

4 Romance and/as tourism

Heritage whiteness and the (inter)national imaginary in the new woman's film

Diane Negra

In this chapter I devote attention to one of the ways in which romance in recent American cinema is implicated with the fantasy transcendence of US borders. Attending to the emergence of a set of films that centralize a narrative of Europeanization, I argue that these texts constitute an important new permutation of the woman's film in the 1990s. Films such as *Only You* (1994), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *French Kiss* (1995), *The Matchmaker* (1997), and *Notting Hill* (1999) are bound together by a codified set of narrative protocols which include, for instance, the reluctant or accidental arrival of the protagonist in a nation in Western Europe, the discovery within that national setting of new possibilities for coupling and family formation, and the narrow averting of a return to the US by the heroine, who is instead inscribed within a "happy ending" achievable because of her symbolic acquisition of a foreign nationality.

I argue that these films carry a set of concerns pertinent to the experience of American female spectators at the close of the twentieth century. Among those concerns are:

- The evolution of US culture in such a way that idealized family formation is culturally contradictory, both urgent and impossible. Confusedly responding to the advent of the "New Traditionalism" in American culture, these films register a desire to escape from the strictures of American "family values," although they ultimately re-inscribe those values.
- The superficial stigmatization of whiteness which now must enrich itself through contact with desirable ethnicities. Romance, which has long proposed solutions to social problems, now addresses itself to the provision of fantasy states of whiteness corrective to perceived deficiencies. These fictions specifically redress the disconnection between American whiteness and heritage homelands and give evidence of the way that in recent decades "white ethnicity emerges as a trope of empowerment" (Decker 1997: 207).
- Economic developments which increasingly curtail individual agency and mobility while endlessly celebrating those values. In these romances, heroines are either separated from quotidian economic concerns, or restored to a simplified, purified economic realm. In their adopted national context economic concerns are entirely eliminated, presented as altogether absent, or meaningful only as an expression of coupling. (In *French Kiss*, for instance, an American heroine's romance with a French vintner is enhanced through a mutual entrepreneurial bond.) While romances set in the US increasingly acknowledge coupling as a form of repair for disconnected social relations and ferocious modes of economic competition (*You've Got Mail* [1998] is a telling example), these films absent their heroines from those pressing concerns.

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In devoting attention to these films' presentation of imaginary European homelands, I will shed light on the complex interrelations between popular film and tourism as an experiential mode set up to resolve identity problems in late-twentieth-century US culture, and investigate the rescripting of romance to reflect perceptions of American national identity (and American whiteness) in crisis. Analyzing the contiguity of romance and expatriation, I will argue that these narratives rely on a formula in which tourism serves as the antidote for a variety of overtly or tacitly diagnosed social problems. When romance is correlated with the symbolic acquisition of alternate ethnic/national identity, it takes on a powerful new charge.

The tourist romance

Tourism, it is clear, is an ever more important social and economic phenomenon in contemporary life. If, in earlier phases of modern life, tourism was most often constructed as a tranquil, therapeutic respite from one's everyday cares, tourist experience is now most frequently positioned as an opportunity for integration and stimulation that will make up (implicitly or explicitly) for the deficiencies of daily life. Thrill-seeking tourism of all kinds has boomed in the 1990s, with a particular emphasis on conquering nature through extreme sports. Climbing Mount Everest became increasingly popular (in some cases with disastrous results) throughout a decade which closed with the deaths of a number of adventure-seeking tourists in 1999 on a canyoneering tour in Interlaken, Switzerland. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has observed, the rewriting of tourist experience around higher grades of stimulation has produced a crisis for traditional sites of tourist interest: "Museums are experiencing a crisis of identity as they compete with other attractions within a tourist economy that privileges experience, immediacy, and what the industry calls adventure" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 7).

A key development in the recent history of tourism is the recognition on the part of tourist industries that tourists want to feel they know the place they are visiting. Thus, new modes of tourism attach value to those experiences that reflect the closest connection to the place being visited. Stress is increasingly placed on fully immersive modes of tourism predicated on integration in a new environment/culture. At the close of the twentieth century, particular emphasis has been placed on tourism that is personally enriching, with a fuller experience of local culture being demanded by a larger percentage of travelers. Recent tourist practice has been defined by the ascendance of the "authenticity"-driven "special interest," "active," or "adventure" tourism model, which presupposes the desire to integrate as fully as possible into local culture. As the authors of *Tourism: A Gender Analysis* have noted, "Tourism therefore involves the purchase of the particular social relations and characteristics of the host" (Kinnaird and Hall 1994: 13). In a climate emphasizing the postmodern play of identity, touristic pleasure is now more likely to be linked to the performance of those characteristics and the reproduction of those social relations. In *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, Jane Desmond trenchantly observes that "The natural, represented by this essential culture ... emerges as something lost by white, middle-class tourists and briefly rediscovered through invigorating contact with representatives of that culture" (Desmond 1999: 255). As I will show in my discussion of the tourist romances, the desire to experience somatic stimulation and environmental encounters marked out as "authentic" pervades those fictions just as it increasingly factors as part of the appeal of vacation packages.

As it has shifted to a new integrative and experiential model, tourism has also begun to cultivate new constituencies. While the tourism industries maintain a strongly dominant focus on heterosexual couples as their primary clientele, some room is being made in the marketplace for other kinds of travelers, including single women. A 1996 article in *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported that:

Rising incomes, delayed marriage, divorce and longer life spans have produced a burgeoning number of women with the means to see the world, but without husband or family to accompany them. Social change and sheer demographics are shattering lingering taboos that once discouraged women from traveling far without a male protector.

(Dickerson 1996: 5G)

A growing category of advice literature directed toward prospective women travelers has emerged, including titles such as *A Journey of One's Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler* (1996, Thalia Zepatos), *Traveler's Tales: Gutsy Women, Travel Tips and Wisdom for the Road* (1996, Marybeth Bond), and *Every Woman's Guide to Romance in Paris* (1998, Caroline O'Connell). In 1999, the top internet destination for women, women.com, added a new travel feature with specialized information about the travel interests and needs of women.

The dynamics of tourism have long implicated the male tourist in the consumption of indigenous femininity, whether overtly designated as sex tourism, or at a more implicit level. When women travel, romance is often presented as a natural outgrowth of immersive tourism. In a recent feature article a female journalist wrote, "While I wouldn't say that the possibility of meeting someone motivated my wanderings, it's always floated in the back of my mind like moonlight on the Taj Mahal" (Spano 1998: E7). The quest for romance is thus discursively figured as equivalent to the destination itself.

The desire to identify with indigenous populations and feel a sense of inclusion within local culture is a key feature of the recent tourist romances which assume that the national/cultural location visited is more "real" than the (inevitably American) culture the protagonists leave behind. *The Matchmaker* posits this distinction by equating American culture with the ersatz world of political "spin" and contrasting it to the comical "authenticity" of rural Ireland. Its heroine Marcy Tizard (Janeane Garafalo) is presented as a woman whose energies are fruitlessly expended in the service of a corrupt American politician. In Ireland, she meets Sean, an Irishman who has abandoned a career in public relations because he perceives it to be morally bankrupt, and has resettled near his family in the West of Ireland. Marcy acquires the ability to critique slick, American-style political showmanship as she gains "insider" knowledge of Irish culture.

Tourism has traditionally operated as a mode of ideological reinforcement—we experience another place in order to return, rejuvenated, to our customary environment.¹ Yet in the tourist romances of recent film, this last link in the traditional social contract of tourism is emphatically severed—the films decisively emphasize the non-return of the native—Kate in *French Kiss* and Faith in *Only You* are narrowly prevented from returning to the US, while at the close of *Notting Hill* the heroine Anna Scott answers

¹ In Hollywood film, the most emblematic instance of this return is of course Dorothy's discovery in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) that there really is "no place like home."

the question "How long are you intending to stay in Britain?" with a jubilant "Indefinitely." In all three films, satisfactory narrative closure strikingly hinges on the spectator's agreement that the greatest prospect for a happy future life for the heroine lies in expatriation.²

The tourist romance and the burdens of citizenship

Few critics have addressed the flourishing category of cinematic romance in the 1990s. Yet as Catherine Preston (2000) has shown, the romance has played an important role in the cinema of the 1990s and particularly in the filmographies of major female stars such as Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, and Sandra Bullock. Preston argues that the generic status of the romance is somewhat blurred, and its prominence as a successful film formula is frequently obscured by the fact that it is often grouped with many other kinds of films. Nevertheless there has indeed been what she terms "a steady rise" in the production of film romances since the late 1980s and, further, those films have been among the most successful at the box office. Surveying the box office results for 1990–99, for instance, reveals that at least one film romance was among the top highest-grossing American films worldwide in every year except 1995 and 1998. In key respects, some of the most successful film romances of the late 1980s established precedents that are still being adhered to. From *Moonstruck* (1987) and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) forward, a large number of cinematic romances have promoted regionalism as an accessory to romantic fusion through camerawork that is highly attentive to the local landscape. Such films would seem to serve as the domestic correlatives to the films I discuss here. I turn now, however, in more specificity to themes of internationalism in the romance.

Certainly Hollywood films have long treated themes of international romance. Postwar American film was particularly adept at thematizing the encounter between Americans and European culture, in films such as *The Quiet Man* (1952), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), and *Roman Holiday* (1953). Taking *Now Voyager* (1942) as another representative case, it is possible to see how earlier films display an altogether different conception of the relation between travel and female identity. In the melodrama, Bette Davis' Charlotte Vale is able to escape her mother's stifling, repressive influence by affiliating herself with the exoticism of travel (in this case to Brazil). Although Charlotte's mother has reproached her in the past, saying "You have all the vigor of a typical American tourist," this film figures tourism slightly differently than in the newer romances. Here, tourism is likewise emancipating, but it confers an identity that is sustainable upon a return trip home. Charlotte's romance on a cruise to Rio de Janeiro with Jerry (a married man also trapped in an unhappy domesticity) will live on after the two have returned to the US. Charlotte's new sense of herself enables her to transform her grim home life, and she is ultimately able to generate an alternative model of maternal behavior from the negative example set by her mother. She continues to wear a camellia corsage as a

2 That the trope of Europeanization inevitably centralizes female transformation is attributable to more than the fact that the romance conventionally tells the stories of women. For a counter-example, consider *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), a film that pathologizes male identity transformation in Europe. This did not, however, prevent the film from inspiring travel-related press pieces advising readers on the towns, cities, and beaches to visit to reconstruct Ripley's travels in Italy. See Rebello 2000, 42–45.

sign of her newly tropicalized identity, and at the close of the film, Charlotte and Jerry fondly recall their time together in Brazil and pledge to protect "that little strip of territory that's ours," as the film celebrates their reterritorialization of their sphere of the American social landscape. *Now Voyager* imagines its heroine spending time overseas to enrich her identity for a more empowered homecoming, in which she reshapes her domesticity to reflect what she has learned. Such returns are largely ruled out in the newer romances.

What I propose is that more recent American films cover much the same terrain, but they do so now under the terms of a new ideological agenda. A crucial shift involves the assumption of dysfunctional gender relations in the American context, and the proposition that US affiliation has become burdensome. Dissatisfaction with the prospects for romance in the US has been provocatively addressed even in romances that (strictly speaking) depart from the model I investigate here. Set in the US, such films nevertheless propose correction for the social problems that impede coupling through an invocation of Europe. In *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), heroine Lucy's (Sandra Bullock) quest to produce a home for herself (the real romance here is with the hero's family and the domestic security they represent) is associated with her fantasy of travel to Italy. An employee of the Chicago Transit Authority whose days consist of a series of anonymous urban encounters in a tollbooth, Lucy is obsessed with Florence, and carries an unstamped passport around as the film's sign of her emotional and geographic confinement. The unspoken mutual feeling between Lucy and Jack (Bill Pullman) appears to be cemented as he gives her a snow globe of Florence, and at the close of the film, Lucy proudly recounts, "Jack gave me the perfect gift—a stamp in my passport. He took me to Florence for our honeymoon."³ The remake of *Sabrina* (1995) proceeds from the assumption that the titular heroine has found herself through Europeanization, becoming visible as a candidate for romantic attention only after a transformative stay in Paris. Other films, such as *Next Stop, Wonderland* (1998), centralize a heroine paralyzed by a kind of free-floating nostalgia that the film briefly anchors to her reminiscences of a childhood vacation in Ireland.⁴

Up to this point, I have alluded only in rather vague ways to a widely shared perception in contemporary American romances that "social problems" impede coupling, noting that often the resolution of those problems involves the transference of the hero-

³ *The Story of Us* (1999) is also imprinted with the notion of Europe as a fantasy ideal. In this film (a diagnostic of an American marriage) a married couple, Ben and Katie Jordan, briefly experience marital reconnection on a trip to Venice. When they return to the US, their problems instantly reemerge and their closeness is revealed to have been a temporary response to their European environment (and mutual rejection of a stereotypical American couple whose saccharine romance disgusts them). Ben laments in voiceover narration, "If only there was a way to bottle that unfettered state of mind that comes with being on foreign soil." He chastizes his wife, telling her that when they were in Europe their relationship "would have come first." The film provides other signs that Ben, in a state of crisis during his estrangement from his wife, links the deficiencies in the marriage to its distance from a vibrant Europeaness. A writer, he plans a book project on his European-born mother, whose marriage and parenting he idealizes.

⁴ It is interesting to observe the kinds of films high-profile female film stars choose to make at particularly empowered stages of their careers. In the 1990s, these are often travel-oriented romances. Julia Roberts appeared in *Notting Hill* after rejuvenating her career in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, Meg Ryan in *French Kiss* after *Sleepless in Seattle*, and Marisa Tomei in *Only You* not long after winning the Oscar for *My Cousin Vinny*. My purpose here is to investigate how such films marshal a kind of response to the ideological contours of 1990s US culture. If they aren't progressive at all levels, they at least engage fantasies of travel and national redefinition worth analyzing.

ine from the US context to a setting in Western Europe. These social problems remain vague in narrative context because it is the nature of Hollywood film to showcase trajectories of transcendence/resolution rather than to perform sustained social diagnosis. Yet, the tourist romances are bound together by their (muted) critique of a number of dominant features of contemporary US experience—social isolation, gender disempowerment, class difference, body anxiety, and conditions of environmental oppression. These features are brought together as the implicit catalysts for the heroine's identity crisis which is subject to adequate resolution only in a European context. By analyzing these dynamics I will begin to develop a response to the main question which this essay seeks to address: what function is Europe currently made to serve in the American romantic imaginary?

The authors of *The Social Health of the Nation: How America Is Really Doing* maintain that nearly exclusive reliance on economic and business barometers for measuring the national condition have obscured other significant social indicators such as poverty, crime, economic inequality, housing affordability, and access to health care. The authors' gathered data suggest that by many indicators national social health has declined in the 1990s, even while economic health has appeared to be robust through much of the decade. One of their most significant findings addresses the distribution of wealth and highlights the widening gap between poverty and affluence. At the close of the twentieth century, the United States has the largest gap between rich and poor among industrialized nations; in 1996 the poorest fifth of the nation held a mean annual income of \$11,388, while the mean income of the top fifth was \$125,627 (Miringhoff and Miringhoff 1999: 104). This polarization of wealth has produced extraordinarily competitive social terms in which widespread (and accurate) perceptions of a shrinking middle class have fostered awareness of a two-tiered economy.

In a discussion of work re-engineering and its implications for family life in the 1990s, Sarah Ryan observes that many post-baby-boom Americans feel that the "social contract" that seemed to structure white American life in the post-World War II period has been increasingly violated. Ryan writes that:

An almost constant sense of insecurity haunts American families in the 1990s. Nearly half the population worries that someone in their household will be out of work in the next year. Parents no longer expect their children to have a higher standard of living than themselves. Most expect large-scale layoffs to be a permanent feature of the modern economy; meanwhile, they experience more stress while at work and are contributing more and more hours to the job. No wonder nostalgia for more prosperous and predictable times is a recurring theme in politics and the arts, even among young people who have embraced the technology and values of the 1990s. (Ryan 1999: 332–333)

The widely held view that Americans now operate in a "postfeminist" environment in which the concerns of feminism are taken to be irrelevant and/or archaic has largely led to the stigmatization of a feminist vocabulary that might serve as a productive outlet for responding to this state of affairs and its impact on women. The disappearance of mainstream feminist discourse was chronicled in an editorial in *USA Today* in which founder Al Neuharth announced that *Ms.* magazine would soon cease publication. "Reason: Women's libbers are fewer and far less fanatical than 30 years ago" (Neuharth 2000: 12). The decreasing availability of feminism as a responsive mode to the continued disenfranchisement of women means that dominant Hollywood fictions (as well as

self-help discourses and the new domestic regimes propounded by figures like Martha Stewart) face little competition in their characterization of women's lives, interests, and concerns in 1990s US culture.⁵

The expatriate romances restore quality of life for American women on terms now viewed as impossible in the US, for any notion of US citizenship in the late twentieth century is thus implicated with these competitive, precarious, social and economic conditions. In addition, definitions of American identity are increasingly bound up with anxieties over the loss of community, and the destruction of a viable definition of place.

In *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life*, William Leach argues for a dynamic of placelessness as a key feature in contemporary US culture. As a function of the preeminence of an intermodal transport system designed to promote the mobility of people and goods to the detriment of human quality of life, the emergence of an economy dominated by temporary modes of labor, and the delocalization of business, he contends that Americans now feel a powerful "need for continuity and stability, and for confident attachment to a place to be from" (Leach 1999: 6). The current emphasis on temporary housing, both in the form of easily resold generic mansions for the executive class and mobile homes for the poor testifies to the way that "For many Americans, rich or poor, the home has been reconceived to accommodate the new flexible patterns in work and management" (Leach 1999: 60).

The 1990s have also seen the distinctive emergence of what Leach refers to as a neo-expatriate class—Americans who seek their fortunes overseas, particularly in emergent markets such as Asia and Eastern Europe. As the American Dream has gone global (in many ways, seeming to be most realizable outside of US borders) the definition of expatriation has undergone revision. If the dominant image of the expatriate was once tied to the creativity of the literary figure or artist, it is now tied predominantly to business. As Leach argues, "In the 1990s the thrust of business, reinforced by the state, has been toward flexibility and dissolution of place" (Leach 1999: 85). For those American regions, cities, and towns left by the wayside in the rush toward corporate globalization, tourism has stepped into the breach as a means of economic rehabilitation. By the 1990s, tourism employed 10 percent of the American workforce as American cities and towns repackaged themselves for tourist consumption, selling an ersatz definition of place to compensate for the destruction of their economic, political, and social vitality.

In surprising ways, the tourist romances register the anxieties produced by these new forms of rootlessness and economic competitiveness. For the reasons I've indicated, their perceptions of US social problems are never presented in depth, and they are thus best understood by examining the strenuous efforts made toward their correction. For instance, the films demonstrate that the social isolation of heroines who are imprisoned by fame (*Notting Hill*) or confined by an all-encompassing job (*The Matchmaker*) will be corrected by their incorporation into a warm and enveloping community of friends and relatives when they resettle outside the US.

In some instances the films rely on the most clichéd of strategies to exposit their heroines' isolation, presenting them as real or implied orphans. This is the case in both *French*

⁵ It is worth pointing out that the success of the tourist romances supplies story ideas to women's magazines. An article in the March 2000 issue of *Marie Claire*, for instance, chronicled the experiences of several expatriate American women married to non-American men, inviting reader speculation about whether they would make a similar choice. See Harney 2000, 78–86.

Kiss and *Only You*, which showcase heroines who have virtually no family and look ahead to the families they will gain by marriage. Both protagonists are schoolteachers “marrying up” to professional men (an oncologist and a podiatrist) in arrangements that are implicitly understood to connote their economic/class advancement. In the case of films like *The Matchmaker* and *Notting Hill* a stark incompatibility is shown between work and personal life; if the heroines of *French Kiss* and *Only You* will advance themselves economically through marriage, the protagonists of these films indicate an inverse case in which successful working women must forgo a rewarding personal life. It should be clear that this set of films thus maps out both dimensions of what 1990s popular cultural discourse has defined as women’s dominant lifestyle choice—to look to marriage for economic providence or, if choosing a professional path, to expect to be unable to sustain any other type of reward. In the fantasy structure provided in the tourist romance, all such problems of economics/class/social integration are made to dissolve in the European context. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has written that “Tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 9), and this insight certainly enables us to understand better why the mechanics of tourism are so compatible with Hollywood narrative. In the tourist romances, a false opposition is posited between a US social environment in which women are bombarded with “tough choices” about work and coupling as binarized categories and a Europe in which those categories are brought into a close alignment and rendered no longer problematic.

As I have suggested, one of the most striking features of these texts is that, in stark contrast to the assimilationist credo of earlier Hollywood films, they de-assimilate their heroines. While heritage memory has tended to be eradicated by the “landscape of the temporary” (in Leach’s terms) and the ongoing quest for economic advantage in US culture, the films function to reattach white Americans to the designated viable homelands of Europe. As they Europeanize, they shed the constraints of American whiteness, connecting themselves to ideologies and lifestyles the films mourn as lost within our own national context. In this respect we can come to see how these films are part of a broader symptomatology of late-twentieth-century whiteness which has settled into two dominant paradigms: defensiveness and nostalgia. Divorced from its traditional representational moorings in a multicultural environment in which whiteness is less self-evidently valuable than it once was, recent American film, as I have argued elsewhere, manifests a variety of signs of an emergent crisis in the once-stable and self-explanatory definitions of whiteness. Narratives that centralize an embattled white patriarch (*Falling Down* [1992], *Ransom* [1996]) have proliferated in popular American film, while both romances and male melodramas thematize a retreat to an idealized white hometown. Cinematic narratives of hometown return have emerged (*Hope Floats* [1998] and *Practical Magic* [1998]) as well as three recent TV franchises founded on the premise, *Providence*, *Maggie Winters* and *Judging Amy*.⁶ Another set of American films focuses

6 In the first series, an unusually strong midseason replacement hit for NBC, a thirty something woman abandons her professional life in southern California to return to her parents’ house in Rhode Island; in the second, a CBS show that did not survive its first season, a thirty something woman returns home to rebuild her life after a divorce; in the third (also on CBS) a female judge’s professional authority is held in bounds by her return to her mother’s house. It bears noticing that *Providence* has helped foster a tourism boom in Rhode Island, the state in which the drama is set. A short blurb in *USA Today* on April 21, 2000 noted that “Tourism experts are urging more hotels in Rhode Island, where convention business and the NBC drama ‘Providence’ are behind a travel boom.”

on white ethnic communities defined by social bonds of intimacy, community, and ethnicity as they are imagined to have existed in the past. Exemplary in this regard are *Once Around* (1991) and *Polish Wedding* (1998), ethnic romances where the adult heroine lives in her parents' house. These films face a difficulty, however, because they so transparently fictionalize contemporary social relations. Forced radically to readjust contemporary social experience to carry off their version of ethnic intimacy, such films often feel out of kilter in ways that detract from any credible verisimilitude. This may account for their general failure at the box office despite their star casts.

When we turn to the tourist romances (many of them box office hits), it becomes clear, however, that Europe has become an ideal staging ground for nostalgic fantasies of American whiteness. In essence, these films really reflect a displaced nostalgia. Unlike the US-based ethnic romances, which often exhibit an anachronistic character despite their present-day setting, the tourist romances maintain a contemporary flavor by seeming to reveal to us that the vibrant family and community relations of the past still exist, awaiting our discovery, in Europe. In this way, the surface quest plot of the films facilitates an underlying travelogue which strongly thematizes a European past as a consumable good. American whiteness is now understood as an evacuated category, and the rootlessness of the heroines in the tourist romances reflects this. The single most important gesture of resolution in the tourist films is that they stabilize their migratory heroines.

If in some respects this category of recent film romance might appear progressive in that it undertakes social diagnosis, it must not be mistaken for a searching analysis of contemporary culture. Rather, the films offer a conservative cultural escape route in which American women are coupled with European men who will lead them out of the public sphere. The romances resettle their heroines in ways that finally camouflage the problems that catalyzed their identity quests. One of the ways that this is accomplished is through strong pictorial representations of an idealized harmony with nature. The "right" men in such films are often literally and metaphorically grounded—associated with the land. In *French Kiss*, Luc teaches Kate to "read" nature in a scene in which he cues her to identify all of the contributing flavors in a locally produced wine. In *Only You*, Peter speaks of his love for trees and states that he would be happy doing nothing for the rest of his life but growing them, while in *The Matchmaker*, Sean has opted out of urban life in favor of a retreat to the country. In all of the films, the couples take scenic walks together—walks that seem symbolically to cement their relationship to their environment. In *The Matchmaker*, Marcy and Sean take a crucial walk along the sea cliffs in the Aran Islands that seems to clinch their feelings for one another, while in the hit romantic comedy *Notting Hill*, protagonist pair Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) and William Thacker (Hugh Grant) take an evening walk in the eponymous neighborhood that leads them to a garden retreat. Where they are not directly connected to land itself, the European heroes are at least shown to be in a state of harmonious accord with their environment. In *Notting Hill*, William is depicted as fully a creature of his environment—most evidently in a symbolic season-transcending walk through a freshmarket in his neighborhood. Although this is urban space, it is defined by flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and various natural signs of seasonal change.

In this category of film, European men are distinguished by their willingness to take life at a slower pace, and by a strong sense of identity linked to their environment. If the heroines are dispossessed at a crucial level from place-oriented community (they do not know where they are from) the heroes are inevitably living their lives in just the right place. Their settledness in contrast to the heroines' nomadism is related to their

status as representatives of a social harmony that is meant to contrast distinctly with the implied social chaos of contemporary American life.

The tourist romance and the promise of community membership

Fantasies of long-term settlement lie at the heart of the tourist romance. As I have indicated, the heroines are inevitably socially isolated—through romance they acquire membership in a literal or symbolic family. In *Four Weddings and a Funeral* American Carrie (Andie MacDowell) is virtually always alone as is Anna in *Notting Hill*, while in both films British Hugh Grant is incessantly surrounded by a close-knit group of friends. In *The Matchmaker* Sean woos Marcy with a song whose lyrics imply the promise of community membership, “Won’t you stay, stay a while with your own ones?”

The films’ Europeans⁷ are depicted as understanding and honoring the rules of community membership in contrast to a US public sphere in which competition has supplanted community. This is vividly conveyed in *The Matchmaker* when Marcy (with the assistance of the residents of the small Irish town of Bally na Gra) stages an obscene tableau of rural Irish life for her American politician employer that satirizes US definitions of Irish community. By now an insider, Marcy is able to author a scene that reflects her newfound knowledge of the distinction between authentic and fabricated community and legitimately reproach her employer for his desire to manufacture Irish roots for US political gain. Marcy’s incorporation into the community is possible because she refuses to exploit it.

Humane local authorities are often key accessory figures in the tourist films, and they frequently act to validate the heroine’s emotional agenda. In *Only You* Faith’s assimilation into European ethnicity is tellingly signaled by the contrasting outcomes of two hasty searches in airports at the beginning and end of the film. Early on, as Faith bolts through an American airport in her wedding dress hoping to intercept the man she believes she’s fated to marry before he boards his plane, she is represented as an object of scrutiny, and the subject of bemused gazes throughout the airport. It is clear that her execution of an emotional agenda in public space is bewilderingly inappropriate to those around her. Making it to the gate, she attempts to explain herself to the American Airlines personnel, who call security when Faith asks them to call the plane back to the gate. The moment is paralleled and corrected at the conclusion as Faith runs to stop another plane from leaving in the Rome airport (this one carries the man coded as “right” for Faith). In this cultural context, intense emotional expressiveness is not seen as aberrant. This time Faith is significantly able to communicate her emotional agenda to the sympathetic Alitalia staff who drop everything to assist her when they understand what is at stake. The film concludes as the closed jetway is reopened for Faith, who reunites with the hero aboard the plane.

Just as the films fantasize hospitable natives as accessories to romance, and a social environment that is uniquely accommodating to the needs and desires of the heroine, they also depict a communal interest in and agreement to the burgeoning romance. This communal interest is most clearly expressed in the endings of the films which characteristically assemble a group of the hero’s native friends to bring the couple together

⁷ Such characters are frequently played by a small group of actors whose European identities have become archetypal over the course of their careers (Hugh Grant, Jean Reno, Kristen Scott Thomas, etc.).

(this occurs in *The Matchmaker* and *Notting Hill*) or nominate a local representative to do so (Luc's police detective friend plays this role in *French Kiss*). These characters, whether operating collectively or individually, assist the films in bearing witness to the fact that the onset of modernity has not precipitated the dissolution of community cohesiveness.⁸ Emphatically insisting upon the authenticity of their locations, the films employ travelogue aesthetics and fetishistic camerawork to produce a deep and resonant vision of place that effectively compensates for a contemporary sense of American placelessness.⁹

It seems likely that the tourist films' vision of an intense European "placefulness" represents another category of response to the crisis of place discussed by William Leach. Recent American emphasis on various forms of a domestic landscape of nostalgia (commercially reconstructed colonial towns, the emergence of the highly ornamental postmodern Victorian as a major model for the high-end American home, and the invention of an entire Disney town, Celebration, Florida) attests to a widespread desire to simulate the physical and social models of the past. In the tourist romance, intensely romanticized public spaces correct for the culture of retreat that prevails in the late twentieth century US. Symbolically reconciled are the desire for privacy and the desire for communal membership. In *Notting Hill* (a film whose narrative strategies I discuss more fully in the next section), Anna and William's romance is linked significantly to a communal garden symbolic of the European urban paradise that is the staging ground for coupling. Yet, the communal gardens, the defining feature of the Notting Hill neighborhood, according to one recent article, are (despite their name), limited access only:

It is the communal gardens that make the houses in these streets so special. London is famous for its garden squares, but the Notting Hill gardens are different. Sandwiched in the gaps between the terraces, many of these communal gardens are only glimpsed from the road with access solely through the houses themselves.

(Masey 1999)

8 *The Very Thought of You* (1999) hystericizes the formula for the tourist romance. Here a romance between a British man and an American woman interrupts the lifelong bonds of a male friendship group and the desirability of the American woman is represented as such that three British men vie for her attentions. This film leaves its central couple in national limbo, heading on a plane for Iceland, rather than comfortably establishing a life together in Europe. In a notable departure from the notions of community that structure the other films, here the European characters are cast in largely competitive and dysfunctional terms rather than supportive ones.

9 In this regard, it would be interesting to consider *Before Sunrise*, another tourist romance, but one quite different in tone from such films as *French Kiss* and *Only You*. A somber meditation on the transitory nature of human connection, the film derives its pathos in part from the fact that neither member of the protagonist couple (Celine, a Frenchwoman, and Jesse, an American) can stay on in the location in which they have come together. The film simply charts the conversation and growing intimacy of the couple during one night in Vienna. (Jesse is to fly home in the morning, bringing to an end a failed vacation he had begun to visit his American girlfriend in Madrid; Celine is *en route* from a visit to her grandmother in Budapest back to Paris). The film solidifies our tourist sensibility in a closing montage that takes place after the couple's departure. Here, the camera revisits many of the locations through which Celine and Jesse traveled, mourning their absence on one level, but also inscribing the landscape with a powerful, pleasurable nostalgia. Through its deviations from the narrative paradigm of the expatriate romance, *Before Sunrise* underscores the importance of a local figure to the romance formula.

The somatic subtext of the tourist romance: *Notting Hill*

As I have suggested, the contemporary tourist romance is devoted to generating new national contexts that resolve the contradictions and dilemmas of "normative" contemporary American femininity. This mode of redemptive tourism proposes deliverance from the economic and sexual dynamics of US culture. Yet in its search for more stable ground for female identity, this new narrative paradigm focuses continually on the status of the body and the films' criteria for evaluation are consistently tied to conservative, consumer-oriented somatic definitions. Consequently, the films in this category evaluate women's bodies in travel and probe the connection of the body to food, to clothing, to sex, etc. Indeed, a preoccupation runs through the films with somatic versions of national status as the American female body is rendered hysterical (via traces of slapstick comedy in *French Kiss* and *Only You*) or neurotic, or simply problematic (the potentially unruly body of Jeaneane Garofalo serves this function in *The Matchmaker*)¹⁰ in contrast to the European body at ease with itself. Vital to these films' presentation of cultural contrast is their assumption that the European body retains a close bond with the realm of the natural, communing easily with the landscape, with animals, with food, etc., while the American body's relationship with the natural is seem to be disrupted or severed in some way. The establishment of a romance involves the correction of this dysfunctional relation to the natural realm. These preoccupations are developed most fully in *Notting Hill* (Fig. 4.1), in which Julia Roberts' Anna, a major American film star who clearly resembles the actress herself, is defined by her exclusion from the warm modes of community enjoyed by William, a travel bookstore owner whose placement in a warm coterie of friends, and easy, settled relationship to place, are his defining traits. The film deeply fetishizes the pleasures of a geographically defined home, and invests Notting Hill (a suburb of West London) with an enormous amount of narrative power as a source of stability. William experiences no disjuncture between life and work; this is symbolically communicated by the fact that he lives nearly across the street from his workplace. *Notting Hill's* thematics of refuge work in such a way as also to showcase the communal garden ("they're like little villages," says William) in which there is a wooden bench inscribed by a long-time husband to his deceased wife.

Here, as in many of the other films in this category, the heroine's discovery of homeland involves a reoriented relationship to food. Comfort food is a particularly important element in creating the ground for the fiction. In *Notting Hill*, William is continually associated with comfort foods of various kinds—in the film's first scene he enters his apartment to make toast. He meets Anna briefly in his bookstore and then shortly after they meet again when he inadvertently spills a glass of orange juice on her in the street. On their first date to a dinner party celebrating his sister's birthday (in a scene of remarkable expository efficiency) a final brownie is vied for by the guests who explain in turn why they most deserve the morsel of comfort food. Anna recounts not the stresses and strains of her job, but instead makes a speech whose primary focus is on the status of

10 A brief scene in *The Matchmaker*, in which Garofalo's Marcy (having hurt her ankle) is carried into a pub by Sean, gives rise to the only overt anxiety expressed about Marcy's body. A pub patron turns to Sean and says, "She looks a heavy carry," to which Sean replies "No, sure no." Garofalo, whose body fails to conform to Hollywood mandates of size and slimness, had been earlier vividly contrasted with Uma Thurman in a romance entirely centered around body anxiety, *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (1996).



Figure 4.1 Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill* (Polygram Filmed Entertainment 1999). Courtesy of the Kobal Collection

her body, speaking of her plastic surgeries and telling the group, “I’ve been on a diet every day since I was nineteen, which basically means I’ve been hungry for a decade.”

We meet Jeff King (Alec Baldwin), Anna’s callow American movie star boyfriend in just one scene but it is enough for us to glean understanding of his status as an agent of those industrial and cultural forces that police Anna’s food intake. In contrast to the time spent together by Anna and William, who are seen comfortably eating together on several occasions, the dysfunctions of Anna’s relationship with Jeff are indicated by his admonishment to her “not to overdo it” on her room service order, because “I don’t want people saying there goes that famous actor with the big fat girlfriend.” His American-ness is underscored in his room service order for cold water “unless it’s illegal here to serve water above room temperature.” The distinctive sole appearance by Roberts’ American boyfriend consists of a reminder to her not to eat too much, and mistaking William for their room service waiter.

The film’s obsessive subtext about bodies and food¹¹ is brought full circle in the character of Bella, William’s close friend and former girlfriend. Bella’s body has been damaged (she has suffered paralysis as a result of an accident the film leaves mysterious) yet she is nurtured and cared for by a loving partner. The film gives us to understand that even lacking an ideal body, she retains value. The new national context is thus

11 *Notting Hill*’s obsessive preoccupation with food runs deeper than I have room (or necessity) to indicate fully here. Indeed, from its earliest scenes, incidents and emotions in *Notting Hill* take place and are expressed nearly exclusively in the language of food. On their first meeting, William attempts to sell Anna a guidebook for Turkey by telling her it features an “amusing incident with a kebab.” William’s lodger Spike announces that he’s “going into the kitchen to get some food. Then I’ll tell you a story that will make your balls shrink to the size of raisins.” Separated from Anna later in the film, William is introduced to a series of women in turn who are expositied nearly exclusively in terms of their relationship to food and drink. The excessive exuberance of one woman is indicated by her invitation to William to “get sloshed,” the rigidity of a second is communicated by her blunt announcement that she is a “fruitarian,” and the attractive pragmatism of a third is revealed by her frank assessment of the dinner she is served.

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associated with alternative definitions of femininity that are not simply and exclusively oriented around the idealized body. In this regard, *Notting Hill* activates an established contrast between the US as a site of body dysfunction and Europe as a place in which women enjoy an easy, settled relationship to food and an untroubled somatic identity.¹² The film's ending, in which a pregnant Anna relaxes with William in the communal garden, implies that Anna has gained somatic control in a way that contrasts with the public ownership of her body (strict regulation of diet in service of the body that is professionally required, bodily exposure through the publication of nude photographs, etc.) and an unreality defined in relation to American celebrity culture (as Anna tells William "Fame isn't real"). In its connections between a vision of British utopianism and food, *Notting Hill* thus gives evidence of the way that fantasies of the gratified body stand alongside fantasies of environmental integration in the tourist romance.

Romance narratives have long operated as confirmation that our social system is working the way that it should. For recent evidence of this, one need only turn to 1999's *Runaway Bride* where an hysterically "all is made right" method of closure leads strangers to cheer and couples to embrace on the street at the news that the protagonist pair has finally tied the knot.¹³ In this discussion, I have sought to show that, despite its enduring ideological conservatism, the genre of contemporary romance has nevertheless given rise to an interesting permutation that distinctly fails the confidence test. The "expatriate romances" are unified in their commitment to staging coupling outside of US borders altogether, and because of this they gesture at (although perhaps not as fully as one might wish) an indictment of contemporary American social and economic structures that has rarely been seen in the genre.

Filmography

Titles are accompanied by the year of US release, and the country in which the major part of the action is set.

- Before Sunrise* (1995, Austria)
- The Matchmaker* (1997, Ireland)
- Only You* (1994, Italy)
- French Kiss* (1995, France)
- Sabrina* (1995, France)
- Stealing Beauty* (1996, Italy)
- Next Stop, Wonderland* (1998, United States)
- Notting Hill* (1999, Britain)
- Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994, Britain)
- Shirley Valentine* (1989, Greece)
- Local Hero* (1983, Scotland)
- Tokyo Pop* (1988, Japan)

12 In Susan Bordo's useful discussion of the European stereotypes at work in a FibreThin diet pill commercial she details how "a metaphor of European 'difference' reveals itself as a means of representing that enviable and truly foreign 'other': the woman for whom food is merely ordinary, who can take it or leave it" (Bordo 1993: 100).

13 Of course, a more subversive reading of the film's conclusion might stipulate that the excessive celebration is really tied to the fact that the single woman's potential challenge to patriarchy has now been extinguished.

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