

## **Love as a Cultural Artifact: Love Letters Composed by Three Social Groups**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The assumption that a love letter is the ideal vehicle for the sincerest expression of a person's most intimate desires is the foundation of a literary territory formally inaugurated with "Letters from the Portuguese Nun", published for the first time in 1669. The 21 re-iterations in the following 6 years, are a mark of the publication's success. Love letters and epistle novels came to be copiously written and published in the centuries thereafter.

Another consequence of the popularization of love letters, was the creation of instruction manuals for writing them. These flourished particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in France, Germany and the Netherlands. The main objectives were to translate into the vernacular the knowledge of learned experts, and to accompany the new process of teaching literacy that was also developing during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These "how to" books are still in circulation. One example of their continuity is the 110-year span of Philipon re-iterations, a letter-writing manual published in Paris for the first time in 1858, and for the last time in 1968.

Love letters written by ordinary women and men are highly prized today for the valuable insight they provide into everyday life. Historians find "the need to question silences, to shed light on dead angles, to invent sources and methods with the aim of probing as far as possible (...) those groups who do not make any mark to register their passage, because leaving traces is not part of their culture" (Capdevilla 2002:53).

My particular interest is in the discursive dimension of culture, in other words, the particularities, transformations and innovations used to express the communication of love. By the discursive dimension of love letters, I mean what the different young people consider "writeable" within their given socio-cultural context. Unlike the response suggested by educators, for whom learning the written language, and how to write letters, is the frame work to support the construction of correct communication, I would much rather say that love letters reflect two inter-related dimensions: on the one hand the gender code, and on the other, the cultural surroundings that in their turn also codify the subject's options.

Love letters have a condition all their own. Their modality of interaction favors the private sphere by paving the way to intimate expression. Nevertheless, each letter always possesses additional characteristics pertaining to its era and cultural environment. A letter responds to prevailing historical and social conditions which allow the writer to speak of love in a manner particular to each given period. What interests me in these love discourses is the significance that can be recognized through the shared social code, because letters are the result of rules of production, as well as being codified and articulated according to their multiple cultural practices.

That said, I would define the object of this reflection as a study of the tension between the usage evidenced in the writing of love letters, and the different tendencies of the different social groups. In other words: What are the end-products of this negotiation between the cultural diversity of the social groups, and the homogenizing tendency of writing?

This Article discusses the results of research carried out among young Mexicans from three social groups. The first is a group of young indigenous people from the Huichol ethnic group, who have no contact with the mass media, but who know how to write Spanish as a second language and their customs center around the oral practices of communication.

The second group of young people, representative of the majority in Latin America, comes from the low-income groups, a culture largely immersed in the mass media. Writing as such plays a very small part in their lives, their most common means of communication still being the spoken language.

The third group of young people comes from the economically privileged social class. They have access to all the mass means of communication, as well as to the modern technologies of information and the internet. These young people live in a world where writing is an important tool for communication, and an element of power.

To distinguish the letters written by the low-income young urban people from the letters written on the internet by the young people from the high income groups (even though both groups are urban), the three groups will be differentiated in this Paper as follows: Huichol letters (H), urban letters (U) and internet letters (I).

The analysis reveals that writing is not merely a process that reproduces unaltered the rules of the written language, but rather a re-composition of different aspects decided by the communicative needs of that particular social group.

I discovered three factors behind the multiple styles of writing: 1) the technological factor of writing in inter-relation to orality, audio-visibility and the internet; 2) the schooling factor and access to the printed word; and 3) the degree of value accorded this form of communication.

As to the first factor, the letters reveal signs of the media context, of writing conventions and of orality. In the Huichol letters, I found a rigorous knowledge of the rules of the letter-writing code. However, the characteristics of orality are also present: the participation of the community spirit that determines the forms of loving relationships, the use of rhythmic formulae and contextualization.

In the letters written by the low-income young urban people, it is clear how far they are from the written form of expression. Poor spelling, the low average number of words per letter, and an ignorance of the margins of this written genre, would all lead one to believe that, in this group, literacy has been taught formally, but it has not been internalized as a means of communication that they would consider their own. Even though these young people are immersed in a written context – street signs, billboards, flyers, packaged products, public transportation, compulsory schooling, textbooks, political propaganda, etc. – they do not choose to use writing as a regular form of communicating with each other. The evidence of their orality in their writing is visible in their phonetic use of language, where spelling, punctuation and the correct separation of words are not essential to their written communication. Most common of all here, are signs of the audio-visual forms of communication: brief messages, melodramatic themes and forms, the use of decorative images and expressions that are more like advertising slogans.

The internet letters demonstrate a relationship between the mastery of writing and a technological form that facilitates conversation. The writers understand the margins of composing a letter and the grammar rules for written Spanish, but they are also experimenting with abbreviations, onomatopoeia, and a use of punctuation symbols, all of which seem to saturate their writing with the rhythm and gesticularity of spoken language.

The three groups of young people are all currently enrolled in secondary school, and their syllabuses are basically similar. However, the Huichol and their teachers do not speak Spanish as their first language, and their access to written culture is minimal up in the mountainous Sierra where they live. Nevertheless, it was clear that this group is by no means the least likely to master the art of writing. Undoubtedly schooling and access to written material, play a major role in the formal teaching of literacy and how to interpret the codes of written language, but they are clearly not the determinant factors in the dissemination of writing or its equitable distribution.

Lastly, it is also clear that the social value each group accorded the written word, plays a determining role in the writing practices of that group. The recognition and value accorded to writing by the Huicholes, define the extension and care apparent in their letters. The security these young people feel in the power of writing is evidenced by the commitment they express in their letters.

The highly audio-visual environment in which the low-income young urban people live, seems to distance them from writing. Music and television commercials overrun their world, leaving little room for any spontaneous original expression of their own. The popular culture of these groups migrated to mass culture a while ago, and their ways of talking have been hijacked by the radio and television, leaving their own written expression very much wanting.

The young people who write by internet reflect a mastery of both the written language and of internet technology. For these young people, writing is an everyday practice, part of their preparation to enter into the world of those who write.

The comments made below, stem from my analysis of the different discursive components in a corpus of 235 letters. Limited in space, I will only mention a small selection of the “figures” that make up the different love letter examples. Making use of Roland Barthes (1982) methodology, I extracted out of the corpus certain figures and phrases in the form of unfinished messages. Although many of the figures are used by the three groups, in this place I made a selection of the fragments used only by one particular group. The object of this is to underline the discourse differences and therefore the cultural expressions of love.

In the first place I will briefly go over the formal conception of a “love letter” in the 3 Groups according to the average number of words in each letter and the generic margins. Secondly I will expose the different love figures.

	<b>HUICHOL LETTERS</b>	<b>URBAN LETTERS</b>	<b>INTERNET LETTERS</b>
<b>Place</b>	94%	0%	0%
<b>Date</b>	87%	8.5%	100%
<b>Heading</b>	72% * 28% **	18% * 82% **	96% * 4% **
<b>Exordium</b>	89%	55%	74%

<b>Closing</b>	68%	49%	93%
<b>Signature</b>	70.5%	87%	85%
<b>Postscript</b>	2.2%	9%	41%
<b>Illustrations</b>	14%	40%	0%
<b>Average number of words</b>	129	95	245

\* Epistolary heading. \*\*Informative heading.

### Figures in the Huichol letters

#### Love and Our Relationship

For some young people (only Huicholes), speaking of love inevitably means the couple: what “you” and “I” are, and the relationship that unites both “you” and “me”. The letter expresses a loving feeling in the plural: we are both in love; we walk together; if you are fine, I’m fine too. Love is constructed as a couple relationship, and this is expressed in the association of the two participants and in the clear definition of the relationship.

*You and I: “I hope you are fine because I’m fine” (H); “I love you because you loved me first” (H); “I’m falling in love with you” (H); “When I’m with you, everything makes me happy” (H); “We’re in love” (H); “We’ll walk together” (H).*

*Our relationship: “My love” (H); “My lady” (H); “Unforgettable love” (H); “My best lover” (H); “You’re my life” (H); “I want to meet your family” (H); “I’m going to marry you” (H); “You’re my every day” (H); “You’re my everything” (H).*

#### Eternal Love

Life-long love is matrimonial love. Expressing constancy and eternity suggests continuity and security in a stable relationship. Only the Huichol love letters expressed such long-term commitment.

*Eternity: “I’ll live the future of my life with you” (H); “I won’t forget you until I die” (H); “I’ll never forget you” (H); “I’ll remember you as long as I live” (H); “I could never tear myself away from you” (H).*

### Figures in the urban letters

#### Illuminated Love

Love can occur as a palliative for an unhappy or mediocre life. As a metaphor, love “illuminates” this gray, opaque, nocturnal life. Metaphors involving light are common in music and commercial verse, and in the letters written by the urban young people.

*Luminosity: “You’re the dawn” (u); “You’re the light that brightens up my existence” (u).*

#### Love as Suffering

Pain and suffering accompany the loving feeling, and even seem to help in revealing it. Mariana Alcoforado, the Portuguese nun, expresses with inordinate passion her desire to suffer rather than not to feel love: "From the bottom of my heart I thank the desperation that you cause me, and detest the tranquility in which I lived before I met you" (Alcoforado 2000:46).

Only the urban young people seem to entertain an inclination for this figure of love and for "unrequited love".

*I'm suffering: "It hurts" (u); "I'm afraid" (u); "I'm jealous" (u); "Even though I'm suffering, I don't say anything" (u); "I feel lonely" (u).*

### Unrequited Love

Underneath, the one who falls in love with an impossible option, seems bitterly to enjoy being rejected, and still continues to yearn after the beloved.

In the urban letters unrequited love is caused not only by jealousy, but also by disdain, confused feelings, "you love me, but I don't love you", "you don't even notice me", "you're not interested in me", "you betrayed me".

*Unrequited: "I know you don't love me, but I love you" (u); "Even though I love you, and you don't love me" (u); "I love you in silence" (u).*

## **Figures in the internet letters**

### Love in the Extreme

This figure is composed of unlimited passion as expressed by the young people in love. In this case, the expression is exaggerated. Love seems temporarily to suspend the normal senses, and the one in love is totally involved only with his(her) love, who thus becomes the focus of his(her) attention and life.

Ortega and Gasset considers that the one in love has "fallen into a hermetic enclosure, without any porosity towards the outside ... Hence all enamouring automatically tends towards frenzy. Having abandoned him(her)self, it goes on multiplying to the furthest extreme possible" (2000:110).

*Extremes: "You have made me the happiest man in the world" (i); "There's no one who could love you more" (i); "I love you with all my heart" (i); "I'll do even the impossible to see you" (i); "I wouldn't change what we have together for anything in the world" (i); "You're everything to me" (i); "I feel wonderful" (i).*

### Phatic Love

According to Jakobson (1963), the phatic function of language comes into play when the initiator establishes or prolongs communication with the recipient, simply in order to accentuate the contact. The phatic function can give way to ritualized formulae, the main aim of which is to prolong the conversation. There does not seem to be any information to transmit in the love letter, it is solely a means of servicing the relationship and expressing the need for contact.

The exchange of love letters nourishes the state of being in love, it expresses the sole theme that concerns the enamoured: "Even the love letter, that innocently perverse attempt to

calm or restart the game, is too immersed in the immediate fire not to speak further about the “me” and the “you”, or even of the “us” that emerges out of the alchemy of identifications, but not of what really happens *between* the one and the other.” (Kristeva 1995:3)

*Contact: “I really need to hear your voice” (i); “I’m dying to have you near me” (i); “Write or call soon” (i); “I can’t live without hearing from you” (i).*

### Repetitive Love

The one in love lives a constant reiteration of his(her) feelings. In a normal state, no-one would go on and on like a scratched record repeating the same idea. Yet, between two people in love with each other, the incessant confirmation of “I love you” becomes the cornerstone of their relationship. This obsessive ratification of love appears most of all in the internet letters.

*I love you: “I love you” (i); “I adore you” (i); “You fascinate me” (i); “Neta, I adore you” (i).*

One figure used by all groups is “the organs of love”, even though each group has its own particularities.

### Love and the Organs of Love

Love and eroticism go hand in hand. As love is also perceived through the senses, the body actually complies with a definitive function. Thanks to love, the body takes on a new condition. The parts of the body are not merely biological sections, they now have a new importance and prestige. The writers in the different groups express a preference for different parts of the beloved’s body, and the preference varies noticeably from group to group.

When courtly love – the courting ritual developing into love passion – originated in the West, seduction and the physical attributes became properties to be discovered, displayed and marketed. For young people today from both urban groups, the physical attributes worthy of mention in a love letter, are: the lips, mouth, eyes, ears, cheeks, hair, smile, face, hands and the voice. In the urban letters the eyes are the organs of love which are quantitatively more often mentioned, even more than the heart itself. The eyes seem to captivate the passion as much for men as for women, among young people from both urban groups. Perhaps this demonstrates the predominance of the sense of sight in the West, where the world tends to trust more to sight than to any other sense.

In their letters, the Huicholes – removed as they are from western love models – only make one reference to the mouth, one other to the lips, and another to “your little waist”. The human body does not appear fragmented in other discursive Huichol productions either, for example in photographs, their embroidery or the woolen squares they make. In a collection of 2700 photographs taken by the young people of San Miguel Huaixtita (a Huichol community) themselves, there is not one photograph that shows people in close-up, or only a part of a person. All the photographs show the entire body. Elsewhere I have ventured to suggest an interpretation for this observation (Corona, 2002). Here I am limiting myself to remarking on the different ways the body is used in the written forms of love.

The heart appears in all the love letters, even if only minimally in the case of the Huichol letters. Alfredo López Austin (1996) would have us question whether the heart is in

fact the seat of our passions. The author established that the Ancient Mexicans actually considered the liver to be the recipient of our passions and feelings. Sahagún's informants called the liver "our anger-maker", the place where we become annoyed; but, at the same time, happiness, pleasure and love are also produced by a healthy, fortified liver.

*The organs of love: "soul, heart, eyes, little eyes, black eyes, smile, physique, little face, well-groomed hair, cheeks, fine face" (u); "I only want your heart" (u); "heart, tears, eyes for you, eyes like lights, gray eyes, face, mouth, nose, head" (i); "you are my yellow flower"(h); "you are the flower of my home" (h).*

## BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

In light of all the above, we can make the observation that love letters – which appear to be purely subjective exchanges – do in fact reveal a double code: the code implied by the letter genre, and the code constructed according to social group.

I have been able to glimpse the love code operating within each of the three groups of young people. This has provided clues towards comprehension of the love discourse – or what is considered "writeable" – according to each group of young people.

Ethnographic work in the different cultural contexts has allowed me to discover the communicative surroundings of the young people and their cultural references regarding writing and love. The discursive approximation being reported here, on the other hand, has allowed me to examine what their letters (which are links of communicative flow) reveal in the way of traces of their context, their references, their knowledge and their feelings.

Analyzing the letters as enunciations brought me closer to the presence of the sender and the recipient; in other words, the "I" who is writing to the "you" who is receiving. It also revealed how both are themselves constructed within the relationship: an in love "I" and a beloved "you".

My methodological proposal has nothing to do with discovering implicit ideologies, or tracing degrees of cultural development related to writing. Both of those courses are limiting, in that they consider a text in isolation from its context, a direction towards passiveness in the discursive subject, and a view of writing simply as a cultural parameter. By addressing the discourse and its complicity within the construction of subjectivities, I have tried to respond to the following questions: How do lovers write about their love in these three groups of letters? What do the young people in the letters see, where do they hold back, what do they emphasize, what do they leave out? How are the three groups of writers constructed as desiring and desirable human beings?

Love passion –the reference for love in the West – is exaggeration, the loss of reason, total suffering. However, the young people in this study seem to inhabit their love in different ways. The young Huichol people express serenity and courtesy. Their moderated love, that experiences less uncertainty and has a long-term project, seems to be settled in a stable place and time, a regulated environment, and a future which is continuous and predictable.

The low-income young urban people express love in a way that is closer to commercial music and televised stereotypes. Love is claiming, unrequited, suffering, a sentimental tug-of-war. As reading and writing do not feature greatly in the habits of these young people, they tend rather to accompany their messages with illustrations, in which bleeding hearts and the intertwined initials of the two love birds say it all.

The young internet people usually express themselves in an exaggerated, hysterical, superlative way. In this highly individual experience, in which the beloved is the source of all inspiration, the young person enjoys his(her) love.

Serene love, media love, love of self? Three expressive tendencies, three different social needs?

The closely-knit Huichol society, with all its traditions and social controls, decides the way in which couples form. The tendency towards inclusion in the community, family participation, early formalization of the couple, all guarantee continuity of the community. On the other hand, the love letters written by both urban groups of young people allow us to see our less closely-knit Western culture in action. The letters written by the high-income group reveal individualism and de-territorialization; whereas those written by the low-income group reveal the loss of their own popular language which they have substituted with language acquired from the media.

Love in itself would seem to be universal, but the ways of expressing it are many and varied. I have caught a glimpse of the ways in which three different groups of young people express their love in writing. It would be worth researching further the cultural threads that make these forms possible. Which "Figures" does each group consider more – or even most – prestigious? Which is a writer allowed to express – and which not – according to social group and gender? Why do some writers dwell more on the happy aspect of love, while others dwell more on suffering?

With or without the answers to these and perhaps other questions, it is clear that the old adage still holds true: "*sobre amores no hay reglas*" (love obeys no rules). Despite all I have learnt from analyzing these love letters, the cryptographics peculiar to each couple still withhold tantalizing secrets that probably only those two particular in love will ever be able to decipher.

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