Modernity without romance?

Masculinity and desire in courtship stories told by young Papua New Guinean men

ABSTRACT
Romance has been theoretically associated with the estrangements created by modern individualism. As demonstrated in courtship stories told by young men from the Murik Lakes in Papua New Guinea, the relationship of Murik culture to modernity has not resulted in narratives that privilege a construction of courtship in which the self merges with the beloved. Desire is not defined in terms of romantic love but is set amid events that are scrupulously fixed in the foregrounds of specific times and exact locations. In these tales, representations of personhood are organized by a Homeric chronotope rather than by a romantic one. Although masculinity in Murik culture has undergone important transformations in the 20th century, its sociology has not given way to the discourse of modern individualism. [modernity, romance, masculinity, chronotopes, Bakhtin, Papua New Guinea, Sepik River, Murik]

In Euro-American discourses of romantic love, self and other seek entry into a state of emotional, erotic, and social fusion (Bataille 1962). For good reason: Male or female, the beloved is idealized as unique, the epitome of everything that is beautiful and virtuous. The beloved becomes an object of excruciating desire toward whom duty and pleasure are united and toward whom “all alienation is extinguished” (Alberoni 1983:23). Euphoria, an intensity of feeling, an acute sensitivity to the behavior of the other, heartache, buoyancy, shyness, all become figured around the actions of the beloved, imagined or otherwise (Harris 1995; Tennov 1979). When expressed as pining for merger, romantic love challenges the boundaries of the self and, therefore, threatens its integrity. A common metaphor for this kind of attraction—“falling in love”—therefore invokes its riskiness. The idealization of the beloved, which must be seen as a voluntary act by the self, is simultaneously symbolized as involuntary, for example, as a “fall” (Solomon 1981:36). It is represented as a loss of control, which may, nevertheless, be a way of entering into a utopian moment (Illouz 1997). Transcendent, romance is timeless, for now and forever. It is creative and imaginative (Singer 1966). It is equal and free. Romance propels self and other into a temporary state of total and boundless devotion, a “fading of the ‘thou’” (Weber 1958:347), a perfect refuge from the “cold skeleton hands” (Weber 1958:347) that wield impersonal quantities, calculate through means–ends rationality, and afflict banality on the everyday world (Hegel 1948).

However it is represented and whatever its background, romantic love is a strong influence in and on Euro-American societies: It has been called a “latter-day religion” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995:175), and it stands out as a powerful metaphor through which collective morality is formulated and understood (D’Andrade 1995; Featherstone 1998; Illouz 1997; Unger 1984:29; Varenne 1977:189, 204). Since the time of Plato (1996), who saw love as a desire for goodness, for the Good, for absolute beauty, there has been persistent debate in the social sciences and humanities about it. Here I am specifically interested in one part of this debate, namely, the relationship
of romantic love to the global spread of European modernity (Taylor 1999). In this article, I look at a handful of courtship tales told by young men from the Murik Lakes area, in the estuary of the Sepik River. These stories largely omit idealizations of, and a wish to merge with, the other, the features that I view as so characteristic of romance.

Theoretical debate about the position of romance in modern courtship has largely sought to explain its presence, by reference to its historical causes, functions, or influence. The main question I ask here diverges somewhat from that project and, more or less, reverses it, that is, why, despite the sway and long-term thrill of modernity, is romantic discourse absent in courtship narratives told by young men living in a particular postcolonial place and moment? What, in other words, inhibits it? My subsidiary task is, then, how to account for nonromantic images in and styles of courtship discourse, in other words, for the poetics in which young men talk about choosing their spouses.

**The theoretical importance of romance**

Historians and sociologists have argued that romantic sentiments and practices in modern Europe are exceptional (Goody 1998:98). Many historians, such as Lawrence Stone (1977, 1988; see also Elias 1994; Lewis 1936), have traced the beginnings of romantic love either to the end of the 11th century or to the start of the 12th century, when troubadours sang about the great virtue of knights’ love and heroic deeds performed for noble ladies. Imported from Muslim Spain and influenced by the Cult of the Virgin, such verse created a new view of love and self according to which amorous sentiment was no longer construed as either dangerous or tormenting but, rather, as ennobling. It was also the discourse of an upwardly mobile class of bachelor poets whose love was a perpetually frustrated fervor for the noblewomen on whom their homage was fixed (Boase 1977). Courtly love was often tragic: In the story of Tristan and Isolde, only death united the lovers and ended their betrayal (De Rougemont 1983).

By the 16th and 17th centuries, the theme of virtue in contention with hierarchy in stories of courtly love began to change and, thanks to the spread of literacy, the reach of romantic love became “quite extensive” (Stone 1988:17). Thus, Shakespeare’s 136th sonnet: “Make but my name thy love, and love that still,/And then thou lovest me, for my name is Will” (1969:1476).

Prior to the 17th and 18th centuries, Stone notes, the propertyless poor, who lacked corporate interests to protect, were already engaging in some form of love marriages, preceded by long courtships. Marriage for love began to gain broader acceptance late in the 18th century, when the ideal was incorporated into the bourgeois culture of early English capitalism, but it “was not until the romantic movement and the rise of the novel, especially the pulp novel, in the nineteenth century, that society at large accepted a new idea—that it was normal and indeed praiseworthy for young men and women to fall passionately in love” (Stone 1988:19; see also Watt 1957). Thus, historians view romance as becoming embedded in the Western heart over a period of 800 years, via the forlorn courtiers of Provence, the values of individualism, the spread of literacy, and the popular media. The major sociologists, by and large, have supported the historians (see Bertilsson 1986; Lindholm 1998; Oakes 1984). I first sketch out the glum views of Max Weber and then turn to Talcott Parsons, William Goode, and Anthony Giddens, the more optimistic functionalists, before considering the ethnography of romance, which, by and large, has not supported historians’ views.

Weber held a deeply ambivalent view of sexuality, particularly once sexuality became disconnected from religion; he feared it because he saw it as “the most irrational and thereby [the] real kernel of life” (1958:345). The rejection of otherworldly values elevated erotic love to a privileged position as the means to modern salvation. Religion had once provided a fulfilling, meaningful institution that regulated sexuality in favor of ethically oriented marriage. But the promotion of an ever more rationalized culture destroyed religiously based morality: The process of rationalization must inevitably lead to tragedy, the loss of meaning, the creation of the other as a means rather than as an end. All that remains is a desacralized form of romantic love that breaks up ordinary life like a religious conversion, except that it is experienced within the individual rather than within the community.

Functional concepts of the relationship between romantic love, the individual, and modernity are less morose. To appreciate them, one must acknowledge their roots in a Durkheimian (1964) view of the tie between economic change and the rise of individualism. As the division of labor becomes more specialized, the self becomes differentiated from society at large, that is to say, more unitary, distinct, and separated from the other. The self then becomes indivisibly linked to a notion of agency that is located in the individual who makes decisions or “owns” his or her actions. According to Emile Durkheim (1964), the emergence of an economy made up of specialists is accompanied by a decline of the culture of “the gift,” that is, the decline of society that is made up of persons (and, of course, things) whose identities are constituted as part of, rather than as opposed to, the other (Mauss 1967; Meeker et al. 1986; Strathern 1988). Individual agency then displaces agency embedded in, and arising from, the relationships of which both self and society are inextricably composed.

Functional sociology, given this framework, has sought to evaluate romantic love in two contrary ways: as either integrative or disruptive. Although a more specialized
division of labor may create individual agency, in other words, individual freedom, it may also create anomic. It may drive the self away from the other and arouse a longing for a sort of intimacy that transcends fragmentation and agency; it may arouse a longing for the romantic experience of merger. As the individual is set adrift of kinship, collective status, and religion and is thereby deprived of attachment and security, romantic love resolves a problem of identity that is caused by the very society of which it is also a symptom. In an otherwise anonymous universe, meaning and warmth may be found in the idealizations, the intrusive preoccupations, and the desire for mutuality of romantic relationships (Parsons 1955). Romantic love, put another way, may open up a line of communication that enables strangers to leave their impersonal worlds and their loneliness, to meet, converse, and possibly achieve intimacy. It offers a code for symbolic exchange of social information (Luhmann 1986).

In a prescient piece, Goode (1973) argued that romantic love must be controlled because it threatens social solidarity. Voluntary spouse-selection, Goode allowed, is permitted to the degree that the unity of the husband–wife dyad is pivotal within a particular social structure. Elites want more control of marriage because preserving their superior position in a lineage or in a stratified, class-based system is more important than permitting potential disruptions to be caused by voluntary marriage. “The upper-strata have much more at stake in the maintenance of the social structure and thus are more strongly motivated to control the courtship . . . decisions of the young” (Goode 1973:169). Ordinary, working-class people, by contrast, interfere less with marriage because they have less status to lose. Goode cited the well-known role of the virgin princess, or taupou, in traditional Samoa. At the same time that commoner girls freely chose lovers and spouses, the relationships of the taupou were carefully surveilled and controlled by her chiefly father (Mead 1955; Ortner 1987). That is, beginning in the 19th century, as women became increasingly domestic, they became “specialists of the heart” (Giddens 1992:44), who read and were influenced by romantic novels.

Although in agreement about the gender of romance, Goody (1998:104) dismissed Giddens’s claim that romantic love introduced a new narrative form of introspection: “Life histories,” he declared, “were certainly individualized from the beginning of time, with notions of self . . . being universal but taking different forms” (Goody 1998:103). For Goody, this kind of reflexivity did not derive from romantic love but was promoted by reading and writing, abilities that are neither exclusively Western nor modern. Whereas reading is a contemplative mode of understanding, writing permits the expression of longing for and encourages an idealization of an absent other. Writing “creates an object outside oneself in a way speech cannot do, at least in the same clear-cut fashion” (Goody 1998:108–110). Writing, in short, makes the heart grow fond: Idealization may flourish at a distance. Thus, the spread of romantic love “can [be] linked . . . with changes in communication techniques and practices, changes that differentially affect . . . groups at different times and places” (Goody 1998:106–107). Romantic love is therefore found in cultures with developed literary traditions. Romantic love is evident in Chinese poetry as well as in Arabic tales. “Literacy is the key to the mode of representation of love” (Goody 1998:123). Thus, love is not exclusively European, or exclusively class bound, or exclusively modern, but it is, rather, a discourse that has been promoted by the ability to read and write.

I am, of course, sympathetic with Goody’s critique of Giddens’s view of romantic love as Eurocentric: Romantic love cannot be seen as a distinctively Western phenomenon.4 It is not the invention of history, a modern economy, modern individualism, or the atomism of modern society. It is not “the Siamese twin of modernity,” as Howard Gadlin (1977:84) concluded. But literacy? Although the theoretical relationship of literacy to culture has been the object of ongoing, and important, debate in the social sciences, I think it is clear from the ethnography that nothing intrinsic to literacy causes or imposes an invariable set of changes on all cultures (see Besnier 1995). For my purposes, one need look no further than The Sexual Life of Savages (Malinowski 1987:264) to learn that at least some of the imagery of romantic love that I mentioned above—such as the use of imagination to win the heart of
the other, steadfast preference, an appreciation of the personality of the beloved, and feelings of loss—were experienced by preliterate Trobriand Islanders. Moreover, although the data are somewhat ambiguous and depend on the criteria of definition (Lindholm 2001:353), it would seem that elements of romantic love, clustered in different configurations, are experienced in various cultures, be those cultures minimally or thoroughly colonized (Jankowski and Fischer 1992). In some instances, these emotions must be reconciled with the demands of collective obligation, as among the Kutali of Sri Lanka, for example, where love is a silent precondition for arranging a cross-cousin marriage (de Munck 1998). Among the Kalasha of the Hindukush, child betrothal coexists with the right of a woman to elope, which right Wynne Maggi has called “the prototypic act that defines Kalasha women’s freedom” (2001:168). Authority in both cultures is challenged to fit the needs of personal desire and attraction to those of kinship and alliance. Empirically, then, love among literate peoples cannot be opposed to love among preliterate groups. Rather than one exceptional construction, several different relations between romance and society seem to coexist. The implication that there is a historical sequence of “progressively more loving society” (Gillis 1988:89) is therefore unsustainable. If one dismisses geographic, historical, and sociological dichotomies as false and Eurocentric, then perhaps new questions about romance ought to be raised.

If romantic love is neither an exclusive byproduct nor a symptom of European modernity, if it cannot be associated with literacy and the popularity of pulp fiction among modern women, then what, if anything at all, is distinctive about it? Two things, I think. First, whatever its theoretical relationship to modernity, outside of Europe young people do perceive romantic love as a distinctively modern relationship discourse, particularly when they view it as the exclusive motivational basis for courtship leading to marriage, and they completely separate it from collective concerns of kinship or economy. And, second, representations of romantic love proliferate all over the postcolonial world. Missionaries, the mass media, and advertising all proclaim and endorse it as modern and Western. Meanwhile, ethnographic research into the relationship between romantic love and modernity has tended to focus on how romance may become a tactic in an intergenerational politics (asserted by youth) for independence from parents or lineage elders and in a cross-race politics (asserted by women) for power vis-à-vis a patriarchy (Collier 1974; Wolf 1972).

Ethnography of romance

Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has reported that romantic discourse threatened male authority in an Egyptian Bedouin community, despite being inhibited by sentiments of shame and modesty as well as by arranged marriages. Nevertheless, love poetry (ghinna) is composed by both young men and women. “To love, or to express the sentiments of love, then, also signifies one’s freedom” (Abu-Lughod 1990:36). In the 1970s and 1980s, Bedouin men began to buy and sell land as individuals, either for agricultural purposes or for profit. Conflict over land ownership led them into greater relations with the state’s legal system in search of land title. As a result, senior men got more power and wealth, leaving women more dependent and confined within domestic spaces. Whereas all men had independent access to the market, women did not. Their power in society was further diminished. A generational conflict with elders was then asserted in women’s love poetry.

In rural Nepal, Laura Ahearn (2001) has described a shift in marriage practices. Although romantic love is not new, it is becoming more common, a change that is reflected by an increase in elopements and by a reduction in arranged or capture marriages. Ahearn sets this change in a context marked by monetization, democratization, a development discourse that emphasizes individualism, and, as if to confirm Lawrence Stone’s, Giddens’s, and Goody’s views, increased literacy, particularly among women. Amid a stress on personal agency over fate, to be modern is to choose a lifelong partner in a companionate marriage. Modesty norms that restrict young men and women from spending time alone together persist: A new form of courtship has resulted. Fatalism remains a strong conviction among elders. So young people assert freedom through love letters, which correspondences their parents bemoan.

In the contemporary Pacific, courtship discourse has also been seen to play an important role in generational conflict (see Marksbury 1995). Ideas about love among young, village-based Aboriginal Australians in Arnhem Land who have been influenced by Hollywood movies have become part of a “paradigm of adolescent resistance” against adult authority (Burbank 1995:193). Young Chambri men and women from the middle Sepik River enter into conflict with elders over the right to choose their own spouses (Errington and Gewertz 1993; see also Gewertz and Errington 1991). The young people have no goal of marrying exogamously, however, or even the wish to live apart from kin. They flee to town because they want the freedom to pursue desire and romance as well as other aspects of modernity with fellow urban Chambri, without worrying about sorcery retaliation by angry parents. Perhaps not surprisingly, Pamela Rosi and Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1995) found no generational conflict associated with the discourse of romantic love among young elites enrolled in art school in the national capital of Papua New Guinea. The young art students expressed no
intention or wish ever to return home to live with kin again. In the Murik Lakes region in the Sepik estuary, a major segment of male youth prefer to talk about why they married in terms of the surfaces of their masculine identities, travel, challenges to honor, and the obstacles they had to overcome. To begin to determine how and why their stories are cast in these terms, I must briefly introduce Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of “chronotope,” which I find useful because it forces exegetical attention on how time and space may be integrated in narratives.

Two chronotopes of romance

A chronotope, according to Bakhtin, determines the ways in which time and space are fixed and interwoven in literature. A chronotope, in other words, is a fictional setting, such as “ancient Greek romance” (Bakhtin 1981:89), in which a course of unexpected events and encounters takes place in a way that comprises what Bakhtin calls an “adventure-time . . . entirely composed of contingency” (1981:89 ff.). Chronotopes organize meaning by tying stories together, by orienting scenes and lending them significance. Importantly, they point to assumptions about the nature of the person. “The chronotope . . . determines to a significant degree the image of man” (Bakhtin 1981:85). Chronotopes make, create, and establish the self in time within a story. The person in the Greek romance, for example, is “a person of chance [who] . . . enters adventuristic time as a person to whom something happens” (Bakhtin 1981:95). Initiative is controlled by chance. Fate controls meetings and failures to meet.

In what I call the “chronotope of modern romance,” an extraordinary, virtually millenarian metamorphosis of a discrete and isolated self may take place, a contradictory metamorphosis that is at once voluntary and involuntary. The individual becomes other than he or she was; that is, the person becomes a combination of self and other. And this may happen, not through a slow evolution, but instantaneously, via a crisis, as it were. The chronotope of modern romance figures a merger with the etherealized beloved, a merger during which quotidian time becomes obliterated and intimate spaces, liminal spaces, dates, rituals, honeymoons, and so forth, become privileged. The settings of the world, subjectively opposed to the broad expanses of everyday life, are reduced to microcosms in which persons act microcosmically, in which they speak their inner voices and feel and act in ways that are deeply embodied. At the center of the chronotope of modern romance is the theme of extraordinary human transformation.

A contrasting chronotope of courtship, I propose, is less differentiated from or, perhaps it would be better to say, is more closely identified with the wider locales in which groups play out the politics of their values and live out social process. I liken the chronotope of this latter kind of attraction imagery not to the portrayal of time, space, and self in The Odyssey itself, but to Eric Auerbach’s (1957) rendering of time, space, and self in that epic. Homer casts Odysseus abroad, Auerbach observes, into a geography that receives a more elaborate portrayal than the subjectivity of the hero. Events occur in the foreground, and they are uninterrupted in their interconnections. Their meanings are unmistakable. This format reflects “the basic impulse of the Homeric style: to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations” (Auerbach 1957:4). History, events, and experience, although vividly described, have little or no effect on Odysseus. His character does not change in the course of the narrative. He is not subject to psychological development. He is not subject to the passage of time. In the chronotope of Homeric narrative, the person is represented in clearly circumscribed, wholly realistic and perceptible, yet temporally rather static terms. “Never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths” (Auerbach 1957:4). Time, space, and person in the chronotopes of these two narrative styles are evidently rather different. The two may coexist within a single culture, the expression of both may be found throughout the world, and, clearly, the one did not evolve historically from the other. But in local-level contexts, actors who prefer to assert them may and sometimes do come into conflict with obstructionists.

Having entered these two chronotopes into play methodologically, I now turn to a brief survey of marriage norms and practices as they have persisted among the Murik throughout the 20th century. I then discuss several turning points in Murik history. I do so to argue that the atrophy of ritual constructions of masculinity and the rise of petty capitalism, amid the continuity of other social forms, such as marriage and kinship, have created a setting in which courtship has become privileged as a context for asserting masculine identity but not for idealizing the beloved.

Early-20th-century Murik marriage and society

Early-20th-century Murik marriage practices exposed a problem of authority in the society. Young men sought magically to seduce women to whom they were erotically attracted. However potent their charms, they were inevitably countered by those of rival lovers, which led to jealousies, intragenerational conflicts, fistfights, brawling, and sorcery. The organization of Murik marriage presented no ready solution to the steady cackle of gossip and violent outbursts that preoccupied youth. A marriage might be arranged by parents with the goal of fulfilling sister-exchange reciprocity or of expanding ceremonial
and regional exchange networks. Sons and daughters inevitably contested parental wishes, the outcomes of the disputes typically favoring youth over age. Often, if not always, a young couple would simply begin to have sexual intercourse and, eating together in front of one set of parents, would thereby declare themselves “married.”

No ritual or bridewealth marked a new union. There was no uniform rule of postmarital residence. First marriages were unstable. They were typically broken up by extramarital affairs, which also led to fistfights between coeval rivals. Unencumbered as it was by having to return valuables, divorce simply meant moving back home. Youthful marriages amounted to little more than a series of temporary, trial relationships. Father Joseph Schmidt, a Catholic missionary who lived on the Murik coast during the greater part of the first half of the 20th century, took avid interest in the intrigues of the young, kept a diary about them, and included the following diary excerpt in one of his three Anthropos articles:

The young woman, X, married Y, on November 19, 1919, and by April 1920, she had married three others; the fourth was the brother of the third, with whom she is still married. The young man A married B in 1918 (probably in response to pressure from the adults), a little later he also [married] C. B was with him three times and backed out. Then she ... married another. She ran away to a youth in another village; there, a big fight ensued. A was hit by a blow on the head with an axe which went down to the skull. It was thought he would die. I bandaged him once. [1926:48]

Now I grant that Father Schmidt may have been motivated by a missionary’s zeal to condemn the rivalries and fissile ethos of Murik marriage in favor of the sacramental marriage he was proselytizing. But my point here is only that his picture of the cycle of marriage, affair, divorce, and conflict matches the processes of courtship and marriage among the Murik I have come to know in the last two decades of the 20th century. Missing from Schmidt’s account is any kind of attention to sentiments of sudden amorous passion, but emotion was generally muted in Murik courtship, particularly from the male side. Passion was more likely to be manifested in fighting, fighting to defend a slight to male honor over an affair with a lover or wife. A male youth might offer a gift to a girl as a gesture of his attraction to her, or he might do something for her parents by way of requesting their permission to marry her. In 1981, for example, Murakau told me a story about marrying his wife, Minjamok, around the mid-1940s. Notice the expression of his desire to do so with which he starts his narrative.

I erected houseposts for Minjamok’s parents. ... I brought the roof leaves and finished assembling the house. ... I told Yamé, my classificatory mother’s brother, to send for her. He was the middleman. ... He brought Minjamok to his mother’s house at night. My father, Wino, was angry. It appeared to him that my work [on the house] was going for naught since he thought that Yamé was going to marry Minjamok. ... Minjamok had been betrothed to Yamé. But Basa, her mother, did not want him to marry her [daughter]. Minjamok could not be found in any event. She had spent the night with me and [was then] hiding in a mosquito basket. ... Yaron [her mother’s brother] went to her family and told them that their daughter was already married to me. Basa [her mother] said to ... Yaron, “Well, he built the house without the help of Yamé.” ... The [rest of the family] ... had no answer. ... Minjamok’s things were brought to Abwaja’s house, to the house of my mother.15

Here, one can begin to glimpse how male courtship discourse is informed by a Homeric chronotope. The appearances of personhood, its passion, initiative in the face of an obstacle, and the moment of ambiguity and its resolution are all set in discrete and precise spatial and temporal terms rather than in terms of the mysteries of and the ecstatic metamorphoses caused by the heart. Murakau builds a house for the parents of Minjamok, his intended. He sends for her, via an intermediary, and she is brought to the house of his mother’s brother “at night.” This move upsets Murakau’s father. A sort of dispute ensues. Minjamok hides (her desire) as a result. She has already been betrothed to another boy, an arrangement to which her mother objects, but ends up marrying her “beloved,” the narrator Murakau, with whom she is already sexually involved. Although metaphors of desire are unvoiced or are indirectly voiced through the intermediaries, the nighttime, and the mosquito basket, they are not unmistakable. Desire appears in scrupulously externalized metaphors; the narrator initially tells about it through the construction of buildings and locations. Desire gives rise to conflict between kin rather than to emotional turmoil. When the wrangle between the parents is sorted out, the resolution favors the desire of the young lovers, which outcome is represented by a silenced assent to the pairing and by Minjamok moving in with her new husband’s kin.

What is omitted from the story is not just the expression of sentiment but any reference to the sway of spells on women’s desire (numaruk moan). From the standpoint of men, love was enchanted labor. For an excellent picture of this magicoreligious metaphor for desire, I turn to an episode in the tale of the spirit man, Kumbun, during which he elopes with a girl called Darua. Father Schmidt collected the story in the 1920s.

Daruwa was [secluded] in the Women’s Cult house [during her initiation] when her father picked a man for her [to marry]. The people of this man’s descent group helped process sago for Darua’s end-of-
The story of the courtship and marriage of Darua and Kumbun is fixed in space and time. While secluded inside the Female Cult house, Darua has been betrothed. Kingspeople of her fiancé work on behalf of the marriage. Because of his desire to marry Darua, the hero hides and then disguises himself as beautiful but also as a cripple. What, then, does Kumbun do? Kumbun casts love spells to compel Darua’s attraction. Thus, “Darua looked at no one except” him. On the morning of the day of her release from initiatory seclusion, she goes to bathe in the sea, that is, to cleanse herself of ritual pollution. Later that afternoon, seated with the other initiates on a platform, she watches dancers perform. She has been blessed by Women’s Cult elders with great doses of love magic that will reduce Kumbun to a state of helpless desire for her (Barlow 1995). That evening, she elopes with him. On the following day, the departure of the couple is said to be a mystery. Where did Darua go, onlookers wonder? But the answer is instantly revealed, “She left last night.” Desire is located in space, “she left,” and time, “last night,” rather than in sentiment. And, it is again depicted as a process of sorting out divided claims rather than intrasubjective ones. In other words, attraction is represented in terms of parental obstacles as well as in terms of definite times and specific spaces, and the power of desire is ultimately hidden in men’s and women’s use of secret charms.

The representation of desire was also institutionalized in the Male Cult. In its sanctum, the very act of sexual intercourse and the possessive sentiments it was culturally expected to arouse were subjected to a course in sublimation. Murik husbands did not monopolize rights to sexual relationships with wives. They were rewarded for relinquishing these rights to cult partners as part of a moiety competition for authority over the most powerful spirits in Murik culture, the kakar (cf. Thurnwald 1916). One of the avowed purposes of this competition was to instill in men sacred invulnerabilities and military power by training them not to be sexually jealous, that is, to be stoic and to control their rage (see Lipset 1997:177–215). The Homeric heroes of the Male Cult were thus removed from an emotionally entangled world; the story they told about winning and possessing their agency was set against the discourse of turbulent desire within the community.

Although belief in the kakar war spirits abided, heterosexual exchanges in the Male Cult abated during the 1960s, after so many years of missionization and the drift of life in conformity with, or under the influence of, the wider effects of colonialism and capitalism. I think that, with the exception of the atrophy of ritual heterosexuality in the Male Cult, the precolonial construction of love according to which contemporary Murik youth are motivated to court and marry has largely persisted in form and meaning. The gesture of gift giving and the efficacy of love magic in courtship, consequent bride service obligations and affinal avoidances, the vulnerability of first marriages to extramarital affairs, the nebulous concept of sister-exchange, and the impunity with which the young choose their own partners would be instantly recognizable, I have no doubt, as distinctively “Murik” to an early-20th-century man or woman, should such a person return home from some kind of extended exile or emerge, like Austin Powers, from a cryogenic state, to reappear on the Murik coast in the early 21st century. This is not to assert that no changes have taken place in the culture. But it is to claim that kinship, courtship, and marriage practices have remained somewhat enclaved from what Edward LiPuma (2000) has justly termed “the encompassment” of cultures in Papua New Guinea by modernity, capitalism, and individualism during recent times. The relationship between at least this part of Murik personhood and modernity is more complicated than the all-inclusive implication that the metaphor of encompassment would suggest.

Some turning points in the history of Murik modernity

As did Durkheim, Giddens views modernity in terms of mechanisms and processes of differentiation, or specialization. As societies modernize, their constituent institutions tend to become, in his terminology, “disembedded” from the control of indigenous, cultural authorities (Giddens 1991:17). Disembedding mainly results from interference by the state, the spread of capitalism through commodity production, the commodification of labor, and, of course, the use of money. It takes place through
the separation of time and space, via the quantification of time telling from local constructions (see Smith 1982, 1994). Western “experts” such as doctors, police, missionaries, political officials, and others may also intervene and “deskil” indigenous leaders. Who could take issue with any of this? But Giddens must necessarily ignore the specific effects and consequences of disembedding on existing cultural institutions such as the sexual division of labor. Therefore, he cannot comment on the dynamic relationship between modernity and indigenous constructions of gender, masculinity in particular. The events to which I now turn constitute turning points in the 20th-century history of the disembedding of Murik institutions. They suggest, among other things, that the history of the relationship between modernity and Murik culture might be read, at least in part, as a history of the vicissitudes of Murik masculinity (see also Tuzin 1997).17

1918: Burning the Male Cult houses

The Catholic mission, as I mentioned above, arrived on the Murik coast around 1910 (see Huber 1988). At the invitation of a few “progressive” young men, whom the church had employed some years earlier to cut a canal linking the Sepik River and the Murik Lakes, Father Joseph Schmidt took up residence in a Murik village. He built churches in each of the five Murik villages, translated the liturgy into the Murik vernacular, trained catechists, and conducted weekly services throughout the Lower Sepik for the next 30 years. A decisive moment took place a few years after Father Schmidt arrived. A new Male Cult house was consecrated. A war party killed a man to anoint the structure’s ridge post with human blood (see Lipset 1997:197–198). Sexual exchanges were begun between the warriors’ wives and the senior members of the Male Cult who personified the Kakar spear spirits. One of the women, who came from Ali Island, had been to school in Alexishafen for several years. Expected to join in and provide sexual intercourse to her husband’s cult partner, she objected to, and was enraged by, this obligation. She was literate and sent a letter complaining to Father Kirschbaum, the mission head, who alerted colonial officials in Aitape, located a few hundred miles up the coast. The district officer arrived and burned down Male Cult houses in two of the Murik villages. Perhaps Stone, Giddens, and Goody would appreciate the irony here: The Male Cult conceded its right to engage in violence to the state, not because of a love letter but because of a letter complaining about love, not bloodshed.18

1954: The first outboard motor

During the 1950s, Murik men and women were still building and sailing outrigger canoes up and down the north coast and out to the Schouten Islands, largely for ritual purposes, under the restrictions of hereditary relationships and the precapitalist morality of the gift, according to which reciprocities were compelled by magic. Wewak town, as provincial capital, had only just begun to emerge as the central market for Murik fish (Fleetwood 1984). In 1954, Father Louis Kovacs, who had succeeded Schmidt following World War II, got a six-horsepower Seagull outboard motor, fitted it to a canoe, and rode down the Sepik from the mission base at Marienberg on rounds in the Murik Lakes and the lower river. In 1958, he recalled in Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinean Pidgin English) the breathless reaction that seeing the machine aroused:

“Fata, em i samting tru. Mipela laik baim.” [Father, this is the real thing. We want to buy it.] They insisted. So, I told them to go ask the Bishop. A Seagull was finally obtained for them and the [villagers of] Big Murik put it on the back of a big outrigger [which was] loaded down with fish and people. They got stuck on the way to town. They were stubborn and very worldly.

By the 1970s, the Murik outriggers had all been motorized, and reliance on wind power across the coconut bark sail came to an end. Then, in the mid-1990s, store-bought fiberglass dinghies abruptly replaced the local manufacture of dugout, outrigger canoes. The precapitalist fishery, based in boats built and overseas trade conducted by Murik men, was no more (cf. Barlow and Lipset 1997).

1959: Ludwig Somare insulted

At one point, during a Murik end-of-mourning celebration that was held in Wewak town, Pita Simogun, a well-known war hero turned entrepreneur, evidently launched into an outrageous speech that made laughingstocks of his hosts. His lips dripping red with betel nut spittle, Simogun declared that “the only thing” Murik men knew how to do was “fuck women on base-roots of mangrove trees and then paddle out into the lagoons, dangle a leg over the gunwale of [their] canoes and compose [verses of] Woyon [songs]!”19 The ironic sting of Simogun’s burlesque of Murik men as being mesmerized by lechery and lyrical melancholy, and, therefore, utterly disconnected from the rising postwar context of petty capitalism, caused a ruckus among the men present. But Ludwig Somare, a local-level leader, for his part, is remembered not to have budgeted.20 Instead, he began to look for backing from the colonial administration, with which he eventually went on in 1961 to found the Angoram Cooperative Society, the first regionwide business organization in the Lower Sepik district (Somare 1975). Murik men learned how to run a fishery. A trade store was set up in one of the villages, and members of “the Society” pooled money to buy a 35-foot plank boat. The vessel operated for a few seasons, running up and down the Sepik and back and forth along the coast to Wewak town selling salted and smoked fish.
“The Society” folded in 1967. “We were just like Communists,” one man recalled to me in 1981. “There were too many meetings. . . . We did not have good business sense then. We were trying for the first time, still training ourselves. . . . We did not know the white man’s business. We did not know how to use gill nets or pull a pocket net.” Today kin-based business groups continue to market fresh fish in town, and village men own and operate trade stores; and everyone holds impromptu minimarkets at which they sell sago, tobacco, and betel nuts. The enchanted reciprocities in the precapitalist culture of “the gift” have become inextricably mixed up with the commodities and transactions of petty capitalism at home and, of course, in town.

1973–75: Michael Somare and the postcolonial state

Papua New Guinea was granted independence from Australia in 1975. Sir Michael Somare, a Murik native son, became its first prime minister. From at least some Murik men’s perspectives, however, Somare’s influence and effectiveness, not to mention his very role in the founding of the state, benefited from his having been anointed with the magical power of the Male Cult spirits, the Kakar, during initiation rites performed on him a few years earlier (see Somare 1975:25–38). In 1997, when his son Arthur Somare defeated a handful of candidates for the Lower Sepik seat in parliament, village men concluded that his victory, too, had been aided by the Kakar spirits, whose ashes had been secretly deployed on behalf of his candidacy by Male Cult leaders. In the village of Darapap, men granted that their unified vote for Somare the younger had tipped the electoral scales in his favor. Enchanted male agency had become blended with the postcolonial state and its secular democracy.

If one reads these four episodes as registers of Murik masculinity, then what changes or trends, if any, appear in them? On the one hand, none of these situations completely succeeded in elbowing the male self out of the precapitalist ethos of interdependency, of “the gift.” On the other hand, they all contributed toward that end. Burning down the Male Cult houses ended men’s autonomous right to make war, eventually ended initiation rites for warriorhood, and subordinated that part of male vitality to the state. The Catholic Church and, later, other missions baptized Murik people for nearly the whole of the 20th century.21 In addition to condemning the sexual exchanges in the Male Cult, Father Schmidt instituted and presided over many church-based marriages during the 30 years he served the Murik coast. And, of course, church doctrine insisted on defining marriage as a sacrament, forbidding divorce. A new authority positioned itself in the culture and disembodied local-level negotiations between parents and youth. The new maritime technology made masculinity dependent on Western resources such as money, gasoline, fiberglass dinghies, and outboard motors. Not only did this technology diminish the symbolism and reduce the contribution of Murik men to an indispensable domain of economic production and social reproduction, but it also reduced the cultural patrimony and, thus, the significance of descent group membership, thereby subtracting an important political opportunity from men (see Barlow and Lipset 1997). Simogun’s taunting of Murik men’s masculinity began to reorient the Murik fishery in the late 1950s toward commodity production, the cash cropping of fish, moving it away from being solely targeted on subsistence and regional production. This shift increased the overall poverty and decreased the renown of the culture, a renown for which Murik men largely credited themselves and their wives. The independence of Papua New Guinea, the statecraft of Sir Michael Somare, and, more recently, the leadership of his son Arthur have disposed male attention toward a national political arena and away from local rivalries and prizes.

The overall consequence of these events, and the processes that they reflect, damaged Murik masculinity in a partial, not a unified or encompassed, way. Although ritually emasculated, the Male Cult continues to play a significant role in the thinking of the local community about military, political, and athletic agency. Local-level leadership, both male and female, continues to deploy modes of social control (see Lipset 1987). Outboard motors and fiberglass dinghies are obviously not manufactured by the Male Cults, but their use continues to fund the ceremonial economy through which the political statuses of both men and women are still claimed within culturally distinctive idioms, particularly during mortuary rites. The ongoing rise (and fall) of business groups and petty capitalism has diminished but has not displaced the ethos of the gift, either within the village or regionally. Nor have market-based economics transformed the Murik adaptive strategy of aquatic foraging. Murik families and sibling groups continue to serve as units of both production and consumption. They go on fishing and harvesting shellfish. They go on importing foodstuffs from and exporting handicrafts and dance productions to hereditary trading partners as gifts. The election of Sir Michael Somare and his son Arthur to national-level positions in the postcolonial state has brought few resources into the Murik villages, which remain remote and materially dependent. The labor of both women and men continues to serve both customary and capitalist cultural needs. In general, the inroads of modernity have disembodied Murik men more than women, thereby raising the equality and interdependency of the sexes to an even greater level than was the case early in the 20th century. In particular, aspects of modernity have devastated the opportunities for male youth to assume and assert some kind of customary, or neocustomary, gender identity, or at least one that combines with modern components of masculinity in any effective way.
This conclusion is consistent with other information about how capitalist transformation has affected men and women as well as male youth in this region of the Pacific (see, e.g., Knauft 2002:27). In Murik, however, despite changes that have erased important ritual domains of male life, adherence to values of generalized reciprocity and local concepts of attachment to kin have remained rather undeterred by 20th-century events. Courtship and marriage, as I aver, have been little altered; young men and women go on possessing the same sort of choice that they had and go on expressing choices in the idioms and imagery that they used early in the 20th century. All appearances of modernity to the contrary, the narratives that follow, provided by three young Murik men, are not set within a chronotope of romance, in which the self yearns longingly for utopian merger, for love.22 They do not reveal a self that mimics commodities rather than gifts. They do not reveal a self that is bounded, under the control of the individual. They do not reveal a self that is owned, like property (Strathern 1988). After 100 years of colonial and global influences, Murik manhood is not figured in opposition to the other in the context of courtship. Instead, within this larger context of ritual emasculation, by staying the same, courtship has come to offer youth a newly privileged opportunity to assert a new—old masculine identity.

More, I suspect that the courtship stories to which I now turn represent a prominent discourse among a swathe of young men in Papua New Guinea more generally.23 One may certainly reject this claim, either by questioning how the stories do or do not reflect lived emotion and behavior or by questioning the extent to which they stand for the voices of a segment of contemporary youth. The narratives may or may not correspond identically to behavior, emotion, or thought per se. But at least I can vouch that they convey more than a mere narrative style performed for the simple and only purpose of pleasing a (more powerful, elite) anthropologist with a story. I conclude as much because I have listened to stories these three young men have told about many other events that I myself observed and in which I participated, stories that they told to each other as well as to me. The men were, rather, motivated by a desire to talk about subjectively valued moments in their young, as yet unprestigious lives, moments when they took a big step toward manhood, and to tell their stories to me, a middle-aged white man they had known most of their lives who paid close attention and had a tape recorder going, to boot. Perhaps I am ethnographically and socially naïve, but I think that the manner in which these stories were told and their content depict both the narrators’ styles and their candid perceptions of courtship and attraction. This assertion, however, must be qualified in two ways. First, description of social process and emotion obviously does necessarily correspond to the reality of experience (Swidler 2001). The relationship of interview narratives to life is not one-to-one; life is always more complex than narrative. Second, this sample of narratives certainly does not exhaust the polyphony of voices either specifically in Murik or in Papua New Guinea as a whole. Jolene Stritecky and I (1994), and then Kathleen Barlow and I (1997) have argued that differences between male and female discourse about both Murik kinship and Murik outrigger canoes are dialogically related. Perhaps the pattern also extends to male and female discourse about Murik courtship.24 Other male voices, more urbanized, more educated, or more Christian, would talk about the courtship experience in other ways. Nevertheless, the stories told by the young men in this “sample” reflect a major genre of courtship discourse among male youth today, both on the Murik coast and elsewhere, particularly in rural Papua New Guinea (see Jenkins and Alpers 1996).25

Although each story shows the hero facing down a challenge to his masculine identity, the order in which I have arranged the three goes from the most direct expression of sentiment about the beloved, which is still understated, to the least direct, in which knowledge of the beloved is completely denied.

“I met her myself”

The first story opens with a kind of a Shavian scene, an image of male desire aroused by a young woman selling her wares at a market. But here the woman, a mango vendor, does not serve as a means for showing how the heart (and then education) may pierce class difference, as it did in Pygmalion (Shaw 1971). The scene, rather, introduces the background and some ordinary tropes of desire and exchange that inform modern Melanesian masculinity, tropes that meet in the marketplace. Here a quantified type of time and space is managed and, to a certain extent, controlled by the state. Manhood within that time and space is composed of literacy and employment, the ubiquitous complexities of intertribal relationships, and of course, by anonymity, shopping, and beer. Markers of stratification, as I say, are little in evidence in this corner of Wewak town (cf. Gewertz and Errington 1999).

Makus Murakau, the narrator, was a man about thirty years of age and had left school after the eighth grade. He was raised in Darapap village by his parents, both of whom were themselves lifelong villagers. His story tells how he met and courted his first wife, who was from a non-Murik village located up the coast about one hundred miles west of the Sepik Delta.

I met her at the Dagua market in Wewak. She was selling mangoes. I bought one from her. I met her myself. She sent me a letter through a mutual friend, a...
boy from the Sepik River. The letter said that “if I had my father’s bones,” I would come visit her in her village… My friend knew the village. I was working at that time at the Sepik Copra Marketing Board. It was Thursday. I got my little toea [i.e., received his pay]. I bought some beer. At that time, I was drinking beer [i.e., he did not then belong to the Seventh Day Adventist church]. I took my bush knife for protection. I bought a K3 [ticket for the] bus! It was far! I got to her village. No one there knew who I was. The village magistrate wanted to arrest me. But we sorted things out. They came to understand what I was doing in the village. I showed them the letter. Then, they started talking about custom. I got two bags of rice, one carton tinned fish and put K100 on top of the gift. They did not complain.26

Despite the personal initiative Makus displays, it should be evident that courtship in his tale is not expressed in a modern, romantic chronotope. Makus does not seek to lose himself in a microcosm of the other. He does not idealize his beloved. And he is not overcome by euphoria. Makus was working in town, living apart from kin, and relying on voluntary relationships, that is, on friendship, in matters requiring intermediaries, rather than on classificatory mothers’ brothers, as he would have in the village. Set in the marketplace, the first meeting of the lovers and the sudden flare-up of his passion for the mango seller Makus represents as a purchase. Makus, as it were, buys “the young woman’s fruit” himself. In turn, he says, she responded to him in writing. What kind of a “love letter” did she compose? How did she contemplate the absent other? What kind of skill in feminine love did the letter reveal? In retrospect, the metaphor in the letter that stood out to Makus did not flatter his qualities. It did not express the woman’s romantic or erotic desire for him. Instead, the woman challenged his masculinity: Should he possess “his father’s bones,” which is to say, “should he be a real man, should he be a true member of his father’s lineage” and, therefore, possess the collective power of its magico-religious patrimony, he would have the gumption to overcome obstacles and come to her. Perhaps the woman did profess love for him. Perhaps the letter had also dwelled on how handsome he was to her eyes. But Makus incorporated no religious patrimony, he would have the gumption to overcome the mystery of his identity as stranger and turned him into a potential affine. Both customary and modern conjunctures—bridewealth, the bus, and the letter—served to mediate relationships through direct and uninterrupted declarations. Why? Because in this Homeric chronotope, self and other are unproblematic. The passage of modern time and the traversal of modern space do not really intervene in or impede the courtship. Desire may be manifest in commodities purchased and exchanged as gifts. Within these market-based and reciprocal idioms, courtship is recontextualized, to be sure. However hybridized or syncretic his account, Makus talked about the experience of this recontextualization in the scrupulously externalized terms of the Homeric chronotope. In his story, the modern representation of self and other removed from time and space because of romantic passion is perceptible, but superficially so.

“She had nothing”

In the next story, courtship is set amid gender role-reversals. Again, desire is expressed through a Homeric chronotope rather than a romantic one. As in the Makus story, the narrator, called Beldon, had also gone to live and to work in town. Perhaps in his late thirties, and, thus, a few years older than Makus, Beldon had been raised in the village and did not belong to any church. He had left school after the sixth grade.

I went to Wewak and had a job in a store for a time. I was still married to [my first wife] Y. and our kids were going to school [in town]. I went to Goroka by boat via Madang and then by car. I worked for a [Murik tribesman] on a coffee plantation. Then, I got another job on a cocoa plantation. Rosa… sent me a letter to come back to Wewak quickly because Y. was seeing someone else. I returned to Wewak. But the day before I arrived, Y. left for [the town of] Lae [with her new husband]. I was left in charge of the kids. I got another job supervising a trade store in Kreer market. I cooked. I looked after the kids all by myself. It was very hard work. On the weekends, I did the laundry. I saw a group of Darapap women on their way to Jabaraka for a meeting of the S.D.A. [Seventh Day Adventist] Women’s Federation. In the group was a cousin-sister of Y., Sarah M. She had nothing, no food, no money. She was unmarried. She had no children. She had adopted one child. I made her a gift [of money]. I took a loan from my boss at the trade store. Later, I spoke to [Sarah] … and told her that I wanted to marry her, but if she were
interested or willing she would have to be ready to get along with and look after my kids. She said she wanted to marry me and that she would be happy to take care of them. So we married and I moved back to the village.

Although time and space in this topsy-turvy world are surely divided by separations, disconnections, and identity reversals, they still leave no gaps in the story. Beldon and Y. go to town to send his children to an urban school. Beldon then leaves Y. to go work (for tribesmen) in specific contexts elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, for reasons that are left unexplained but that do not interfere with the narrative. In his absence, Y. begins an affair with another man. The news reaches Beldon by letter, not by love letter, to be sure, but by a letter informing him that he has been cuckolded. Time and space are specified: Beldon attempts to intercede but misses meeting Y. by one day. She has already left with her lover to go live in another city where her lover is employed. Beldon's masculinity is then implicitly questioned, as he becomes a man doing what in Murik culture is classed as woman's work, taking care of children and doing domestic chores by himself.

But this turnabout is momentary. An image of kins-women presents itself to him. Among them is Sarah, whom he instantly recognizes as an affine. Instead of desirable qualities and attributes, Beldon is attracted by her nullity: “She had nothing.” She is poor, without children and food, lacking in feminine identity. If Beldon, as a father, is an incomplete man who has lost or been dispossessed of his mother–wife, and must therefore “mother” his children, then he has been drawn to Sarah because she too is deficit ridden. She is an incomplete woman. His desire thus seems represented as pity rather than passion. That is, an image of dependency, of the self in need of the other, catches his eye, rather than qualities such as the girl’s beauty, personality, or wealth. He expresses desire for starting a relationship with Sarah through a gift. But the gift requires money. It is, indeed, a sum of money. Beldon must go into financial debt to his employer to get and give money to Sarah. Ineluctably, the gift leads to a proposal of marriage. What is Beldon’s condition? That Sarah agree to mother his children. In other words, he predicates marriage not on his own or their mutual desire, but on Sarah’s willingness to parent. In this narrative, Beldon’s masculine identity may have been momentarily compromised by his having been cuckolded and by having to do women’s chores; but the solution he creates, to choose a new mother–wife, reveals no basis in a chronotope of romantic attraction but, rather, explicitly derives desire from an absence rather than an idealization of a unique other or a wish to merge with her.27 The actions of the Homeric hero know no back-grounds. He admits to no impulse to brood or mope. Self and other appear in unambiguous terms, without any need to delineate further qualities.

“I didn’t know the girl”

In my last story, desire, however represented, completely drops out of the picture of the hero’s motivations, which is to say, the woman becomes anonymous. As in the account of the mango seller, the courtship process is advanced by the narrator’s answer to a slight against his honor. Unlike either of the two preceding tales, the third one is set in the village rather than in town. Tabanus Wambu, the narrator, was about twenty-five years old and left school after the sixth grade. He was raised in Darapap by village parents. He belonged to no church. The woman in his story was from one of the “bush Murik” villages located just inland from the lakes.

David Lipset: You were staying with your elder brother in Goroka?

Tabanus: I was up there [in the highlands]. I returned to [the village of] Darapap. I was here for one week when he came and attacked me, this relative of M.’s.

DL: He came to the house, or?
T: He attacked me outside—

DL: He came and—
T: He came and called me and we fought.

DL: What are you saying?— 28
T: He said, “You came back here to the village. You didn’t come back to sit quietly and behave yourself. You came to make trouble and hit on our women again.” I answered him, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” I fought back. I was angry. I fought for my rights.

DL: What was this girl’s name?
T: Paula

DL: OK, had she married him already?
T: No. They weren’t married. The two of them were just having an affair.

DL: OK.

T: After the fight, I didn’t think about Paula, but then I thought to myself, “If I am my father’s son, I better
do something in front of everybody. After all, I fought for her.”

**DL:** So when you came back from Goroka, she was here in the village?

**T:** She was here.

**DL:** Before, before you fought, had you noticed her a little, or?

**T:** No.

**DL:** Did you know her at all?

**T:** I didn’t know her. I was in the highlands. I came back to the village and I did not know of her.

**DL:** Why did he attack you then?

**T:** I would say this: the custom of young people in the village is to fight like that because “eyes pop out.” Eyes pop out at other guys’ girls.

**DL:** He was jealous, eh?

**T:** Yeah, he was jealous.

**DL:** He thought you had designs on Paula?

**T:** Yeah, but I didn’t know her at all.

**DL:** You hadn’t even seen her?

**T:** Yeah, I hadn’t laid eyes on her.

**DL:** OK

**T:** After we finished fighting, I didn’t know the girl. I didn’t know where she lived, in which house. People told me where she was living. I went there—

**DL:** OK, she said what?

**T:** When I went to her, she said . . .

**DL:** Paula?

**T:** Yeah, Paula did not say anything. She did not object when I took her home with me. I was strong. According to our custom, if you fight for a woman, an unmarried woman, then you ought to go take the woman from her boyfriend in front of him. You should take the woman for whom you have shown your anger, shown your strength.

**DL:** When you went to her, did you explain yourself like that? Or, what did you tell her?

**T:** When I went to her, I said, “I am here to get you.” She herself had seen the fight.

**DL:** Ah.

**T:** So when I came for her, she knew what to expect.

**DL:** Where did you two go?

**T:** Back home. I stayed here with her for four months and then for four more months. Then we had our first child. . . . The two of us stayed here, then we went to Boig for seven months, after which I returned to Darapap.

**DL:** With her?

**T:** I left her there and I came back here.

**DL:** Ah, she is staying up there.

**T:** Yeah.

**DL:** OK.

**T:** I don’t worry about women. I am a man who has to move around. I have to keep moving.29

In *Mangrove Man* (Lipset 1997:217–276), I discussed the relationship of sexual jealousy and cultic masculinity to a broader problem in the embodiment of Murik moral imagination.30 Here I focus on the representation of male personhood in time and space. Observe how exactly Tabanus established events in a modern chronology and in the village landscape. “One week” after his return from visiting a specific foreign space to the familiar space of Darapap, he is attacked “outside,” that is, in public. After establishing coresidence, he and Paula live together in Darapap for “four months,” evidently discover that Paula has become pregnant, go on for another “four months,” and then, after the baby is born, go to live bilocally for “seven months” in Boig village. By contrast, the play of emotion-discourse in the story is relatively elemental. Having been confronted, Tabanus fights back “for my rights,” but not because of a specific kind of sentiment, say, anger in defense of an attachment. He did not know, in other words, whose affections he was being accused of alienating. Paula’s kin, it is true, were probably not “total strangers” to Tabanus given that Paula came from one of the inland horticultural villages that dot the periphery of the Murik Lakes with which various kinds of hereditary
trade persist today. But I have no reason to doubt his claim that desire played no role whatsoever in his decision to propose to her. The marriage, as he told it, arose not from a romantically based courtship process but from customary norms about masculinity to which both he and Paula subscribed. Presumably, the “custom” Tabanus cited, that is, a man’s right to start a relationship with a woman after fighting over her, might ordinarily have been motivated by knowing her identity and finding her attractive in some sense—as it did in the incident recorded by Father Schmidt that I cited above. In this instance, however, Tabanus professed to have no feeling at all for Paula when he fought over her. He did not even know, he declares, who she was, much less where she was staying. Does that bother him? Not, it would seem, a great deal. He goes on to talk about the birth of a child that, in Murik terms, is a claim to conjugal viability rather than an indication of the growth of mutual love. The narrative thus tells about a turning point, a crisis, in the biography of its hero, which is resolved by deeds that have consequences for his subsequent life. But the feelings he ascribes both to himself, as a man, and to the marriage are exquisitely represented in terms of what I am calling a Homeric chronotope. That is, the reasons for courtship are cast externally, motivated by a challenge to his masculinity, and not cast in the subjective terms of romance. No contour of personhood is blurred. “Eyes,” on the contrary, “pop out.” Psychological process receives no attention: Nothing but desire is concealed. The beloved is not an object of contemplation. And, finally, the identity of the hero is firm, unchanged by the passage of chronological time and by the turn of events. “I don’t worry about women. I am a man who has to move around. I have to keep moving.”

Modernism without romance

These three stories illustrate that, despite nearly 100 years of modern influences, young Murik men phrase courtship in terms of a Homeric rather than a modern romantic chronotope. Why? Why are their stories so much more concerned with gift giving, the defense of male honor, and the details of travel than with qualities of the other? Why do these courtship tales construct the male self in modern time and spaces without the least regard for an expression of sentiment?

Of the multiple loyalties to which young men in contemporary Papua New Guinea adhere, both customary and modern, that manifested through courtship of a beloved does not, it should be admitted, account for the totality of men’s emergent identities. On the one hand, courtship does not comprehensively define the self. It amounts to but one rather pivotal event amid many significant turning points in the men’s contrary lives. But, on the other hand, one must grant that courtship may mark something of a milestone in men’s ongoing negotiation of subjectivity, gender identity, and modernity. No doubt it is possible to argue that romance discourse may be viewed as independent of history and the changing structure of society, for example, purely as a poetics. And, no doubt, other institutions, such as various forms of popular media, exert important influence on the construction of desire (Appadurai 1996). My view, however, is that the images and metaphors of courtship in these narratives reflect—at least, in part—the limited extent to which these young men, and the segment of society they represent, have been disembodied from indigenous social forms that preceded the slow arrival of 20th-century modernity. Their metaphors of desire have not become disembodied from local or foreign processes and values. A romantic expression of agency, for example, depicted in starting relationships with non-Murik girls or overcoming obstacles imposed by parents, was nevertheless muted in their stories. Instead, Makus dutifully sought parental permission and willingly paid bridewealth. Beldon offered Sarah M. a gift. And Tabanus fought for his honor. Apart from Makus’s terse admission that he had “met her myself,” nothing in these stories represents individuated subjectivity in which the beloved is idealized without reference to sociocultural process. Instead, the stories attend more closely to the hero’s adventures in and travel through everyday life in modern contexts within the postcolonial state.

What do travel and adventure mean in these stories? How are they represented? First of all, in Murik culture, maritime trade was customarily viewed as a form of seduction (see Barlow 1985; Barlow and Lipset 1997:24), and travel itself remains a metaphor of male desire. In the courtship narratives I have related, trysts and trade goods obviously are not the prizes of travel. Nevertheless, the employed, wandering hero is drawn out of the familiar, familial demands of village life. He traverses a heterogeneous environment in which value and time are measured in terms of an impersonal matrix. The hero endures the experience and the challenges to his identity that it entails, only to return home completely unchanged. Travel is depicted externally, objectively: The hero moves through modern space and time unambiguously. His emotions are strong and instantaneous. Beldon saw Sarah and knew that she might be available to him. The narratives are constructed in terms of foregrounds. Tabanus decided that, having won a fistfight, he should go and propose marriage to a stranger. The meanings of events are unmistakable. Elements in the stories are placed in vivid relation to one another. Conjunctions make for an uninterrupted flow of action leading to no epiphanies. Makus rode a bus to go to his mango girl. Travel is instrumental, not a moral education. Its outcome does not disentangle the marital bond from kinship and economy. It does not
change the self. Rather, just the opposite occurs: Actors marry and begin to take their place in the community, a transition that they construe in unproblematic terms.

As a phase of life, Octavio Paz (1993) has noted, youth is a time of love. Particularly for young Papua New Guinean men, I would say, youth ought to be a time of presences, a time of vitality and individualism. I have privileged their voices in this article more so than others in their society because young men seem to seek encounters and engagement with life outside the village, where norms of community appear to slacken, no longer constraining the self. They are compelled by the tantalizing allure of freedom that urban modernity seems to present. Instead of independence and opportunity, however, contemporary Papua New Guinea offers male youth absences. As part of the reality in which young men live, education has disembedded ritual seclusion because the state and Christianity have replaced the Male Cult. But neither education, nor the state, nor the missions typically lead them to permanent employment, that is, to membership in a modern, middle-class life. More frequently, modern institutions lead them back to an arena in which they vie for status through devalued village relationships rather than prestigious, modern ones. At the same time, reality is increasingly disembedded by commodities, a world of wristwatches and fiberglass dinghies. Young men find themselves in difficult economic and political circumstances in which they have few resources to deploy and over which they have little control. Not surprisingly, the reckoning of such young men with modernity leaves them preoccupied by athletic matches and small-stakes poker games played amid the bittersweet odors of marijuana smoke.

When depicted in Murik courtship stories, however, the male self does not appear lonely and formal, as in an Edward Hopper painting. While employed in town, while traveling among strangers on buses, the male self does indeed take on a more isolated and anonymous position that is separated from the other. But this is an ephemeral and exceptional situation. Courtship returns narrators to gifts, reciprocities, and reproduction, that is, to a representation of self that is cast as part of the other. Alan MacFarlane (1986) rightly points out that the experience of “marrying for love” elevates the marital relationship above other relationships, such as those with children or a wider kin network. Insofar as their voices reliably disclose their subjectivities, these young men did not “marry for love.” They did not construe either their motivations or the relationship of their marriages to kin in terms of the modern, romantic chronotope. The point of orientation among these young men is the Murik village, the small, incompletely missionized community in which life is not in the least anonymous, is only lightly commoditized, and is rather superficially connected to mass media. In spite of the considerable degree of disembed-

ding that has emasculated it during the 20th century, Murik masculinity remains constructed and conducted in, as well as through, an asymmetrical kind of collectivist virtue according to which cross-generational values prefer youthful will over age.

As a consequence, marriage remains an unassuming, unproblematic prospect, whose purpose is not to assert adherence to a modern lifestyle, a personal independence, or to compress the self into a microcosmic world with the other. No. The narrators come to marry in chronological time and move about postcolonial space, to be sure. Their experiences, however, seem to matter little and do not persuade their hearts. Jobs and travel seem to leave them untouched, failing to challenge or change the shape of their desires. Instead, if anything, the boundaries of their identities as young men appear to be shored up in these stories rather than given up.

More generally, what do these stories suggest about the dialogics of modernity as played out in courtship? The voices of these young men are more or less similar; they are informed by a single, Homeric chronotope of romance. They convey only one, rather static, expression of desire for the other—one among the many—that may be raised in answer to modern individualism. In turn, I think that this chronotopic uniformity indicates at least two things. One is that the self may respond differentially, rather than comprehensively, to modernity. That is, a young man may report to work five days a week, go to market, ride the bus, attend church services, and write and read correspondence at the same time that he may marry a virtual stranger to defend his honor. Second, how identity is configured during a particular historical moment may be a measure of a specific trajectory of historical experience to which a society has been subjected by the colonial and postcolonial flag bearers of modernity. That is, if the self may be reconfigured in terms of a heterogeneous, rather than a standardized, mix of individualism and the state, capitalist relations of production and exchange, and Christianity, class stratification, Western education, and so forth, then the relationship of modernity to romantic attraction is not reliable or predictable; the presence of the one is not necessary or sufficient to cause a longing for merger with the other. If, in Murik, as well as elsewhere in contemporary Papua New Guinea, this kind of courtship story suggests that identity is composed of multiple constructions of the self in time and space, then to make sense of the dialogical relationship of modernity to such a self, one should not expect that relationship to be consistent but, rather, contrary and polyphonic.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Departmental Workshop of the Department of
Anthropology at the University of Minnesota and at the 2003 Meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania in Vancouver, B.C. I should thank Diana M. Dean, Virginia Dominguez, Timothy Dunnigan, Stephen Gudeman, John Ingham, Mischa Penn, Jolene Stritecky-Braun, and two anonymous reviewers for comments. The article is based on data collected during fieldwork conducted during 1981–82, 1986, 1988, 1993, and 2001. The most recent fieldwork was funded by a faculty research grant from the anthropology department of the University of Minnesota.

1. Other metaphors, of course, exist. Denis De Rougemont (1983:244), for example, discusses military metaphors for love, for example, a lover besieged his lady. Delivering amorous assaults upon her, having pursued her, he conquered her. This warrior metaphor likely goes back to the days of chivalric love, when knightly vassals paid erotic services to the ladies of their masters (Weber 1958:345–46). Love is also likened to a flame. Some metaphors emphasize feeling love involuntarily, of being struck by “love at first sight,” being “wounded by Cupid’s arrows,” feeling “the magic of love,” as if it were a spell cast, and finding the right “chemistry,” as if by accident. People also talk, by contrast, about “searching” for love and about “love as work.” Love, I suppose, is also spoken of as an “emotion.”

2. As aquatic foragers, the Murik supplement their fishery with year-round trade to import foodstuffs and a wide variety of goods (Barlow 1985; Lipset 1985). Important distinctions in the division of labor predated the Murik inclusion in the world system. To a certain extent, the difference between locally obtained fish and horticultural goods produced by and imported from non-Murik trading partners is mitigated because exchange is based in hereditary relationships and is conducted through long-term forms of generalized or balanced reciprocities. Nonetheless, Murik culture has never defined itself as economically independent but, rather, as a part of a regional system of production.


4. Thus, Goode asserts, “Love is a pattern found only in the US” (1973:40).

5. “Love is a passion to the Melanesian as to the European, and torments mind and body to a greater or lesser extent; it leads to many an impasse, scandal, or tragedy; more rarely, it illuminates life and makes the heart expand and overflow with joy” (Malinowski 1987:69). See also Landes 1937 on Ojibwa courtship; see Berndt 1976, which affirms the paramount import of romantic love in northern Arnhem Land as having religious significance in certain contexts and secular meanings in others; see Harris 1995 on romantic love among the Mangaians, Plotnicov 1995 on romantic love among urban Nigerians, Bell 1995 on the presence of romantic love in precontact courtship among the Taifa, despite the claims of missionaries that Africans were incapable of feeling any emotion other than lust, thus promoting the view that love was caused by European influence.

6. More generally, Fred Myers (1979, 1986) has argued that emotions are political, and Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (1990) have said that emotion discourse establishes, asserts, and contests power–status differences.

A third use of romance has been discussed by Millie Creighton (1991) for Japan. There Valentine’s Day was imported by a chocolate company executive in the late 1950s and became a unique opportunity for women to openly declare personal romantic attraction for men, which was viewed as a Western practice, by giving them gifts, dark chocolate in particular. Twenty years later, this imbalance was amended by the invention of a reciprocal holiday during which men give white chocolate to women. 7. Holly Wardlow (1999) has described two models of love practiced by both urbanized and rural Huli youth in the highland fringe of Papua New Guinea. One is based in love magic cast by women on men, a magic that is held to assault the latter’s spiritual autonomy and agency. The other is based in a modern, independent kind of mutual attraction that reflects obedience to God and that should result in companionate marriage. Both models are promoted by women and reflect women’s increased agency in the contemporary period. But both create conflict and tension with prospective mates. Men reject the prohibitions required of Christianity, and they experience the feeling of being “in love” as a frightening loss of autonomy, “which suggests the possibility of spiritual assault” (Wardlow 1999:7). Women, too, worry about the spiritual repercussions of using love magic, that it might cause sickness. Couples later rededicate themselves to traditional menstrual taboos and Christian orthodoxy by way of fostering a companionate marriage.

8. See Clifford 1988 and Hatfield 2002 for two other uses of the idea of a chronotope.

9. In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin (1981:84–258) lays out an elaborate historical classification of chronotopes, for example, of the ancient Greek romance, of the chivalric romance in the Middle Ages, in Rabelais, and so on.

10. Erich Auerbach (1957) contrasts Homeric narrative in The Odyssey with the narrative style of the Old Testament story of the sacrifice of Isaac. In the latter story, only certain parts of the action are brought into relief, whereas others are left obscure, unexpressed, and invisible. Divine forces, for example, influence the heroes. The narrative flow is subject to abrupt turns of events. Meaning is multiple and must be interpreted. People change in the course of narrative experience and are preoccupied with what is morally problematic. Similarly, in the chronotope of romantic narrative, motivation arises from the unseen, interior of the person, from the heart. Boundaries between self and other become volatile. Narratives of romance become imbued with, or incarnated by, multilayered backgrounds, emotional complexity, only some of which is expressible, if imperfectly so. By contrast to the Homeric chronotope, events touch the hero and ecstatically transform him or her.

11. Compare with Horkheimer and Adorno 1955. Their reading of Odysses presented in Dialectic of Enlightenment is quite different; namely, that he is “a prototype of the bourgeois individual … a figure of the protagonist compelled to wander” (1955:43).

12. Murik society was, and continues to be, divided into corporate, ceremonial groups called poang. Each group of the ancestor spirits of the poang resided in a poang-specific ghost community. The spirits were symbolized among the living by named, heraldic ornaments, called “sumon,” which were personified by elders (Lipset 1997). Among their many duties, these big, great men and women (cf. Godelier and Strathern 1991) monitored and sanctioned an incest taboo in society, attempting to differentiate nonmarriageable from marriageable kin. That is, they sought to prevent marriages within the poang into which youth were initiated. Why? Marriage prohibitions were viewed as arising from the sumon heraldry rather than from biology. The concern was that married couples should not share rights to the same ornament, so that a myriad of material, sociological, and spiritual claims on the property of spouses’ groups, particularly their networks of trading partners, would be maximized. Although no payments were expected, marriages were meant to be reciprocated through loosely interpreted notions of sister exchange.

13. Linguistically, the couple would refer to each other mein (husband) or neman (wife). No ritual demarked marriage; a
man’s joking partner, his classificatory mother’s brother, might break open a mature coconut and beat a slit-drum in the men’s house to signal his nephew’s new marriage and to make the union endure.

14. A careful reading of Joseph Schmidt’s Murik trilogy in Anthropos does not give the impression that he was a racist missionary.

15. Residence was not rigidly specified, but could go in either patri- or matrilocal directions, depending on the relative resources of the kin groups. In other words, it too was a subject of negotiation. After a couple moved in together, bride and groom services were expected, demanded, and performed by both spouses. Taking a man’s perspective, Somare writes, “We do not have big ceremonial exchanges of gifts. The husband’s obligation toward his father-in-law really begins after the marriage. It is an obligation that lasts for the rest of his life. If the father-in-law says, ‘Cut me a canoe,’ the son-in-law has to go and carve a canoe” (1975:45).

Affinal avoidances were established with senior kin of both spouses’ extended families. A man was expected to abide by hierarchical respect relations with his wife’s elder siblings of both sexes, with her parents, and with their siblings. These affines immediately became wandiik to him, an avoidance and respect term he then substituted for the personal names of the wife’s senior kin. The same avoidance and respect relationships, terms, and roles held for women vis-à-vis their husbands’ kin. A woman was, and continues to be, expected to remain on her knees in the presence of her husband’s father. When women entered the houses of their father-in-law, they walked on their knees.

16. It was so for women, too.

17. This would likely constitute one-half of a dialogue with Murik women.

18. On the other hand, Besnier (1995:177–178) notes that literacy became a means by which colonizers controlled their subjects in Nukulaelae Atoll in Tuvalu.

19. Woyon, “the songs of the mangroves,” constitute a genre of Murik music that largely commemorates loss of various kinds. They are said to be composed in the mangrove lagoons to preserve the dignity and anonymity of the lyricist. Simogun’s statement is recorded in my field notes.

20. Ludwig was the father of Sir Michael Somare (see below).

21. A Seventh-day Adventist mission was started in 1951 in Darapap village and remains a strong congregation today.

22. Thus, Bataille writes, “I intend to speak of . . . three types of eroticism in turn, to wit, physical, emotional and religious. My aim is to show that with all of them the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity” (1962:15).

23. The narratives are drawn from a series of interviews I conducted in December 2000–January 2001. The interviews were done in a mixture of Tok Pisin and Murik that I have come to speak.

24. Moreover, male–female differences in the expression of romance have constituted a subsidiary theme in the theoretical literature on the subject (see Cancian 1987; Giddens 1992; Goody 1998).

25. Jenkins and Alpers draw the following conclusion from the 1996 report on “Youth, Urbanization, and Sexualiry in Papua New Guinea” that they compiled for the “Global Programme on AIDS,” sponsored by World Health Organization:

For most young people sexual encounters predate the emergence of deep feelings for one another. Romance, in the Western sense, does not figure prominently in the discourse of either male or female informants, but young women speak of longing for their boyfriends in terms similar to those found elsewhere. Young men, however, seem to have no vocabulary of love, no way to talk about their deeper feelings except in terms of sexual pleasure, i.e., “kisim piling.” (1996:249)

Thanks to Leslie Butt for pointing out this passage to me.

26. The PNG Kina equaled about $0.45 at that time.

27. In Murik kin terminology, a wife may be addressed as ‘mother’ by her husband.

28. I found myself so surprised by events in his narrative that I could hardly refrain from pressing Tabanus rather baldly, trying to ascertain as specifically as I could how he viewed what had taken place.

29. The interview went on as follows:

**DL:** Do the Boig have this custom? About marriage?

**T:** You are referring to payments?

**DL:** Yeah. What do they do?

**T:** I didn’t pay for her.

**DL:** Ah.

**T:** Here, we usually exchange; you take my sister, I take your sister.

**DL:** Yeah.

**DL:** What did they say?

**T:** They said to never mind a payment.

**DL:** They said, “Forget it,” eh?

**T:** Yeah. They said, she could come live here and then we would go live there. OK. After we stayed up there, we would come back here. Go, come. If I did pay for her, I would pay using our [nautilus] seashells, we do not think that is too hard—

**DL:** They called for—

**T:** They wanted shells. They didn’t talk about money—

**DL:** Just shells.

**T:** Shells. **Kev, kev.** They are in the lagoons and stand up vertically like this.

**DL:** Yeah.

**T:** We have plenty in the lagoons.

30. See also the quotation above from Father Schmidt regarding the marital history of the young woman X.

31. Lastly, this is a second account of the beginning of an intertribal marriage. In Murik culture, such unions may or may not assert personal choice over obligation, because clan
or village endogamy is neither required nor highly valued. Intertribal marriages are viewed positively because of the reliable and generous, bride service–based trading partnerships they usually instigate. In 2001, 17 percent of all marriages I counted in the village of Darapap were with non-Murik mates (n = 85), whereas 57 percent of all urban marriages involving Darapap villagers living in Wewak town were with non-Murik mates (n = 21).

32. Trading partners were symbolic women who had to be magically seduced into being generous. Foreign women were viewed as sexually aggressive or as willing to have their affections “stolen” by visiting Murik traders. Feathers, color-coded by geography and standing for specific overseas sexual affairs, were named for the donors’ lovers as they were placed in the hair of young male initiates.

33. See the ethos of isolation in Edward Hopper’s The Intermission, In a New York Movie, or Nighthawks (Kranzfelder 1995). Thanks to Diana M. Dean for pointing these paintings out to me.

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accepted September 12, 2003
final version submitted September 25, 2003

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