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Love and Narcissism in Reality Television

Abstract

Love Island is a reality television series structured as a dating game, where participants compete to form romantic relationships. This article puts the show in conversation with theories and philosophies of love to draw between them an idea of love as a singular moral event that is constrained by cultural imperatives. What emerges is an existential phenomenology of love in three parts: first, romantic love is framed as an opening on to moral life; then, it is argued that moral life is enacted through a love for the neighbour that constitutes and animates our being in the world; and finally, it is shown that narcissism is not straightforwardly a negative condition but a balancing force in moral life. The article concludes with reflections on what this conceptual work might offer to analyses of relationships played out on reality television.

Keywords

Dating Shows; Moral Life; Popular Culture; Romantic Relationships; Social Theory

Love Island is a combination of dating game and *Big Brother*-style reality television, where participants compete to find love and win a share of a cash prize – and lucrative exposure. The competition starts out with equal numbers of men and women who initially partner up based on first impressions and according to a heteronormative idea of relationships. Each week one member of every couple has the power to stick with their partner or recouple with someone else, whilst new contestants join the Island to tempt others to stray. There are weekly evictions based on viewer polls, Islander votes or being left single after recoupling. This carries on until four couples remain, with the winners then determined by an audience vote. *Love Island* has been dogged by complaints of tawdriness, exemplified by Barbara Ellen (2018) in the *Observer* who referred to the show as 'sneak porn' populated by 'wannabes', depicting 'people in swimwear bickering and screaming', and all 'to entertain the gawping masses'. Stuart Heritage (2018), in the *Guardian*, characterised the contestants as 'narcissists' and described *Love Island* as 'a petri dish of obnoxious self-adoration'. Tragically, the suicides of two former contestants and one former presenter have cast a dark cloud over the series and the scrutiny that comes with participation.

Criticisms of *Love Island* and its participants are often reminiscent of Christopher Lasch's account of diminishing expectations in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1991). Lasch sketches the figure of an anxious narcissist who seeks to find meaning in life but who rejects the old ideas of loyalty and the security of the group; who imagines others to be competitors; who is sexually permissive but never at peace; and who is acquisitive but ultimately unsatisfied with their instant gratification. Lasch's narcissist trivialises the past, believing they have nothing to learn from it, that it cannot provide a standard by which to discuss the present, but the same cannot be said of social theorists of love (see Rusu, 2018), and it is here that we might find the beginning of a less moralistic account of *Love Island.*

In his essay 'Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions' Max Weber tells of how the ethos of brotherly love as a 'communism of loving brethren' (1958: 330) was flattened out by the protestant ethic, made less spontaneous and more dutybound, and then co-opted by the spirit of capitalism. In *Love as Passion* (1986) Niklas Luhmann uses systems theory to show how we love and suffer by cultural imperatives, an undertaking drawn by two distinct but interwoven frameworks: the first marking the transition from traditional to modern societies; and the second conceptualising love as a symbolic code that underpins our ability to communicate effectively with one another. On the second count, love is understood only

secondarily as a feeling; first and foremost, it is a symbolic code without which we could not demonstrate the appropriate feelings within intimate relationships. Intimate relationships are then social systems that are expected to meet the needs of those engaged in them and that therefore emphasise individual expectation whilst balancing this with social cohesion. Historical approaches are found also in Anthony Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995), Giddens charting the rise of romantic love (in distinction to passionate love) in the late eighteenth century, when ideals of freedom and self-realisation became ascendent, and of the pure relationship (that exists only to meet the needs of the individuals in them) as 'a transactional negotiation' (Giddens, 1992: 3), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim situating love in the individualistic process of modernity as a project, where the individual retreats into intimate ties to find meaning and security in a life uprooted from existential certainties. Zygmunt Bauman, in his *Liquid Love* (2003), writes of a subject without strong bonds, finding at best loose ties that are not guaranteed to last, who turns to personal relationships precisely because of the precariousness of these liquefied bonds, but who finds that those relationships have become mere connections, more apt for a world where romantic possibilities are meant to accumulate to the individual and never diminish in their availability, a consumerist rather than passionate kind of being with others.

The worry is that love construed as a culturally specific code ultimately reduces love to a null point. Love would then be the communication of norms, it would be about learning and participating and formatting a code that structures relationships, as Luhmann says, and whilst he adds that love is unstable, that there is always something that is uncommunicated and that cannot be grasped, it is precisely this that takes us beyond a code and towards the other. The symbolic code would then be a formalisation of love as a way of being that gives meaning to the individual before any codification, and a communication, a saying before anything said, that founds the intersubjective. The above accounts very usefully give us an idea of love as something subject to cultural change, that what love means and what it is meant to provide and how it is supposed to be enacted shifts with the times. But for there to be a reckoning of what has been lost and what has been gained, it is useful also to understand how these changes augment or deviate the intersubjective orientation of our very existence.

Bauman (2003: 3) himself points us in this direction when in *Liquid Love* he describes love as a singular event. Here he signals his earlier and deeper commitment to the moral philosophy

of Emmanuel Levinas (for example in Bauman, 1993, 1995), and it is this way of understanding love and existence that will animate the argument made in this article, namely that love is bound up with ethics as an event, an encounter with another being that breaks, momentarily, with the normative demands of society that would dictate responsibilities in this direction or the other, and that opens the individual completely to its being for the other person. This approach, although animated by Levinas, is motivated by Linnell Secomb's (2007: 3) observation that the 'enactment and depiction of love supplements and disseminates love's possibilities'. Emphasising the event of love, rather than the grander historical narrative of how love changes, this article captures love's reformulation by unpacking and unpicking moments of contemporary love on *Love Island*. In what follows, the focus will be on this idea of love as foundational, love in its pre-social state, as an orientation that makes the individual and the intersubjective together possible, because without this, the effects of changes in norms or codes can only really be logged – and the mourning of loss risks becoming entirely backwards looking rather than forwards facing, towards the future and towards the other. Then we would be able to make a moral assessment of what programmes like *Love Island* tell us about the constraints and demands of love today without recourse to moralistic sentiment.

In keeping with the idea of love as an encounter, this article then stages an encounter between theory and *Love Island,* not to apply theory or to derive theory, but to put the two in conversation, as Secomb does, to reveal what it tells us about the possibilities of love. It focuses on events from series four of the show to draw out and situate three problems of love and their possibilities: love as possessive union; love as frustrated accumulation; and love as narcissistic self-fulfilment. The idea is not to resolve love's problems, as they are presented on the show, but to reveal what they tell us about moral existence, to move beyond moralising about participants or formats so we can take stock of the cultural changes – charted by those mentioned above and more to come – and find the ways that living lovingly with others is altered or diminished. The article then concludes with ideas of how this approach might supplement and organise future work on love and relationships as they play out on reality television.

Possessive Love

On day one, wildcard Adam, a personal trainer from Newcastle, was tasked with breaking up one of the newly formed couples to pick a partner for himself. He chose to split up Niall and Kendall but on day four, a new contestant, Rosie, arrived on the Island and Kendall suspected that Adam had taken an interest in her. As a result, she started to take things slower. Adam told Kendall that she had no reason to doubt him, that her insecurities meant she was too scared to let him in, and that he was left making all the effort in the relationship as a result. He appeared to break things off with Kendall at the end of this conversation, and then went over to Rosie, who he kissed; the show's narrator clocked the time between these two acts at four minutes. Kendall later had second thoughts about the breakup with Adam. Meanwhile, he confessed that he liked the fact that she was upset that he had kissed Rosie; he then told Kendall that he preferred her being jealous – and she acknowledged that he had pushed her buttons to get what he wanted. On day six, Adam recoupled with Rosie and Kendall was evicted from the Island. As Adam stated to camera: 'I know what I want, and I get what I want'. On day sixteen, a new contestant, Zara, chose to go on a date with Adam. He reassured Rosie that, although Zara was his type, there was nothing between them. Adam then appeared to ignore Rosie, something he denied to her by suggesting she was overreacting. He later told a visibly distraught Rosie that there had been nothing between him and Zara until she had started making a big deal about it. The camera appeared to show Adam smirking as she told him how much he had hurt her. He then recoupled with Zara on day twenty, with Rosie later evicted after failing to find a new partner. As Rosie reflected: 'he always thinks he has the power'.

The question of power goes to the heart of the contemporary conceptualisation of love, its pursuit of unity and the tendency for one identity to overwhelm the other under cultural norms that favour possession. The idea that in love we become one with another appears culturally entrenched, reproduced in popular culture and yet lampooned at least as far back as Ancient Greece (see Plato, 1997). Levinas (2007: 254) characterises this pursuit of unity as an act of egoism; not so much a quest for the other but a journey home, to reside in oneself. He finds this unsatisfactory, since it seems to depict love as the simple attainment of a need or desire rather than an encounter between two distinct people, arguing instead that the one you love must always retain their alterity or else they cease to be something beyond the self to desire at all. Levinas (2008c: 86) argues that love is not a fusion, of two complementary entities that become a whole, but rather 'an insurmountable duality of beings'; 'it is a relationship with what always steps away'. There are three useful consequences of thinking of love in the way Levinas describes.

First, if the person you love always steps away, in the sense of remaining an independent entity, then you must always take a step towards them. This takes us away from a conceptualisation of love as 'the terminus of a movement', as Levinas (2008a: 29) characterises it – a passive relationship or a 'a calm rest in oneself' – and keeps it alive as an active intersubjective relationship. 'The very possibility of love', writes Levinas (2008a: 35), 'lies in its negativity', which is to say that love is always essentially unfulfilled, a movement towards but never a possession of the beloved. The fires of love are then never consumed.

Second, if there is not unity but instead alterity then the other person does not become ours but instead 'withdraws into mystery' (Levinas, 2008c: 86). By resisting assimilation to my possession, the other, mysterious, remains other, never fully worked out, at no time a possession of my thought, always holding something back. Levinas argues that love introduces transcendence to a being caught up in its own existence. The object of this love is then something alluring precisely because it is not a projection or possession of oneself.

Third, this introduction of transcendence opens our eyes to moral experience. An encounter with something that resists my possession, is, for Levinas, a moral encounter – 'arousing my goodness' (Levinas, 2007: 200) – since it reveals an existence that exceeds my experience. Whatever exceeds the individual must be met with attentive care precisely because it goes beyond what they might have any mastery over. The other person does not, in love, reside within me, but responsibility for their existence rests with me before all others. To step towards the other person who always steps away is then a moral movement; it is to trace the orientation of our being towards the other.

There is a balance to be found in love, between the activation of the ego in the pleasure of being loved, and, in loving back, being drawn toward the other – a position beyond solipsism or unity. Levinas (2007: 268) call this 'fecundity': where the love between lovers is consummated and gives birth to the future – a future which is not a future of the same but an openness to alterity and to the unknowable. One of the contradictions of love is that, in settling down, we settle for a future that can never itself be settled. 'Commitment is oriented toward the future', as Eva Illouz (2018: 98) notes, 'but it is a future in which one assumes that one will be and will want what one is and one wants in the present time'. This contradiction speaks to the endurance of the idea of love as finding unity. The notion that love is the completion of a quest for

completeness – an idea that seems to underpin the very format of dating shows like *Love Island* – forecloses an understanding of the future as an opening onto the beyond. At its heart is a kind of fixing of identities.

Adriana Cavarero (2000: 110) argues that love is something fragile, two unique identities exposing themselves to each other, where *what* we are is less important than *who* we are – where that *who* is a relational story that is told, and that is heard. Trivialising your partner's thoughts and feelings, telling them the world is this way and not that to distort their experience of being in it, or twisting events to place blame on them, suggests, as Rosie seems to encounter on *Love Island*, the negative potential of the idea of love as becoming *one*. That is, the idea of unity is here a unity of the self that has taken possession of the other. Rachel O'Neill (2018: 38) argues that under the cultural rationality of neoliberalism, love is caught up in the discourse of attainment and self-work, or, an entrepreneurialism of the self, and relationships become part of 'self-interested individualism' such that 'every aspect of coupledom becomes a matter of tactic and strategy'. We might see the negative behaviours depicted on *Love Island* – such as provoking jealousy, telling someone that their perception of events is all in their head or that their insecurities or paranoia are a causal factor in events – as a corollary of this self-interested individualism incorporating the other person in its purview, such that they become an object of self-gratification. It is an exercise of power over the other rather than the recognition of the spontaneity or freedom of the other as a limit to one's power. The pursuit of unity then denies the other person their status as a relational subject, with a view on the world of their own, fixing them as a 'what' and not a 'who' – and a 'what' can never form a 'we'. In its extreme form, unity in relationships excludes the possibility of difference, of a different interpretation of the world or orientation to the future.

For Levinas (2008c: 88), love is completely opposed to possession or power. But in the sort of neoliberal culture that O'Neill describes, and that *Love Island* seems to capture, possession and power permeate everything we do. If we valorise the idea that love is unity then we do not just lose the vitality of uniqueness in some abstract sense; we risk validating a more possessive kind of love – or at least we endorse the condition in which such a possessive love might thrive. Scenes of manipulation or control within relationships on programmes such as *Love Island* ought to be contextualised not only within the dynamic of neoliberalisation, but also the way that this dynamic accelerates and accentuates the harm of romantic fusion as a cultural totem. When love comes to be an act of possession, where one identity overwhelms and then takes

ownership of the other, then, as Rosie hinted at on the show, the quest for unity has become ineluctably a pursuit of power.

Luhmann (1986: 175) observed that love was not about reciprocity or unity but personal interpenetration, about finding 'meaning in the world of someone else'. What a reading of Levinas adds here is that the meaning to be found is in the undoing of identity, not in the individual's recombination with the other, but in the movement away from the self and towards the other – and towards an unknowable future. As Bauman (2003: 8) notes, Levinas's rejection of unity as possessive, as an act of power over the other, gives us an idea of love whereby the 'challenge, the pull, the seduction of the Other render all distance, however reduced and miniscule, unbearably large'. Love understood this way would operate according to codes, manners and symbols engrained in cultures, but it would also, underneath these, introduce the frightening yet radical dimension of moving across the distance between us, a movement that for Levinas is fundamentally moral. Bauman hints at this at numerous points in *Liquid Love* when he draws parallels between love and death – for Heidegger, existence was oriented towards death; for Levinas, towards the other – but stops short of a fully existential account of love. We can say here that love would be bound up with an existence as being towards others, as well as then being something constrained or contorted by norms and injunctions. Love as being towards the other gives us an idea of love that is more than a null point; it would be the very point of life itself. The processes of modernity described by Bauman, or Giddens or Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and the acceleration of these by the neoliberalism of life, as outlined by O'Neill in the context of love and relationships, then encroach upon and reformulate what love communicates, what it means as a cultural value, but not what it achieves – or ought to consummate – as a moral stance.

Frustrated Love

Alex, an A&E doctor from Carmarthen in Wales, coupled up with Samira on day one. They soon agreed to be just friends once he realised that she was not that into him. When recoupling came around, the two would stay together in an attempt to ensure that neither had to leave the Island, but with an understanding that the coupling would end when one or the other found someone they wanted to be with. On day four, viewers voted for Alex to go on a date with Rosie. This went nowhere and Rosie ended up with Adam. On day eight, a new contestant, Megan,

arrived on the Island and seemed to take a shine to Alex when she chose to go on a date with him. Megan then coupled with Eyal on day ten. Alex's frustration at not being able to find someone to couple up with led him to complain that 'I feel like I'm a leper or something!' On day sixteen, two more new contestants, Zara and Ellie, picked Alex for a date, and he coupled with the latter on day twenty. However, Ellie eventually told him that she was not into him romantically – at which point Alex, visibly disgruntled, told her that she had not tried hard enough at the relationship and had strung him along. He briefly coupled up with Grace, until she was voted off by viewers. Soon after, Alexandra arrived on the Island and chose Alex for a date, and the two coupled up on day forty. Three days later, Alex became interested in a new contestant, Laura C, but she ultimately coupled with Jack. Alex stayed with Alexandra until they were both evicted by public vote on the day before the final, although any romantic aspect to the relationship appeared to have broken down, with Alexandra accusing Alex of neglecting her feelings and stringing her along.

When an asymmetry of feeling is cast as a kind of frustrated entitlement it seems to go hand in hand with the diminishing status afforded to an idea of selfless or charitable love that finds itself at odds with a more possessive culture. If love is bound up with moral existence, then it is important to note that in the work of Levinas, love and morality are not the same thing – or at least, there is distinction to be made between *love between lovers* and *love for the neighbour*. For Levinas, love between lovers is a reciprocal relationship grounded in enjoyment of the other; love for the neighbour is an asymmetrical encounter founded by giving to the other. The first is a romance and the second is responsibility. Levinas (2006: 17) writes: 'To love is to exist as if the lover and the loved one were alone in the world'. Carving out this exclusive space, where the one lives for this other person, loves this other person more than anyone else, is to find enjoyment in the existence of another. This is beautiful, of course, but Levinas argues that this does not necessarily afford it the status of a moral relationship, since enjoyment of the other activates one's ego rather than selflessness. But as Jacques Derrida (1999: 41) explains, in his reading of Levinas, this kind of exclusive, romantic love is nevertheless bound up with moral responsibility even if it does not accomplish it, since it embraces alterity and directs the individual towards the other. In any case, this imagined position of lovers – *as if alone* – is quickly dispelled. The closed society of lovers is exploded by love for the neighbour – a kind of infidelity of the third. The neighbour as a third party presupposes an infinite number of other neighbours with whom one might initiate a singular relationship. This is a kind of love 'in which the ethical aspect dominates the passionate aspect'; it enacts a relationship of

responsibility, which Levinas (2006: 88) suggests is 'the harsh name for what we call love of one's neighbour' – harsh because it signals a movement away from enjoyment and towards selflessness.

Three things distinguish *love for the neighbour* from *love between lovers*: that it is asymmetrical; that it is directed towards frailty; and that it is enacted in giving. First, Levinas (2008c: 137) writes that love for the neighbour 'is without concern for reciprocity: I have to respond to and for the Other without occupying myself with the Other's responsibility in my regard'. To expect anything in return is to treat the other without respect for their freedom to give or not. Second, this kind of love is directed towards the frailty of the other, a frailty borne not in inferiority but in the precious vulnerability of otherness. (For Levinas, otherness refers to the mystery or transcendence of the other person, something beyond me that is precious precisely because it escapes my grasp.) 'To love is to fear for another', says Levinas (2007: 256), 'to come to the assistance of his frailty'. Third, Levinas (2008b: 72-74) argues that you must enjoy what you give in order to give it with your heart; but in the act of giving, it is no longer a gift of the heart but of material care or hospitality. That is, the gift is altered by the immediacy or urgency of the encounter with the other; it is no longer grounded in enjoyment but in responsibility.

This idea of love for the neighbour is infinite rather than universal. Moral or charitable love is intimately enacted and infinitely encountered; it approaches the other person in all their uniqueness and is also available to that person and another person and all other people, with respect for their uniqueness too – a procession of closed relationships. Love between lovers is such a powerful experience not only because we derive enjoyment from it but also because it encourages us to decentre ourselves, to go towards the other person, without assimilating the other person entirely to our own needs. It orients the individual to the other's existence, which is then fundamental to a love for the neighbour, in which enjoyment is eschewed in favour of giving selflessly. Love teaches us to be-with others so that we can be-for others.

A lack of reciprocity in romance is a miserable thing, as Alex discovered, bouncing from one rejection to the next on *Love Island*. Cavarero (2000) argues that loving without being loved is so devastating because we expose ourselves without the other appearing; we make ourselves vulnerable without any such exposure in return. This is a kind of frailty without relation. When you expose yourself without reciprocation, you do not appear to the other in all your

uniqueness: ‘The one who exhibits herself without appearing to the other remains, paradoxically, an unexpressed uniqueness. She remains a *what* in front of a *who*’ (Cavarero, 2000: 113). It is a sadness encompassed by the thought that *I* do not exist for *you*. Illouz (2018: 122-124) explains that we seek social recognition in loving relationships, and in so doing our sense of self-worth is vulnerable. Fear of rejection is a social fear because it impacts on our sense of value to others. As such, when we see the pain of rejection on shows like *Love Island* we are tapping into a much wider social production of suffering.

O’Neill (2018: 22) argues that the cultural rationality of neoliberalism has cast the attainment of relationships as a measure of the individual’s worth, often with gendered connotations that lead to the objectification of women’s bodies. Part of this logic is that if you work hard enough for something then you ought to be able to achieve it – if only you are entrepreneurial enough (O’Neill, 2018: 26). On the show, the participants refer to this as *grafting* and, taken to its logical conclusion, it normalises a sense of entitlement to the other. Sexual relationships, for example, have come to be seen as a commodity controlled by women, such that graft is the means of procuring the resource (O’Neill, 2018: 35). But the hyper-individualism of the entrepreneurial spirit also means that if you fail then you have no-one to blame but yourself, which is why rejection might be so hard to face or feel comparable to leprosy – as Alex suggested – and why it might be easier to displace this blame to the person who has rebuffed your advances. Under a market logic of romance, rejection becomes a kind of social bankruptcy.

Illouz (2018: 164-166) notes that unrequited love was a virtue back when love was still enchanted but that today romantic suffering is seen as unacceptable or unjustifiable. Love has become bound to self-interest such that unreciprocated love is regarded as a bad investment rather than something valuable. To love someone who does not love you back would then be a form of self-harm – something pathological – for which you would be expected to seek therapy. ‘Love’, writes Illouz (2018: 197), ‘has lost its cultural pathos’. In saying that, we should not want to valorise unrequited love as a sort of vale of soul making, where our own individual romantic suffering is seen as something noble or essential, nor to face backwards wholly in mourning a certain loss.

On the first count, the idea of suffering for love is inconsistent with love as moral existence if it directs attention towards the self and not towards the other. ‘Suffering in its woe, in its spite

of consciousness', writes Levinas (2006: 79), 'is passivity'; 'the least one can say about suffering is that, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless'. The trick is neither to see rejection as a form of frustrated possession nor to valorise romantic pain. If the experience of romantic love allows us to adopt a stance towards existence that is open to the other, then the experience of frustrated love ought to guide us right out towards the other. The way out of my own suffering is to attend to that of the other, such that 'a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman' (Levinas, 2006: 80). It feels awful to put yourself in a vulnerable position and then to be hurt in the process, but it can be redeemed by going out and helping the vulnerable and the hurting – whoever they are and whatever the cause. The experience of one's own suffering is then no longer passive but instead mobilises an attempt to transform the other's experience of suffering. In this way romantic suffering avoids its uselessness by becoming an attention to the suffering of others.

On the second count, the idea that love for the neighbour was merely a particular cultural imperative, and not an expression of human existence itself, might lead us to a despondent nostalgia when we ought to look, instead, to conceptualisations of love that would challenge the injunction to consume or to accumulate or to otherwise reduce the intersubjective to the transactional. Weber's account of how the 'unbrotherliness' (1958: 330) of the capitalist spirit – with its rationalising and individualising impetus – diminished the cultural valence of brotherly or neighbourly love is important, as are the elaborations of this theme by Giddens and by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, but if we regard love as a social code and not as intersubjective existence, and if we take this charitable love to have been only a fleeting cultural mode, then we are limited to charting its passing. The analysis then focuses on what has passed, without looking to what is buried alive by the kinds of imperatives O'Neill and Illouz document. *Love Island* would then stand moribundly as a sign of the times, an articulation of all that is wrong with love today, when it ought to remind us instead that the cultural demands of love are never settled, precisely because these imperatives run up against love as our very being. This would then give us an idea of the future beyond the narrow economic framing of relationships.

'Justice comes from love', says Levinas (2008b: 92). But under the logic of the market, any kind of asymmetrical love is seen as a sunk cost; under these conditions, love for the neighbour would be a moral failure rather than an initiation of moral responsibility. We can see this play out in the responses to rejection and displays of frustrated love on *Love Island.* The idea that

love is a kind of possession blinds us to the real value in giving – emotionally and materially – without receiving in kind. This is lost if we read *Love Island* simply as an epitaph for a charitable love now gone, and not as a representation of how the value of grafting and an existence of giving are in live and open conflict.

Responsible Narcissism

Wes, an electrical and nuclear systems design engineer from Staffordshire, coupled with Laura A on day one. They remained together until Wes decided to break things off, coming to this decision after a conversation with his friend Josh where he offered, rhetorically, that 'I am happy, but could I be happier?' Laura A then got with Jack on day thirty and Wes coupled up with Megan three days later. Laura A's new partner then quickly found himself attracted to new arrival Laura C. Jack sat down with Wes and Josh to talk about his feelings for the two Lauras. Josh, repeating the earlier reasoning of Wes, asked Jack: 'You and Laura [A] are happy, but could you be happier?' Wes advised: 'I know you're attracted to Laura [A], but if you're attracted to someone else, you're more attracted to someone else: don't live the lie'. Jack dumped Laura A on day forty-seven to get with Laura C, but they were voted off the Island by viewers six days later. Wes and Megan made the final where they finished fourth. Over the course of the series Laura A found herself dumped by two men both claiming to be happy with her but in pursuit of greater happiness elsewhere; she eventually partnered with Paul and finished as runner up.

Narcissism is held to be a wholly negative orientation to others when it might be seen to play a more vital role in moral life. The idea that a degree of narcissism is a necessary condition of being with others is perhaps best encapsulated by Derrida (2004: 199), who writes:

> Narcissism! There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other.

Levinas advances a similar idea in his work on dwelling and recollection. 'Recollection', writes Levinas (2007: 154), 'designates a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in

view of a greater attention to oneself, one's possibilities, and the situation'. This means drawing yourself together so that you are better able to go towards others; feeling at home with yourself so that you are ready to offer hospitality. In a moment of 'tranquillity' we repose as if in a 'still-life' (Levinas, 2007: 158), a necessary condition that presupposes moral responsibility, but one that we must always already be moving away from and towards others if we are to exist socially. Recollection is the punctuation that makes responsibility possible, at once a pause for breath and the disambiguation of moral existence. It is possible, Levinas (2007: 173) notes, for this to go too far, into egoism, but without such a possibility it would not be possible to go freely the other way, toward the other, and embrace moral responsibility. Some degree of narcissism is essential to the relationship between self-identity and intersubjectivity. As a variety of self-care, or recollection, it makes possible care for others. Narcissism, as such, is vital to both *love between lovers* and *love for the neighbour*. 'Recollection' – or responsible narcissism – 'coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent' (Levinas, 2007: 172). It allows us to go beyond the secure individuality of the present and towards the spontaneous futurity of the other.

Illouz (2018: 78) characterises the kind of commitment-phobia shown on *Love Island* as 'hedonistic', where commitment is deferred to pursue pleasurable short-term relationships rather than out of an inability to commit. Romantic commitment is then reframed as a limitation of opportunity for self-gratification. O'Neill (2018: 30) sees this as a reflection of the lionisation of the entrepreneurial subject under conditions of neoliberalism. Such a subject is encouraged to see romantic relationships as a kind of accumulation that drives the sense that you ought never to be happy with what you have previously banked. But if there is no such thing as non-narcissism, it is at least prudent to suggest that narcissism fares badly under an economic logic that encourages us to consider every facet of our lives in terms of accumulation. Richard Sennett (2002: 326-327) argues that we see narcissism as a personal failing when really it is more of a social norm in a society that promotes individualism whilst withdrawing stability or security. The trick is to hold both that narcissism is an unwelcome social norm and that it is bound up with sociality or the intersubjective relation – it is just a question of what imperative it is directed towards serving. We could then say that narcissisms that are less generous, open and extended – which might include continually dumping your partners to trade up, as Wes and Jack appeared to do – shift the balance away from narcissisms that are vital to moral life.

In this light, the kind of criticisms levelled at the participants on *Love Island* appear misplaced. It is no doubt possible to read the Islanders as pop cultural avatars of a neoliberal age of love and to hold the show responsible for the reproduction of its sufferings. Bauman, for example, saw 'the fluid world of *EastEnders*', the British soap opera, as a 'hothouse' of floating and frail relationships (Bauman, 2003: 76) and argued that reality shows like *Big Brother* or game shows like *The Weakest Link* teach us that the other person is not to be trusted, that they were 'public rehearsals of the disposability of humans' (88). But if we place narcissism on the continuum of love and not as its opposite, if we see both narcissism and love in terms of irreducible social being, then we would be more open to the idea that what is communicated culturally can be recalibrated. As Bernard Stiegler (2009: 48) sees it, the narcissism that forms the intersubjective relation stands opposed to the false individuality of consumerism, which cannot allow for the individual to flourish if it cannot allow for love to bloom. Lasch's narcissist, in lack of loyalty and in no need of community, does not ultimately suffer from their narcissism but from an empty individualism, an individualist ethos that rides roughshod over responsible narcissism.

Lasch (1991: xvi) argues that the 'narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past', that the narcissist has rejected the possibility that the old ways are the best. But too much of this kind of thinking in any historical account of cultural change risks refusing the idea that things can be otherwise than now or then. In an odd quirk, the historical sociological accounts of love ultimately cannot give us what an idea of love as a singular event can, which is of a relationship with alterity that takes us beyond the present. Narcissism rehabilitated in line with this idea of love is an orientation towards the future insofar as it prepares us for a world of others. The problem is not so much that the contestants on *Love Island* are narcissistic, but that the cultural imperative is to point our narcissism in the wrong direction. The way out of this points forwards and not backwards, which is to say that we need to work with an idea of narcissism that can be positively future-oriented, to not dismiss narcissism as backwards in its disregard for the past and then miss what it might achieve.

Concluding Remarks

The idea of love advanced throughout this article has been as an event or encounter such that: romantic love is an opening on to moral life; moral life is enacted through a love for the

neighbour that constitutes and animates our being in the world; and narcissism balanced between inwardness and openness is vital to the commencement of moral life. Carried along with this conceptualisation of love has been an argument that love is not only a cultural code with a historically specific instantiation but, underneath all this, a moral imperative of existence. So: where does this leave us when it comes to thinking about reality television?

Research on reality television has highlighted the way that its production shapes reductive representations of identities and relationships (Allen et al., 2014; de Benedictus et al., 2017); that it facilitates the performance of ritualised behaviours that reinforce dominant cultural norms (Couldry and Littler, 2011; Hill, 2015); and that it intervenes in and visualises moral subject formation according to dominant value systems (Skeggs, 2009; Tyler, 2013). Reality television has been shown to promote a neoliberal ideal of the self-governing subject (Wood, 2017); its emotional content is often centred on romantic and sexual relationships (Aslama and Pantti, 2006); and, by extension, it presents identities and relationships as something marketized and that one invests in (Lewis, 2017). Dating shows are often constructed to situate ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (Syvertsen, 2001), providing contingent and risky environments to the extent that they destabilise individual identities, but in ways that reinforce an extant governmental ideology of relationships (Wang, 2017). Programmes like *Love Island* are fertile ground for a critique of the social production of romantic troubles precisely because the mediation of relationships participates in the production of the norms that shape them.

It is hoped that future work on reality television can build more concretely on the tension highlighted here between love as a cultural imperative and love as a singular event indicative of moral existence. Aslama and Pantti (2006) have argued that watching participants find love on television, in such artificial scenarios, provides a context in which emotional extremes might be considered normal. Nevertheless, these extremes bring to the fore the faults and indeterminacies in our conceptions of love and romance, and this article has sought to locate, as Alison Hearn (2017: 21) puts it, 'the alienating weight of cultural and economic commands being silently imposed', and to register its impact on a life lived for others.

Ultimately, popular culture does not simply capture how love is, however real or constructed its scenes may be. As Secomb (2007: 159) indicates, the displays of love on these shows remain as unsettled as love itself and, in their incompleteness, open on to an understanding of love

rather than foreclosing what it might mean. Theories and concepts entwine with these stories and together unravel our certainties about love. We are left with an idea of love, through a reading of the work of Levinas, that would embrace the uncertainty of life, of a life lived with others, but that is diverted or diffused or defeated by the cultural commands of an individualised and then neoliberalised society. When analysing shows like *Love Island* we can then assess the story they tell us about moral life now, without moralising about the participants or those they stand in for, and without reducing them to dupes of the culture. The death of former presenter Caroline Flack, coming after those of participants Sophie Gradon (series two) and Mike Thalassitis (series three), has raised a question mark over whether the series will – or should – continue (Jonze, 2020). But whether *Love Island* or other reality formats that centre on romance, there is a need to speak critically and carefully with these popular representations of love and relationships – particularly when so much is at stake.

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