

***Technology's Role in the Consumption of Love***

Janelle Ward, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Weigel, Moira (2016). *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating*. (292 p.)  
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN: 978-0-374-18253-3

*Keywords: dating, emotional labor, history, technology*

People's love problems are social, not individual, in origin. That's the final argument of Moira Weigel's *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (2016). We've always searched for love, but what's the social history behind it? Weigel dives deep into a (U.S.-based) look at dating, taking readers on a richly researched journey from the early 1900s through present day. Her scope is broad, but in this review I concentrate on the technological connection with dating, considering *Human IT's* focus and my own research on dating apps.

Dating is both new and old: it's a fairly innovative practice in the course of human history yet it has been around for more than 100 years. Weigel reveals how dating as a social activity appeared once women were able to leave the home and enter the workforce. Through rich anecdotes, her historical journey shows how female presence in public space was a necessity for this ritual to thrive. Weigel's main argument is that dating is an activity closely linked to market forces, and such a relationship has resulted in a commodification of the self.

Within this marketplace environment, we shop for a mate, but we also sell ourselves. Part of becoming a successful dating product is the cultivation of personality. She describes the development of personality as something that we can attain, and points to online daters as skilled in presenting it: “To construct a picture of yourself through photographs and likes and other gestures takes a lot of effort and requires constant tweaking to maintain” (45). We portray ourselves through careful descriptions, and we list our interests, or our most loved books or films. The visual is king in the mobile dating app environment, but the rule remains the same: we continue to show our interests, but now primarily through carefully chosen photos. Skiing, traveling, posing with friends at an event: this is who we are.

Weigel reminds us that the original intent of dating was to find a spouse. Those who have created and profited from dating platforms – from the restaurant, to the bar, to the dating app – would rather we all be stuck in a perpetual cycle of searching. She asks us to consider who wins in this scenario: consumption or courtship? Within this reflection is her use of the term “labor” to describe the search for love. The way she sees it, dating is unpaid labor. Dating can be hard work, and is a form of emotional labor for those of us – particularly women – engaged in it.

*Labor of Love* focuses on a dating history specific to the United States, which looks primarily at the dating practices of white heterosexual individuals. This is also true for much of the literature on technologically-mediated dating. This narrow perspective leaves out the stories of how different cultures and communities experience love, whether as labor or something else. But *Labor of Love* does include some other perspectives. For example, Weigel identifies how developments made popular in the LGBTQ community are often adopted as heterosexual trends. This was the case with dating apps: the first of their kind was Grindr, an app released in 2009 and made specifically for men seeking geographically proximate men. In 2012, Tinder was launched and has become the most popular app primarily (though not exclusively) used by straight people.

Hookup culture is one of the negative consequences of dating app use, claim the naysayers. The argument goes that engaging in superficial swiping promotes emotionless encounters. Yet Weigel points out this culture is not specific to the dating app scene. She provides a description of her own experience with hookup culture in the 1990s, complete with horrified media personalities and teachers determined to educate about the dangers of casual sex. Dating apps, like bars, can facilitate sexual relationships, and they can also enable a search for love. These motivations are grounded in our cultural understanding of dating, which often comes down to the search for companionship. She puts it like this: “When strangers catch each other’s eye across the room, however briefly, they become a *we*. Whatever form our relationships take, and for however long they last, it is with a desire for *we* that they began” (70).

*Labor of Love* does not provide a definitive critique of dating apps and their role as the latest technological courtship offering. Yet it does detail a fascinating history of dating. It also reminds us that technology is not changing the way we connect to each other. Rather, it is merely providing new avenues to do what we have been doing all along. This book is a good reminder that new trends do not fundamentally change what humans have always sought: connection with others.

The story goes that Weigel wrote this book after a breakup, to more deeply explore the forces that shaped her own expectations and behavior in her search for love. In the course of writing the book, she got married. She explored a phenomenon which she has also simultaneously experienced, from beginning to end (or from end to beginning). Weigel is also a graduate student, and this book is an inspiration for fellow Ph.D. seekers: research skills can be used to write a book geared toward a broader audience. It has an academic style but is much more readable than the typical academic text. This may provoke criticism from those expecting a purely academic analysis or from those looking for a popular discussion of the topic. She walks a fine line between both, and does so quite well. It is also useful for scholars, particularly those who want a broader look into

the social forces behind meeting romantic partners, in the time before mediated dating was invented.

*Janelle Ward is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research and consultancy expertise is in digital communication. She currently researches how people create and manage impressions on digital media, examining mobile dating apps like Tinder.*

*Contact: [ward@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:ward@eshcc.eur.nl)  
[www.eshcc.eur.nl/ward](http://www.eshcc.eur.nl/ward)*