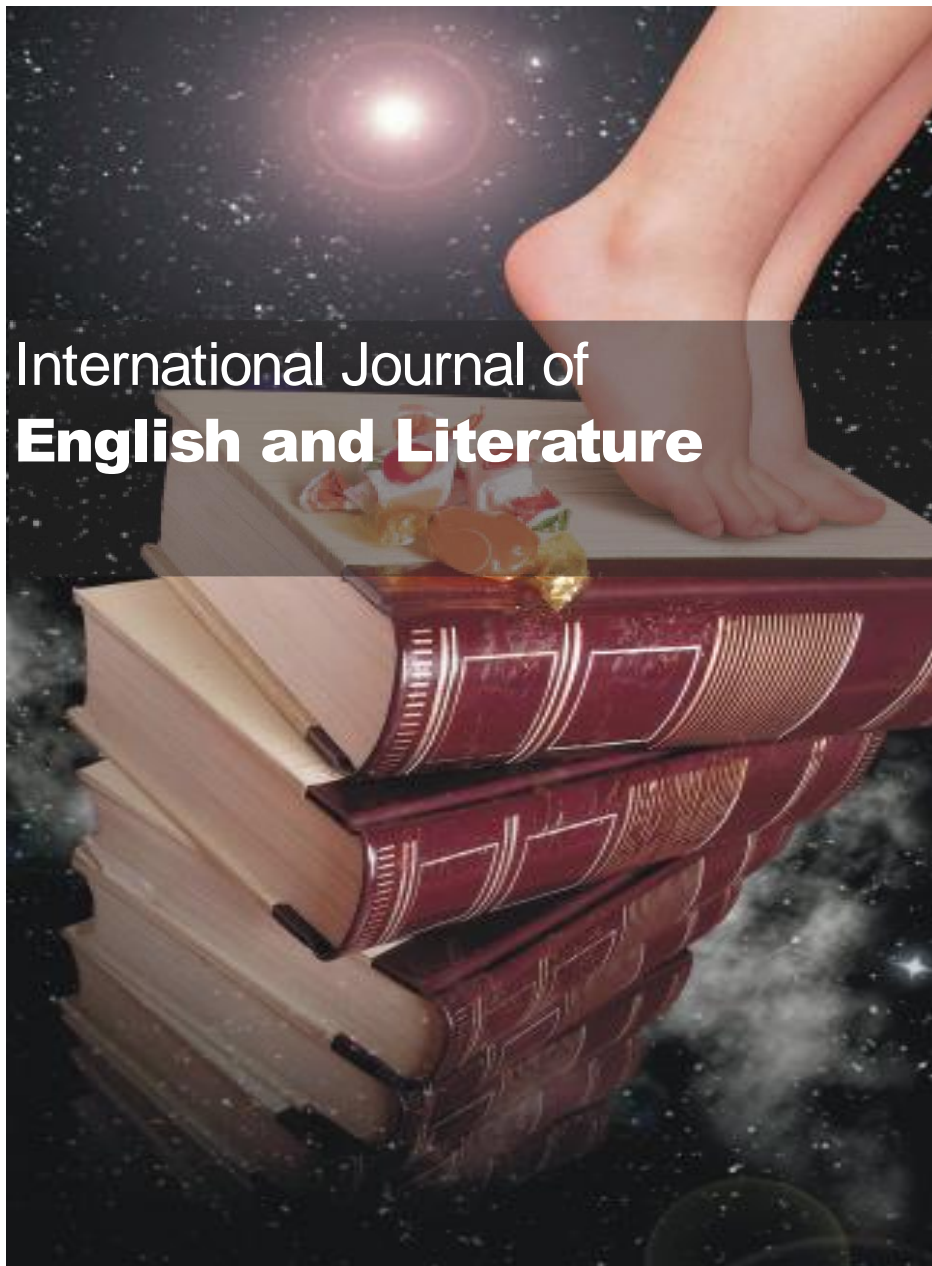


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Full Length Research Paper

Mimicry, rebellion and subversion of Western beliefs in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Migration is a global issue that entails the movement of people from one place to another. Edward Said states that “our age, with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi, theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration” (2002: 138). The crossing of transnational borders and entry into the receiving country presents various challenges which an immigrant has to contend with. In the assimilatory process, identities are reshaped and reformed into something that is not quite the same and various forms of negotiations occur. This paper contends that a key concern for immigrants in the host country is the negotiation of different cultural forms such as the use of language, the expression of a particular “hair do style” and ways of behaviour which are often alien or not acceptable to the immigrant. Conformity with established codes of behaviour provides easy admission and acceptance to Western life and culture, while rebellion on the other hand poses its own challenges and ambiguities. With the aid of Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of hybridity, this paper examines how the immigrant utilizes mimicry and rebellion as strategies for survival and as means of challenging and subverting the stereotyped image of the “native African” in the West in particular. It concludes that through mimicry and outright rebellion, the immigrant can effectively or somehow challenge dominant Western beliefs and assumptions.

Key words: Migration, mimicry, Western beliefs, Nigeria, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Americanah chronicles the yearning of most Nigerians to travel abroad in the quest of the “proverbial greener pastures”. In the face of stringent social economic realities in the nation, many Nigerians risk different life-threatening situations in order to improve their academic and economic opportunities. Several historical and economic reasons are behind this phenomenon of mass migration that has picked up speed and volume since the second half of the twentieth century. Among them are

“the second world war, the demise of the British Empire and the subsequent migration from the former colonies to the West” (Moslund, 2010: 1). Of equal bearing are “the emergence of totalitarian regimes” and “technological developments” (Frank, 2008: 1). Also, poverty and lack of decent jobs have become reasons for leaving one’s home country, and this is considered as economic migration. This is often seen in inter-country migration, especially in the movement of people from developing

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countries to developed countries in search of comfortable lives (Wickramasinghe and Wimalaratana, 2016: 15).

Some fictional characters in *Americanah* such as Ifemelu, Aunt Uju and Emenike are representative of Nigerians who travel abroad for academic and economic reasons. Procuring a visa to travel presents a myriad of problems with the embassy which the potential immigrant has to surmount. On arrival in the host country, the immigrant is often faced with the task of reengineering their mind to process and mediate certain cultural and behavioural information previously had vis a vis the one currently available in the host country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigration literature is a dominant genre in the oeuvre of African literature which has continually captured the imagination and attracted a lot of literary output from writers across different literary generations. The corpus of immigrant literature therefore continues to amass as many writers continually portray the persistent movements of people all over the continent which is largely due to the poor and difficult socio-economic realities in their respective countries.

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (2009), narrates the peregrinations of Mustapha Sa'eed to Cairo for high school and then to London where he studies Economics. Sa'eed exploits the images of the exotica which the numerous white women he encounters have of Africa and the Middle East in order to seduce them, break their heart and later abandon them. The actions of Sa'eed which may be judged by some as morally questionable, however reveals how the immigrant can exploit these distorted stereotypical images for personal gain.

In Pede Hollist's *So the Path does not Die* (2012), Fina migrates abroad to have a better future. After some years, Fina begins to feel an acute sense of disconnection from her culture and like Ifemelu in *Americanah*, begins to long for her home country. Fina achieves complete self-knowledge when she discovers that home means sharing herself with her people. With this realization, she shuns the allurements and privileges of life abroad and relocates to Sierra Leone to help the poor of her country.

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2014), exposes the harsh economic conditions faced by the inhabitants of the fictional town of paradise. The town of paradise is for its inhabitants, the "hell-hole" which they have been forced to relocate to because of the demolition of their houses and the forceful take-over of their lands by the government. Much like Ifemelu who processes a scholarship to study in America as a result of the incessant strikes of the university, Darling also longs to travel abroad to escape the poverty and hunger that haunts her every day. So, when the opportunity comes for Darling to travel to Michigan to join her aunt Fostalina,

she grabs the opportunity without a second thought.

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* (2010), illustrates the nitty gritty of black prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium. The black street walkers, who are from different African countries, have migrated to Antwerp in order to escape from poverty, unemployment, ethnic cleansing, etc., and to have a better life. For the ladies who trail the streets of Antwerp during the day and spend their nights partially nude behind show glasses, Belgium provides the anonymity they need to sell their bodies for dollars. It takes the death of Sisi for her colleagues to realize the precariousness of their lives and the riskiness of their new-found profession.

The thematic resilience of the migration theme in African literature is seen most poignantly in the corpus of Adichie's prose works which are all coloured by various shades of nomadic movements. In *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Aunt Amaka chooses the option of relocating abroad with her children to continue her lecturing career when the hardship and assault from the military government becomes unbearable. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Richard Churchill's muse is his fascination with the Igbo Ukwu culture which brings him to Nigeria and into the gathering storm of the Nigeria-Biafra war. *The Thing Around your Neck* (2009) is a collection of different short stories that majorly dwell on various strands of migration experience. The subject matter of these fictional works all serve to portray the pervasiveness of the migration theme in literature.

The purpose of this paper is to closely explore *Americanah* in order to depict how Ifemelu, Aunt Uju and Emenike negotiate their hybrid statuses abroad. While the other characters choose mimicry and conformity as survival strategies in the Western world, Ifemelu untangles herself from the linguistic and cultural expectations of the American society; she rebels against certain aspects of Western culture and carves out a niche for herself.

METHODOLOGY

This paper does a content analysis of *Americanah* using Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. The essay utilizes both primary and secondary research materials. The primary data were from the novel, *Americanah*, while the secondary data were from the library and the internet. The analysis of the novel is based on the authors' comprehension of the text with due guidance from the literary theory.

Research questions

The following are the research questions that guide this work:

(1) How do the characters, Aunt Uju and Emenike,

employ mimicry as survival strategies to gain privileges in the West?

(2) How is Ifemelu's non-conformity with some aspects of the Western culture a means of subverting negative popular Western beliefs?

(3) How is Ifemelu's rebellion a means of achieving cultural assertiveness in the West?

Theoretical framework

Hybridity

The term hybridity is used in postcolonial studies to represent the mixture of people and cultures and the resultant birth of new transcultural forms. Hybridity is manifest in situations where people migrate to other countries, are influenced by the cultural orientation of the country and their identities consequently become entwined with elements of the foreign culture. The title of the novel *Americanah* is the first indication of the assimilatory potential of hybridity. It is a term of address for people who were abroad for some time, and who later decided to relocate to their home countries. In its usage, the title suggests that Nigerians who have been exposed to other cultural influences portray a hybrid identity in their cultural behaviour.

The Location of Culture is an important book of cultural studies by Homi K. Bhabha where he describes the concept of hybridity and its manifestations. Bhabha (1994: 159-160) states that:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal. Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but replicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.

Two aspects of Bhabha's definition are highly relevant to the present discussion.

Firstly, hybridity is a tool through which the hybrid reevaluates colonial assumptions through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. This aspect refers to the attempt of the hybrid to mimic or imitate the accent, dress, behaviour and other aspects of the Western culture. Bhabha remarks that mimicry is one of the principal ways through which the hybrid undermines colonial power. In his essay on "Mimicry and Man", Bhabha describes mimicry as sometimes unintentionally subversive. In Bhabha's opinion, mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality of all symbolic

expressions of power (Singh, 2009). Importantly, the idea of mimicry does not refer to mere imitation, nor does it assume assimilation into the dominant culture. Rather, to Bhabha, it is an exaggeration of a copying of the ideas, language, manners and culture of the dominant culture that differentiates it from mere imitation: it is "repetition with difference". There is, then, a sense of mockery to mimicry, giving this "sly civility," as Bhabha calls it, a particular comic quality. Bhabha asserts that mimicry is "an ironic compromise" (1994: 86). In this manner, the imitative strides of the hybrid immigrant is seen as a means of reevaluating all assumptions of colonial superiority because through mimicry, the colonized replicates the colonizer's identity and renders common place what is regarded as superior.

The second fundamental aspect of Bhabha's essay on hybridity relates to the hybrid's strategy of challenging entrenched colonial beliefs and values through systems of subversion that consequently turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. In *Americanah*, Adichie presents to us the character of Ifemelu, a hybrid character, who unsettles or undermines the mimetic demands of colonial power by challenging institutionalized colonial assumptions. She does this by using the technology of blogging to address topical issues like racism and to evaluate poor and discriminatory racial relationship existing between "blacks and whites" in America. These activities ultimately serve the role of diverting the spotlight from the blacks and fixing it on the whites. These points will be further analysed subsequently.

MIMICRY

In *Americanah*, we are faced with several characters that mimic the American way of speaking. Aunty Uju is principal amongst this group. Whenever she wants to obtain favours and get preferential treatment abroad, she uses an American accent to speak whereas at home with her family, she speaks with her Nigerian accent. Her behavioural pattern suggests that she only compromises her accent for privileges and not because she believes in the superiority of the American accent over the Nigerian. This is an ironic compromise. Aunty Uju seems to have perfectly imbibed the aphorism which says that: "When in Rome, behave like the Romans". As a result, "When she (Aunty Uju) spoke to white Americans in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans", there emerged "a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (Adichie: 132).

Emenike is another character who mimics Western modes of behaviour to the point of mockery and utilizes his hybrid status to his advantage. Emenike's first strategy in Britain is to marry a white woman old enough to be his mother. This immediately entitles him to a good house in Islington, fashionable clothes and exposure to

his wife's sophisticated circle of white friends whom he always entertains with an exaggerated appreciation for the white culture, while referring to Nigeria as a jungle where all sorts of improbable events take place. Although Emenike does not go about breaking women's heart like Mustapha Sa'eed in *Seasons of Migration to the North*, he however supports Western stereotypes of Africa for selfish interests.

A classic portrayal of Emenike's pretensions is at a dinner with his old school friend Obinze and his white wife, Georgina, and her friends. Obinze is dumbfounded when Emenike begins to praise the household furniture in the manner in which whites normally do. This comes as a shock to Obinze because the idea and talk about "good furniture" is a European concept, especially as the furniture in question is old and already used (Adichie: 310). The pretence at being refined is a disguise employed by Emenike to fit into the social circle of his American wife and her friends.

In the same light, in his attempt at appearing sophisticated, Emenike is full of praises for the serving plates which are "handmade and chipped around the edges". Giving a closer look at the so called beautiful plates, Obinze discovers that "those plates, with their amateur finishing, the slight lumpiness of the edges, would never be shown in the presence of guests in Nigeria" therefore, Obinze "wondered if Emenike had become a person who believed that something was beautiful because it was handmade by poor people in a foreign country, or whether he had simply learned to pretend so" (Adichie: 312).

REBELLION AS A SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY

Chinua Achebe has observed that over time, Africans have been caricatured by centuries of stereotypes and myths that have been spread through European discourse. In order to recover agency, and rectify this unfair and unbalanced representation, writers have the right to challenge their misrepresentation in what Achebe terms "writing back to the West", which has become a necessity in order to "reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer" (Achebe: 55). This is precisely the task Ifemelu performs in the novel.

Two key issues which Ifemelu addresses during her stay in America are racial discrimination and cultural stereotyping. Ifemelu discovers shortly after her arrival in America that her skin colour is considered problematic and inferior. The same applies to her accent and dark curly afro hair. These discoveries propel her towards learning more about America's racial politics in order to better tackle it, "and as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms: race, ideology and region, became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (Adichie: 160). Ifemelu's knowledge about the racial politics in America is

also attributable to her first-hand experience of racism in its varied manifestations and the experiences of her black relatives abroad. For instance, Aunty Uju once recounts to Ifemelu the ugly experience she had in the hospital where she worked as a medical doctor. As soon as she entered the examination room, the patient who must have been white demanded to see the doctor, and when she confirmed that she was the doctor, the patient became angry and later requested that her case note be transferred to another doctor's office (Adichie: 213). This action by the white patient implies several things. For example, it suggests that the average white person will want to be treated by a white doctor because blacks, even when qualified for the task are considered as intellectually inferior to the whites. Another related incident is when Aunty Uju laments to Ifemelu that Dike's principal accused him of hacking into the school's computer network without any shred of evidence other than the fact that he is black, and the crime seems like one which blacks are capable of committing (Adichie: 400).

One of the most dominant ways through which Ifemelu interrogates, negotiates and challenges colonial assumptions of racial superiority is through the Western technology of blogging. Dean Jodi expands on the peculiarity of blog authorship when he states: "blogs offer exposure and anonymity at the same time. As bloggers we expose ourselves, our feelings and experiences, loves and hates, desires and aversions" (2010: 72).

Ifemelu's decision to set up the blog is predicated on her pent-up emotions and misgivings about racial inequality in America. Her blogging initiative thus becomes her outlet for educating people about racial politics abroad. The blog posts are satirical in nature, her language is not judgemental or accusative, but instead it functions as a social commentary on life in Europe. Through blogging, Ifemelu shifts the spotlight from the "blacks" to the "whites" as she depicts the various ways whites discriminate against blacks on account of skin colour. Her position is that many whites delude themselves that racism ended a long time ago, but this is a blatant lie because racism exists in various shades in the American society. In one of her blog posts, for instance, Ifemelu states that, "the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not" (Adichie: 361). Racism does not manifest itself in the form of mean "white" people who lynch "blacks" in public places, rather it can be seen in instances where a crime is committed in a white neighbourhood and the blacks living there are regarded as the prime suspects or where a black woman is expected to straighten her curled hair in order to get a job. In another post, she states that tribalism is alive and active in America, and on America's racial ladder, whites are always top, American Blacks are always at the bottom and what is in the middle depends on time and place (Adichie: 216).

Ifemelu equally challenges Western assumptions when

she decides to wear her hair as an afro despite the negative connotation it attracts. On one occasion when Ifemelu is preparing for a job interview, she is advised by Aunty Uju and her friends to look “as white as possible” to better her chance of getting the job. Looking as white as possible for Ifemelu means that she has to straighten her naturally curly afro hair. Ifemelu agrees to these suggestions and eventually secures the job. But after some time, she realizes that carrying straight hair impinges on her freedom and constrains her to carry her hair in certain fixed ways. As a result, Ifemelu cuts her straight hair and starts grooming her natural hair afresh. Ifemelu’s action of cutting her hair, is symbolic of her decision to shed all forms of pretensions and artificiality in order to conform to Western standards. Although she is on a foreign soil, she decides to set standards for herself and live an unencumbered life. Ifemelu gets the support she needs to carry her natural curly hair from an online group of black women who carry their natural hair and also trade recipes on how to maintain hair. By becoming a member of this group, Ifemelu aligns herself with black independent women who assert through hair do, the freedom to live unprohibited on American soil. Through the grand agenda of these women, who are committed to deconstructing the canon which says that in America only straight hair is beautiful, Adichie asserts that whether at home or in the diaspora, everyone should have the right to look the way he/she wants to look without fear of discrimination in as much as your looks does not negatively affect the next person. Ifemelu’s hair episode reveals another shade of racism in America, where everything black is viewed with distaste and white values are exalted.

Another issue which Ifemelu contends with in America is the expectation that immigrants speak with an American accent. She discovers that on America soil, respect is accorded to non-Americans who are able to imitate to perfection, the slurred speech and accent patterns of Americans. Ifemelu experiences a particular humiliating episode with a front desk officer at graduate school, Cristina Tomas, who assumes that Ifemelu is an illiterate because she cannot speak with an American accent (Adichie: 157). On closer observation of her surroundings, Ifemelu discovers that her aunty and other blacks she interacts with abroad appear to have subscribed to this unwritten code of speech as the norm in America. In her early days in America, Ifemelu also decides to speak with an American accent in order to blend in. She carefully learned and observed the discourse of newscasters and friends; and in her private time, she perfected the blurring of the “t”, the creamy roll of the “r”, she began starting her sentences with “so” and responding with the clique “oh really”. Ifemelu so perfects her accent that a telemarketer mistakes her for a white during their telephone conversation. She however notes with dismay that speaking with an accent is an act of will and commands a lot of efforts because if she is in a panic situation or is jerked awake during a fire, her first reaction

will be to cry out for help with her natural, God given voice and accent (Adichie: 203). As suddenly as she made the decision to speak like an American, Ifemelu also decides to drop all falsifications of accent and speak like an educated Nigerian, with a Nigerian accent. These actions of Ifemelu are considered rebellious because contrary to popular Western expectations, Ifemelu chooses the path to cultural assertion. Instead of discarding certain vital aspects of her culture and identity she engages in purposive cultural selection and imbibes aspects of Western culture that are commendable while renouncing others that stifle her individuality and femininity.

Conclusion

This study has examined how some fictional Nigerian characters, like Emenike and Aunty Uju who migrate to a foreign country, mimic Western modes of life in order to quickly assimilate and blend into the host country. The protagonist character of the novel, Ifemelu who is more assertive, however chooses to straddle between host and native culture. She imbibes certain Western behaviours like a dogged work culture and timeliness but criticizes the high rate of racial discrimination abroad which leads to a lopsided and tensed relationship between “whites and blacks”. In the same vein, Ifemelu rebels against the notion that straight hair is beautiful or speaking with an accent is a mark of literacy and finesse. Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity revealed that an integral outcome of migration to a formerly colonizing country like America is that the crossing of the transnational borders invests a hybrid identity on the immigrant who is better positioned to challenge and interrogate certain Western assumptions and beliefs. Through mimicry, Emenike and Aunty Uju are able to behave and speak like whites and even use this ability to gain privileges, while Ifemelu uses her unique hybrid position to question Western beliefs and assumptions. Through her rebellious and non-conformist stance, Ifemelu retains more of her individuality than Emenike and Aunty Uju, by exercising the freedom to wear afro hair and speak in a Nigerian accent. Conclusively, this study finds that some of the characters portrayed in *Americanah* exemplify the notion that either through mimicry or rebellion, the African in diaspora is capable of challenging Western assumptions and reshaping the discourse between “whites and blacks”.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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Review

Anthropological investigations of love through a medieval lens: The perspectives by the Middle High German poet, Walther von der Vogelweide

Albrecht Classen

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One of the fundamental problems of the modern university is the artificial creation of departments which cuts up organic research fields and creates unnecessary divisions when cooperation and mutual learning would be called for. There are certainly differences in methodologies and theoretical concepts between archaeological anthropology, for instance, and literary studies (Humanities); but anthropology, ultimately, is nothing but the study of humanity in all of its manifestations. Even though literary scholars and anthropologists pursue diverse materials at a time, ultimately, their goals are virtually the same- the understanding of human culture, values, morals, and material conditions. This paper first reflects on these outdated and misguided administrative hurdles in our universities today, and then presents an exemplary case study of the love poems by the famous Middle High German poet, Walther von der Vogelweide (d. ca. 1220), to illustrate how much the literary analysis can fundamentally contribute to anthropological research. This also implies, of course, that literary scholars should draw from the parallel investigations by their anthropological colleagues.

Keywords: Collaborative research, anthropology and the humanities, courtly love, Walther von der Vogelweide, medieval German literature.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, people throughout the ages have struggled hard to come to terms with universal conflicts that have reappeared virtually for every new generation. During some periods, the gender relationship and the experience of love were more studied by poets and artists, philosophers and theologians than at other periods. The High Middle Ages, above all, witnessed an enormous development in that regard, essentially driven by the desire to understand and to explore the issue of love more than ever before. We can fruitfully engage with

some of the best poetic expressions, such as the poems by Walther von der Vogelweide, in order to gain deeper insights into the fundamental human experience of love and its meaning for all our culture at large. This then promises to lay the foundation for innovative interdisciplinary investigations. Love, above all, needs to be examined both by literary scholars and historians, by psychologists and anthropologists, by theologians and philosophers. We might, of course, never achieve any kind of consensus as to the meaning of love, but the

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discourse which will subsequently be developed certainly promises to build significant epistemological bridges among the various academic disciplines.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE HUMANITIES

However we might define Anthropology and whatever methodology we might use in that field, there is no doubt that the study object is the human being, human society, and everything that comes along with it in terms of communication, ethics, morality, politics, emotions, ideals, values, transgressions, fears, desires, etc. In short, there is much overlapping with other disciplines, whether Literary Studies, History, Art History, Psychology, and so forth. Online we can read, for instance (Boston University), the purpose of anthropology is “to advance knowledge of who we are, how we came to be that way and where we may go in the future” (<https://www.bu.edu/anthrop/about/what-is-anthropology/>). Or (UC Davis): “The focus of Anthropology is on understanding both our shared humanity and diversity, and engaging with diverse ways of being in the world” (<https://anthropology.ucdavis.edu/undergraduate/what-is-anthropology>). The School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona presents its own field as follows: “As a science, anthropology is the only discipline that effectively examines humans as a species, including all past and modern human cultures and physical adaptations. The anthropological perspective is unequalled in its command of both diachronic and synchronic evidence in investigations of human evolution and the origins of modern human diversity because of its conceptual coordination of research on human ancestors (pre-modern culture and hominid biology during the last five million years) with inquiry on modern humans (language, modern cultures, modern human biology)” (<https://anthropology.arizona.edu/content/vision-statement>; all last accessed on March 1, 2021).

The Issue of love in human life

One of the central issues in all of human life has almost always been love, a highly contentious, profound, all-consuming, at times destructive, at other times glorifying force which transforms most individuals and melts them together with other individuals. Love has made people do many different things, at times crazy, at other times heroic, or baffling, amazing, hilarious, or moving. There would not be any reasonable approach to any kind of anthropological research if we ignore this fundamental phenomenon, love, whether in historical or in contemporary terms because love has shaped human beings most profoundly throughout time, whether this has been expressed in literary, artistic, musical, philosophical,

or religious terms.

Literary scholars have already taken it upon themselves for a very long time, and this quite naturally, to examine this topic through the lens of a vast body of poetic texts, and historically speaking, we could hardly gain any grasp on the world of western medieval culture, this research focus here, without a profound sense of this evanescent aspect of love. Love has also been equally influential in all other world cultures, but for the purpose of this paper it is limited to western literature, history, and anthropology.

The intentions of the following reflections cannot be to revisit the huge, probably infinite topic of love in its physical, religious, spiritual, political, or sexual dimensions. Historians, literary historians, psychologists, religious scholars, musical historians, art historians, and many others have already engaged with this huge issue, and we cannot expect that the flood of relevant studies will slow down or dry up in the near future. Instead, this study probes in a very modest fashion some of the reasons why medieval love poetry might be so profound for us today, especially within the context of anthropology. In a way, this paper is thus a modest attempt by a literary historian to contribute to anthropological research.

HISTORICAL PHASES OF THE DISCOURSE ON LOVE

Some cultures, at least in the European context, seem to have entirely ignored the theme of love, at least as far as the surviving documents indicate, either because the poets were occupied with other issues, or because a society was extremely bound by external forces and could not afford any focus on something so evanescent as love when their own existence was at stake. While love was of central concern in antiquity, whether in poetry (Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, or Virgil) or in theoretical treatises (Ovid), the early Middle Ages appear to have been occupied with very different issues, especially warfare, struggling against monsters, military conquests, settlements, and religion (*Beowulf*, *Njál's Saga*, *Walthariuslied*, *El Poema de Mio Cid*, the *Nibelungenlied*, or the *Chanson de Roland*). The famous “Hildebrandslied” (copied down ca. 820 C.E.) illustrates this existential focus within the literary framework most dramatically. Here two armies clash, and before the battle begins, the leaders engage in a conversation. They are separated in age by several decades, the old Hildebrand as a representative of the Huns, the young Hadubrand as a representative of a Germanic kingdom, but it becomes immediately clear that they are father and son. Tragically, this would be the common tone in much of these early medieval narratives. Hadubrand is firmly convinced that his father has died a long time ago as an honorable warrior. So, he severely distrusts his opponents and only wants to fight him in order to maintain his own social position and his masculinity, being the leader of his army.

When Hildebrand realizes that he cannot even convince his son of their close blood relationship, he laments his destiny, and then the fight begins. Due to the fragmentary nature of the poem, the outcome remains unstated, but there is no doubt about the tragic conclusion, whoever might kill whom (Schlosser, 1998/2004; for an English translation, see, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/hildebrand.html>).

There are no words about love in this heroic poem. Similarly, the vast body of early medieval religious literature has naturally no interest in the erotic, although we know that classical literature survived in the Christian monasteries where much of Roman literature was read (Ovid) to practice Latin in preparation for the study of the Bible. However, the theme of love emerged already once again within that world via poems and songs, such as the *Cambridge Songs* (eleventh century) and the *Carmina Burana* (early thirteenth century; cf. now Franklins and Hope, 2020). And then, by the early twelfth century, the topic of love burst onto the stage, with the poems/songs by the *troubadours* (southern France), the *trouvères* (northern France), the *Minnesänger* (Germany), and the poets of the *stil dolce nuovo* (northern and southern Italy) (Akehurst and Davis).

In the course of time, poets and writers increasingly turned toward marital love, spiritual love (mysticism), and also crude sexuality, all typical of the late Middle Ages (Classen, 2005; Classen, ed., *Sexuality*, 2008). The subsequent centuries witnessed a continuous growth of the public discourse on love and marriage (Classen, ed., *Words of Love*, 2008), but the sixteenth century also experienced a strongly religious turn because one of the battle cries by the Protestant reformers against the Catholic Church aimed at their allegedly hypocritical stance regarding celibacy for the clergy.

The seventeenth century suffered badly from the Thirty Years' War, at least within the Holy Roman Empire of Germany, so love assumed a much more spiritual dimension, if it was addressed in the first place (see the poet Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, 1633–1694). And ever since, much of public culture has been determined by constantly new efforts to come to terms with love, whether we think of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), or Emily Dickinson (1830–1886). Surprisingly, however, despite the infinite number of relevant texts dealing with this phenomenon, composed both in the West and the East, and certainly also in the South of our globe, conflicts and tensions between the genders have not subsided, faded away, or lost in relevance. Happiness and harmony are in desperately short supply. In fact, almost to the contrary, the postmodern world appears to be more troubled about misguided, failed, lost, destroyed, or simply absent love than ever before, at least if we consider the divorce rates, here disregarding a certain upswing in the number of stable marriages in the USA over the last ten years ([https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/12/united-](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/12/united-states-marriage-and-divorce-rates-declined-last-10-years.html)

[states-marriage-and-divorce-rates-declined-last-10-years.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/12/united-states-marriage-and-divorce-rates-declined-last-10-years.html)).

Of course, neither marriage nor divorce can really speak to the issue of personal happiness, and even less to love as the fundamental emotional bond between two people (<https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>). Apart from statistical data, we can be certain that people's emotional relationships have certainly not improved since modernity, if not on the contrary. This means that the need to explore the meaning of love as a fundamental bonding force within society continues on a high level, so it should not surprise us that love would be a topic of high relevance also for anthropologists.

Inasmuch as marriage has always been a social and historical construct, we do not need to pursue here in specifics the nature and condition of this form of legalized cohabitation. But love as a force connecting two people with each other over a long period of time, if not until death, remains a universally challenging phenomenon especially because, despite its highly individualistic, subjective character, it strongly supports a person's happiness. If parents are happy with each other, then the entire family certainly profits from it as well, which thus contributes in an essential manner to the young generation's growth into healthy, constructive adulthood. This is not to say that single parents might not achieve the very same effect, but this would be beside the point in this study.

We are thus called upon to examine the topic of love much more seriously than commonly assumed and to put it more up front in a variety of other research fields, similar to literary history. In practical terms, it is required of all people who want to get married that they first take a course on love and learn the fundamentals of all human communication and interactions without which even the strongest form of love will not be able to sustain itself. Love would need to be understood from a psychological, economic, religious, medical, chemical, physiological, or legal perspective, if we want to be prepared for its arrival when it strikes the individual. Some of the best avenues toward a critical examination of love have been literary analysis, philosophy, art history, and also music. Virtually all of the greatest poets, novelists or playwrights have engaged with this topic in one or the other way, whether we think of Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Jane Austen, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf or Bertolt Brecht. Conflicts, tensions, happiness, sorrow, frustration, irritation, and many other human emotions have always been clustered around the theme of love, which thus emerges as one of the crucial and permanent drives in all of human life.

While the study of the love poems by Walther von der Vogelweide all by themselves does not necessarily represent new research, considering almost two hundred years of research focused on his works, we can learn much about new interdisciplinary approaches in the Humanities and Social Sciences through the focus on his poems. In other words, anthropologists are strongly

encouraged to accept the songs by this famous poet as relevant statements about the discourse on love at around 1200, which astoundingly continues to affect us deeply today.

The role of the literary discourse

One of the crucial teaching tools regarding the well-being of humans has always been the literary discourse in which both dreams and horrors of love have found vivid expressions, all depending on the individual perspectives. By means of poetry or prose, especially from earlier times, we can gain access to a sort of laboratory of human existence, where all kinds of extreme conditions, behaviors, opinions, attitudes, and the like can be studied closely. The dream of love appears to be a universal factor, yet the reality has commonly looked very differently, though the discussion of love relationships in literary texts only rarely leads to a perfect happy end, unless we rely too much on trashy or maudlin novels representative of illusions or dreams far removed from reality.

We know for sure that love as an emotion consists of an infinitely wide range of registers, and yet we can be certain that whoever falls in love or experiences love both in short and long terms can find those experiences mirrored in literary texts, even if those easily prove to be extreme lenses through which the ordinary situation in human life finds its disproportionate reflection. Hence, once again, literature serves exceedingly well as a laboratory, where countless experiments with and about human life have been carried out. Studying fictional texts thus makes it possible to experiment with the extremes of otherwise rather ordinary conditions and thus to learn more properly to understand those situations and to handle them better in practical circumstances.

It would be virtually impossible to attempt to specify concretely what love might be, although some medieval poets such as Andreas Capellanus, 1969, (*Ars amatoria*, ca. 118; Lewis, 1936; 2013) certainly made a serious effort in that regard (Andreas Capellanus). Each person, each character, each subject responds to subjective feelings and external, material (objective) conditions both in the past and in the present, so we might be in danger of losing the academic grip on this phenomenon, unless we turn our attention to a solid body of relevant data, such as poetic expressions formulated at a specific time, within a specific cultural framework, addressing a unique audience. In other words, we must make sure that our research is solidly founded and can be verified and falsified, which the literary-historical lens makes possible. Fortunately, we have available a vast treasure trove of relevant poetry from throughout history and only need to carry out a focused study based on a selection of significant poetic statements in order to gain valid insights into a historically-determined discourse on love

(Bumke, 1986).

WALTHER VON DER VOGELWEIDE – A MAJOR MEDIEVAL VOICE

By choosing some of the poems by the Middle High German poet Walther von der Vogelweide (fl. ca. 1190–ca. 1220), whose enormous popularity far into the early modern age is testified by a nearly endless stream of manuscript copies and continued references back to him as one of the great masters of courtly love poetry (*Minnesang*) (Richter, 1988), we will be in a solid position to identify his statements and opinions as highly influential on his society and his posterity. I do not intend to argue naively or simply that medieval love poetry would be the ideal model for modern discussions and probing of love at large. Nevertheless, I propose to read Walther's poetry as exemplary of the critical perspectives examined, probed, weighed, and considered by his contemporaries, and this at a time when all those aspects, love, sexuality, and marriage, suddenly mattered so centrally, at least for the aristocratic audiences (Classen, 2015).

Previous research, mostly philological and literary-historical, has already engaged with Walther to a large extent; we have available critical editions of his poems, English translations (and other translations), a concordance of his works, numerous monographs, collected studies, articles, conference papers, and digital copies of his manuscripts, so we can limit ourselves here to just a few points pertaining to the timeless relevance of his works for modern anthropological research focused on the question of what love means, how it functions, and what relevance it might have for people (Walther von der Vogelweide, 2003, 2013; for an English translation of a selection of his songs, see online at <https://archive.org/details/selectedpoemswa00philgoog>; for a list of manuscripts containing his works, see <https://handschriftencensus.de/werke/414>).

Significantly, Walther was the first courtly poet to create not only love songs, but also a series of political stanzas in which he reflected critically on the conditions of his time, often targeting with biting commentaries the situation within the Christian Church. But he is probably most famous for his poems on love, especially because he probed its dialectic character so deeply and offered most insightful, almost psychologizing perspectives. The truly best one was certainly his woman's song, "Under the linden tree" (no. 16; or L. 39, 11), in which an anonymous female voice – as assumed by the male poet – reflects on her experiences with her lover who awaited her under a linden tree situated somewhere at the edge of a forest, hence away from human society, and yet not completely in the wild forest, or dangerous nature.

As much as she addresses a courtly audience, she insists on the privacy of the matter, her love affair. The

lover had prepared a bed out of flowers and grass for the two of them, and she went out there to the meadow to meet him, which indicates that both voluntarily found each other at that secret meeting place, that he was a caring individual who wanted her to feel happy with him, and that both wanted to be completely alone. Nevertheless, the female voice is aware that other people later passed the site of their love-making and recognized from the imprint of their bodies on the love bed what had happened there. Instead of feeling anger, jealousy, or envy, those other people expressed their approval, their delight, and their own happiness about what had taken place there (stanza II), an almost utopian setting, and this already in the Middle Ages. Witnessing the erotic site, they quietly smile and demonstrate their support of this love event which was obviously beyond all traditional norms; certainly outside of the marital bonds (maybe pre-marital).

For the singer, privacy, intimacy, and personal joy emerge as the highest goals, and yet, she allows the audience to participate, like voyeurs, which underscores the extent to which all erotic love poetry contributes to a certain extent to voyeurism (Spearing, 1993). Even though she voices great concerns that her secret with her lover might be divulged, the poem itself specifically serves that purpose to transgress the privacy of that erotic adventure. Each stanza concludes with an onomatopoeic refrain, "tandaradei," which reflects the sound made by a nightingale which had observed their love-making. A nightingale, however, it represents poetry itself, the experience of love, and thus evokes a long classical tradition (Pfeffer, 1985). Walther thus formulates the fundamental insight that poetry itself represents love, and love leads to poetry, especially because the bird certainly would sing about what it had observed below it, but obviously only in enigmatic terms which do not reveal the full truth. Love poetry is suggestive; otherwise it disintegrates into pornography in verse.

Finally, in the second stanza the female voice appeals to the Virgin Mary for her blessing of this love relationship which she hopes would last forever, which thus adds a religious component to the entire erotic discourse. Altogether, although the singer repeatedly expresses her shame if anyone were to find out what she did under the linden tree, the entire poem serves the very opposite purpose to give vent to the strong feelings of love and to allow the audience to imagine the happy scene where two young people in love with each other had met and joined in delightful erotic embraces and sexual pleasures (Sievert, 1990).

Despite the projection of intimacy, Walther really operates as a public entertainer who also intends to instruct his audience both about the nature of love and, maybe even more importantly, about the concept behind courtly love poetry, as he illustrates in "Ich hân ir sô wol gesprochen" (no. 17, or L. 40, 19). Here he sheds the role of the female speaker and reflects directly upon the

social relevance of poetically treating love as a fundamental medium to train the members of the court in aristocratic civility, or *urbanitas* (Jaeger, 1999). In this poem, Walther underscores specifically that his wooing of a lady strongly contributed to her gaining public esteem, whereas the opposite situation, with her ridiculing and mocking him, would undermine all of courtly culture. Wooing for a lady's love would primarily contribute to the development of a loyal heart, hence honor and fame, that is, the highest value within aristocratic society (Schultz, 2006). The poet appeals to Lady Love (*Minne*) asking her to send her arrows into his lady's heart so that she may feel the same wounds and the same pain as he does.

On the face of it, Walther might express his own lamentations that he does not receive back the same feelings of love, but in essence, as the very last line of his poem reflects, he sounds the alarm over the danger that the discourse of love might be disrupted at court. If he as the poet would no longer enjoy the usual esteem, then he would stop singing his lady's praise, which then would also undermine all courtly joys. Although indicated only in a bit cryptic language, the poet clearly underscores his central role within the courtly context because without the singing of love poems about ladies and without the male singer's wooing, all public values and happiness would be undermined and could get lost.

Similarly, in his song "Ich bin als unschedelîche frô" (no. 19, or L. 41, 13), he reveals the true intention behind the theme of courtly love, which proves to be public esteem, honor, respect, and civility. There would be too many people who resorted to false praise and lying and who would thus endanger the very nature of the discourse which binds and holds all members of aristocratic society together (Classen, 2008, "The Quest for Knowledge"). He regards his own purpose as a composer and singer of love songs as enhancing worthy people's "werdekeit" (II, 1; worthiness), that is, social prestige based on ethical standards. Similarly, Walther regards himself as the crucial voice for women to establish their virtues, which is possible through granting their love to virtuous men. Without going too much into detail, the poet alludes to the famous notion of "høher muot" (IV, 2; high spirit), which comprises a wide range of ethical ideals, such as honesty, steadfastness, loyalty, trustworthiness, and goodness (Ehrismann, 1995).

One of the crucial inner values in human life proves to be, as Walther emphasizes, the ability to observe moderation ("mâze") and to approach things with a calm, rational mind, and thus also in love, as his poem "Ich høere iu sô vil tugende jehen" (no. 20, or L. 43, 9) indicates. In this 'love song' he appeals to his lady to grant him not only her heart, but also to teach him how to acquire this inner value. In a poetic exchange, a man and a woman explore together the ideal of "stætecheit" (III, 1; constancy), which is closely connected with "triuwe" (IV, 4; trustworthiness). As much as the love relationship stands in the foreground, in essence, as the poet alludes

to throughout, virtues and ethical ideals matter centrally. The poetic discussion of love thus proves to be a medium for the individual's development of a character according to the highest levels of courtly society. As much as the erotic appears as the basic glue bonding the singer and his beloved lady together, as much the poem actually explores social aspects which make life within courtly society worth living, if not possible in the first place. The technical term for this experience can be found in the poem "Sô die bluomen ûz deme grase dringent" (no. 23, II, 4, or L. 46, 12): "hovelîche[] hōchgemuot" (courtly high spirit). In other words, Walther here suggests that we should understand all discussions about love as a medium to develop one's character and to aspire for ideals according to the highest norms of society. The motivating force taking the individual toward that goal would be joy, both about the imminent arrival of spring in the month of May, and about the beautiful lady whose attractiveness creates the inner spirit of happiness in the singer (stanza III).

Once love filled the man's heart, then the notion of moderation would make itself felt, both in public and in private. For the poet, the feeling of love constitutes the engine which makes the drive toward moderation and other ethical values possible. Wooing itself, however, requires a careful balancing act because the lover should not aim too high or too low (stanza IV), meaning that he ought to find the middle ground between the sexual desire and the extremely esoteric dimension. Of course, in many other courtly love poems, such as in those by the first *troubadour*, William IX (early twelfth century), the opposite appears to be the case (Fajardo-Acosta (2020), "The Negative Imagination"), but this huge genre simply set the stage for the extensive public discourse on what love means, and how lovers, that is, members of the courts, ought to aspire for it. Walther himself intensively argued with contemporary poets such as Reinmar the Elder about the proper approach to composing love poems and what true love might consist of, and they all thus contributed to the critical discourse which constituted the essence of courtly culture (cf. Kircher, 1973; Bumke, 1986; Fajardo-Acosta (2010), *Courtly Seductions*; Bauschke and Hassel, ed.).

We cannot tell precisely how Walther might have imagined or evaluated this tension, but we can be certain that he wanted to define the striving for love as a strategy to lead a life in accordance with one's own means, needs, and desires fitting the courtly standards. "Nidere minne" (V, 1; low love) implies the excessive focus on the physical fulfilment, whereas "hōhe minne" (V, 4; high love) makes the individual aim for great honor due to the elevated status of the admired lady. The latter might seem admirable, but the poet still warns about losing moderation out of sight, and urges the audience to strive for a love truly felt in the heart: "hertzeliêbe" (V, 8).

In matters of love it would be irrelevant whether the lady would have much wealth or be of extraordinary

physical attractiveness (no. 26, or L. 40, 25). Those women who attract many wooers because of their beauty would also easily invite hatred (stanza III). For Walther, bodily appeal should be secondary to the true feeling of love, whereas heart-felt love would transform the other person into full beauty. Explicitly, he warns his audience that it would be better to receive as a symbol of love a ring of glass, given out of a true feeling of love, than a ring of gold from a queen who would not even know the meaning of love (stanza IV). The last stanza then sums up Walther's straightforward admonishments to all lovers. Only if loyalty/honesty and constancy would be present, could one trust that true love exists between the two. Under that circumstance, the lover would not have to worry about the rise of heart pains. Love, in other words, is defined here primarily in ethical terms sustaining strong bonds without fail.

LOVE AS AN ETHICAL DISCOURSE

Intriguingly, Walther does not talk specifically about passion, sexual fulfilment, or public glory as a result of a love relationship. Instead, for him, a worthy lady proves her real value through her demonstration of ethical ideals. Love thus emerges as a catalyst to transform the individual, so to speak, from narcissism to altruism. True love consists of the merging of two hearts (no. 27, IV, or L. 51, 5), to the complete exclusion of anyone else. For Walther, hence, love constitutes a bonding experience, merging two individuals, who then can rely on and trust each other.

Walther explored the phenomenon of love (*minne*) in many other poems, examining constantly changing perspectives, conditions, feelings, and exchanges with his beloved lady. In "Ich freudehelfelôser man" (no. 31, or L. 54, 37), for instance, he admits of being a complete servant of love, having lost his self-control, his mind, and self. Pain is filling his heart because of his longing for his lady. *Minne* proves to be all powerful and cannot be resisted; neither young nor old would be able to close their heart once she arrives (stanza VI). But love service would prove to be the ultimate reward, the foundation of all happiness: "lâ mich dir leben mîne zît" (VI, 9; let me give my time to your life).

As we finally hear, there is not any real endpoint in Walther's discourse of love, the experience of love makes him sing, and his poetry makes it possible for him to find love (Nübel, 1985). Courtly love as analyzed by Walther emerges as a critical instrument to help the individual to mature, to pursue ethical ideals and values, and to establish relevance in one's life. No court without courtly love poetry, and no love poetry without a court, as he formulates in "Lange swîgen des hât ich gedâht" (no. 49, or L. 72, 31). The sensation of love induces the poet to create his songs, and those songs ultimately serve the court to practice their own ideals through a discursive

engagement with the poems.

It would be absurd to talk about a long-term civilization process, as Norbert Elias had famously tried to do, especially without an in-depth knowledge of the relevant literary-historical sources from the pre-modern world. In fact, the future social developments might have left behind some of the highest ideals as formulated by this famous courtly love poet (Elias, 1939/1981). Love was, as Walther argued, a medium for ethical ideals which are very difficult to achieve, and this until today. Cultural processes are not simply progressing, and we do not necessarily find ourselves today in much better conditions compared to the middle ages. Ethics, morality, spirituality, or social values are constantly subject to negotiations, external influences, and so they emerge and fade away again. But the erotic desire proves to be, as we can read in these Middle High German verses, the critical engine to transform the young individual from a selfish individual into a socially responsible member of courtly society. Politeness, as we call it, originated in courtliness, and all social interactions depend on a certain degree of mutual respect. The discourse of love served the central purpose to practice courtliness, and since love appears, as we might say, naturally as part of a human's growing up into adulthood, the poet's central task was to channel those feelings (emotional, sexual, spiritual) toward the shaping of the individual determined by ethical and moral values.

Once having accepted these insights gained from a close reading of Walther's poems, we can easily expand the critical examination and incorporate a vast body of contemporary or subsequent Middle High German, but then also Old French, Italian, or Latin poems dedicated to the central topic (*Carmina Burana*; cf. Franklino and Hope, ed.), courtly love. Heinrich von Morungen's songs would serve as much in this regard as those by Guido Cavalcanti or even Dante Alighieri. For this purpose, Walther's poems simply stand out because he addressed the ethical issues involved in the love discourse so poignantly and because his poems continue to appeal to modern readers in a wide range of approaches, as the rich body of modern scholarship indicates (Bauschke and Hassel, 2020). Love has almost always been one of the strongest bonds between people, but has also led to much negative feelings, so anthropologists and other researchers today can certainly profit profoundly from interdisciplinary perspectives which would also include Middle High German *minnesang*.

CONCLUSION

As much as we need to translate Walther's language into modern terms to understand his concrete messages, his poems carry timeless value. The modern world might be far removed from the High Middle Ages, but the drive toward gaining love, hence ethical ideals, and thus

toward the establishment of a harmonious, respectful society continues until today. The past world was not simply worse than our modern one; the interactions among people change all the time and poetry from the past might well serve as an ideal for us today once again. So, Walther's poems promise to shed important light on universal concepts and the foundation upon which humanity is predicated. Looking backwards toward one of the most famous medieval love poets might thus allow us to move forward once again, especially with regard to human love (Classen, "Amazon Rainforest"). Undoubtedly, this poet was a leader in the larger discourse on love, on the public examination of the relationship between the genders during the early thirteenth century, and he was succeeded by countless others, both in medieval and early modern Germany and in many other parts of Europe. We might not always want to agree with his opinions, but we can be certain that his public exploration of love as a central topic relevant for all members of courtly society was exceedingly well received. By studying Walther's love poems, we gain access to a central issue of courtly society, and maybe also of ours. This thus entails that this medieval German poet promises to provide us with deep insights into the discourse of love at his time (Classen, ed., 2004), and with significant understanding of how this discourse continued until the present. In other words, if we accept that 'love' ought to be studied by anthropologists, for instance, parallel to literary scholars, then Walther's contributions prove to be most meaningful and valuable, particularly because he also challenged some of the by then already traditional concepts of courtly love and endeavored to establish more authentic feelings of love through his own poetry.

This study can certainly not claim here to have introduced a new poetic voice or innovative perspectives on Walther's love songs. By contrast, the purpose of this paper consists of introducing his concepts and ideas about the ideals of love into the wider humanist discussion about the values that determine human life, both then and today. If we acknowledge that love constitutes one of the most challenging and problematic issues in our existence, then it makes perfect sense to incorporate Walther's opinions into our anthropological examinations today. After all, Walther exerted an enormous influence throughout the ages (Richter, 1988), even more so than his famous contemporaries Reinmar the Elder or Heinrich von Morungen, so it should not come as a surprise that his poems carry meaning also for us in the twenty-first century because they offer timeless messages about "the ennobling power of love," as Kaplowitt (1986) formulated it so appropriately. The exploration of courtly love, both by the *troubadours* and the *Minnesänger*, and especially by Walther von der Vogelweide, set the stage for the establishment of modern subjectivity, and this already in the High Middle Ages (Fajardo-Acosta (2010), *Courtly Seductions*, 45).

Once we have placed Walther's love songs on the conference table, we will suddenly realize that our colleagues joining the discussion come from many different disciplines because what is at stake here is nothing less but the meaning of all of human life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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