LOVE FROM AFAR:
TRANSCENDING DISTANCE AND DIFFERENCE IN AGE-DISSIMILAR COUPLINGS?

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ABSTRACT

Anthropological examinations of romantic love often describe it as immaterial and transcendent, yet simultaneously anchored in materiality. In this paper, I uncover how the concept of transcendence can elucidate studies of cosmopolitanism. Based on interviews with heterosexual, age-dissimilar couples in Australia, I explore shared understandings of relationships, focusing on the dimensions of age, nation, and distance. Interviewees spoke of their relationships as transcending – as well as simultaneously constructing – distance and (age and national) difference. I consider four examples that illuminate these dimensions, interrogating how these are thought to be transcended (or not) by Australian couples. Situating these cases in relation to existing cosmopolitan analyses, and to the anthropology of love, I conclude that further consideration of the notion of transcendence could extend and strengthen research in this field.

Keywords: Love, difference, distance relationships, transcendence, cosmopolitanism

INTRODUCTION

When I first undertook research into heterosexual, age-dissimilar relationships in Perth, Western Australia, I was surprised by the high proportion of couples who had begun or developed their relationships from a distance, or were currently living in distance relationships. These couples' circumstances varied: some were in inter-cultural couplings, often involving older, white Australian men and younger, Southeast Asian women; some had met during overseas holidays and education- or work-related trips; and others lived in different locations across Australia. This paper explores these couples' shared under-

standings of their love relationships, focusing on the dimensions of age, nation, and distance. I draw on twenty-four semi-structured interviews with people currently or previously in female-older or male-older romantic couplings.

Interviewees' spoke of their relationships as transcending – as well as simultaneously constructing – distance and (age and national) difference. My analysis thus centres on this notion of love as *potentially* transcendent: as above or beyond the normal, the ordinary, or the physical, with the ability to overcome constraints like distance or difference. Here, I utilise Charles Lindholm's (1998, 248) conceptualisation of romantic love as 'a vision of the beloved other as a unique, transcendent and transformative being'. He describes love as a means of 'transcending the existential limits of the self', which *can* be (but not always *is*) disentangled from sexuality and, by extension, physicality (Lindholm 2006, 16). Lindholm (1995, 1998, 2006) thus sees formations of love and sexuality as highly malleable and culturally specific, rather than universal (see also Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Drawing on Lindholm (1995, 1998, 2006) and others' (Goode 1959; Jackson 1993; Singer 1984; Venkatesan *et al.* 2011) conceptualisations of love, I examine couples' understandings of their distance, age-dissimilar (and sometimes bi-national) relationships.

In considering the concept of transcendence, I employ anthropological analyses of cosmopolitanism, and, to a lesser extent, sociological examinations of mobility and distance (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013; Carter *et al.* 2015; Cheah 2006; Holdsworth 2013; Holmes 2004, 2014; Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Skrbis and Woodward 2013; Werbner 2008). Such analyses highlight tensions between proximity and distance, as well as the local and the global. Terms like transcendence are often deployed to explore and articulate such tensions, yet receive little analytical attention themselves. Indeed, within anthropology, the concept of transcendence is only rarely explained, despite the term regularly appearing in discussions of love and religion (Lindholm 1995, 1998, 2006; Weber [1946] 2009; cf. Venkatesan *et al.* 2011). In this paper, I argue that transcendence is and should be considered central to analyses of cosmopolitan coupledom and the anthropology of love.

I begin by outlining existing scholarship that addresses love as transcendent. I continue with a review of the literature on distance and difference in relationships, focusing in particular on analyses of cosmopolitanism and mobility, and discuss all of these in relation to the project methodology. Next, I consider four distinct examples that illuminate the dimensions of distance, age difference, and national difference, interrogating how these are thought to be transcended (or not) by Australian couples. Finally, I situate these cases in relation

to existing cosmopolitan analyses, and to the anthropology of love, concluding that further consideration of the notion of transcendence could extend and strengthen research in this field.

BACKGROUND: LOVE AS TRANSCENDENT

According to widely held conceptions of romance, the feeling of love, far more than other sentiments, is unique (Illouz 1997). As a result, the meaning of love has tended to be assumed, rather than being elaborated, in academic literature (Evans 2003). Indeed, until fairly recently social science scholarship on love and emotion has been peripheral, with these aspects of social life often being dismissed as lacking in seriousness and as characterised by irrationality (Jackson 1993; Lutz and White 1986; Maskens and Blanes 2013; McElhinny 2010; Svašek 2005; Venkatesan *et al*. 2011; Weber [1946] 2009).

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, there emerged a growing scholarly interest in the anthropology of emotion. Bonnie McElhinny (2010, 311) suggests that this developing concern was due to the 'the increasing impact of (and continuing backlashes against) scholars previously underrepresented in the academy, as well as broader social and political struggles'. Others have understood the shift to be a result of challenges to the division of the biological and the cultural, as well as the rational and the irrational (Lutz and White 1986; for examples see Needham 1971; Schneider 1980, 1984). Still others suggest it reflected the increasingly individualised concerns of modern, capitalist societies (Rose 1999). Regardless, social scientific scholarship on love and emotion has flourished in recent decades.

In keeping with this, anthropological theorists have increasingly sought to define and explore the concept of romantic love (for examples see Jankowiak and Fischer 1992; Lindholm 1995, 1998, 2006). In 1959, when love remained a rarely discussed topic in the social sciences, William Goode (1959, 41) defined it as 'a strong emotional attachment, a cathexis, between adolescents or adults of opposite sexes, with at least the components of sex desire and tenderness'. Most theorists today would dispute some aspects of Goode's (1959) definition, however, as he denies homosexual and pre-pubescent partners the ability to love romantically.[2]

Although Goode (1959) simply uses the term 'love', it is clear that he is referring to couple love. William Jankowiak and Thomas Paladino (2008) distinguish between two forms of couple relationships, aside from exclusively sexual partnerships. That is, those characterised by romantic (or passionate) love and

companionship (or comfort love). Romantic love, they say, is 'the idealization of another, within an erotic setting, with the presumption that the feeling will last some time into the future' (Jankowiak and Paladino 2008, 3). Companionship they describe as a 'deep affection', friendship, concern, and understanding, but which can also be sexual (Jankowiak and Paladino 2008, 2–3). Jankowiak and Paladino (2008) understand these forms of relationships to be cultural universals. This contrasts with Lindholm's (1995, 1998, 2006) conception of romantic love as culturally specific and variable (although not exclusive to so-called 'Western' societies). For the purposes of my analysis, I find Lindholm's (1995, 1998, 2006) approach, emphasising cross-cultural difference and flexibility, to be more useful (see also Jackson 1993).

It was clear from my conversations with interviewees that they saw their relationships as based, at least initially, in romantic feeling, although many were now in what might be described as companionate relationships. Moreover, even those who had been in relationships for long periods explained their partnerships as originating in feelings of romantic love (even if such feelings now emerged less frequently than they had previously). Thus, I describe my interviewees as having love relationships, which are romantic and sometimes also companionate.

The features of sexual desire and tenderness identified by Goode (1959, 41) remain as key elements of most contemporary definitions of love. Yet, sexuality tends to be somewhat differentiated from love, and the latter is generally seen as superior to the former (Illouz 1997). This separation goes back at least as far as Plato, who valued 'love for eternity' over the 'transient' desire for the other's body (Bertilsson 1991, 298; see also Singer 1984). Indeed, the Platonic notion that love is 'sexless and timeless' remains influential to this day (Bertilsson 1991, 299).

Lindholm (1995), to some extent reflecting Plato's understanding of love, sees transcendence as a feature of love. As outlined briefly above, he argues that love involves the idealisation of a unique, transformative, and transcendent 'other' (Lindholm 1998, 248; see also Singer 1984). He too questions whether sexuality is an inherent part of romantic love, suggesting instead that love is 'one way of transcending the existential limits of the self' (Lindholm 2006, 16), reflecting a 'desire to escape the limits of the given' (17). Here, love is conceived as sacred, as not inherently tied to the sexual and, indeed, the physical (Lindholm 2006). Thus, for the purposes of my analysis here, transcendence is existence or experience that is above or beyond the normal, the ordinary, or the physical. It is something that simultaneously arises from and surpasses

the usual limits of the material universe: for instance, eclipsing constraints like distance or difference.

Lindholm (1998) is critical of the centrality of sexuality to modern theories of romantic love which, he says, often presume that love is a means to a reproductive end. My own interviewees tended not to talk about sexuality when they spoke about love. Although this may in part have been due to the sensitive nature of the topic, like Lindholm (1995, 1998, 2006), I conclude that romantic love and sexuality are not *necessarily* connected, but that their connection is so taken for granted that the two are not commonly distinguished (cf. De Munck 1998).[3] Below, drawing on Lindholm's (1995, 1998, 2006) arguments, I examine couples' understandings and experiences of love, which they spoke of as transcending distance and (age and national) difference, yet as also inevitably located in the physical. I begin by exploring previous conceptualisations of distance and difference among couples and how they relate to my argument here.

CONCEPTS AND METHODS: DISTANCE/DIFFERENCE IN COSMOPOLITAN COUPLES

Ever since love emerged as a significant topic of study, there has been a great deal of discussion about how contemporary couplings are changing: becoming more autonomous, free, equal, and contingent (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2013; Giddens 1992). While such arguments are not without their critics (Jamieson 1999; McKenzie 2015), there is general agreement that patterns of intimate and family relationships have shifted somewhat in recent decades. Researchers have paid increasing attention to formations of family and intimate life that are viewed as indicative of these shifts: bi-national, inter-cultural, inter-racial, inter-faith, and age-dissimilar couples; distance and 'living apart together' partners; remarriages and blended families; as well as same-sex relationships (including friendships) (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013; Blatterer 2014; Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009; Carter *et al.* 2015; Cole 2014; Constable 2003; Holmes 2004, 2014; Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Leahy 1994, 2002; Pyke and Adams 2010; Yuill 2004).

Cosmopolitan analyses similarly tend to focus on social change, proposing that continuous processes of globalising democracy (and democratising globalisation) are underway (Werbner 2008, 3). Here, democracy is seen as shifting, repeatedly contributing to a cosmopolitan 'transcendence of the particular' and the concrete (Cheah 2006, 487). As well as being transcendent in *practice*, cosmopolitanism is also understood as an 'aspirational outlook' (Werbner 2008, 2). As such, Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward (2013) define cosmopolitan

analyses and practices as 'productive engagement[s] with difference', including cultural, racial, and national differences. These engagements with difference, rather than being individual, are collective and relational (Werbner 2008, 2). On a very small scale, they occur within and between couples.

In undertaking research on age-dissimilar relationships,[4] I found there was relatively little qualitative research that examined these couples. Instead, the bulk of research has been quantitative, and focuses on marriages in Western European and North American contexts as well as in their former colonies, including Australia and New Zealand (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993). The qualitative research that has been conducted is largely sociological, and has focused particularly on homosexual or male-older couplings (Leahy 1994, 2002; Pyke and Adams 2010; Yuill 2004). However, age-dissimilar relationships – most frequently male-older ones – have sometimes appeared within anthropological monographs, usually as part of discussions about marriage and kinship (Lee [1984] 2013; Radcliffe-Brown 1953). There has also been some anthropological focus on differences within couple relationships, yet this is much more often oriented toward inter-cultural, inter-racial, and bi-national intimacies (Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009; Cole 2014; Constable 2003). Even when age differences appear in tandem with these, they are not commonly analysed.

Unlike research on age-dissimilar couples, qualitative research on distance relationships has been relatively common, and is particularly widespread in sociology and the study of mobility (Holdsworth 2013; Holmes 2004, 2014; Jamieson and Simpson 2013). This research focuses on shifts towards couples 'living apart together' (Carter *et al.* 2015; Jamieson and Simpson 2013); family mobility and transnational relations (Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009; Constable 2003; Holdsworth 2013); as well as exploring how norms of coupledom transcend distance (Holmes 2004, 2014). More recently, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2013, 2) have investigated what they call 'world families', described as those 'living in, or coming from, different countries or continents'. Such families, they claim, evidence the 'globalization of love', whereby love 'transcends geographical, cultural and political frontiers', producing contradiction and chaos (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013, 3).

Anthropologists have also paid some attention to national, cultural, and racial differences (Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009; Cole 2014; Constable 2003). Much of this research is of relevance to cosmopolitan analyses of distance and difference. For instance, Jennifer Cole (2014, 544), in her study of bi-national marriages between French men and Madagascan women, uncovered a series of 'working mis/understandings', which simultaneously foster global connections

and movements of people and materials, as well as reinforcing national differences between these same men and women. Thus, the mutual understanding that forms the basis of cosmopolitan ideals is partial and incomplete. Overall, however, anthropological studies of relationships characterised by difference have been peripheral to the discipline, and have rarely been tied to concepts such as cosmopolitanism.

For this study, I conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews in 2008 and 2009. I interviewed those who were or had previously been engaged in heterosexual, age-dissimilar couplings, excluding homosexual relationships due to the problems associated with finding a suitable (and representative) number of people. I recruited interviewees in a variety of ways: some I found through my own acquaintances and through snowball sampling; others I recruited through magazines, radio, online, and using flyers. Partners were interviewed either separately or together, according to their own preferences. Although I sought to interview both partners where possible, this was not always practicable (for instance, when couples were in distance relationships). I interviewed each partner or couple once, and our discussions went for around one hour. I then transcribed the interviews and undertook thematic analysis of the transcripts. The names used below to refer to my interviewees are pseudonyms.

I interviewed people from a variety of socio-economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, although the majority of those I spoke with were white, middle-class, and had grown up in Australian cities. Interviewees' ages ranged from twenty-two to seventy-six years old, and their relationships were between two-and-a-half months and twenty-nine years long. I spoke with eleven men and thirteen women, nine of whom were in female-older relationships, and fifteen of whom were in male-older relationships. However, relationships between older men and younger women tended to have much larger age differences than did those between older women and younger men. I include the accounts of those in relationships with a range of age differences, the smallest being seven years and the largest being thirty.

I was initially surprised by the high proportion of couples – half of those I spoke with – who had begun or developed their relationships from a distance, or were currently living in distance relationships. As outlined above, some were bi-national, inter-cultural couplings, several of whom had met while travelling. Others lived in different locations across Australia, or were living apart within the same city but had been together long-term. Thus, different degrees of distance characterised my interviewees' relationships (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Interviewees' living arrangements*

Living arrangements	Interviewees
1a) Living apart now (different city/ country)	Charlotte (male-older relationship) Jessica (male-older relationship) Monica (male-older relationship)
1b) Living apart now (same city)	Juliette (female-older relationship) Rebecca (female-older relationship) Suzie and Peter (male-older relationship)
1c) Living apart now (same city, 'not ready to live together')	Andy (female-older relationship) Anna (female-older relationship) Daniel (male-older relationship) Mohammad (female-older relationship)
2) Lived apart previously (different city/country), living together now	Alan (male-older relationship) Caitlin and William (male-older relationship) Mark and Khiem (male-older relationship)
3) Living together now (same city)	Alana (male-older relationship) Amelia (male-older relationship) Benjamin (male-older relationship) Colin and Ruby (female-older relationship) Elise (female-older relationship) Michael (male-older relationship) Shaun (female-older relationship)

RESULTS: INTERSECTIONS OF DISTANCE, AGE, AND NATION

I now examine couples' understandings and experiences of romantic love, which they spoke of as transcending distance and (age and national) difference, yet as also inevitably located in the material. I address four distinct accounts: two from couple interviews (Caitlin and William; Mark and Khiem) and two from individual ones (Juliette; Charlotte). In my examination of interviewees' understandings of their relationships, I focus not only on distance relationships *between* nations, but also distance relationships *within* them. This enables me to explore a fuller range of movements, providing a perspective that is so often missing in discussions of mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013; cf. Holdsworth 2013). Indeed, a number of the couples I spoke with who had engaged in distance relationships *within* Australia had a greater physical distance between them than those in bi-national relationships.

Caitlin and William

Caitlin, aged thirty-eight, and William, aged fifty-three, met on the internet. Caitlin was a student at a Western Australian university, and had travelled to Sydney to take part in a musical performance with a number of other students. Upon returning home, she decided she wanted to email a male musician she had met. This was in 1992, and email was a relatively new development. She randomly chose a staff member from the University that the musician attended and emailed him, asking whether he could provide the student's email address. William, it turned out, was the staff member that she emailed, and they continued to write to one another for some time, before eventually meeting.

Of their early relationship, William said, 'it was just this disembodied person talking'. Later, following on from a discussion of what they had initially liked about one another, Caitlin and William had more to say:

> *Caitlin*: I guess it's interesting because we met online, and so we didn't know what each other looked like. So [we] didn't have to deal with that other experience of having the physical attraction come first, and then you have to work out whether or not you're actually compatible after that.

> *William*: With us it was almost the other way around.

> *Caitlin*: It was very strange, especially because I felt very strongly in love within a fairly short space of time, and it seemed very off to be feeling that strongly about someone I haven't actually met in person.

> *William*: 'Cos there's a spirit… and then you have to deal with the physical stuff. Are they attractive, do you get on, do you get off?

> *Caitlin*: What will my mother think? [*laughs*]

William described their relationship as 'disembodied', while Caitlin referred to it as being beyond the 'physical'. As Caitlin said, this had made their relationship seem 'strange' and 'very off', and they had felt that it was necessary to see if their relationship would work in the physical, social world. Thus, although their love was largely described as transcending the physical and the normal, this was not seen as wholly positive.

Luckily for Caitlin and William, when they eventually met they had found they

were physically attracted to one another, and Caitlin's mother had approved of William. Caitlin and William had since married. Yet their unusual experience of falling in love draws attention to how, normally, any understanding of love as beyond the physical incorporates the prevailing trend that love is usually only allowed to develop between certain people.

Later, following on from a discussion about other age-dissimilar couples that they knew, Caitlin and William spoke about their age difference:

> *Caitlin*: [P]eople who knew my real age assumed William was younger than he actually is, and people who knew William's real age assumed I was older than I actually am. People always assumed there was a smaller gap between our ages than there actually was.

> *William*: There is, there is a smaller gap than there actually is. I mean, I have to really think about it.

> *Caitlin*: Yeah, it's interesting, because if you sort of, I'm now the age that William was when I first met him, and I sit there and think 'god if I was to date a twenty-four-year-old' [*laughs*].

> *William*: Scandalous!

> *Caitlin*: Shocking! [*both laugh*] So, yes.

> *William*: It wasn't anything I set out to do, it just happened.

> *Caitlin*: Yeah, not exactly.

> *William*: And I don't think that's the issue, I wasn't, I didn't see the young secretary. It was just one of those, it was a disembodied…

Again, William describes their relationship as 'disembodied', as transcending the physical realities of age. Furthermore, earlier on in the exchange he says, 'there is a smaller gap than there *actually* is' (emphasis added). Such responses were extremely common among interviewees, as I discuss in greater detail below.

Juliette

Juliette had met her current partner, Arthur, in 1978, after she moved to Perth from another State in Australia. Arthur was eighteen years her junior. For

some time, however, they had both been unaware that their age difference was so large. She assumed he was older, while he assumed she was younger, and neither asked the other how old they were. Two years after they had met they began dating, and when I spoke with Juliette they had been together for twenty-eight years: she was seventy-six, and he was fifty-eight. Juliette and Arthur were not married, had no children together, and lived apart, but both owned homes in suburbs near to one another.

Juliette spoke about how, throughout her life, she had always looked young for her age, and how, when she had met Arthur, he had seemed mature for his age. Yet now, she said:

> I look at him and can't imagine that he's almost sixty, 'cos he still looks younger to me. Whereas when I first met him he looked, he came across more that he was older. I think that may have been his attitude because now he laughs, whereas [before] he was very sombre.

Speaking about her own appearance now, she added, 'once you hit sixty it doesn't matter', you can no longer avoid looking old. In all of the interviews I conducted in which the woman was the older partner, only Juliette said that she appeared older, although this was quite common among the men in male-older couples. Juliette also made it clear that she could, if she chose, make herself look more youthful through cosmetic surgery. She demonstrated the possible effects of surgery on her own face by stretching back her skin, and then laughingly complaining that she could no longer see. Juliette's joking about surgery was arguably one way of minimising the importance of appearance, by making it seem changeable and therefore relatively meaningless.

As seen above in relation to William, other interviewees made similar comments about the irrelevance of chronological age, saying things like 'age is just a number' or 'age doesn't matter'. Speaking about their relationships, they suggested that their *actual* age differences were not as large as their chronological ages might suggest. They argued that their (or their partners') chronological age was not their *true* age, and made adjustments to their ages based on physical appearance, felt age, levels of maturity, and life experiences. This was a common way in which interviewees dealt with and normalised their age differences: by arguing that they and/or their partner *transcended* them. Indeed, when asked, interviewees tended to compare themselves to age-*similar* couples, rather than age-dissimilar ones (for further discussion see McKenzie 2015).

Juliette's account also drew attention to intersections of distance, age, and physical proximity. Juliette and Arthur lived apart, and Juliette was content with this living arrangement and had no plans to live with Arthur in future. Previously, they had seen each other three or four nights a week, sometimes less, and had often spoken on the phone rather than meeting in person. This had recently changed, however, following the sudden death of Juliette's sister of a heart attack, as well as Juliette's development of osteoarthritis and osteoporosis. Now, Arthur dropped in on her every day after work. They had tea together and he did her household chores. Juliette described her current relationship with Arthur in terms of caring. Talking about Arthur's daily visits, however, she expressed regret that he felt the need to look after her in this way. In Juliette's case, ageing made it increasingly important that Arthur be proximate, thus reinstating the importance of physical co-presence in their relationship. Thus, while in many ways Juliette spoke of her relationship with Arthur as transcending the physical, this was increasingly limited by her ageing.

Mark and Khiem

Mark, aged fifty, and Khiem, aged twenty-three, were very different to one another. Mark was Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, university-educated, and had lived in the United Kingdom and Australia throughout his life; Khiem was Vietnamese, had not completed her high-school education, and had worked long hours in a marketplace prior to meeting Mark. Mark was divorced with two children, and had met Khiem two years before our interview, while he was on holiday in Vietnam. Mark spoke about their meeting at length. Khiem had been enlisted by a friend to show him around during his stay, and they quickly began spending more and more time together. Mark's holiday soon came to an end, and:

> *Mark*: She said, 'yeah, we'll keep in touch', and I said, 'sure, yeah, no problems'. And that's what I expected when I came back to Australia, I expected that we'd probably exchange a few emails and like many of these things it would just sort of wither and die over the years, and we can keep trying but distance is bit of an enemy. But, anyway [after travelling to my next holiday destination]… I got an email from Khiem saying, 'how's it going?', you know, 'have you arrived in Malaysia?' sort of thing. I can't remember what I replied but I got back to Australia and then we started sending emails probably once a week. Very, very low key, 'how's it going?' And slowly over time that sort of got from say one email to two to three each week, and clearly there was some attraction between us, and we liked each other. And

then… my daughter was a fairly experienced MSN [online instant messenger] user, and I didn't know very much about it, so I asked her…

Khiem: You asked me.

Mark: So I must have had this idea in my mind that I'd probably get on to this chat, 'cos I remembered that my daughter had done. So I asked her and she said 'yeah it's easy dad, this is all you have to do'. So I got myself an MSN and I spoke to Khiem and said 'do you chat?', and she said 'yes'. And then we started chatting, and then we got the microphones, and then, the next thing I got a camera. So over the years before Khiem came here we became relatively expert at Yahoo and MSN, Skype, we're very good at those things now [*Khiem laughs*]… [Then] I came to Vietnam on a holiday to meet Khiem there, three months later.

Khiem: Three months later.

Mark: And we went on holiday together for ten days. Is that right?

Khiem: Yeah.

Mark: … And we had a fantastic time and clearly there was something between us at that point. Unfortunately I had to come back to Perth again, so I came back to Perth and then I think I did that funny trip, Easter… out of the blue, I thought 'I'm just going to go to Vietnam for Easter'. So I went for two days literally, I just flew over there and spent two days with Khiem and then flew back. Then my business takes me to Beijing in China, especially last year quite frequently, and I one day had an idea that maybe Khiem could come to China, so while I was there she could come over. And [we] talked about the Visa… Well it turned out to be quite easy… we ended up spending, three times? Three times in Beijing, together, and one was a six week stint where we lived as husband and wife. And at the end of that I was pretty certain I wanted to marry to her.

They worked on, and eventually succeeded in obtaining, a Visa for Khiem, so that she could come to Australia and marry Mark.

In describing how their relationship began, Mark initially speaks of distance as

'an enemy', something that prevents relationships from forming. It is assumed that love does not *normally* transcend distance. Yet his partnership with Khiem largely developed over a distance, with their communications being mostly online. Furthermore, he describes a series of short trips and Visa applications, involving complex and sometimes lengthy negotiations within several different nations.

During our interview, Mark also spoke extensively about Khiem's maturity for her age. Initially, this was similar to how others talked about age and maturity. Yet, as our interview continued, his account revealed further complexities:

> *Lara*: Do you think there's necessarily anything different about age gap relationships to age similar ones?
>
> *Mark*: … There is part of Khiem that is still like a twenty-three-year-old… which means that there's still some immaturity there, as I would see it as an older person. But the immaturity that I observe in a younger person is something that can be quite exciting for a relationship. It makes it, it's different... It's a lot more exciting, it's a lot more fun. You don't know what, well I wouldn't say you don't know what to expect, but… because the younger person is usually wants to do more things… wants to explore, they've never done this… especially someone like Khiem. A lot of things in Vietnam she never had the opportunity to do. Come to a country like Australia… travelling the world or whatever, and, yeah, she gets excited. And I get excited by her being excited. So you get this vicarious sort of, like, pleasure from seeing someone else introduced to something new. So, yeah, I like that. I love that… [But] I see some older–younger relationships as being not so free, and not so flexible.

According to Mark, his relationship with Khiem gave him a sense of excitement that his previous, age-similar marriage had not. Thus, although he described Khiem as mature for her age, he also viewed their age difference as one of the reasons that their relationship worked. In his case, transcending their age difference was not considered desirable.

Charlotte

Charlotte was fifteen when she began a relationship with her current boyfriend, who was twenty-two at the time. They had met in Singapore, where she attended an international school for a few years, and he had grown up, but

they had both then moved overseas to attend university. He was studying Law in New York, and she was studying Science in Perth, Western Australia. Like many others, Charlotte noted that she had been mature for her age, and was therefore able to engage in an adult relationship in spite of her chronological age. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Charlotte, who was twenty-three when we spoke. I asked her what it was like being in a distance relationship:

> *Charlotte*: [It's more about] what's keeping you in the relationship. Because I guess the end thing is to get married and spend the rest of your lives together… but… if you don't see yourself being together for the rest of your life then why are you in it?
>
> *Lara*: So would you see your living arrangements as important then?
>
> *Charlotte*: It definitely made things difficult, I mean I would love to live with him. But I guess what's maintaining it for us is that I guess we've decided, I've decided in my head, that he is the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with. And therefore, you know, even though we can't be together right now… he's worth waiting for… [W]e were together in Singapore for three years, and then I came to Perth and we actually broke up, 'cos we just thought, you know, I'm going to uni[versity], blah, blah, blah. You know, it's just asking for trouble if we stay together. But then it was just awful and we decided to get back together, and so we knew then that there was an end point… 'Cos I've had friends who've been in long distance relation-ships and there just isn't an end point… I'm finishing uni[versity] and then we're going to be together… [So] I think [living together] is important.

Charlotte, to some extent, saw her relationship with her boyfriend as tran-scending their age difference – in that she was 'mature for her age' – as well as distance and location – in that 'what keeps you together' is more important. Yet she felt that there were limits to distance relationships, and yearned for the co-presence of her partner (Jamieson and Simpson 2013, 200). Her willingness to be in a distance relationship was dependent upon it having an 'end point'. A relationship that was *always* going to be beyond the physical was not seen as desirable.

DISCUSSION: TRANSCENDING DISTANCE/DIFFERENCE

Caitlin and William, Mark and Khiem, Juliette, and Charlotte all spoke about transcending (and sometimes failing to transcend) distance and difference in their relationships. These and other interviewees frequently suggested that age was irrelevant to their relationships, and Caitlin and William even spoke of their initial partnership as 'disembodied', as beyond the physical and the normal. Yet, although interviewees often made bold claims about the irrelevance of age as a concept, our conversations revealed that rather than dismissing age altogether, they tended to reframe it in non-chronological terms. They discussed their age differences by comparing themselves to others, for instance, saying that they (or their partner) were mature or felt young for their age. Thus, they did not necessarily see age as being beyond the physical. Rather, they normalised their age differences by suggesting that their relationships were *actually* age-similar. Moreover, Mark suggested that his relationship with Khiem worked *because* it failed to transcend their age difference: being with someone younger was fun and exciting, although she was still relatively 'mature for her age'.

Meanwhile, discussions of distance commonly emphasised a desire or need for physical contact. For instance, in Caitlin and William's case, their relationship had not felt 'quite right' until they had met in person. Charlotte said that she would have loved to have lived with her partner, and her willingness to be in a distance relationship was dependent upon it having an 'end point'. Conversely, after years of living alone and seeing Arthur a few times a week, Juliette increasingly needed him around to complete her chores. Thus, physical proximity was an increasing necessity in her relationship. Overall, interviewees' comments suggested that they were mostly able to transcend distance, and go without physical contact, for some time, even establishing relationships with their partners that were initially a-physical. No one desired this indefinitely, however. My interviews revealed that those in bi-national couples similarly understood themselves to be transcending distance, as did those in relationships where both partners lived in the same country, but far apart.

The notion that love transcends has a long history, and the idea that love is 'sexless and timeless' remains influential to this day (Bertilsson 1991, 299). My research suggests that distance, age-dissimilar, and (occasionally) bi-national relationships are imaginable through a discourse of love as transcendent, as moving beyond (as well as being tied to) the physical and the normal. This challenges many existing studies of mobility – as well as conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism – which have an enduring tendency to focus on physical

limitations and constraints, albeit with some emphasis on methods of 'over-coming' such constraints: for instance, through the use of new information and communication technologies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013; cf. Holdsworth 2013). Such accounts rarely address how distance and difference can produce and foster love, as well as thwarting it (Holdsworth 2013). Thus, my account is peripheral to most cosmopolitan analyses of relationships.

Among the recent work on mobility is Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2013, 13) book on distant love, discussed above, in which they suggest that 'the bonds of place, country and family… have now begun to float free of one another'. They discuss widespread, distant love as 'romanticised', and as dissolving social and cultural bonds and disregarding physical proximity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013, 44). In this globalised, distant love, tensions between proximity and distance emerge, producing growing 'turbulences' in people's personal lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013, 7). Therefore, distance is seen as *challenging* love.

In contrast, Clare Holdsworth (2013, 2) has argued that we need to explore people's movements as a means through which relationships are constructed and maintained, as well as severed or problematised. She challenges the assumption that mobility brings about the decline of families, and that families are thus 'anti-mobility'. This, she suggests, 'places too much emphasis on the social significance of… co-presence' (Holdsworth 2013, 4). Similarly, as Lindholm's (2006, 16) theorisations of sex and love suggest, romantic love is quite capable of being separated from the physical and the sexual. Yet, romantic love and the physical were not *neatly* separated by my interviewees, and love was not understood as transcendent in the sense that distance, age, and nationality were considered meaningless within people's relationships. To some extent, however, interviewees understood love broadly, and their relationships specifically, as capable of moving beyond the physical and the normal: not simply *overcoming*, but, rather, *transcending* distance and difference.

CONCLUSION: THE COSMOPOLITAN IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE

What do such understandings mean for the concept of cosmopolitanism? According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013, 67–68), a process of 'cosmopolitanization' is underway: an increasing 'state of interdependence between individuals, groups and countries that is not just economic and political but also ethical, transcending national, ethnic, religious and political boundaries and power relations'. They suggest that this process produces chaos and contradiction, particularly within personal relationships.

Further addressing the concept of cosmopolitanism, Skrbis and Woodward (2013) identify four dimensions: cultural cosmopolitanism, political cosmopolitanism, ethical cosmopolitanism, and methodological cosmopolitanism. My findings hold the most significance for the latter – methodological cosmopolitanism – which, they posit:

> [S]eeks to extend social analysis beyond national borders and frameworks – and in particular, to analyse the fluid, relational and mobile aspects of social life on a continuum from the local to the global… [Such an analysis would embrace] a post-national and transnational perspective in understanding the forces of globality (Skrbis and Woodward 2013).

Methodological cosmopolitanism therefore 'opens up the relational processes which bind local and global, universal and particular, familiar and other' (Skrbis and Woodward 2013). As a result of such concerns, it is anticipated that an improved social science, better able to describe 'the processes which form the structure of the global world', will ensue (Skrbis and Woodward 2013). By incorporating the notion of transcendence into cosmopolitan analyses, I propose that anthropologists are well positioned to articulate such processes.

While scholars of cosmopolitanism have at times talked of transcendence (Cheah 2006, 487), this concept has received little serious attention in the literature. Yet it highlights an important omission in research on cosmopolitanism and mobility: the possibility of seeing distance and difference not simply as material barriers, but as (sometimes) capable of being moved beyond. Thus, anthropological examinations of romantic love – as an immaterial, transcendent feeling that is simultaneously anchored in materiality – may play a significant role in further elucidating people's cosmopolitan understandings, thoughts, and experiences.

NOTES

1   Lara McKenzie is a Research Associate in the Discipline of Anthropology and Sociology at The University of Western Australia, where she received her PhD in 2013. Her PhD research focused on age-dissimilar, romantic relationships in Australia, exploring themes of gender, age, difference, love, autonomy, and relatedness. Her dissertation was recently published as a book, *Age-dissimilar couples and romantic relationships: Ageless love?* (Palgrave Macmillan, Studies in Family and Intimate Life Series, 2015). She has also undertaken research on e-learning and inequalities in education, internationalisation at home, and is currently conducting a study on recent PhD graduates' experiences of looking for stable academic work.

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2   My previous work suggests that the 'adult' status of partners remains important to contemporary Australian conceptions of couple love (McKenzie 2015).

3   Other theorists have discussed additional elements of romantic love. For instance, Irving Singer (1984, 9) identifies appraisal and bestowal as features of the Western tradition of love, with the appraisal of the beloved leading to the bestowal of value, through which lovers respond and attend to one another. The love interest is also frequently conceived of as 'special' or 'right': someone whose interests and character are compatible with the self (Strauss and Quinn 1997).

4   There has been a considerable amount of debate as to what constitutes an age difference (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993). Given that larger age differences are more common and more widely accepted when the older partner is male, it is problematic to define age-dissimilar, female-older relationships in the same way as male-older ones. Some researchers have dealt with this by arguing that what constitutes an age-dissimilar relationship varies according to the gender of the older partner (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993). In such cases, the age difference required for a female-older relationship to be labelled as age-dissimilar is many years smaller than that required for a male-older relationship to be similarly labelled. Moreover, what constitutes a notable age difference is highly cross-culturally and historically variable (Berardo, Appel, and Berardo 1993). Thus, I judge what counts as an age dissimilarity to be dependent on factors such as gender and partners' social roles.

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