

Essig, Laurie. *Love, Inc.: Dating Apps, the Big White Wedding, and Chasing the Happily Neverafter*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. Xiii + 239 pp. \$85.00/£66.00 (hardcover); \$26.95/£21.00 (softcover). ISBN: 9780520300491.

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In *Love, Inc.*, Laurie Essig stakes the claim that “romance is a privatized solution to what in fact are structural and global matters” because it “lulls us into focusing on our love life rather than politics” (p. 2). To prove this, she uses multiple methods, which include an analysis of various cultural texts, mostly popular in nature, fieldwork in sites of romance, and interviews with people engaged in forms of romantic behavior. Rather than refusing to disavow herself fully of romance, Essig unearths the mechanisms through which the privatization of romance in today’s economic framework does the affective labor that neoliberal capitalism cannot. She then reads this insidiousness beyond the scope of ideology. Capital in the twenty-first century, she goes on to demonstrate, works most effectively when interwoven with ideology and emotion. The book covers a range of cultural sites imbedded in the privatized manufacturing of romance, such as Disney World, Hallmark, and Celebration, Florida, the suburban master-planned community initially developed in the 1990’s by The Walt Disney Company. Essig’s work will be most interesting to scholars of social theory, anthropology, cultural history, cultural studies, and popular romance studies. She bases her theoretical grounding on the intersections between fieldwork and research.

Organized like a “typical love story,” (p. 19), her book begins with the chapter “Learning to Love” and ironically concludes with “Happily Never After.” It would be of interest to this journal’s readers to obtain a glimpse into the inner workings of such a narrative since the horizon of futurity—its promise and failure—envelops both the intent and the execution of her book. She appropriately begins with a brief history of romance as a modern ideology and introduces the concept “Love, Inc.,” which she then uses throughout the book, to prove how romance is both a “vector of socialization” (p. 33) and a way of life facilitated by a profit-maximizing romance industry complex. Her combined readings of Victorian literature and popular romance, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Twilight*, reveal how women’s erotic and racial fantasies translate into a dynamic system where we are paradoxically all called upon to act romantically. This creates a zero-sum game through which non-normative subjects are punished while normative ones are lulled into believing

they have won when in fact they serve to enhance the efficacy of neoliberal capitalism. These actions are not limited to fantasy or individual pleasure; rather, they are a “strange mix of emotion and consumption” (p. 49) where reality must be held at bay in order for the magic of romance to remain believable.

In “Finding Love,” Essig is primarily concerned with unpacking the ideological, affective, and economic logistics of hook-up culture through an analysis of two of the most popular online dating sites, Tinder and Bumble. She argues that the science of love is entangled with romance and capitalism and portents what Nancy Jo Sales calls a “dating apocalypse” (p. 65) since they are, in essence and design, the “opposite of romance” (p. 71). “[H]olding our future in our hand, we now date by swiping left or right” (p. 66), writes Essig, as if to reveal how the future of romance may be already forever lost. Despite this objection to dating-maximizing technologies, Essig does not comment in significant depth her position concerning the rise in the moral panic discourse about the digital turn of romance. *Love, Inc.* rather offers a negative dialectic of modern romance in the digital age by paying special attention to what feminist theorist, Corinne L. Mason, writes regarding Tinder’s subtle work of racism as an “aspiration and fantasy” of whiteness that is “confirmed by the imagery” against a backdrop of erasure and intolerance of Black bodies.

“Marry Me?” immerses the reader into the highly ritualized and overtly publicized marriage proposal world where examples of online proposals are meant to illustrate how gender and race hierarchies become desirable and eventually consumable. This idea bleeds into “White Weddings”—pun intended—where Essig argues that extravagant white weddings, most notably that of British royals Kate Middleton and Prince William, serve to further the economic and symbolic interests of the “sexual ruling elite, who also happen to mostly be the national, racial, and ruling class elite” (p. 116). A unifying theme across the book is Essig’s case that romantic rituals have always been central to state power. For Essig, the optimism about “Love, Inc.” that seeps and circulates in people’s psyche is related to power and the collective. It is a connection that stems from French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s concept of collective unconscious—an “excess of energy” (p. 135) Essig writes—that we cannot chalk up to the sum of individual choices or desires. This excess often falls flat during the honeymoon period. She then goes on to explain how this falling through of heightened energy draws newlyweds to places devoid of eroticism. To write “The Honeymoon,” Essig traveled to Disney World, one of the world’s primary destinations for recently wed couples. These places have historically been marked for children. Her fieldwork offers insight into the prevalence in these spaces of niceness and whiteness, but it also proves that millennial newlyweds knowingly participate in these manufactured dream-like worlds because the world that awaits them is rife with economic insecurity.

Of most interest to the reader of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, I believe, will be Essig’s immersive experience of Celebration, Florida, the suburban master-planned community initially developed in the 1990s by The Walt Disney Company. The crux of her thesis coalesces in her concluding chapter, “Happily Never After,” in which she reveals how “Love, Inc.” disconnects us from a sense of community while simultaneously presenting us with what is manufactured and sold as the *real* space of safety, what was once suburbia and is now gated communities. Essig uses Rich Benjamin’s concept of “whitopia” (2009) to explain how the white wedding, the white honeymoon and white gated communities are constructed as the only way to protect white bodies from the impending present-future of environmental and economic crisis. Imagining happily ever after through Celebration,

Florida, Essig explains, feeds the collective anxiety of invasion from without so that escape or resistance become impossible. Despite the pervasiveness of “Love, Inc.,” Essig does not refuse to believe that romance can also be the solution. She concludes by hoping for empowerment through romantic love without necessarily attending to the ways in which this space or time of liberation may be materialized.

References

Benjamin, Rich. *Searching for Whitopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.