

REACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Rather than launch a new queer manifesto—“What do we want? Remarriage! When do we want it? Now!”—I am happy to acknowledge the others who got there before me. First among them is Stanley Cavell, of course, although he declined to pursue the connection between remarriage and gay marriage. Cavell did, however, belatedly disclose the connection between his thinking about remarriage and the “general sentiments of guilt and failure” that attended the dissolution of his first marriage.¹ In 1994, shortly after he had seen Ingmar Bergman’s stage production of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* in Stockholm, Cavell was prompted to recall his first viewing of Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) in 1960 when he was mired in the difficult process of separating from his wife and child. “I was thirty-four years old,” Cavell writes, “precisely half my lifetime ago, evidently lost in the middle of life’s journey within the bright parks of Berkeley, where I was completing my fourth year as an assistant professor in the philosophy department.”² Unable to complete the overdue dissertation that, unless submitted, would mean his position would be terminated the following year, Cavell encounters Bergman’s film and “the economy of discredit” it redemptively outlines as a reflection of his own personal and professional dilemma. In this emotionally labile state, he finds himself sharing “elements” with all of the key characters in *Smiles of a Summer Night*, no matter their gender: the “isolated” father, the “unclaimed” wife, the “turbulent” son, and the “skeptical” actress “tending to a child alone.”³ Adopting a retrospectively enlightened autobiographical perspective, Cavell comes to understand that his estrangement from marriage not only coincided with but perhaps brought about his inability to write. Now, with the benefit of intellectual hindsight, Cavell can link both productions—“Bergman’s presentation of summer and Shakespeare’s of winter and spring”—to his dawning understanding as a young man headed into divorce of the difference between false and true marriage and his appreciation of remarriage comedy as a mechanism to parse that distinction without rancor.⁴ On top of this recognition comes the parallel recognition of the

ability of film, and particularly the “matter-of-fact” genius of film dialogue, “to redeem academic discourse for human sociability” and the intellectual liberation attendant on that.⁵ Needless to say, in the way of comedy all comes out right in the end: the dissertation gets finished, tenure is secured, and eventually the world receives an account of remarriage comedy as popular culture’s way of reckoning the difference “between a liberating and a stifling understanding, or between sincerity and cynicism” in the matter of coupled love, a relationship memorably figured as “the civilized violence of one soul’s intelligence of another.”⁶

Other experts on marriage are less tethered to the idea that a philosophy of remarriage can best be advanced through a philosophy of film. One such person is long-time marriage counselor Esther Perel, the author of the best-selling *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence* and its sequel, *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*, the promotional blurb for which flattens the Shakespearean premise of the Hollywood remarriage comedies into contemporary self-help speak: “An affair can even be the doorway to a new marriage—with the same person.”⁷ With thirty years’ experience as a couple counselor under her belt, Perel has recently launched a series of podcasts that are redacted recordings of actual counseling sessions with disenchanting attachments from all points of the erotosphere—straight husbands and wives, gay and lesbian partners, serial philanderers, the polyamorous—in what seems to be an upscaled enterprise version of her hugely successful TEDx talks, “The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship” (2013, approaching 14 million views) and “Rethinking Infidelity: A Talk for Anyone Who Has Ever Loved” (2015, 12.5 million).

Reviewing Perel’s podcasts in the *New Yorker* in May 2017, Alexandra Schwartz refers to the just-breaking internet story, and associated memes, of Melania Trump instinctively batting away her husband’s presidential hand as they crossed the tarmac in Tel Aviv to be followed by a similarly chill though more composed public rebuttal of intimacy the following day, as the pair deplaned Air Force One in Paris, a city no longer known for romantic or global accord thanks to the Trumps’ visit.⁸ As Schwartz points out, these gestures—exemplarily though not exclusively matrimonial—were set against an equally generic attachment scene by Pete Souza, the former president’s official photographer, who took the opportunity to post to his Instagram account a photograph of Barack and Michelle Obama in 2015 seated before the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Bloody Sunday civil rights protest. As Schwartz describes it, Mr. and Mrs. Obama are holding hands in “a gesture that needed no interpretation” but, since *Reattachment Theory* is founded in the drive to interpret, I think



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The state of matrimony

(Official White House photograph, Pete Souza, 2015).

it is worth reflecting on the photograph's semiotic richness, whether that be considered a property of its surface or its depth.

Taken in high sun, the short depth of field of Souza's photograph captures the glint of the gold band on Obama's left hand while visually softening the iconic bridge behind the two evenly balanced figures who fill the foreground in matching black outfits, their profiles crisply aligned in the direction of the commemorative events unfolding outside the frame. The handsome presidential couple are linked by both the arching superstructure of America's racialized history and the diagonal infrastructure of marriage as Mrs. Obama's long, lithe arm reaches across the foreground in an action that perfectly betokens the effortless seaming together of publicity and privacy that is conjugality. Their expressions bear witness to the weight of racial injustice but the sunlight on Michelle Obama's black skin and the block of bright yellow to the right of Barack Obama's head, like the blue sky overhead, imprint the scene with hopefulness. As Schwartz goes on to say, "The difference between the Obamas' obvious intimacy and mutual respect and whatever is going on with the Trumps is enough to make any American despair about the state of modern marriage, along with the state of everything else," in the kind of slick segue from marriage to state that would be familiar to anyone who has read

Stanley Cavell or Lauren Berlant, two names forever joined in my thinking about marital commitment and its funny and unfunny genres.

I began this book by drawing on Katherine Franke's argument that advocates for and against gay marriage have a lot to learn from the historical example of the extension of marriage law to formerly enslaved African Americans. In the time since I first drafted that argument, Ann duCille has edited a collection of essays that address the issue of black marriage from the time of slavery to the time of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé's visual concept album that uses public speculation about her husband's infidelity as the lever through which to explore the sexual legacy of slavery.⁹ In his brief contribution to that volume of essays, Kendall Thomas reviews Franke's argument about the white-washing of the marriage equality movement in order to ask if black marriage is queer. Importantly, his question is not framed as a historical or legal inquiry into the status of black marriage but as a rhetorical gambit. Black experience, Thomas argues, cannot be reduced to the history of enslavement, as if stigma were an indelible and ongoing property of race rather than something that can be reimagined on different terms:

To be faithful to its aspirations, then, a queer critical theory of black marriage must refuse to restrict its field of vision to what black marriage was in the nineteenth-century past, or even to what it is in our twenty-first-century present; it must also be willing to reflect speculatively on what black marriage might become in a twenty-second-century future. Similarly, in taking up the question of how black intimate alliance and the black intimate imagination can be mobilized to forge new, more democratic forms of sexual and racial citizenship, a critically queer engagement with the politics of black marriage must declare its independence from the ideological terms and institutional terrain of "law and rights-based advocacy."¹⁰

Setting aside his academic affiliation to legal studies, Thomas finds speculative evidence of these new imaginings of black intimate alliance in narrative films as distinct from each other as Barry Jenkins's Academy Award-winning *Moonlight* (2016) and the Marvel-Disney blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018). Whatever their specific generic affiliations and achievements, Thomas insists that these "cinematic figurations" are alike in that they gesture toward "African American erotic and intimate life *beyond* the binary boundaries of normative whiteness and nonnormative blackness, of white supremacy and black inferiority" and refuse to be limited to the vexed conditions of the present, however well they understand them.¹¹

Thomas ends his essay by arguing that the way to shift the “Americanist’ narrative that always and only figures blackness as accreted stain, lack, failure, inferiority, stigma, mark, or curse” is to engage a transnational comparative framework that asks “whether, why, and how bisexual, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian black people around the world experiment with conjugality by crafting spaces *within* marriage that engage and include intimate relational possibilities *outside* it.”¹² As someone who writes from outside the United States, it pleases me to close my queer updating of Cavell’s account of remarriage by invoking American black marriage as an exemplary instance of matrimonial perfectionism, a form that nurtures utopian imaginings that reverberate transnationally. While others may see this as a universalist extension of the ruse of neoliberalism to black subjects who have nothing to gain from the whitewashed agenda of same-sex marriage equality, I prefer (like Thomas) to regard it as a final reminder that categories of sexuality, like categories of race, have evolved together, not apart, and that in this regard, as in others, the story of marriage has always been more expansive and open to change than we have sometimes thought.

For Cavell, it is the sociable language of the Hollywood comedies of remarriage that allows us to shift our attachment from the imperfectly attained state of marriage to its utopian form. Importantly, the coupled ideal of serial reattachment allows us to recognize our separateness and difference from each other, including those we love most. Unlike queer theoretical skepticism around marriage equality, which likes to imagine itself grounded in the stern stuff of political realism, the work of reattachment is more delicately tethered to the figural and to the notion of repair. Rather than proposing a queer theory of marriage, this book demonstrates my ongoing attachment to close reading as a way of taking a question, or even a deeply personal problem, to a particular film and, through the miracle of writing about it, letting it help you find the answer that you need, perhaps not forever, but for now. That is the awful truth about this book: it originated in something like a marriage crisis.

One of the many insights passed on in Cavell’s account of *The Philadelphia Story* is that it takes not a family but a community—perhaps even a community so diverse it can stand for a nation—to hold a couple together. I have found this to be true. The idea for *Reattachment Theory* first came to me in 2015 when my long-term partner and I were on sabbatical in Berlin, the German capital of reunification, although we were working through a lot of stuff pointing in the other direction, the direction of estrangement and separation. The city knew better. In a fourth-floor apartment in the auspiciously named suburb of Wedding, I read *Pursuits of Happiness* for the first time and

understood that the book on homosexuality and melodrama that I thought I was writing (although fairer to say I was not writing it) could be reframed as an argument about gay marriage as remarriage that wrested that discussion from its usual moorings.

Across the ellipsis between now and then I have learned that the theory and practice of remarriage is not easy, not for anyone, but it would be impossible without a community of friends in support. Among all those who have contributed to my attachment to reattachment, as both theory and practice, I particularly thank Prudence Black, Anna Breckon, Carolyn Dinshaw, Richard Dyer, Brett Farmer, Melissa Hardie, Chris Healy, Scott Herring, Una Jagose, Mary Kisler, David Kisler, Jenny Keate, Shuchi Kothari, Marget Long, Kate Lilley, Heather Love, Sharon Marcus, Astrida Neimanis, Al Pope, Elspeth Probyn, Susan Potter, Susanna Sachsse, Marc Siegel, Kate Small, Katrina Schlunke, Amy Villarejo, Julie Wallace, Lisa Webb, Patricia White, Robyn Wiegman, Pamela Wojcik, and Nabeel Zuberi.

Most theorists of attachment link it to ambivalence. Lauren Berlant, for instance, suggests that popular genres of attachment, like melodrama, exist to acknowledge ambivalence and make it bearable through an optimistic process of recognition and reflection that approximates a “scene of negotiated sustenance.”¹³ Raising attachment to the second degree, the popular genre of remarriage comedy is built around the reacknowledgment of ambivalence, which was poorly managed the first time around but is crucial to the fortunate fall back into coupled love. As a student of Leo McCarey, Cavell frames it thus, “It is an awful, an awesome truth that the acknowledgement of the otherness of others, of ineluctable separation, is the condition of human happiness. Indifference is the denial of this condition.”¹⁴ In the comedies of remarriage, regaining the knowledge of ambivalence involves a complicated process of seconding that culminates in the rediscovery of a mutual language. To Annamarie Jagose, I tender this book as my half of that promise.

As those familiar with Cavell’s account of remarriage will know, reacknowledgment is not enough to secure remarriage, which also requires enchantment and the sense that something miraculous is taking its course. It is a “requirement of the genre,” he writes, “that the pair have known each other forever, hence that they are, or have been, something like brother and sister.” This “original intimacy,” which is based in the kind of sibling resemblance that can also be found between brothers and brothers, sisters and sisters, “must be broken if a different intimacy, that of strangers, or of the exogamous (ultimately, the difficult recognition of the separation, the otherness, of others), is to be achieved.”¹⁵ For the satisfaction of this peculiar quirk of the remarriage

contract—that familiarity must precede strangeness—I thank Jan Wallace and Anne Jagose, who briefly knew each other as young mothers on the West Coast of New Zealand in the early 1960s before we were born. Three decades later, when Annamarie and I first declared our relationship, our mothers met our newness as a couple—something still strange to us—with recognition, as if our erotic randomness was importantly destined to reunite them in friendship and familiarity. It is this maternal happenstance—the kind of coincidence of fantasy and reality that remarriage comedy is built on—that allows me to stand among all the stars in the remarriage canon and say to the extraordinary stranger whose ordinary company I keep, I loved you all the time. Forever.