Love, Romance & New Technologies

12:30 – 12:50 “Moroccan Romance 2.0: Upholding Traditional Religious and Gendered Norms in the Digital Era”
Jessica Lambert

12:50 – 1:10

“‘A Strange Kind of a Relationship’: New Possibilities for Thinking about and Experiencing Love in Urban North India”
Jennifer Koester

1:10 – 1:30

“Fantasy in the Sugar Bowl: Sugar Baby Narratives of Love, Money, and Agency”
Carmen Rowe

1:30 – 1:50

“Virtual Love: Technology and the Struggle for Gay Romance in Contemporary Vietnam”
Dat Nguyen

1:50 – 2:20

Discussion moderated by Jennifer Koester

2:20 – 2:30

Wrap Up