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Love, Intimacy, and Passion: Shapers of Family and Kinship

Karen Leonard

Hewlett, Barry S. *Intimate Fathers: The Nature and Context of Aka Pygmy Paternal Infant Care*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991. viii + 201 pp. including references and index. \$27.95 cloth.

Trawick, Margaret. *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. xx + 299 pp. including notes, references, and index. \$40.00 cloth.

Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. xi + 261 pp. including notes, references, and index. \$35.00 cloth.

United by a concern with feelings and the role they play in structuring families and kinship, these three books stretch the mind, both empirically and theoretically. The reader moves from Kath Weston's delineation of gay and lesbian constructions of family and kinship in San Francisco to Margaret Trawick's exploration of love in a Tamil-speaking South Indian family to Barry Hewlett's documentation of the intimacy between central African Aka fathers and their infants. All three are ambitious works which combine fieldwork with thoughtful and provocative challenges to existing theory. Weston contends that gay and lesbian discourse about "chosen" families can transform contemporary discourse about family and kinship in the United States. Trawick argues for a person-centered account of the Dravidian kinship system in India, one that places love at its center. Hewlett speculates about what the parent-child and marital relationships in Aka Pygmy society can tell us about fathers' roles in human evolution and sexual equality in and across cultures. All three are comparative works, although to different degrees. Weston compares constructions of family and kinship within the United States; Trawick compares her own Western notions of love to Tamil and other Indian notions of love and kinship; and Hewlett compares paternal infant care among Aka Pygmies to infant care among hunter-gatherers and others for whom there is comparable data. Two of the

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authors, Weston and Trawick, write self-consciously about their own role in the creation of the ethnographies.

Kath Weston writes with clarity and conviction, an engaged advocate of the emergent culture she is describing. *Families We Choose* is one in a new series from Columbia University Press, "Between Men—Between Women: Lesbian and Gay Studies," established to increase understanding of lesbians and gay men but also of culture in general. This is certainly Weston's agenda. She calls the nuclear family formed by blood and marriage ties (Schneider 1968) a "privileged construct" in the United States but is not willing to make it "central" in a way that makes all other family forms "alternatives." She prefers an historical approach that would show continuous transformations in kinship ideology and family relations, transformations wrought through contradictions and struggle (p. 7). Reporting that people taking on a new, ostensibly sexual identity as gays and lesbians talked as much about kinship as sexuality, she establishes that for them, identity, not sex, is the issue (pp. 18, 65–66). The "coming-out" stories central in her own interviews were revelatory not only about identity but also about relationships with blood or adoptive relatives—the desire was to establish the new identity without suffering the withdrawal of love, the withdrawal of kinship, by relatives. (Here she explicitly concedes that there is choice exercised by the relatives, who can continue to treat the gay person as family or not; and she implicitly concedes that love shapes family and kinship for the straight family members, as for the gays and lesbians.)

Her own summary in the final two pages best shows the scope and orientation of Weston's work and, perhaps, its major weakness.

"When cast in narrative form, the shift from the identification of gayness with the renunciation of kinship (no family) to a correspondence between gay identity and a particular type of family (families we choose) presents a kind of collective coming-out story: a tale of lesbians and gay men moving out of isolation and into kinship. By the 1980s, when gay people came out to relatives . . . , they often were hoping not only to maintain and strengthen those biologically calculated bonds, but also to gain recognition for ties to lovers and other chosen relatives who could not be located on any biogenetic grid. . . . Yet gay men and lesbians encounter added dimensions that complicate the practice of constructing kin ties: parenting children in a heterosexist society, maintaining erotic relationships without viewing them through the one-dimensional lens of a gendered sameness, risking kin ties in coming out to straight relatives, interweaving peer relationships in multiples of three or four or seven, consistently asserting the importance of *relationships that lack social status or even a vocabulary to describe them*." (pp. 212–213, slightly re-ordered and emphasis added)

The part emphasized points to a structural issue not given the importance it deserves, but before coming back to that, let me summarize more of this intelligent, informative book. Weston's introductory chapter sets discourse on gay and lesbian families in the context of the 1980s politics of kinship (issues centering on abortion, adoption, reproductive technologies, divorce, remarriage and "blended" families, and female poverty). Along the way, she inserts brief personal impressions of gay life in contemporary San Francisco and tells us that she herself is a lesbian (and white, from a working class background). Her "insider" status is taken up in the ensuing discussion of methodology; her main method was participant-observation, and she also conducted 80 in-depth interviews.

Starting with friends and utilizing the snowball technique, Weston assembled 40 men and 40 women, taking care to include "people of color" (a term she acknowledges as problematic) and working-class people (by both background and present

occupation). Two of the 80 turned out to be bisexual rather than lesbian and gay, and she wishes she had included more older people, more gay parents, and fewer highly educated people. She is not interested so much in the demographic characteristics of the interviewees as in "the interpretive links they made (or did not make) between their sexual identities" and other aspects of their identities (p. 12), and the tables describing these 80 interviewees are not discussed in the text. Yet the tables tell us that only 11 of the 80 people were over 39 (Table 10), that only 9 were parents (6 women and 3 men: Table 17) and very probably biological parents from heterosexual marriages (6 women and 2 men had previously been in such marriages: Table 16), and that the "longest" same-sex relationships were of relatively short duration (35 for 2 years or less, 58 for 5 years or less: Table 18). These facts raise some question about the "fit" between her interviewees and (other?) gays and lesbians who are choosing to constitute families, or perhaps raise the question of what kind of families gays and lesbians are choosing to constitute in the San Francisco area (and the need for legal accommodation of them).

There is some ambiguity here. While gay and lesbian discourse on chosen families challenges the notion that kinship is based on procreation, it also includes discussion about raising children and/or building relationships across generational lines. Chapter 7 analyzes the lesbian baby boom from the mid-1970s as a partial reincorporation of biology into chosen families; it also discusses cooperation between some lesbians and gay men in alternative insemination and coparenting arrangements, cooperation now threatened by AIDS. Yet most of her evidence concerns "peer" families, constituted of lovers, friends, and ex-lovers. These are people of roughly the same age, gender, race, and class (p. 111), people who support themselves (p. 114). They build family relationships with peers by meeting regularly for dinners and holiday occasions and providing the kinds of help and emergency assistance formerly associated with bonds of blood or marriage. These gay and lesbian families are characterized as "ego-centered" (a same-sex couple is *not* the center), formed by the "idiosyncratic choice" of each individual, not "mappable" by an anthropologist (p. 109). It is precisely this kind of "family," composed of self-sufficient individuals in and across households lacking generational depth or long duration, which "traditional" laws entitling dependents and descendants to tax breaks or to acquired assets (such as insurance and retirement benefits and property) find most difficult to accommodate. Weston recognizes this, but is not discouraged by it, in her final chapter, where she uses the language I emphasized earlier to describe the families she urges should be accommodated by sweeping changes in the legal system.

Weston valorizes choice and sees "chosen" families as the creation of gays and lesbians. Yet American social historians and anthropologists have been talking about "volitional" families and "fictive kin" for some time, and these have been shaped by many forces, emotional and other; some have been socially recognized. Certainly Weston's is the first serious investigation of this phenomenon among gays and lesbians, and while her book offers historical discussion of the gay and lesbian moves from friendship to community to family in San Francisco, she might have compared her chosen families to some of the other ways of creating families or incorporating non-kin into kinship systems. This would have directed her attention more to structural issues—while she tries to ground her discussion of discourse in

concrete social practice, her ultimate concern is with ideology. She closes with a consideration of whether the discourse on gay families represents assimilation to a heterosexual or "bourgeois" model. She thinks, instead, that the new ways of thinking about family and kinship can help change prejudicial perceptions of gay people, as gay people help change the ideology and practice of family and kinship in the United States.

Margaret Trawick's *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* is a rich, multi-layered work. Trawick is a masterful writer, and she moves back and forth between informality and formality, disclosure and mystery, as she presents this account of herself and her "companions in the ethnographic situation" (p. xviii). In the prologue, she states that "for anthropologists, the boundless, ragged, and plural collection of things called 'context' has become more real than the neat, discrete, and well-ordered thing called 'text'; and 'performance' with all its flaws and slips has become more real and more interesting than the never-realized perfection of potential we call 'competence.'" Trawick wants to mediate between contending visions in anthropology, the old holistic and the new decentered ones, by recognizing the desire for wholeness as she studies forces that prevent its achievement; she does this particularly well in the important chapter, "Desire in Kinship," and in her "Final Thoughts."

The book is both disturbing and rewarding, engaging the reader as well as the ethnographer in the situations being described. Although Trawick's initial self-presentation is intrusive, almost flippant, one is immediately drawn into the work by the intuitive "rightness" or "fit" of her observations about India and doing research there (I also work in India). She skillfully evokes the complexity of Indian society and the intensely personal relationships formed there as she tells of her first extended visit to Madras with her husband and infant son in 1975. She and her husband tried to cope with feelings of sickness, disorientation, and anger; she began to learn through the Tamil people she met, and eventually through one particular man and the poem he taught her.

The account she gives of finding this teacher emphasizes context: the temple where she met him, with its "Cow of Desire" and special *sivalingam* (which she terms Siva's erect penis, symbol of the eroticism which marks the Saivite tradition in Hinduism); the replacement of the initial distance between herself and the teacher by intimacy; the growing tension with her husband and his departure for home (pp. 12–16). She too returned after some time, but the closeness to her teacher continued. Her dream for years was "grandiose," she says, one of building a bridge between American and Indian civilizations by working with this man, as she and he brought their two worlds together through scholarly work and creation (pp. 18–19). To further this dream, she brought him to her home for a summer to teach her the Tamil Saivite poem "Tirukkovaigar." The poem is about the abstract divine force and its love for human souls; it is also about "love between two strangers, a man and a woman, from two different lands," "the love between guru and disciple," and "it became a poem about the two of us" (pp. 22–23). We then learn much about the poem, about Tamil culture, and finally about the teacher's family, with whom Trawick lived on her 1980 return to Tamil Nadu. The engaging photographs of all in the household (save Trawick herself) are a bonus.

Since love, intimacy, and passion are (rightly) implicated in Trawick's discussions

of Indian culture, Tamil culture, Hinduism, and Saivism, as well as in her relationship with her teacher, it is difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of that relationship. One can think of the difficulty of describing one's own intense relationships with others, and one can think of the "love in separation" theme within the Hindu *bhakti* (devotional) tradition, with the greater value accorded to unconsummated longing. But non-area specialists and beginning students will probably interpret the relationship along more familiar "love in consummation" lines. Perhaps she does not care about this, but I believe it is important. The relationship is central to the book, as to Trawick's life and work, and I suggest that her intention is to engage the reader's curiosity and raise it above the personal to an intellectual level. The thrust of her theoretical contribution, as of her communications about her experiences as a person and a member of families in two cultures, is to confront us with feelings and force us to think about their entanglement with social structure.

Thus she argues, as she presents detailed observations about the teacher's family and the ways in which love, or *anpu* in Tamil, was expressed on a daily basis in his home, that we should think of culture as an activity "done among people." "Let us say that culture is in the interaction. . . . there is only the turbulence of confrontation, with ourselves as part of it. . . . what is most important is . . . what happens between us. . . ." (pp. 89–90). She believes that kinship organization is strongly shaped by feelings, "that kinship is as much a matter of 'affect' and free from 'aesthetics' as it is a matter of 'cognition' and social 'regulation'" (p. 118).

Most South Indian kinship systems practice matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, and Trawick considers five approaches to the study of kinship in South India: the structuralist, culturalist, poststructuralist, Freudian, and post-Freudian. The last two are least developed in the literature but closest to her own person-centered account of kinship. This chapter pulls together Tamil and Indian literature, theory, and ethnographic material. Trawick argues that marriage, matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, is the crucial feature, and that the continuation of such a particular institution "may be posited, not upon its fulfillment of some function or set of functions, but upon the fact that it creates longings that can *never* be fulfilled" (pp. 151–152). Thus she sees South Indian kinship as maintained by unrelieved tensions and conflicting desires within marriages and families, and the final ethnographic chapters draw again upon her experiences with the teacher's family to document this.

Trawick herself is a sort of culturalist, subscribing to the view that there are distinctively South Asian concepts of personhood (though she points out that discrepancies always exist among "native points of view" in India and one must resist labelling one as "the culture": p. 132). She talks about "intertextuality" among South Indian poems and myths (so much projection into and introjection from other texts, so much borrowing and lending) being analogous to "interpersonality" among human beings, and she believes that for South Indians, "living within one another is a concrete physical fact" (p. 252). This ties her interpretation of expressions of love in Tamil culture to her account of kinship. One expression of love is its concealment (mother for child, wife for husband), and the hiding of feelings in Tamil Nadu "encourages relationships to become and remain in a dynamic mode. It establishes a tension that binds self to other." "(A)s giving increases desire,

hiding encourages further seeking." In the household in which she lived, "communal plurality" was valued, and "all that stood for self and other, mine and yours, was deliberately, creatively, repeatedly overturned" (pp. 256–267). This is exciting, provocative thinking, and very suggestive with respect to South Asians more generally (see Marriott 1990, Ramanujan 1990, and Rutherford 1984).

What the third book reviewed here, Barry Hewlett's *Intimate Fathers*, has in common with the first two is a concern with domestic relations, with love and intimacy between household members and between parents and children as constitutive of the social order. In its way, his study is as compelling as the two already reviewed although his methodology is quite different. Hewlett used systematic behavioral observations and structured questionnaires to carry out his research, drawing on the literature of psychology and evolutionary biology for his theory and cross-cultural comparisons. He tells us little about himself, just that he first worked with the Aka Pygmies of Central Africa in 1973 and noticed that Aka fathers seemed exceptionally close to their infants. After reading the Western psychological literature on fathers' roles and being struck by its inapplicability to the Aka, he undertook a six-month study of Aka fathers in the Bokoka section of Bagandu village in the Central African Republic in 1984.

Hewlett's is the first extensive study of the father-infant relationship among non-Westerners at the band or tribal level, and also the first child development study to use father-focal sampling techniques and to conduct behavioral observations in evening hours as well as daytime. Taking a "traditional anthropological approach to understanding human behavior" (p. 9), he begins with a holistic description of Aka culture. Members of a small-scale foraging society, Aka today rely upon a combination of net hunting in the tropical forest and seasonal plantation and lumbering work from a village base. He notes that a man's bride service to his in-laws often terminates when their first infant "walks well" (p. 27); here, in the terminology used later, is an obvious reason for paternal investment in an infant's progress. The "methods" chapter provides a thorough discussion of the research design, including tables of the observational items Hewlett and an assistant coded at 15 minute intervals all day for 15 fathers and 6 infants and for 15 infants for 2 hours daily. Spot observations of the 15 sample families were carried out in the evening hours. In order to elicit Aka conceptions and feelings about fathers, mothers, parenting, and the father-infant relationship, Hewlett also conducted what he terms qualitative or "emic" research by means of five different structured questionnaires administered to subgroups in the population.

The many specific measures and findings are then presented, indicating that Aka fathers are very intimate with their infants. 47 percent of a father's 24 hour day is spent holding or within arm's reach of his infant (p. 126); Aka fathers hold and are around their infants more than twice as often as fathers in other societies where comparable data exist (p. 133). Many photographs admirably convey the ease and warmth of Aka fathers with their children. The chapter on intra- and intercultural variation in the father-infant relationship is a fine, closely reasoned exploration of the detailed findings and their implications, and the first few pages of the concluding chapter provide a useful summary as well. The single best explanation for Aka parenting patterns, he concludes, lies in the net hunt and the husband/wife

cooperation it requires (Aka husband and wife are within sight of each other 46 percent of daylight hours: p. 139). Readers will find much of interest in this meticulous study.

In the final two chapters, however, Hewlett ranges more widely to speculate about the father's role in human evolution and to commend the Aka as role models for "Euroamerican fathers" (p. 167) or "contemporary American parents" who are trying to achieve an ideal society in which there is sexual equality (pp. 171–175); neither effort is particularly persuasive. His admittedly heuristic and very simplified, speculative reconstruction of fathers' roles from the Late Pleistocene to the "Modern" (which he characterizes as "contemporary white middle class, dual income families in the United States": p. 155) considerably weakens the book, to my mind. Aside from the problem just pointed out, there is the problem of using contemporary hunter-gatherer populations to stand for Late Pleistocene and Holocene hunter-gatherers. To use contemporary populations as evidence about human ancestors, "to naturalize and objectify them as primal beings virtually untouched by history" as Mary Louise Pratt so memorably phrased it (1986: 48), is something Hewlett recognizes as "not ideal," but he does it (p. 157). Similarly, dropping his earlier careful attention to holism and context, he enjoins American parents to "learn from Aka parents and children." The ending is not among the book's strengths.

I began by making some of the obvious comparisons among these three books. Now I want to go more fully into three issues, first the locus of love and the way love is written about in each of these three studies. In each case, the locus of love is "different" or in some way surprising to many outsiders who have studied these cultures. Weston focuses on love between members of the same sex, Trawick on love between brother and sister, and Hewlett on love between father and infant. Within each culture, these loves are naturalized, a point made explicitly by Weston and Trawick. But only Trawick really tries to extrapolate kinship from this paradigmatic love, this emotional core of family and kinship structure. Weston argues, instead, *against* viewing gay and lesbian families as shaped or structured by a same-sex couple; she holds out for families shaped by individuals. Hewlett sees his contribution not in better analyzing Aka families but in contrasting Aka father-infant intimacy to western mother-infant intimacy and pointing to the transformative potential of father-infant intimacy for western society.

Second, I want to comment on the ways in which Trawick and Weston have put themselves into their ethnographies and into their writing. Rereading two classic self-reflexive writings about close emotional involvement with another family and/or society by women anthropologists, Laura Bohannon's 1954 *Return to Laughter* (written under a pseudonym so unacceptable was the approach then) and Jean Briggs's 1970 *Never in Anger*, reminds one of what such "fieldwork accounts" can be (Clifford 1986: especially 14). Only Trawick really uses what Owen Lynch calls a "doubled dialogue" (1990: 25), so that we learn what she understood about love and what Tamilians understand about love or *anpu* and something of the interaction between these meanings and their shared experiences. Weston uses herself more as an informant; she tends to cite her behaviors. She talks about constituting a lesbian family, but we learn little of her feelings about that family or about emotional

turning points in its developments. While Trawick has provided plentiful ethnographic material on experiences within her Tamil family, she is less forthcoming on the reactions of her teacher and his family to her. (She does give hints, once using a verse of the Tamil poem to describe the relationship between herself and the teacher's wife (p. 52); did the wife know that poem as well as Trawick did?)

The third issue concerns western and "other" social science, an issue addressed by the work of Trawick and Hewlett. They have both been doing research for more than fifteen years and know the people with whom they work very well. Trawick writes assuming a specialized audience of South Asianists—Tamil words, texts, and sayings are used and explored throughout her book. She also reaches out to other readers through the power of her prose, her highly personal presentation, and analytical discussions drawing upon western social science theory. Implicitly, however, she assumes the "westernness" of social science as we know it. Her work stands as a testament to McKim Marriott's call for the development of Indian and other social sciences, a call to escape the limitations of the "Western ethnosocial sciences" and increase the range and power of the social sciences (Marriott 1990: 1–6). Trawick writes of Indian, Tamil, realities, though she claims to present only her own "particular vision of truth" to "take its place among the multitude" (p. 258). Hewlett writes for other social scientists, employing the language of western social science in a straightforward, workmanlike manner and assuming its terms and measures to be universally valid. Thus we read about holding, proximity, availability, attachment behavior, vigorous play, punitive discipline, and intrinsic-extrinsic role dichotomy. Aka terms play almost no role in the text. Hewlett uses "ideology" as just another measure for the study of human evolution, alongside "distribution of females," "paternal certainty," "warfare," "level of polygyny," and "females' contribution to subsistence." This is Hewlett's approach as an anthropologist, and he does it well; it stands in great contrast to the direction taken by Trawick and others like her.

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