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Threads of Eternity? Gender and Marriage

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 Is marriage a cruel institution that preserves religiously saturated nuclear family structures, normalizes heterosexual citizenship, and conceptualizes all those who reject its universalizing *good life* claims as “affect-aliens” (Ahmed 30)? Is it an out-dated concept of the past, since more and more young people all over the world voice their unwillingness to ever enter nuptial bonds? Yet, how to tackle the multi-faceted debates over queer-inclusive marriage, taking place in liberal and queer liberal, queer radical and openly homophobic conservative circles? Or controversies over marriageable age and the racialized Othering of migrant and refugee communities? Surely, there are no easy or *universal truth* answers to the above, intentionally provocative, intrinsically polarizing and always deeply ideological questions. After all, questions of marriage in its gendered, cultural and socio-political implications call for nuanced and contextualized theory formation, for caution not to fall into the trap of simplified oppositions, discriminatory heterocentric or Eurocentric ethical violence or the displacement of differentiated desiring subjects.

2 The articles assembled in this issue deal with the multiplicities of contemporary marriage formations. They shed light on their gendered manifestations in neoliberal consumer societies, but also engage modes of thinking intimate relationships outside the normativizing powers of institutional marriage and marriage outside the juridico-political, paradoxically secular-minded yet WASP-centric bio-power of the (U.S.) nation-state.

3 In “‘I’m the *Bitch* that Makes You a Man’: Conditional Love as Female Vengeance in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*”, Patrick Osborne reads Flynn’s novel as a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media. The novel provides an outlet for female violence and frames revenge as a response to a consumer culture that impedes female happiness through the construction of emphasized femininity, inequality in marriage, and ‘raunch culture’. Amy Dunne, the protagonist, breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic desires of America’s consumer culture that suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage. Thus, deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces gendered illusions of self-actualization and allows male entitlement to remain unchallenged.

4 Nicole Richter’s article “Affirming Plural Marriage: *Sister Wives* with Benefits” examines the ways in which TLC’s controversial reality show *Sister Wives* radically challenges traditional conceptions of marriage-as-monogamy and agency in polygamous marriages. *Sister Wives* documents the daily life of the Browns, a fundamentalist Mormon

polygamist family. Richter argues that the series is as interested in the relationships between the wives as it is the relationship between husband and wife in a polygamist family. Richter's paper will chart the interpersonal communication and emotional development between the four wives on the show. By analyzing the rhetorical claims made by each wife, each woman's personal experience of her family and lifestyle will be related to theoretical perspectives on piety and postsecular agency. Even as there are immediate problems that present themselves when analyzing the show from a feminist perspective the show does reveal benefits to this arrangement that are not available in the 'traditional' family unit.

5 In "'A Little Bit Married' while Black: A Personal and Political Meditation on Marriage, Single Adulthood and Relationship Literacy", David M. Jones cautions that, amid debates about the meanings of marriage, the social fact that the United States remains a nation where nearly half of the adult population is divorced, widowed, or never married should not be overlooked. With 1.2 million divorces occurring annually, relationships are in flux in numerous households at any time. As the U.S. enters an uncertain and contentious era of legal marriage equality, only about 56% of US adults over 18 are married, compared to 72% in 1960. Using personal reflection on thirty years of living as a single Black male, Jones calls attention to several core concepts for contemporary relationship literacy. He asserts a need for advocacy, caring connections, and relationship education to widen public acceptance of gender, sexual, and family, re-education measures regarding the state of relationships and a re-dedication to standing on the side of love in *all its varieties*.

6 The issue closes with Kimberly Miller's review of L.H. Stallings' 2015 study *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, published by University of Illinois Press.

Works Cited

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“I’m the *Bitch* that Makes You a Man”: Conditional Love as Female Vengeance in Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*

By Patrick Osborne, Florida State University, USA

Abstract

Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* presents a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media. Her goal throughout the novel is to provide an outlet for female violence and presents revenge as a response to a consumer culture that impedes female happiness through the construction of emphasized femininity, inequality in marriage, and ‘raunch culture’. Amy Dunne breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic desires of America’s consumer culture that suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage, and her deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces gendered illusions of self-actualization and allows male entitlement to remain unchallenged.

1 In the summer of 2012, Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* captured the world’s attention with a caustic and transgressive satire concerning the dissolution of marriage within America’s contemporary culture of narcissism. The novel focuses on the disappearance of Amy Dunne who has gone missing on her fifth wedding anniversary to her husband, Nick Dunne. Following a series of diary entries serving as red herrings to misdirect the audiences’ attention, Amy reveals herself in the second half of the novel to be the mastermind of a malicious plot to frame her husband for murder in response to his infidelity. David Itzkoff deemed the novel “the year’s biggest literary phenomena for a book not containing the words ‘Fifty Shades’ in the title” (“New Two-Book Deal), and, with the aid of its 2014 cinematic adaptation, *Gone Girl* spent over 130 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List (“Praise for *Gone Girl*”). Much of the book’s success derives, of course, from its ingenious and original take on the classic whodunit that consistently manipulates the reader with shocking plot-twists and unreliable narrators. Yet, moreover, *Gone Girl* speaks to an American society that has increasingly grown cynical concerning the transcendent power of love. Bell Hooks decries in *All About Love: New Visions* that “youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found . . . To them, love is for the naïve, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. Their attitude is mirrored in the grown-ups they turn to for explanations . . . [and this] cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart” (xviii-xiv). *Gone Girl* exposes the improbability of unconditional love because of America’s consumer culture that breeds a

narcissistic selfishness that forces impossible demands on relationships due to self-seeking behaviors.

2 Perhaps Americans are justified in their anxieties regarding love and marriage. The divorce rate in the United States is known to range between a staggering 44-50% (Kennedy and Ruggles 588), and many scholars suggest that America's culture of expressive individualism has constructed much higher expectations on marriage than the past by demanding its fulfillment of self-actualization goals on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a hope that ultimately leads to a greater sense of disappointment when it is not fully achieved (Neff and Morgan 96). Yet while American's are increasingly demanding more from their marriages, they are simultaneously putting less time in the cultivation of their relationships. Many cultural critics, beginning with Tom Wolfe in 1976, define the self-expressive era as a cultural shift towards consumer narcissism: i.e. the emergence of the "Me Generation." Wolfe suggests, that "the old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is changing one's personality—remaking, remodeling, evaluating, and polishing one's very self- . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)" (143, emphasis and ellipses in original). The transformation of the American Dream from production based to consumer driven ultimately incites narcissistic desires to revise the self through conspicuous consumption, as the symbols of success (e.g. fitness indicators) are readily available for purchase. Following this transition, cultural critics began declaring the sense of communal belonging that governed previous consumption practices was being replaced by the establishment of individual identity and new standards of comparison that are increasingly difficult to obtain (Schor 10). This consumer capitalism, of course, not only profits when "it can address those whose essential needs have already been satisfied but who have the means to assuage 'new' invented needs—Marx's 'imaginary needs'" (Barber 9). The American Dream within consumer culture thus becomes elusive, repackaged as an ever-changing product that must be obtained by an individual who anxiously measure him/herself against the accomplishments of his/her peers in the quest for identity and self-actualization.

3 This consumer narcissism likewise worms its way into marriages by transforming the two partners into consumer subjects that must bolster each other's self-esteem, help the other achieve a sense of self-actualization, and are constantly pitted against the hyperrealities glorified by the media. This creates an internal conflict between an individual's desire to find an 'authentic' self (i.e. self-actualization) and the continual pursuit of self-image, or the attempt to construct an

‘inauthentic’ self. Inauthentic individuals maintain a more fragile self-esteem dependent on external validation such as goal achievement or the approval of others (Davis et. al. 117). The concept of self-actualization is gendered in American society and, for this reason, the quest for individualism constructs two diverging paths for men and women: “For women, the process is within the context of intimate relationships, and for men, its outside the context of intimate relationships” centering on the acquisition of success in the work force (Coy and Kovacs-Long 142). Contemporary American media simultaneously dramatizes the decline of social rules while emphasizing the rise of the individual’s agency in a consumer-driven culture. For this reason, over the last few decades, a self-centered view of relationships has become much more prominent and the influence of mass media produce both a fear of compromising personal desire and becoming hurt because of emotional ties.

4 Accordingly, Jean M. Twenge suggests that many Americans feel entitled to relationships that are built off instant gratification and do not involve much personal sacrifice: i.e. an infantilist ethos perpetuated by consumerism. Sexual relationships devoid of feelings and concern for others are often presented as a way in which to “do what feels good for you” (i.e. self-expression) without the threat of attachment and/or emotional effort that conceivably lead to disappointment (22; 168). The progression of gender equality in education and the workforce has likewise influenced this transition by allowing women to rely less on finding suitable partners as means of obtaining financial stability. Over the last few decades, both men and women in the United States have been postponing marriage to earn a college education and enter the workforce focusing more on personal growth than forming lasting relationships. For this reason, the “age at first marriage is at an all-time high; the typical groom is 27; the typical bride is 25” (Bogle 2). Consequently, contemporary marriage places less emphasis on financial gain and greater emphasis on idealized notions of romantic love and the needs concerning self-actualization. The inadequate investment required to meet such goals of self-actualization in romantic relationships has lead scholars to propose a “suffocation model of marriage” to understand America’s rising cynicism and disappointment concerning their relationships:

In short, as Americans have increasingly looked to marriage to help them fulfill higher needs, a process that requires a strongly nurtured relationship, they have increasingly deprived their relationships of that nurturance. The squeeze emerging from these two processes—insufficient fuel to meet the demands contemporary Americans are placing on their marriage—gives the suffocation model its name. (Finkel, et.al. 240)

Amy and Nick desire the perfect relationships reflected in the hyperrealities produced by America's consumer culture. When the two partners reveal their 'authentic' selves the marriage ultimately dissolves as the notion of the ideal partner is exposed as an illusion.

5 In discussing his cinematic adaption of *Gone Girl*, David Fincher claims "in America there's a narcissism in choosing a mate . . . The façade begins to crack, and you realise that the person your spouse has presented themselves as is entirely different . . . the film is very much about the resentment and dissonance that is created by having to admit to the person you're most intimately involved with that you're not going to keep up your end of the bargain" (qtd. in James 20). Nick lucidly discusses such resentments concerning the hyperrealities of consumer culture and the construction of a false-self in *Gone Girl*:

I can't recall a single amazing thing that I've seen firsthand that I didn't immediately reference to a movie or a TV show. A fucking commercial. I've literally seen it all, and the worst thing, the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out, is: the secondhand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can't anymore. I don't know that we are actually human at this point . . . It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters. And if all of us are play-acting, there can be no such thing as a soul mate, because we don't have genuine souls. (99)

Jean Baudrillard argues that "America is neither dream or reality. It is a hyperreality. . . because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (*America* 28). Consequently, American culture worships an idol: a contagious image serving as a system of "luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love" (*America* 59). This idealized notion of love in American culture derives from "the generation by models of a real without origins in reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 1). It constructs a situation in which the "real" implodes; the "real" and the imaginary continually collapse into each other, and, at times, the simulation can be perceived as better than the real thing. Furthermore, simulations are presented as more real than the real itself so that a simulation ultimately creates a perceived social reality. In this sense, a representation does not just stand slightly removed from reality but can become reality itself. The media's idealization of romantic love and representation of gender roles serve as powerful simulations that inculcate men and women with normative modes of behavior pertaining to their marriages. Dorris Rhea Coy and Judith Kovacs-Long argue, "the result is men who are trapped in isolation and self-sufficiency with no means of, and

no knowledge of how to go about making connections or how to have relationships, and women who are trapped in the responsibility for developing and maintaining relationships with few means to develop and maintain their competencies” (144). Thus, the hyperrealities of America’s postfeminist media cultures create two distinct gendered paths for self-actualization that are ultimately damaging to successful relationships.

6 Many women in America are currently finding themselves pressured to conform to consumer culture’s depictions of romantic relationships and the increasing demands of their professional lives. Lia Macko and Kerry Rubin suggest that the current culture of individualism and self-expression is more detrimental to women than men, and, for this reason, many American women today embody “a generation in the middle of a Midlife Crisis at 30” (15). Women are expected to live up to the dreams and expectations achieved by second-wave feminists and are simultaneously expected to conform to the gender norms of doting wife and mother. This, of course, creates an impossible double bind of juggling both personal and professional desires that may lead to a fear of missing out by choosing one or the other. Rosalind Gill argues such postfeminist sensibilities construct a neoliberal version of femininity encouraging women to “render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however constrained one might actually be” (260). Neoliberal and postfeminist discourses thus instruct women to focus on individual self-expression and their consumer capacities as forms of empowerment. Accordingly, consumer culture creates additional strains for women by presenting female power as an act of conspicuous consumption required for achieving impossible beauty standards necessary for attracting men/husbands. Susan J. Douglas argues that the media and advertising ultimately present women fantasies of power: “They assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women’s liberation is a *fait accompli* and that [they] are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than [they] actually are” (5). Although this is the so-called “girl power” generation, Douglas suggests “the bill of goods [women] are repeatedly sold is that true power comes from shopping, having the right logos, and being ‘hot’ . . . enlightened sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women’s calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace” (6; 10). Flynn presents such fantasies of power as detrimental to the female psyche throughout *Gone Girl*. Amy ultimately breaks under the pressure generated by hyperrealities and narcissistic

desires of America's consumer culture that ultimately suffocate the traditional bonds of marriage, and her deviance is a reaction to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces such gendered illusions of self-actualization.

7 Flynn argues that violent actions “really don’t make it into the oral history of women. Men speak fondly of those strange bursts of childhood aggression, their disastrous immature sexuality. They have a vocabulary for sex and violence that women just don’t” (“I Was Not a Nice Little Girl”). This is because violent women become “doubly deviant” in the eyes of society and therefore “remain potentially troubling figures for feminism . . . Enacting revenge against violent men is more controversial and raises questions about the acceptability of the use of violence and, particularly pertinent for feminist criminologists, debates on the best means of achieving justice” (O’Neil and Seal 44-45). Although Flynn identifies herself as feminist, her body of work has been heavily criticized for promoting misogynistic portrayals of villainous women.¹ While her texts are indeed ambivalent in their portrayal of feminist ideologies (particularly, their depiction of rape culture), her work is ultimately a satirical response to violence against women perpetuated by patriarchal simulations in the media that construct idealized notions of love and marriage. Accordingly, *Gone Girl* is representative of the transgressive tradition: a genre of writing often characterized by protagonists that feel confined by their society and, for this reason, violate norms in deviant and/or criminal ways. Such writing employs excessive aberrations as agents of subversion. Flynn overemphasizes the negative influences of American society to grossly delineate the way consumer narcissism negatively effects marriage, and through the novel’s hyperbole provide a fuller understanding of cultural institutions and numerous agents of socialization that construct postfeminist sensibilities. Her goal throughout her *Gone Girl* is to provide an outlet for female violence, and, in doing so, presents Amy’s revenge as a response to a patriarchal consumer culture that impedes female

¹ Lev Grossman of *Time* magazine reports, “even people who didn’t love *Gone Girl* had strong feelings about it. ‘I’ve certainly been called a misogynist,’ Flynn says, ‘and that to me is strange. It feels so old-fashioned to think because you write about awful women that you don’t like women. To me it’s worse to only write about good women’” (48). Eliana Dockterman notes “nobody can agree if [*Gone Girl* is] a sexist portrayal of a crazy woman or a feminist manifesto. The answer is it’s both, and that’s what makes it so interesting” (1), and Nile Cappello of *Huffington Post* claims “*Gone Girl* is decisively misogynistic. There is not a single woman in the entire novel that isn’t a complete and utter mess” (“How ‘Gone Girl’ is Misogynistic Literature”).

happiness and success through the construction of emphasized femininity, inequality in marriage expectations, and the emergence of “raunch culture.”²

8 Angela McRobbie argues that, “rather than stressing collectivity or the concerns of women per se, [postfeminist discourse] replaces feminism with competition, ambition, meritocracy, self-help, and the rise of the ‘alpha girl’” (181). She suggests, such processes ultimately produce a “new gender regime repeatedly framed along the lines of female individualization” achieved via conspicuous consumption (181). Amy, in *Gone Girl*, can be read as a feminist anti-hero that rejects (yet also ambivalently overconforms to) the postfeminist simulation: “cool girl”: A modernized version of femininity derivative of a “messy suturing of traditional and neoliberal discourses” that “(re-)present[s] [desirability] as something to be understood as being done for yourself and *not* in order to please a man” (Gill 261). She employs violent revenge to regain agency in her marriage by forcing her husband to reject the simulation and ultimately accept her as an inherently flawed individual—a step closer to her goal of self-actualization. For this reason, Amy believes that unconditional love does not exist and can only be achieved through violence and other manipulative tactics necessary to “win” in a relationship. Accordingly, Amy concludes her story by suggesting “love should have many conditions. Love should require both partners to be their very best at all times. Unconditional love is undisciplined love” (554). Marriage in *Gone Girl* is thus presented as an arena in which those involved strive to maintain power within a reciprocal system of exchange; power that is often portrayed as violent and demeaning to the other via the concept of the “dancing monkey” which entails submitting to another’s conditions and ‘proper’ gender performativity (74). In this sense, the novel serves as a transgressive satire concerning the current state of marriage/love in American society providing commentary on how the culture of narcissism and expressive individualism negatively effects relationships. By the conclusion of the novel, Amy has usurped the patriarchal role of the head of her household, and, because of her vindictive response to infidelity, is deemed a “psycho bitch” by the men in her life—and, most likely, the audience as the novel’s numerous accusations of misogyny suggest (Flynn 528). *Gone Girl* elucidates the effects patriarchal violence extolled by the consumer culture has on the female psyche, and, presents her deviant actions as a response to a patriarchal social structure that reinforces gendered illusions of self-actualization and allows male entitlement to remain unchallenged.

² See Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*.

“Our Time Was Done”: Masculinity During the Great Recession

9 *Gone Girl* emerged during a critical time in American history and reflects the male anxieties that followed the economic crash in 2008. During the Great Recession, 8 million Americans lost their jobs of which 75% were male oriented professions sharing a strong machismo identification (Fradd 130). This sudden loss of employment and downward mobility negatively affected men’s perceptions concerning their loss of gender statuses (Michniewicz et. al. 94), and many conservatives believed the so-called “he-cession” was a product of “reverse gender discrimination” (Christensen 369). Katherine Newman notes that “about one in five American men skid down the occupational hierarchy in their working lives. In recessions and depressions, their numbers grow at a particularly rapid rate” (*Falling* 7). Yet, even during such economic hardships, American culture remains steadfast to the rising demands produced by a consumer-driven economy. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush striving to “find a metaphor for normalcy . . . seized on shopping—imploping Americans to show Al Qaeda its patriotic backbone by going to the mall and getting on with the business of consuming” (Barber 41). Americans, as Twenge suggests, have consequently “been taught to expect more out of life at the very time when jobs and nice houses are increasingly difficult to obtain” (109). The result is an exacerbation of social strain often leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and antisocial behavior.

10 While material expectations in America are increasing, many men are finding themselves on a trajectory of downward mobility which comes as an extreme sense of shock often creating a “volatile combination of anomie and entitlement” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 42). Men, as Susan Faludi observes, are “not only . . . losing the society they were once essential to, they are ‘gaining’ the very world women so recently shucked off a demeaning and dehumanizing” (39). Many men are thus feeling emasculated, humiliated, and ultimately betrayed by the American promise of economic prosperity and the pursuit of happiness. They are not alone in this sentiment. Over the last few decades, there has been a vast increase in external control beliefs in America leading to

an overarching sense of hopelessness.³ Fierce competition for jobs and education, an ever-increasing divorce rate, the perception of government corruption, a culture of fear, and the constant demand for consumption in the wake of downward mobility all contribute to a pessimistic view that future success is beyond reach. For this reason, Twenge suggests that external control beliefs “increased about 50% between 1960s and the 2000s” resulting in a “rising wave of apathy and cynicism” (140).

11 As an alienating social construct, the American Dream establishes two major pieces of a rigid social structure individuals must negotiate to find prosperity. First, the symbols that equate wealth and status in the United States instill an aspirational reference within the population at large—i.e. its ideology socially constructs common goals, interests, and purposes for all Americans. Thus, the mythos of the American Dream constructs lofty aspirations within the populace that are economically unattainable to many individuals yet also feel entitled to due to the Dream’s inherent promises. Lauren Berlant argues such neoliberal discourses create an affective structure of an optimistic attachment that is ultimately cruel “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (2). As a source of such cruel optimism, the American Dream instills an “attachment to what we call ‘the good life,’ which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it” (Berlant 27). Consumer culture and third wave capitalism further incites, promotes and intensifies feelings of social strain stemming from this cruel optimism:

The spread of consumerist culture, especially when coupled with increasing social inequality and exclusion, involved a heightening of Mertonian “anomie.” At the same time the egoistic culture of a “market society”, its zero-sum, “winner-loser”, survival of the fittest ethos, eroded conceptions of ethical means of success being preferable . . . and ushered in a new barbarism. (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum 6)

To acquire the cultural symbols of success, American’s must negotiate the second element of the social structure: the permissible means for acquiring wealth and success within a society. Because the aspirational references perpetuated by the mythos of the American Dream are inaccessible to many, especially in a recessionary period, the regulatory norms that dictate their realization (e.g. adequate paying jobs) ostracize a large segment of the population and ultimately

³ Twenge suggests “people who believe they are in control are ‘internal’ (and possess ‘internality’); those who don’t are ‘external’ (and have ‘externality’)” (138).

perpetuate social strain. This is especially true for men, as “downward mobility strikes at the heart of the ‘masculine ideal’ for the American middle class. When a man of the house has failed at the task that most clearly defines his role, he suffers a loss of identity as a man” (Newman 139). *Gone Girl* illustrates this loss of masculine identity and its detrimental effects on marriage through its representation of Nick’s response to unemployment.

12 Faltering under the pressure of the Great Recession and losing confidence with his ability to provide for his family, Nick is a socially strained archetype: an everyman for the recessionary twenty-first century. Nick bemoans,

I had a job for eleven years and then I didn’t, it was that fast. All around the country, magazines began shuttering, succumbing to a sudden infection brought on by the busted economy. Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, peoples whose brains don’t work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through. We were like women’s hat makers or buggy-whip manufacturers: our time was done. (5)

A byproduct of the economic crash and the remediation of print, Nick perceives himself as obsolete and believes that only his career can bolster a sense of wholeness and self-actualization. Delineating *Gone Girl* as neoliberal gothic, Emily Johansen argues the “very aspirations that are supposed to guide the success of our characters are what turn them into monsters and destroy them . . . actions [that] follow the logic of normal neoliberal subject formation” (42). Socialized to strive for the symbols that equate wealth and status in American society but unable to achieve them following the loss of his job, Nick becomes resentful of the promises he feels entitled as prescribed by the American Dream. Consequently, he lashes out against his wife who now maintains financial superiority over him and ultimately falls into a state of depression because of his loss of masculine status.

13 In this sense, *Gone Girl* presents Nick’s loss of work as a catalyst for anxiety and rage that damages his marriage as he attempts to reclaim his masculinity through sexual conquest with Andie. His strain is indicative of a noxious value system produced by America’s unbridled commitments to the American Dream, a frame of reference that forces many men to cope with a sense of aggrieved entitlement: the “sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” ultimately justifying male rage (Kimmel, *Angry* 18). Nick claims, following his loss of control, that “over just a few years, the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and the easy ways, literally

shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy. My wife was no longer my wife but a razor-wire know daring me to unloop her, and I was not up to the job with my thick, numb, nervous fingers” (66). For this reason, Nick constantly battles the misogyny he sees reflected in his father. He claims, “I feel my father’s rage rise up in me in the ugliest way . . . I felt a momentary spurt of fury, that this *woman* presumed to tell me what to do in *my own home*. . . stupid bitch (83; 79-80, emphasis in original). Nick thus becomes a statistic of violence that followed the economic crash, as men’s abusive behavior saw a rapid increase as a response to unemployment during the Great Recession (Schneider et. al. 472). Kimmel argues, “this model of violence as the result of a breakdown of patriarchy, of entitlement thwarted, has become the bedrock of the therapeutic work with violent men. Again and again, what research on rape and domestic violence finds is that men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they felt entitled” (*Angry* 186). Throughout *Gone Girl*, Amy states she is fearful of Nick’s patriarchal response to his loss of power (whether this is true or not) and her revenge is a tactic to “make him a better person” that does not “glid[e] through life . . . [on] his beloved child-entitlement” (316-317).

14 Nick’s misogyny also takes the form in less aggressive ways as he regresses into a state of extended adolescence, or what Kimmel deems *Guyland*: a period of limbo in which men remain in a space of irresponsible boyhood while waiting to achieve the traditional markers of masculinity such as a career or the purchasing of a first home. Since such markers are much harder to obtain in contemporary America, Kimmel suggests men reside in a state of extended adolescence that further contribute to their symptoms of anxiety (*Guyland* 3). Following his loss of work, Nick transforms from a “laid-back and calm, smart and fun and uncomplicated” man (53), into a “dull-eyed” lazy partner that constantly drinks beer and surfs porn (114). Consequently, Amy feels she has lost equality in her marriage as she must constantly nag Nick to fulfill his most basic familial obligations. To reclaim his masculinity and loss of identity, Nick opens a bar which he frequents throughout the novel: “I won’t make that mistake again: the one plentiful herd of magazine writers would continue to be culled—by the internet, by the recession, by the American public, who would rather watch TV or play video games or electronically inform friends that, like, rain sucks! But there’s no app for a bourbon buzz on a warm day in a cool, dark bar. The world would always want a drink” (10). Flynn’s depictions of male coping strategies in *Gone Girl* are indeed in line with discourses concerning America’s crisis of

masculinity. During the Great Recession, alcohol abuse drastically increased with 770,000 adults becoming binge drinkers (Bor et. al. 346). Heavy alcohol use is, of course, a coping mechanism to deal with the anxieties of unemployment, but, more importantly, allows men to reclaim power in a culture experiencing a crisis of masculinity: “It allows [men] to prove their manhood and hold onto their boyhood all at the same time. All the freedom and none of the responsibility” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 109). This lack of responsibility is detrimental to marriage as Amy suggests: “I think it’s fair to say garbage shouldn’t literally overflow . . . that’s just being a good grown up roommate. And Nick’s not doing anything anymore, so I have to nag, and it pisses me off” (116). Having lost equality in her relationship, Amy’s revenge is an attempt to force Nick to comply with the basic promises/responsibilities of marriage.

15 Porn consumption is another way in which some men strive to reclaim a sense of masculinity. Kimmel notes that sexual conquest is a time-honored way in which men prove their manhood. Yet, women, as sexual-gatekeepers, become the primary obstacle for such validation. Thus, the pornographic hyperreality becomes a safe-space in which men bolster their masculinity as the pornographic actress willingly submits to sexual advances through the male gaze (*Guyland* 169-170). In addition, pornography alters men’s perceptions concerning sex in real-life via the simulation. In a study concerning the effects of porn consumption, Pamela Paul found that pornography conditions men to accept certain sexual practices as reality: A “massive exposure” group consumed forty-eight minutes of porn a week for six weeks, while an “intermediate exposure group” watched two hours of porn during the six-week period. A third group didn’t watch any porn over the course of the experiment. Following the six weeks, the massive exposure believed 67% of Americans had oral sex (close to actuality), while the no exposure group said 34%. The massive exposure group thought more than twice as many Americans engaged in anal sex than the no exposure group (29 versus 12%) and the massive exposure group believed 3 in 10 Americans engaged in group sex, compared to 1 in 10 for those that did not consume any pornography (78). Such findings suggest pornography consumption greatly effects men’s beliefs concerning sexual activity as they accept hyperreality as reality.

16 Nick’s infidelity stems from his desire for the simulation (what Amy deems “cool girl”) and the need to bolster his self-esteem via sexual conquest. His description of his mistress, Andie, is purely physical and makes her appear non-human, an object solely for male sexual pleasure: “an alien fuck-doll of a girl, it must be said, as different from my elegant, patrician wife

could be” (198). Furthermore, he claims Andie makes him feel “like a worthwhile man, not the idiot who lost his job, the dope who forgot to put the toilet seat down, the blunderer who just could never quite get it right” (199). Unlike Amy, Andie is submissive to Nick’s desires and grants him the entitlement he feels towards his hegemonic masculinity. She is easy to get along with, does not make demands, and never scowls at him. Such submission ultimately makes him believe true love is “*the permission to just be the man you are*” (*Gone Girl* 204, emphasis in original). Nick therefore justifies his adulterous actions and ultimately rejects Amy who he perceives as domineering and ruinous to his identification as a man. Accordingly, he conditionally “love[s] a girl who doesn’t exist,” a postfeminist simulation that he has been inculcated to believe should “bow to [his] wishes” (*Gone Girl* 299; 303).

“It’s Tempting to Be the Cool Girl”: Buying Femininity in America’s Consumer Culture

17 The most shocking and ingenious aspect of Flynn’s *Gone Girl* is that there are two drastically different sides to Amy: a meek and devoted woman delineated in the fictitious journals employed to frame her husband for murder and the bitter psychopathic avenger revealed in part two of the novel. Yet, while both personalities are strikingly distinct, they both are shaped by patriarchal social structures that define femininity in America. Diary Amy is the embodiment of emphasized femininity. R.W. Connell argues, “emphasized femininity is organized around compliance with gender inequality,” and is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (187). It is a pattern of femininity accentuating “the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desires for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and child care as a response to labor-market discrimination against women” (188). Accordingly, emphasized femininity maintains inequality as an “adaptation to men’s power” by stressing empathy, nurturance and playing by the rules as a norm (188). Some of the first words uttered by Amy in *Gone Girl* are, “I met a boy” and her diary subsequently delineates her first encounter with Nick: “I’m too self-conscious. I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I’ve basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I’m dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me” (14-15). In the early sections of *Gone Girl*, Amy’s life centers around Nick, the desire to be swept off her feet, and to fulfill a man’s emotional needs. Her desires for self-actualization therefore conform to the gendered expectations of female

fulfillment through marriage. She further claims to reject feminist notions of courtship (her “Independent Young Feminist card”) (52), and revels in Nick’s masculine dominance: “He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she’s mine, mine*. It feels nice, after my recent series of nervous, respectful post-feminist men, to be a territory” (18). Flynn highlights Amy’s emphasized femininity to misdirect the audiences’ attention from her involvement in her own disappearance and construct the twist in part two, but, more importantly, to demonstrate her desire to gain self-actualization via marriage and her commitment to nurturing her relationship.

18 Many women maintain a curious view of love that incorporates both a critical distance and hope for obtaining a more traditional romantic ideal. As Macko and Rubin suggest, “the term ‘soul mate’ comes up a lot when you talk about love with Gen-X/Y women . . . most of the women [they] interviewed insisted they were not looking for a Prince Charming—then, without missing a beat, they described an equally unattainable ideal” (89-90). This dichotomy derives from the pressure to conform to gender roles concerning courtship, the demands of individualism, and the reinforcement of stereotypic gender messages by the media. In part one of *Gone Girl*, Amy internalizes American culture’s postfeminist sensibilities. Such sensibilities,

include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 255)

Amy’s early notions of relationships stem from postfeminist media cultures, her misconceived perceptions of her parents’ perfect marriage (she claims they are soul mates), and the *Amazing Amy* stories they write which extol notions of emphasized femininity to which she is expected to conform.

19 Furthermore, Amy is a writer of personality quizzes for women’s magazines. Her contributions articulate and prescribe the relative roles and duties of men and women in dating scenes. For example, concerning the fact she has not heard from Nick weeks after their first kiss, Amy writes: “a) Do I know you? (manipulative challenging) b) Oh, wow, I’m so happy to see you! (eager, doormatlike) c) Go fuck yourself. (Aggressive, bitter) d) “Well, you certainly take your time about it, don’t you, Nick?” Answer: D” (35). Essentially, her thought processes stem from conduct manuals of the twenty-first century: a postfeminist media culture producing a

model of desirable femininity. In regards to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Antoinette E. Gupta, Toni S. Zimmerman and Christine A. Fruhauf note “women receive messages about how to change themselves by learning how to change the way they talk and behave with men, and how to make men feel good by fulfilling their sexual and emotional needs. This implies that women need to compromise and sacrifice themselves to be in a relationship. If such is the case, then women internalizing these messages may be placing unrealistic expectations on themselves” (263). Such magazines construct an illusion of female agency achieved through male validation that is ultimately based on masculine sexual fantasies: a neoliberal femininity emerging from the sexualization of culture and represents a remodeling of patriarchal power: “a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification -- one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (Gill 258). This is essential to a postfeminist discourse that perpetuates permissive notions that sexual equality has been achieved for women and that fulfilling male sexual desire equates female empowerment.

20 In the one of the most significant passages of *Gone Girl*, Amy defines and rejects the postfeminist simulation “cool girl”:

Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl*. (299-300, emphasis in original).

The notion of the “cool girl” represents a revised patriarchal model in which a conflict between embedded feminism and enlightened sexism is developed. Douglas argues, “because women are now ‘equal’ and the battle is over and won, we are now free to embrace things we used to see as sexist, including hypergirliness. In fact, this this is supposed to be a relief” (12). Consumer culture extols this postfeminist simulation by presenting female power as an act of conspicuous consumption that joins in on female objectification as a means of obtaining impossible beauty standards necessary for attracting men/husbands, and thus ultimately dismisses outlandish and degrading stereotypes of female sexuality. As Amy claims, “every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*” (301, emphasis in original).

In this passage, Amy critiques a postfeminist sensibility that demands self-surveillance in accordance with the male gaze.

21 Many scholars have commented on this transformation and marketing of female sexuality as the rise of “porn chic,” “the sassy woman,” “the phallic woman,” or what Ariel Levy deems “raunch culture”: a performance of wanton sexuality necessary to be accepted and granted attention in a patriarchal society (163). Levy argues, in America there resides

a disconnect between sexiness or hotness and sex itself . . . Sex appeal has become a synecdoche for all appeal . . . Passion isn’t the point. The glossy, overheated thumping of sexuality on our culture is less about connection than consumption. Hotness has become our cultural currency, and a lot of people spend a lot of time and a lot of regular, green currency trying to acquire it . . . But when it pertains to women, hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable . . . Hotness doesn’t just *yield* approval. Proof that a woman actively *seeks* approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place. For women, and only women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for physicality is welcome. (30-33)

Accordingly, women are compelled to uphold raunch culture in fear of being ostracized. Levy suggests, “the only alternative to enjoying *Playboy* (or flashing for *Girls Gone Wild* or getting implants or reading Jenna Jameson’s memoir) is being ‘uncomfortable’ with and ‘embarrassed’ about your sexuality. Raunch culture, then, isn’t an entertainment option, it’s a litmus test of female uptightness” (40). Such depictions of feminine power inadvertently uphold patriarchy and, for this reason, act as a product of masculine desire. As Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal note, regulatory norms of masculine culture shape the sexual behaviors of both genders and therefore provide no safe way for women to express their sexuality (54). Women are repeatedly told that projecting a kind of sexual eagerness is necessary for the acquisition of male validation, and, because of this, the only alternative to being sexual is being deemed uncomfortable with one’s sexuality. By endorsing the raunch culture as an avenue to female empowerment, postfeminist media cultures present an illusion of sexual liberation that ultimately creates an arrangement that trades sex for male approval and potential devotion.

22 Amy rightfully claims that the rise of raunch culture is an impediment to female happiness as women are pressured to conform to “cool girl” stereotype and consequently lose their identity by becoming a product celebrated by consumerism. Flynn states that the notion of “cool girl” was partially inspired by Cameron Diaz in *There’s Something About Mary* (Dockterman). The trope of the “cool girl” has become increasingly more prevalent in

contemporary media, pornography, and romantic popular culture consumed by young adults. Such “romance, surprising as it may seem, shapes the postfeminist mindset. But even more interestingly, postfeminism is reshaping romance” in contemporary Hollywood cinema (Schreiber 4). Films like *There’s Something About Mary* present an illusion of a postfeminist society in which the aims of feminism have already been achieved. Accordingly, films such as this create a depiction of women that, albeit liberated, use their freedom in a manner that ultimately strengthens previously established patriarchal constructs. As Amy suggests, men “*are not dating a woman, [they] are dating woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men*” (300, emphasis in original). The postfeminist romance, Michele Schreiber argues, is “always about a woman who has choices, but the most important choice—of romantic partner—has already been predetermined” (4). The “cool girl” successfully obtains the romantic ideal and gains agency in her relationships via sexual attraction and submission. Women obtain this power by suppressing their desires for equality and achieve male approval by submitting to the male gaze that upholds the body as cultural currency. In this sense, the female body becomes the sole basis of a sexual contract that exchanges sex for potential devotion. This message is problematic. Carole Pateman argues that such sexual contracts ultimately subject women to subordination: “Women are the subject of the contract. The (sexual) contract is the vehicle through which men transform their natural right over women into the security of civil patriarchal right” (6). Women are inculcated by the “cool girl” stereotype to strive to purchase the standard of beauty/sexuality, a social system that greatly benefits men, due to the expectations that beauty/sex can provide future commitment.

23 Flynn strives to present the postfeminist simulation, “cool girl,” as a hyperreality that does not truly exist. Women are compelled to adapt to the role in their relationships and consequently negate self-actualization, remodeling the self as a “figment of the imagination of a million masturbatory men” (*Gone Girl* 303). Accordingly, she presents the gender norm a source of inequality in her relationships, as marriage becomes an arena in which those involved strive to maintain power within a reciprocal system of exchange. Women are continually expected to perform an ‘inauthentic’ model of femininity while men feel entitled to hegemonic masculinity within a patriarchal social structure. Social exchange theory provides a compelling framework for understanding this gender discrimination in relationships, as individuals weigh the instrumental value of the other and even view relationships in terms of winners and losers

(Hughes, Morrison and Asada 52; Snapp et. al. 50). Delineating social exchange theory, Linda D. Molm argues that

in an exchange relation between actors A and B, A's *power* over B is defined as the level of potential cost that A can impose on B. It derives from, and is equal to, B's dependence on A. Each actor is *dependent* on the other to the extent that the outcomes valued by the actor are contingent on exchange with the other. This contingency is primarily a function of two variables, value and alternatives. B's dependence on A increases with the *value* of B of the exchange resources that A controls, and decreases with B's *alternative* sources of the same (or equivalent) resources. (29, emphasis in original)

Power, within a system of sexual exchange, is defined throughout *Gone Girl* as the ability compel the other to conform to the "cool" ideal and thus become complacent via the notion of the dancing monkey: the "horrible things women make their husbands do to prove their love. The pointless tasks, the myriad sacrifices, the endless small surrenders" (74). In this sense, Nick gains power in the relationship as Amy is compelled via the notion of the "cool girl" to submit to her own degradation allowing him to remain irresponsible in the nurturing of their relationship. Amy attempts to regain agency by abandoning the simulation and is ultimately rejected by Nick because he has been inculcated into accepting the hyperreality. As a result, he replaces her with another woman that conforms to the role of the "cool girl." Amy abandons the unsustainable performance of femininity influenced by postfeminist sensibilities and embraces her 'authentic self' that requests equality in her marriage. Amy states, Nick "truly seemed astonished when I asked him to *listen* to me" (303), and goes on to ask: "can you imagine, finally showing your true self to your spouse, your soul mate, and having him *not like you*? So that's how the hating first began" (304). In response to Nick's abandonment, Amy employs violent revenge to regain power in her marriage by forcing her husband to reject the simulation and ultimately accept her as an inherently flawed individual; loving her as outlined in the conditions of the traditional marital contract.

"No, He Does *Not* Get to Win": Evaluating Amy Dunne as a Feminist Anti-Hero

24 Embittered by the dissolution of her marriage, Amy vindictively frames her husband for murder in an effort to destroy his life and make him pay for the perceived crime of not loving her on her terms. Because of Amy's malevolence, Flynn has been accused of misogyny by many critics of *Gone Girl* (Grossman 48). Indeed, it is easy to perceive Amy's wickedness as a negative portrayal of women and reduce her actions as the crazed response of a "psycho bitch,"

as she is, in fact, a narcissistic criminal.⁴ Yet, to fully understand Flynn's aim in *Gone Girl*, it is necessary to read the novel in accordance with the transgressive tradition that employs hyperbolic aberrations as agents of subversion. Transgressive fiction, as a genre, is often characterized by protagonists that feel confined by their society and, for this reason, violate norms in deviant and/or criminal ways to circumnavigate various social institutions that impede their desires. At the heart of such feelings of confinement, often stems an excruciating sense of alienation derivative of an anomic division of labor, the ever-increasing commodification of society, and, in the context of *Gone Girl*, oppressive gender norms.

25 Many literary works deemed transgressive by reviewers and critics derive from a long history of satirical writers that aim to exaggerate perceived obscenities within their culture to stimulate repulsion, and, in consequence, a desire for social change. Robin Mookerjee argues that the roots of transgressive fiction can be found in Greek antiquity and that many writers within the genre can be read as contemporary reiterations of the Menippean School of satirists: Such writers aim to undermine the social systems and ideologies of their time by promoting an extremely regressive worldview that opposes the cultural and political establishments deemed progressive by their society, and, in doing so, aggressively attack the audience's sense of morality and views concerning civilization (14). Many contemporary transgressive authors strive to visually render a Sodom and Gomorrah for their audiences to compel them to turn away from the deviant aspects of their narratives. Such works overemphasize the negative influences of their culture by grossly delineating the potential threats various socializing agents may cause, and through their hyperbole provide a fuller understanding of cultural institutions and numerous agents of socialization. Popular culture and mass media act as an ever-increasing agent of socialization in contemporary society and indubitably inculcate various ideologies and reinforce normative values. For this reason, many transgressive writers highlight this great socializing potential within their works by constructing deviant characters that are grossly influenced by the negative aspects of popular culture and mass media and/or completely reject the socializing process altogether.

26 For women, the idea of happiness and self-actualization is directed towards the achievement of male validation and the acquisition of romantic relationships. Sara Ahmed claims

⁴ I use the term, "psycho bitch," in reference to Nick's perceptions of Amy following her return. He claims Amy is a "petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch" (529).

“statements on the conditionality of happiness—how one person’s happiness is made conditional upon another’s—ensure that happiness is directive: happiness becomes what is given by being given as a shared orientation toward what is good” (56). This conditional happiness, Ahmed claims, often “means following somebody else’s goods” that some may find as objectionable (56). The female trouble maker, or “feminist killjoy,” thus destroys something thought as good by others in refusing to share the promise of happiness (Ahmed 65). The feminist killjoy has a long literary history. The avenging woman in literature “serves as vehicles of the kind of ‘narrative excess’ that provides room for readings of the representations of the violent woman as agents of subversion” (Mäntymäki 444). Exploring such potential of feminism in rape-revenge narratives, Johanna Schorn claims such stories provide agency to female characters that sharply contrast the passive role regularly used to depict rape survivors (17). Tiina Mäntymäki likewise argues stories of female murders permit an arena in which the performance of violence is employed to critique patriarchal power structures and articulate less-passive modes of resistance (452). Delineating Amy as a modern reiteration of the femme fatale, Kenneth Lota suggests *Gone Girl* provides a social commentary concerning gender expectations in America and rather than simply “present[ing] Amy as an essentialized vision of female evil . . . [serves as] an unflattering mirror held up to millennial gender roles” (163). Amy’s deviance is a response to a patriarchal culture that constructs notions of female happiness and self-actualization.

27 Unable to achieve self-actualization and agency in her marriage with Nick, Amy employs revenge to compel her husband to accept her ‘authentic’ self and ultimately reject illusory gender expectations. Accordingly, she embraces patriarchal aggression that demands respect and status via restorative violence. Scholars struggle to successfully theorize female violence. Violent women remain troubling figures for feminism and their violence is often overlooked due to the widespread denial of female aggression and the idealization of motherhood (Motz 3). Furthermore, the violent woman may be read as a reiteration of the “phallic girl” that gives an impression of having achieved equality by acting like a man, however, ultimately fails to critique masculine hegemony through the adoption of the phallus (McRobbie, *The Aftermath* 83). Judith Halberstam refutes such claims suggesting such “role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use ‘male’ tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and simultaneously challenges the

hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (250-251). Historically, criminological theories delineated female deviance as a product of biological determinism while viewing male crimes as a response to economic and sociological forces (Belknap 6). More recent feminist understandings of female criminality argue that oppression and social conditioning compel women to cope via deviant channels (Motz 6). *Gone Girl* takes such a feminist approach in explicating Amy’s vengeance. Jacinda Read suggests that if scholars desire to understand the feminist implications to female revenge narratives, they must seek to understand the way in which such stories “engage with, negotiate and rework these ‘mass cultural fictions of femininity’” (10). Amy’s violence strives to negotiate and rework the inequalities of marriage, and, much like Nick, she experiences a sense of justified aggrieved entitlement that acts as a catalyst for rage: She demands his contributions toward the nourishment of their relationship, that he fully accept her ‘authentic’ self, and feels entitled to respect and loyalty as defined in the traditional marriage contract. Yet, such basic stipulations are not conducive to a society in which patriarchy and male entitlement go seemingly unquestioned. Therefore, she retaliates with violence in an effort to challenge patriarchal power and demand equality within her marriage.

28 In regards to the “cool girl” stereotype, Amy states she “waited patiently—*years*—for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austin, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organize scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer. And then we’d say, *Yeah, he’s a Cool Guy*. But it never happened” (301, emphasis in original). Rather than passively submitting to her assigned role, Amy employs revenge to force her husband to perform the role of a doting spouse as she has likewise been expected via her gender role. In doing so, she deconstructs hegemonic masculinity by appropriating patriarchal violence. *Gone Girl* elucidates the effects patriarchal violence extolled by the consumer culture has on the female psyche, and, by regendering it, satirically demonstrates the way females have no outlet for violence, as she is deemed a “psycho bitch,” while it remains completely acceptable for men like her husband. By the conclusion of the novel, Amy forces Nick to conform to the notion of the ideal male extolled by postfeminist media cultures just as she has been previously expected. Amy’s vengeance ultimately forces Nick reject the postfeminist simulation and become a better husband via nurturance and connection within marriage. He becomes what Peter Douglas deems the postfeminist man: the “postfeminist man, responding to the unfortunate rhetoric of a mythical

postfeminist era, believes his primary responsibility to be personal transformation. So he aims to become sensitive, nurturing, domestically proficient, emotionally expressive, and develops intimate and mutually supportive relationships with other men” (32). Bell Hooks argues,

patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from being born male . . . In a partnership model male identity, like its female counterpart, would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented. Rather than assuming that males are born with the will to aggress, the culture would assume that males are born with the inherent will to connect. (*The Will to Change* 117)

Amy’s vengeance demands Nick to conform to such a partnership model masculinity. As Amy declares, “he is learning to love me unconditionally, under all my conditions” (555). Nick also acknowledges the transformation he undergoes in response to Amy’s restorative justice: “I can feel her changing me again: I was a callow boy, and then a man, good and bad. Now at least I’m the hero” (553). While Amy’s plot for revenge is indeed contemptible, and has been viewed by many as the vengeance of a “psycho bitch,” she is, in fact, the “*bitch* who makes [Nick] a man” (*Gone Girl* 530, emphasis in original).

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Affirming Plural Marriage: *Sister Wives* with Benefits

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Abstract:

TLC's controversial reality show *Sister Wives*, currently in its second season, radically challenges traditional conceptions of marriage. *Sister Wives* documents the daily life of the Browns, a fundamentalist Mormon polygamist family. As the title makes clear, the series is as interested in the relationships between the wives as it is the relationship between husband and wife in a polygamist family. The term 'sister wives' is used in fundamentalist Mormon contexts to acknowledge the importance of this special connection between the wives, a union that is valued alongside the marital commitment. While the faith of the Brown family is considered conservative in nature, is it possible that this family organization has feminist undercurrents? How does this concept of 'sister wives' fit into a feminist framework? This paper will chart the interpersonal communication and emotional development between the four wives on the show: Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn. By analyzing the rhetorical claims made by each wife of the show, each woman's personal experience of her family and lifestyle will be honored. Even as there are immediate problems that present themselves when analyzing the show from a feminist perspective (for example that Cody, the husband, is free to have multiple wives while the wives are not able to have multiple partners) the show does reveal benefits to this arrangement that are not available in the 'traditional' family unit.

1 Social ideals of the family have been rapidly changing over the last decade, with more diverse representations of family structures focused on single parents, queer parents, cohabitating parents and non-traditional gender roles being portrayed on television. However, these representations still by and large reinforce monogamy as the ideal. *Big Love* broke new ground when it debuted in 2006 by being the first television series to focus on a polygamist family. It was met with widespread acclaim amongst critics and audiences alike and was praised in the academic literature surrounding the show; "the point and the poignancy of the show is to depict a 'real-life' family. Bill Hendrickson and his three wives struggle with all of the daily trials of contemporary family life: parenting, finances, intimacy, and sex. The sympathetic portrayal of their family is as culturally real, although it suffers by virtue of its nonlegal recognition" (Cossman 167).

2 The 'real-life' aspects of polygamy in television flooded into the mainstream in 2010 with the debut of TLC's *Sister Wives*. Now in its eighth season¹, *Sister Wives* documents the

¹ There is no consistency online about how many seasons there have been as sources break up the episodes across different lines. Eight seasons is the most commonly interpreted number of seasons.

daily life of the Browns, a Fundamentalist Mormon polygamist family.² The show has consistently high ratings and the premiere of season 7 was the highest-rated season premiere with women ages 25-54 since December 2013 and was TLC's highest-rated telecast of 2016, driving the network to be #1 on Sunday nights amongst the demographic.³ As the title makes clear, the series is as interested in the relationships between the wives as it is the relationship between husband and wife in a polygamist family. The show's popularity amongst women is significant as it reflects the show's emphasis on the women's perspectives as opposed to portraying events from husband Kody's point of view. The show is unscripted and the format switches between capturing the daily lives of the family and talking head style interviews that address issues raised on the show. The wives all have the opportunity to express their point of view on different aspects of their family life in these extended interviews; there are similarities and significant differences between their perspectives that highlight the diverse ways they experience polygamy.

3 Polygamy, the union of one person to multiple people, is synonymous with plural marriage. Polygamy comes in the form of polygyny, when a man takes multiple female spouses, and polyandry, when a woman takes multiple male spouses. Polygamy presents itself almost universally in the form of polygyny and therefore is often used to refer to polygyny specifically. Polyamory, the practice of having intimate partnerships with multiple people, is a distinct arrangement that is often at odds with how plural marriage is presented in media and is practiced.

4 When plural marriage appears in the media it often takes the form of uncovering abuses in polygamist communities.⁴ Data that gives insight into the lived experiences of women in plural marriage is limited, largely due to the legal prohibitions against polygamy. In Angela Campbell's research into women's agency in plural marriage she found, "polygamy's severe legal implications generate a great deal of resistance among women to share their experiences as plural wives or as members of plural marriage communities. As such, polygamous women's experiential knowledge is not widely disseminated, and this is an important impediment to understanding their encounters in this practice" (Campbell 50). The women on the show face

² The family identifies as Fundamentalist Mormon, distinct from both the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) and the mainstream Mormon Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS).

³ As of June, 2016, based on Nielson data reported by Discovery Communications.

⁴ For example, the sensationalized media coverage of the trial of Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) in 2011.

many legal consequences as a result of appearing in the series and provide a wealth of experiential knowledge to the uninformed public. The mainstream visibility of the Brown family on TLC's *Sister Wives* provides a rare glimpse into how women experience plural marriage. The family also makes appearances on other shows including *Good Morning America*, *Oprah* and *Ellen* and wrote a book together *Becoming Sister Wives: The Story of an Unconventional Marriage*, providing more access into their private lives. This additional access works to reinforce the perspectives of the wives on the show and add to the legitimacy of their portrayals.

5 Moreover, women choosing to practice polygamy pose a challenge to many of the foundational assumptions in liberal and poststructuralist feminist scholarship, principally in how secular feminist theories theorize agency. Saba Mahmood's account of women's participation in the mosque movement, calls for a re-theorization of the concept of agency in feminist theory, in particular in the context of religion. Mahmood notes, "what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (15). It is only by attempting to understand women that practice polygamy from within their own worldviews, rather than applying a predetermined theoretical point of view, that these decisions can be understood and accounted for. Mahmood argues, "it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (14), because agency should not only be understood from the perspective of being subversive. Mahmood's concept of the politics of piety calls for a shift away from secular feminist theory in order to include perspectives that are religiously informed. One of the main reasons the women on the show choose polygamous marriage is because they believe it brings them closer to God. The women's practice of their faith is an instance of agentival capacity (and as will be discussed later the women both inhabit norms of their faith but also violate the law and social norms that surround them).

6 Elizabeth M. Bucar's concepts of creative conformity and dianomy are also helpful here. Dianomy understands agency as layered, outside of the simplistic dichotomy of being free or being oppressed. Agency here is doubled "agency as creative conformity moves away from an idea of empowerment that depends on an autonomous place of perfect freedom. In contrast, creative conformity considers self-representation of women who still see themselves as existing

within the structure of other representations, and as operating inside those lines” (Bucar 682). The wives on the show acknowledge the way they are viewed from the outside and also negotiate their place within a religious structure. Creative conformity creates space to account for these negotiations: “In the case of religious women, creative conformity comprises actions that may not produce ends that appears ‘feminist’ within a secular-liberal framework” (Bucar 683). Rosi Braidotti’s re-definition of the political subject through a post-secular turn also supports this approach arguing that agency can be expressed through religious piety.

7 Several articles have been written about the show, focusing on different areas of emphasis Derek Jorgenson applies the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Cedric Clark to the first season of the show, concluding that the positive portrayal of polygamy on the show “is denied by a depiction of women that can be interpreted as limiting to women, especially from a feminist perspective” (37). The practice of polygamy has generally been interpreted as sexist and in opposition to feminist theories of agency and freedom. However, this reading fails to account for the diverse ways women interpret their lives and creatively express themselves while inhabiting religious norms. Similar to Mahmood’s study of the pious subjects of the mosque movement, “women’s active support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts. On the one hand, women are seen to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority” (5-6).

8 American culture is firmly rooted in monogamy as the ideal. It isn’t simply idealized though; it is presented as the only relationship option available. Following the work of Adrienne Rich’s exploration of “compulsory heterosexuality” which takes the step of “questioning heterosexuality as a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ for women,”⁵ Elizabeth Emens argues the same thinking should be applied to “compulsory monogamy” (261). It is the attachment to the fantasy of monogamy that prevents consensual non-monogamy from being considered. Discussing alternative relationship models is not to express “that monogamy is always a failure. Rather, the aim is to highlight a perspective that we do not always see. The ideal of monogamy as satisfying and desirable, as the only path for truth – and of jealousy as a necessary, even defining, part of love – is so pervasive as to blind us, at times, to its operation as law” (Emens 264). *Sister Wives*

⁵ See Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631-660.

participates in this highlighting of an invisibilized perspective and calls attention to the fact that monogamy is not the only option available.

9 In an essay for the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Courtney Bailey focuses on the parallels between the shows pro-polygamy arguments and LGBT politics. She argues the show queers heterosexuality “by highlighting continuities between the experiences of polygamists and the experiences of LGBT individuals in a heteronormative world” (42). Beyond the parallels between living polygamist and being LGBTQ, plural marriage can itself be understood as a queer form of kinship, although it has not usually been accounted for in queer theories surrounding alternative kinship. Shelly Park argues, “at the same times as adoption, divorce and remarriage and (monogamous) same-sex relationships have become a ‘normal’ part of our social fabric in recent decades, polygamy as a form of kinship remains largely exoticized and vilified as the queer ...‘other.’ Thus, it is not surprising that both feminist theorists of motherhood and queer theorists and activists have largely ignored polygamy—except insofar as it is used to highlight an oppressive practice against which the gender freedoms sought by feminists and queers can be upheld” (15). The focus on the politics of sexual identity in queer theory prevents an inclusion of polygamous families in the accounting of queer forms of kinship because these families may be read as intensely heteropatriarchal. However, this fails to account for the ways women discursively position themselves in plural marriage. Park explains, “The reduction of polygamy to a heteropatriarchal form of kinship undeserving of the label ‘queer’; fails to note the explicit resistance to both monogamy and monomaterialism voiced by women who choose polygamy” (Park 235). Polygamy’s challenge not only to monogamy but also monomaterialism (i.e. the mother-child dyad) lends itself to queer readings of family life.

10 Kaitlin McGinnis provides an extensive legal history of polygamy in the United States and focuses on the charges brought against the family. McGinnis concludes that despite facing criminal charges the show “may simultaneously be ushering in a new social movement regarding more widespread acceptance of the practice of polygamy” (280). In Mahmood’s concept of the politics of piety she argues “the task of realizing piety placed these women in conflict with several structures of authority. Some of these structures were grounded in institutional standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some were grounded in the authority of parents and male kin, and others in state institutions” (15) The women’s choice to practice their faith is illegal, as the nation state’s concept of kinship only applies to the couple,

(previously defined as heterosexual but now allowing for queer couples), denying the women the economic and social advantages tied to this structure. The family faces ongoing legal battles with state institutions that have negatively impacted the family, forcing them to leave their family home and community support in Utah. Their practice is also in conflict with other Mormon traditions that distance themselves from the practice of plural marriage and in many cases they are rejected by their parents and family members on the show who see their practice as disgusting and oppressive (put in some episodes here). In all of these cases, the women's practice of plural marriage can be seen as subversive and radically challenges social norms, while at the same time the women inhabit the norms of their chosen faith.

11 This paper will chart the interpersonal communication and emotional development between the four wives on the show: Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn. By analyzing the rhetorical claims made by each wife of the show, each woman's personal experience of her family and lifestyle will be honored. The show provides rare and vital access to the experiential knowledge of women living plural marriage. The term *sister wives* is used in the practice of polygamy, one of the 'fundamental' tenets of Mormon fundamentalisms (not practiced in contemporary Mormon orthodoxy), to acknowledge the importance of this special connection between the wives in plural marriage, a union that is valued alongside the marital commitment. How does this concept of "sister wives" benefit the women living plural marriage? Even as there are immediate problems that present themselves when analyzing the show from a feminist perspective (for example that Cody, the husband, is free to have multiple wives while the wives are not able to have multiple partners) the show reveals benefits to this arrangement that are not available in the 'traditional' family unit.

Reality Television

12 The role reality plays in reality television is widely contested and most theorists work to distinguish between the documentary tradition and reality television. In the observational documentary mode⁶ the filmmaker removes themselves from the situation as much as possible and captures what unfolds in front of the camera in an attempt to "observe" reality without

⁶ Bill Nichols identified six documentary modes in *Introduction to Documentary*, observational being one.

interference.⁷ While the supposed objectivity of all documentaries has been subject to criticism, the tradition carries on in reality television filming strategies. The view that reality television is ‘fake’ and therefore shouldn’t be studied by popular culture theorists does little to advance the field, especially since the form is incredibly popular and prolific.

13 Despite the fact that *Sister Wives* is a reality television (RTV) show rather than a documentary (which is generally perceived to have more authenticity and social value), it still offers audiences significant information about plural marriage, particularly so because audiences have minimal exposure to the concept through any other means. For example, RTV has played an important role in the way queer people are understood in mainstream culture because it portrays ‘real’ experiences of queer people.⁸ Whether or not these portrayals are ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ the format influences spectators to believe that the people they are seeing portrayed exist in reality. In the same way, the portrayal of plural marriage in RTV is impactful on audiences because it focuses on actual people living the lifestyle rather than a fictional narrative like *Big Love*, challenging audiences to think about the social construction of monogamy. The fact that this family makes it work undermines the belief that monogamy is the only option. As Murray and Ouellette argue “one of the most compelling aspects of reality TV is the extent to which its use of real people or nonactors contributes to the diversification of television culture” (11). The show provides the opportunity to understand how the women construct themselves through rhetoric and thus provides insight into how they position themselves in a wider cultural landscape. The way they present themselves is what is of interest in this essay. Certainly the perspectives presented should not be universalized and understood as the ‘true’ depiction of polygamy. The family on the show portrays one instance of how polygamy can be practiced.⁹ Moreover, this specific family could be seen as an ideal candidate to introduce audiences to this form of ‘otherness’ because they are racially white and occupy a privileged social and economic position. However, the depiction presents a counter-view to the dominant representation of polygamy in the media that presents it only in the form of abuse and misogyny.

⁷ For a detailed review of the criticisms surrounding observational documentary see Stella Bruzzi’s *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*.

⁸ See Bennett, Jeffrey. “In Defense of Gaydar: Reality Television and the Politics of the Glance.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 2006, 408-425.

⁹ A lengthy discussion of the issues in representation and RTV is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay. A consideration of Gayatri Spivak’s work on representation and the subaltern would enable a more detailed discussion of ‘voice’ in RTV.

14 Within the reality television genre there are many subgenres, and the supposed role reality plays in each one is specific to the category. Stella Bruzzi's definition of the docusoap genre is helpful in placing *Sister Wives* in context. Susan Murray applies Bruzzi's docusoap analysis to reality television that combines "many of the textual and aesthetic characteristics of direct cinema (handheld camerawork, synch sound, focus on everyday activities) with the overt structuring devices of soap operas (short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plot points, mini cliff-hangers, use of a musical soundtrack, and a focus on character personality)" (67). *Sister Wives* utilizes all of these conventions, but also complicates the discussion because docusoaps emphasize "entertainment as opposed to serious or instructive value" and "focus on everyday lives rather than underlying social issues" (Bruzzi, 76).

15 *Sister Wives* both advances a compelling, entertaining narrative while also being a serious political text that raises awareness about plural marriage, shows the legal obstacles and social exclusion people that practice it face and decenters monogamy as the only relationship option available. Feminist television criticism has documented the complicated ways the soap opera genre interacts with feminist spectatorship and women's culture, and *Sister Wives*' overlap with the docusoap provides an opportunity for understanding women's various strategies of negotiating their identity outside of monogamy.¹⁰ The show has followed the lives of Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn for nearly a decade. Their views on their own lives and how they ascribe meaning to living plural marriage should be validated as a source of evidence, "familiar to anthropologists who have long acknowledged that the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience" (Mahmood 16). Tellingly, a storyline develops in the most recent season where anthropologists stay with the family to study them and their dynamics. The voicing of their individual perspectives provides insight into how they live and inhabit plural marriage while simultaneously constructing their experience within it by assigning meaning to their lives.

16 Like in feminist discussions surrounding sex work, women's voices who participate in practices presumed to be patriarchal are often left out or ignored in discussions, because they are presumed to have internalized sexism. As Campbell notes, polygamy

¹⁰ See Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera* (1991); Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (1992) and *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (1994).

raises concerns about the authenticity of women's choices given their ostensible vulnerability within these practices and the compromise they appear to impose on women's interests. A practice conjuring associations with cultish, patriarchal, undereducated or geographically isolated communities, plural marriage is met with steep legal and social skepticism and resistance (49).

Like feminist standpoint theory¹¹, this essay values the experience of women who actually live plural marriage. Analysis of the show should be grounded in how Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn view their lives, not to universalize their experiences, but rather to call attention to the diverse ways these women ascribe meaning and value to their sisterhood. The theoretical dismissal of their lifestyle from the outside reinforces universalist accounts of experience. Standpoint epistemology is useful here to refer to "both the importance of perspective and experience to conceptions of truth and to the existence of differing concepts of knowledge for people of differing experiences" (Cirksena and Cuklanz 40). This approach can also be understood as an instance of Bucar's dianomy; "dianomy is not meant to be a universal theory of agency, other than its assertion that in order to understand women's actions we need to understand some aspect of their context" (682). The benefits the women identify in plural marriage fall into seven categories: sisterhood, self-actualization, motherhood, choice, freedom, economic benefits and division of labor.

Sisterhood

17 One of the primary benefits the women see in their relationships are the deep bonds they have with one another. Bonds with sister wives often "constitute a more critical relationship than that with her husband for her productive, reproductive and personal achievements" (Zeitzen 127). Meri sees sister wives as a sisterhood, defining it as "a sister relationship we have with each other but we are all wives."¹² In another episode she explains, "There is definitely a special relationship...with the wives. An emotional intimacy... it is a sisterhood."¹³ The concept of sisterhood in feminist analysis is used to express the solidarity between women working together toward a common goal. The Brown women see themselves as a team working together to

¹¹ See Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (1990).

¹² "Polygamy Questions Answered," Season 4, Episode 7

¹³ "College Bound Browns," Season 2, Episode 20

enhance all of their lives. Robyn is drawn to it because “Wives work together. I want to be a part of that team.”¹⁴ While the wives on the show are married to a man, the majority of their lives are oriented toward an investment in their relationships with one another. The rhetoric of solidarity forms a connection between the women that can be understood as a queer form of kinship. The queering of their intimate connections does not need to rely on their sexual identities. Park argues, “in thinking about polygamous families—as in thinking about other queer forms of kinship—we need to shift our attention away from the politics of sexual identity and toward the politics of solidarity” (226.)

18 Having sister wives is seen as a benefit monogamous marriage cannot offer. Christine in particular never wanted to be monogamous with Kody, preferring to come into the family after there were already wives. Christine grew up wanting to be a third wife in a plural marriage, explaining she was “less interested in the monogamous stage of the relationship than in the plural stage. I wanted sister wives as much as I wanted a husband.” (Brown et. al 48) In the first episode to the series she explains

I never wanted to just be married to a man, I always wanted sister wives. I just like the idea of the companionship, I like the idea of the freedom that it got me. There are too many things that I want to do and be free for, and I just like the idea of having someone around, and I just like the idea of sister wives a lot. I honestly wanted sister wives more than a husband for a good time of my life, I wanted the whole family, I didn’t just want Kody. I wanted everything.¹⁵

The women are constantly asked throughout the seasons whether their bonds with one another are real and whether they really do in fact like each other. The women speak openly about the conflicts that they have with one another, in particular Meri and Janelle’s difficult history, but they still find tremendous value in their arrangement. They are always trying to explain their experience but ultimately they feel it can’t be fully understood by outsiders, as Robyn explains, “I feel like a sister wife relationship is not something that anybody else in the world could understand unless they’ve had it themselves.”¹⁶ The navigating of their differences with one another expands how love is understood within the context of marriage, beyond simply a romantic notion of love between a couple. The commitment to enrich and honor their relationships forms alternative networks of intimacy. In polygamy, “love is enlarged beyond

¹⁴ Opening lines to the show.

¹⁵ “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

¹⁶ “College Bound Browns,” Season 2, Episode 20

parochial and privatized understandings of intimacy by merging care (affection) for particular, concrete others with a reflective commitment to understanding, respecting, valuing, and openly negotiating our differences from them” (Park 29).

19 The women see their sister wives as a source of emotional support, especially when one of them is having a difficult time and needs to reach out. Robyn explains, “There are a lot more blessings, a lot more love, a lot more support...If I’m having a bad day, besides you Kody, I know I’ve got three other adults that are going to sit there and support and help with the kids.”¹⁷ The family structure enables the women to depend on one another and ask for help when they need it. They have different relationships between one another as well—individual relationships with each person in the family as well as a group relationship with one another. Christine expresses that their dynamics shift:

The thing is Meri and I have had a lot of really good, deep conversations and there’ll be a day where I’m struggling, and Meri’s the person I go to, there’s a day I’m struggling and Janelle’s the person I go to, there’s a day I’m struggling and it’s Robyn I go to. It’s where I am emotionally, and where they are emotionally, and where we’re both going to connect and both feel safe.¹⁸

Having sister wives means the women always have someone to go to and are not alone and isolated in their individual marriages. In this context, the concept of sister wives, undermines the traditional nuclear family model through its rejection of monogamy and focus on solidarity amongst the wives. Sister wives do not exist as a concept in the monogamous, heteronormative model. While sisterhood is available in monogamy, the “eternal” bonds of the wives within their relationships with one another are unique to polygamy. In season one, when Robyn comes into the family as the fourth wife, they all become new partners to one another as well. Meri, Janelle and Christine go to the jewelry store to shop for a Claddagh ring for Robyn. She explains, “The Claddagh ring is the traditional Irish wedding band and it’s kind of become a little symbol in our family.”¹⁹ She explains the ring is a symbol they all share with one another. At Robyn’s wedding ceremony Meri presents the ring and Robyn is overcome with tears of joy. The ring is a queer practice of solidarity; “polygamy constructs an alternative to heteronormativity through queer practices of solidarity—practices that challenge us, perhaps, to critically reflect on our own political alignments and practices of abjection” (Park 226).

¹⁷ “Sitting Down with the Sister Wives, YouTube Compilation

¹⁸ “Sister Wives Tell All,” Season 4, Episode 11

¹⁹ “1st Wife’s 20th Anniversary,” Season 1, Episode 5

Self-actualization

20 The women present plural marriage as an opportunity to grow and learn about who they are. They see it as a process toward self-actualization and self-knowledge. Nearly every episode, questions come up from people about how the women navigate jealousy. They are open about their experiences of jealousy and discuss how they process their emotions. Confronting and overcoming their jealousy is a main factor in why plural marriage allows them to grow as people. Janelle explains, “Jealousy is almost always an insecurity...so I had to find my own voice, embrace who I was as a person and enjoy my strengths and be able to recognize everyone else’s strengths, too. When you become confident in who you are,” Robyn jumps in, “you don’t need him to tell you, you are ok.”²⁰ Meri holds a similar view, “One of the benefits of plural marriage is that you are forced to confront your own weakness of character and work on being the best wife, sister, and mother you can be. I’m confident that I would not be the person I am today if I had chosen a monogamous marriage” (Brown et. al 110).

21 Since each woman has a different perspective on the world and their family, they learn from one another through their differences. As a result, they push one another to be more open minded. Janelle explains, “We have all contributed something to the way our family runs. My sister wives have influenced the way I see the world, and I have done the same for them. Some of these changes are moral—we are, among our culture, considered fairly open-minded, almost liberal” (Brown et. al 130). The women grow by learning from each other’s different perspectives and choosing to overcome their differences over the course of their relationships. They are committed to continual growth and self-reflection; “As a queer familial assemblage, the polygamous family is characterized by multiplicity and the ongoing need to reflectively engage with difference” (Park 29).

22 Plural marriage also brings the women in line with their religious beliefs, in their view, bringing them closer to a union with God. The family believes in ‘plural celestial marriage’ as a commandment established by God. Janelle summarizes their views: “Religions have rules and beliefs and it can even be as simple as conduct in a marriage, or foods you can and can’t eat. Every religion has rules that they think bring them closer to God. That is how it is for us. We believe that living plural marriage is a commandment designed for our happiness.”²¹ In this way

²⁰ The Today Show, September, 2010

²¹ Season 2, Episode 20

their desire to practice piety places them on the path to self-actualization to becoming better human beings.

Motherhood

23 The sister wives express important reasons concerning motherhood that exemplify the benefits of their lifestyle. Motherhood in their household extends beyond the individual mother, and the kids have unique experiences with each mother that contribute to their upbringing. Christine highlights her reasons talking to Kody when she says, “I got into plural marriage, I love you, but not because of you, I got into plural marriage because of the sister wives. I wanted sister wives to help me, and my reason was that when I was younger, to help me raise my kids. My kids are better kids than they would be if I just raised them myself.”²² Christine’s view points to the benefits of practicing ‘coalitional mothering’ to both help with the responsibilities placed on her but also because she believes they will turn out better than if she practiced ‘monomaternalism.’ Understanding the polygamous family structure only through the lens of heteropatriarchy “of the label ‘queer’; fails to note the explicit resistance to both monogamy and monomaternalism voiced by women who choose polygamy” (Park 235).

24 Christine goes on to say speaking to her sister wives, “I’m not going to raise any of my kids without any of you, I’m just not.” She remarks on the fact that in polygamy she can have multiple mothers including herself, and her ideal family has influence coming from each mother. She would not choose to have it any other way. Meri affirms the idea when she says “Three of us moms, when we work together, it just makes each of us better in what we do.”²³ It is the diversity of the different mothers working together as a collective that the sister wives advocate helps the unique growth of their children. Robyn states that “The little girls love Meri. They adore her, and she gives a perspective that Christine, Janelle and I don’t give, and I want her to be there... I want my kids to have the exposure to [her] as a mother to them as well.”²⁴ The sister wives see the advantage of multiple mothers as creating a more supportive environment that can enhance the lives of the family.

25 These are not only short-term benefits as all of the children grow up together, but the sister wives view their presence in each other’s life as connected to a much deeper, more long-

²² “You Asked, Browns Answered,” Season 3, Episode 4

²³ “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

²⁴ “4 Wives, 4 Valentines,” Season 3, episode 6

term spiritual commitment. The significance of having more than one mother in this respect is further demonstrated by how the sister wives speak to the possibility of a scenario in which something could happen to one of them, or if one of them passed away. Meri describes her story:

My sister was in a polygamous relationship. She was the second wife. My sister ended up getting cancer and she ended up passing away eleven months after she found out that she had cancer. And her sister wife was just there for her all the time to support her and take care of the kids, and do whatever she needed to do. My sister already had a mom in place to take care of her kids for her. So that's definitely a benefit to this lifestyle because if, I know that if anything were to happen to me, I know that there would never be any question that Janelle and Christine would be there to step up and raise my daughter just like I want her to be raised, with the freedom that she deserves, and whatever she wants to do.²⁵

The possibility of death, and the understanding the mothers have concerning the future lives of their children and who will be able to look after them in such a case enhances the meaning of what motherhood can be, and what it is to the sister wives. Each child has more than one mother who cares for them, and in this way it is an understanding of love that is truly multiplied, one that goes beyond any single individual, thus uniting feminist and queer theory; “polygamous kinship highlights, perhaps better than any other form of kinship, a meeting place for feminists seeking to resist normative (monomaterialist) forms of motherhood and queers seeking to resist normative (monogamous) forms of intimacy” (Park 15).

26 In terms of bearing children and the aspects of motherhood involving fertility, there are also reproductive benefits within this type of relationship structure. For a woman that experiences infertility, such as Meri who expresses interest in having another child with Kody but is unable to, there are advantages that polygamy offers in a way traditional relationships do not. Meri tells of this possibility when she says, “Robyn offered to me to be a surrogate for Kody and I and carry a child for us, if we wanted to try and have another baby.”²⁶ Even though Meri herself may not be able to conceive, it is still possible for her to have a child with Kody, one that can be born within the family. It is also significant that the person who can become her surrogate is her sister wife Robyn, someone she already trusts to be one of the mothers within the family. This tightly bound and intricate understanding of motherhood within the family structure points

²⁵ “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

²⁶ “4 Wives, 4 Valentines,” Season 3, episode 6

to how the relationships founded in sister wives promote unity and cohesion in ways other forms of relationships cannot, and creates opportunity for a woman who may be infertile.

27 The family also values each marriage equally even though Meri is the only legal wife. The empowered way in which the sister wives think of motherhood is brought to a new level by a decision Meri makes. In a demonstration of how much she loves her sister wife, and to what ends she was willing to go for Robyn, Meri begins the process to obtain a legal divorce from Kody. Because of Robyn's previous divorce and a pending custody battle, there was a real possibility that she would lose access to her children. Knowing this could happen, and seeing only one way out, it was Meri who approached Robyn about the idea. If she divorced Kody, then Robyn would be free and able to enter into a legal marriage with him, and then he could legally adopt her children. It was a significant sacrifice for Meri, but she selflessly engaged in the process because she knew for the children it was a necessary step to give them the life she would want them to have as one of their mothers. It is this understanding in plural marriage that shows what is not only possible, but what motherhood can become.

Choice

28 The women view plural marriage as a choice and often frame their decision making in the context of choice. They present their religion as something they should have a right to pursue and promote the idea that freedom of religion is an inherent right. In an episode where anti-polygamists that were formerly in the church that have left confront the family, Janelle expresses her right to choose a religion that tells her it is ok if the man she wants to marry is already married. She views it not as a restriction, but as a benefit that other women do not have because of their faith. In this sense, she is allowed more choice than other religious practices. She also extends this freedom of religious choice to her children, "I want my children to have the same choice...I want them to understand that any choice...you have to be comfortable with your choice and accept the path you are on."²⁷ Christine holds a similar view, "We try and let our kids have as much freedom as possible. We want them to have full and rich lives.... And they can absolutely marry who they choose. As much enjoyment and fulfillment that we have found in this lifestyle, that's for us and it's a calling for us and a religious decision for us and there is no

²⁷ The Today Show, September, 2010

way we want them to have any part of this for themselves unless they choose to.”²⁸ This bears out in a later episode when her daughter Maddie decides to join a different faith.

29 The women are often denied choice by outsiders who do not believe the women are in control of their decision making. People believe that they are being controlled by Kody or being forced into plural marriage. Janelle explains, “Usually they are quick to blame the man, they think somehow he’s manipulated me or made me make this choice, which is so baloney.”²⁹ They are aware of how they are viewed. Robyn is especially bothered by this view. In the anti-polygamist episode she gets upset about how she is being portrayed and demands “Do not make me a victim, sweetie.”³⁰ She later asks Meri, does it “offend you or frustrate you when a woman comes up to you and says you’re just broken, how could you let your husband cheat on you with another woman?” Meri replies, “I just think she’s stupid, I mean that’s her perspective. It’s dumb...I know my truth.”³¹ The women continually insist that they are intelligent enough to make their own decisions.

30 In an episode where anthropology students visit them to study their family dynamics, they play around with the idea that they are submissive to Kody. They devise a prank to play on the students at dinner time where each wife goes up to Kody to serve him food. The prank becomes increasingly absurd until they are all four shoving food into his mouth at the same time. The women performatively enact the stereotypes surrounding polygamy, reclaiming their right to tell their own story. This is another example of dianomy, understanding agency as doubled where “a woman is formed within a specific discursive and performative environment, but she is also able to interrogate that environment” (Bucar 678).

Freedom

31 The women also argue that having sister wives enhances their freedom. Meri explains, “Having the lifestyle, and having him once every third night, frees up a lot of time for us to go do what we need to do.”³² During the anti-polygamy debate episode, when a woman tells her she is not free because she doesn’t have the ability to sleep with Kody every night, she jokes “Do you

²⁸ Season 2, Episode 20

²⁹ “Sister Wives on the Rope,” Season 4, Episode 9

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1, prior to Robyn joining the family

know how liberating it is to not have to sleep with him every night?”³³ In the same episode another woman claims that the wives are not free because they are dependent on Kody economically, and Janelle quickly jumps in “I make my own paycheck and I have my own bank account. I don’t share with Kody.”³⁴ The same question could be asked of a woman in a monogamous marriage, but the question of freedom is not equally applied to that context. Christine feels she is more free because her relationship is not monogamous. She didn’t want to be the first wife because “being the first wife takes too much work and involves too much self-sacrifice...It’s just you and your husband until the day he marries a second wife. This kind of single-minded devotion never appealed to me—I’m independent and I like my freedom” (Brown et. al 43).

32 One of the first issues raised when looking at whether the Brown family benefits women is the objection that the wives cannot have equivalent brother husbands. The women defend the arrangement because it is a tenant of their religious faith, but they also emphasize labor and freedom. Janelle argues that “living plural marriage is designed for our happiness³⁵” and in response to a question asked by one student, she counters “Who really wants that, do you? Guys are a lot of work.” This is consistent with Janelle’s emphasis on how plural marriage gives her room to be career focused and gives her space to be who she wants to be. She does not want the additional labor responsibilities. Meri responds, “I would not ever choose to have more than one husband from a religious standpoint...and also from a personal standpoint, I need my me time and I wouldn’t get it if I had many guys around.” The women ground their choice in the benefit it has for them to develop as individuals and do not desire to live polyandry. Their religious beliefs support their happiness and well-being, an example of Braidotti’s argument that “agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety” (2).

Economic Benefits

33 There are economic benefits to plural marriage, as the family can reduce costs by sharing resources and spread out wealth amongst the family so everyone is taken care of. Kody states,

If one of my wives chooses not to work in order to stay home and look after our kids, I make sure she is taken care of. If another wife makes a bundle while her sister wife is

³³ “Sister Wives on the Rope,” Season 4, Episode 9

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Season 2, Episode 20

looking after the kids, she will share her bounty...Although my wives are fiercely independent and entirely self-sufficient, they never let anyone go without. We are a family of equals (Brown et. al, 9).

Janelle takes care of the finances and works for the family while her sister wives take care of her children. Christine explains, “Ever since I’ve been married, Janelle has always taken care of the finances. And so I’ve never really had to pay utility payments, or rent, and it is not fun. For that reason alone, I would always want to live with someone. I don’t like it [doing finances].”³⁶ Janelle states “I’ve always been a career person, I’ve always worked. I would prefer to be working, rather than be home with the kids, because in a family this big, one breadwinner is not enough.”³⁷ In reality, one breadwinner is not enough for many monogamous married families either in the modern economic situation where it is difficult to earn a living wage.

34 In Season 4, the sister wives start a company together called My Sisterwife’s Closet, an online store. The women discuss business strategies and work together to build the company. They try to make choices that benefit other women as well, for example when Janelle is researching sourcing she says they should work with a local producer Cottage Industry a “woman power, woman driven, entrepreneur.”³⁸

Division of Labor

35 Elizabeth Joseph, an attorney and journalist living in a plural marriage, opposes the perception that plural marriage is oppressive to women and claims “compelling social reasons make the life style attractive to the modern career woman.” She acknowledges the difficulty women face in balancing family life and a career in contemporary society. She sees monogamous marriage as challenging and founded in compromises; in her view, plural marriage offers women “who live in a society full of obstacles, to fully meet their career, mothering, and marriage obligations.” In a speech delivered at a conference organized by the National Organization for Women, Joseph calls plural marriage “the ultimate feminist lifestyle” because it does not force women to choose between motherhood, marriage and a career.

36 The women on the show often express plural marriage as the solution to the failures in the myth of modern motherhood that tell women they can have it all. Janelle explains, “I work

³⁶ “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

³⁷ “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

³⁸ “Sister Wives Tell All,” Season 4, Episode 11

really long days, so I'm gone usually from about 6:15 to 7:00...It's nice usually Christine will make dinner and I don't have to worry about that when I come home. I work with a bunch of women who are like, 'Oh I've got to go home and fix dinner' and I'm like, 'Oh, not me, ha ha.'³⁹

37 The women take turns filling in when another wife needs help. In response to a viewer question about if there is a cleaning wife, a shopping at the mall wife, a take the kids to soccer wife, or a bedroom wife the women answer:

Meri: "I think we're all, all four."

Christine: "You know; I think we are all of them. But the only difference is we don't have to be."

Robyn: "When Christine had Truly, I went over to her house and cleaned the bathroom and the bedroom. I was the mall wife; I was the clean the toilet wife..."

Christine: "I think we complement each other quite well. We all represent, we are four distinct personalities, and I like it like this."

Meri: "Ultimately, I really think it's teamwork, what we are trying to accomplish."⁴⁰

Being able to divide up labor allows each of them to excel at what they are best at. Janelle explains the arrangement: "I love it because I get my children, and we do all the really fun things together, and I get to be the mom, but I don't have to do the cooking or the chauffeuring."⁴¹ "I can say, I'm going to a movie, will you watch my kids? And I have somebody to watch them. I don't have to do everything. I have the time for the things I like to do, not just household stuff." It also helps her balance her work and family life. The family heads away on a family trip. Janelle: "Everybody is leaving to go to the ranch today, and it's really busy for me right now so I couldn't get away. So I'm going to work one more day and then Kody and I are going to go up. It's kind of nice in my world, because I have people in my world who can get my kids there and they can start their vacation, and I can join them."⁴² The family structure gives the wives more flexibility in navigating their schedules and benefits their children's lives.

Conclusion

38 Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn demonstrate substantial benefits to living plural marriage for women, but they are not trying to convince others to live their lifestyle. They repeatedly demand on the show to have the right to choose their family structure but say they do

³⁹ "Meet Kody and the Wives," Season 1, Episode 1

⁴⁰ "Viewers Questions," Season 3, Episode 10

⁴¹ "Meet Kody and the Wives," Season 1, Episode 1

⁴² Free Range Browns, Season 2, Episode 2

not believe it is the right choice for everyone. The show undermines compulsory monogamy by showing audiences an alternative family structure of queer kinship. Whether viewers support plural marriage after watching the show does not matter, what matters is that the show proves other options exist, thereby showing monogamy is one choice out of several available options. Each relationship is unique and negotiates its own form of community and values. The show creates space for women who live the experience of plural marriage to enter the conversation and claim their lives, and their narratives, as their own.

39 While the show engages in some aspects of post-feminism (i.e. the rhetoric of choice) its emphasis on collective action through the bond between sister wives, rather than a focus on individuality, is a radical divergence from post-feminist media texts. The solidarity between the wives offers an example of what Braidotti's postsecular feminism might look like as a practice of affirmation in which "the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others" (16). The women value their relationships as sister wives above their personal differences for the goal of building a better family unit for everyone. Their practice of polygamy attempts to develop deeper connections with multiple others over time. In this way they creatively form a system of support that allows them to overcome difficult times, a model of ethical relations: "Ethical relations create possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. They are the driving forces that concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others" (Braidotti 16). This isn't only in service of the family unit but can be spread to new forms of coalition building between communities. Assuming polygamy can only be heterosexist has "prevented strategic coalitions among those interested in creating non-normative kinship relations, as well as between those practicing queer kinship and those practicing queer sex" (Park 222). Understanding the sister wives' decisions through the concepts of the politics of piety and dianomy allows polygamy to be understood as a possible positive option for women to pursue, one that forms a supportive network of interconnection with others. *Sister Wives* portrays one possible example of Braidotti's 'ethics of becoming', "the quest for new creative alternatives and sustainable futures" (19). It may be a concept that has been around for a while but it is only now becoming a visible option because the practice is no longer in the shadows.

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**‘A Little Bit Married’ while Black:
A Personal and Political Meditation on
Marriage, Single Adulthood and Relationship Literacy**

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Marriage Equality and Socially Stigmatized Relationships: Intersections

1 The 2015 Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* affirmed the equal right of all citizens to marry. However, in the wake of subsequent events such as the Orlando massacre, the election of socially conservative legislative majorities in Washington and in state capitals, and the elevation of a high-profile opponent of marriage equality to the vice presidency (Mike Pence), it becomes clearer that the 5-4 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* established a legal framework for ending discrimination in marriage law, but culturally contested questions as to what marriage means remain to be grappled with in many other contexts. This includes attitudinal gaps in the acceptance of marriage equality within public opinion after the 2016 election. Among so-called “values voters” – white religious conservatives that tend to oppose marriage equality – a preference was expressed for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton by a margin of 81% to 16%, a higher margin than that of Mitt Romney, John McCain, or George W. Bush over their socially more liberal opponents (Smith and Martinez). Gaps in acceptance of same-sex marriage in the 2010s by age, region, religion, and other factors echo the measurable but uneven shifts in public acceptance of interracial marriages after the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case, and it is noted that fifty years after that decision, racial homogeny “is still the norm for intimate relationships today” (Toledo 775). These findings remind us that while a landmark court case may remove legal prohibitions, such legal changes do not “eradicate the forces motivating those barriers” (Toledo 772). Those forces include stereotyping, social shaming, and institutional discrimination that stigmatize relationships which appear to fall outside of heteronormative frameworks.

2 In this context, *Obergefell v. Hodges* offers an opportunity for advocacy, caring connections, and relationship education to inspire wider public acceptance of marriage equality and to deepen our awareness of a spectrum of relationships that are frequently stigmatized or ignored in a heterosexist context. Recent literature within the interdisciplinary field of family

studies indicates a strong research interest in relationship outcomes among sexually and racially marginalized groups, and findings from this literature should be synthesized and integrated into emerging models for relationship education and public awareness. In addition to examining marriage and heteronormativity, education and awareness models should also examine the cultural significance of singlehood, a relationship status that is under-acknowledged and undervalued as a social experience. As an uncertain and contentious era of legal marriage equality begins, only about 56% of US adults over 18 are married, compared to 72% in 1960 (Morello), meaning that nearly half of the adult population is divorced, widowed, or never married. With a divorce rate that amounts to nearly half of the annual marriage rate (6.9 marriages per 1,000 adults annually, 3.2 divorces per 1,000 adults), singlehood occurs and recurs across all demographics and throughout the life span (National Center for Health Statistics).

3 This essay offers definitions and analysis of several concepts that are useful for responding empathically to a spectrum of relationships, including singlehood, with its nuances and variations resulting from choice and/or circumstance. I posit that much of our relationship experience is contained within social circles which welcome people with a similar relationship status, while those with a different status are frequently regarded with suspicion or exclusion. The *Obergefell v. Hodges* case is notable for its widening of a revered social circle, the institution of marriage itself, affirming that marriage bonds among same-sex partners carry the same legal weight as heterosexual marriages. An enriched relationship literacy is an attainable next step for recognizing and resisting the effects of social stigma and supporting health and fulfillment in all consensual relationships.

4 In its effort to map a set of concepts and common understandings for improving relationship literacy, this essay uses unconventional analytic and disciplinary tools. These tools include personal perspectives as a Black heterosexual male and as a humanities scholar who values the clarity of measurement offered by social science data on romantic relationships, but who also contends that empirical approaches are not sufficient for a full understanding of the impact of social stigma in non-normative relationships. Thus, the tools of narrative, cultural history, and self-disclosure complement the discussion of empirical findings, giving shape and voice to key premises explored in family studies research. My racial identity (Black), family identities (formerly single parent, now blended family), and my relationship status (formerly single, now married) are probed to identify larger truths about relationships – ways that statuses

intersect, how they are stigmatized, and how they might be valued if a deeper awareness of relationship variety were to emerge. Awareness of stigmatized relationships in the era of *Obergefell v. Hodges* provides an important step towards a more inclusive public discourse about relationships.

5 Black racial identity is central to this essay's personal and political discussion of marriage and the stigmatizing of relationships that are perceived as non-normative. Historically in the U.S., Black families have been subject to public hostility and racial stereotyping in many contexts. The social history of slavery, Jim Crow, miscegenation laws, and mass incarceration has left in place commonly held stereotypes about Black women and men – Black women as unfeminine and unfit as mothers (Kim 40), and Black men as “inherently animalistic, and therefore resistant to ‘civilized’ institutions like marriage” (Kim 58). This legacy of racial discrimination, undergirded by white supremacy, is evoked and politicized in social contexts such as the publication of Moynihan Report (*The Negro Family: the Case for National Action*) in 1965, a report which contended memorably that the “the breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency” (Moynihan). Criticisms of single parent families headed by Black women were further articulated in conservative political admonishment of “welfare queens” in the 1970s and 1980s, and in racial panics regarding “crack mothers” in the 1980s. Political race-baiting of this kind energized Ronald Reagan's voting base in the 1976 and 1980 elections and contributed to Bill Clinton's successful push for welfare reform, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which narrowed and limited the ways that financially challenged families could qualify for direct support (Editorial Board). In the wake of these developments, open hostility and heightened scrutiny has been evident in public conversations about Black family life, along with an unwillingness to consider public action in response to economic and social pressures on Black single parents.

6 Challenging the public disparagement of a relationship demographic must be done persistently if attitudes are to shift. Even in recent family studies research, marriage is often described as “deinstitutionalized” within African American/Black cultural contexts, a rather editorialized way to describe a demographic trend (NewsOne). Feminist scholar Joan Morgan describes these declining marriage rates among Black families with empathy, as a potential loss of black-on-black love that has endured through slavery, discrimination, de-industrialization, and other social traumas (Morgan 71). I would extend Morgan's argument by contending that an

improved relationship literacy should include more empathic, contextually situated, and intersectional understandings of Black family life; such discussions would help clarify how historical trauma and social stigmatizing of non-normative relationships can increase the risk of negative outcomes for marginalized individuals.

7 Across most U.S. communities of color, disproportionately smaller percentages of marriage partners report being “very happy” in their marriages (Fincham and Beach 637). These data findings have implications for both relationship education and individual life journeys, especially since within communities of color, many relationship options are subject to heightened social stigma due to the perception of non-normativity: bi-racial marriage, cohabitation, and single-parent households, all relationship forms that can include persons of any gender. If we are to build on the affirmative foundation built by *Obergefell v. Hodges* and support the dignity and worth of all loving relationships, it is crucial that we expand our conceptual vocabulary, recall our awareness of intersectionality, and activate our empathy and support of all consensual relationships. In practice, relationship education and other awareness efforts should help us to contextualize the relationship journeys of individual people, leaving us better positioned to respond with care and concern to the stigmas that people may experience in their intimate partnerships.

Love Languages: Six Concepts for Relationship Literacy

8 To respond to relationship variety in the current context with care, concern, and positive engagement, a shared conceptual vocabulary for describing relationship variety is required that highlights key findings in family studies literature and acknowledges demographic trends. The six concepts I list below also inform the narrative developed in this essay and contributes to a common story of love amid social change. These concepts include: *Standard North American Family* (SNAF); *heterosexism, singlism*; *Drive to Marry* (DTM); *Multi-Partner Fertility* (MPF); and *a Little Bit Married* (ALBM).

9 Concept 1 - *Standard North American Family* (SNAF) is used commonly to describe a family structure in which married opposite-sex partners live full-time with biological children, and the husband is the primary wage earner. About 20% of married couples with children have such a structure today (Cohn), which reflects social changes impacting families over the last fifty years: increased workforce participation among women, affirmation of equal marriage rights, no-

fault divorce, wider acknowledgement of human variety in sexual orientation, and the ubiquity of single parenthood by choice or circumstance. Arguably, the term *standard* within this concept of *SNAF* is misleading.

10 Concept 2, *heterosexism*, along with a related term, *heterosexual imaginary*, further highlight the cultural biases that underlie into the concept of *Standard North American Family*. Ingraham and Saunders define *heterosexual imaginary* as “ways of thinking that conceal how heterosexuality structures gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an institution” (Ingraham and Saunders). *Heterosexism* refers more specifically to the discriminatory consequences of a social system that normalizes heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage as the highest order conditions for a flourishing relationship. Assessing cultural attitudes toward marriage that predominated before the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, Ramona Faith Oswald has observed that “our society privileges heterosexual marriage, and thus weddings...link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious benefits” (349-350). Oswald observes further that “the union of one man and one woman is bolstered by defining [LGBTQA] people as a threat to family” (350). Even in the wake of *Obergefell v. Hodges* and majority public support for marriage equality, a wide swath of public opinion still holds that marriage should be available only to heterosexual couples. Public officials in North Dakota, Texas, Kansas, and other states have sought to legitimize religious objections to serving to same-sex couples, meaning that same-sex couples would not be served equitably by the state in the issuing of marriage licenses (Gambino) or by wedding-related businesses (Fitzgerald).

11 In in her research on heterosexism, Oswald has studied participant reactions to wedding rituals such as the tossing of the bouquet and garter, a common tradition in heterosexual weddings. Interviews with heterosexual and LGBTQA wedding attendees discuss the human impact of heterosexism during these rituals:

Participants understood catching the bouquet to be a time when unmarried females unite around the possibility of heterosexual marriage for all women, and compete with each other to be next. Where the bouquet ritual symbolized the importance of marriage for women, the garter ritual was understood to symbolize male bonding over the sexual domination of women within marriage. The values underlying these rituals were in conflict with the values held by GLBT family members. Participants described the bouquet ritual as silly, but were ‘repulsed by the whole idea of degrading this woman who just got married...the garter is not fun, it’s angering. It’s like, you’re marrying her

so now you're going to show the other men her leg? This brings us right back to the ownership of women (359).

Despite their awareness of sexism directed at women and heterosexism infusing the entire ritual, LGBTQA wedding attendees often participated half-heartedly and with irony in the bouquet and garter toss. Oswald describes single lesbian participants who respond to the ritual as follows: ““Every once in a while I’ll get in there and try to catch the bouquet, which is like a brilliant joke amongst all my friends”” (360). Interviewees consistently speak of an intense pressure to participate, with “heterosexual guests treating them as if they were single men and women who desired heterosexual marriage,” even when their same-sex partners were present at the reception (360). In these ways, marriage remains a pivotal event for many heterosexual couples and, potentially, an exercise in heterosexism for same-sex partners who attend these ceremonies.

12 Concept 3, *singlism*, describes social pressures and negative judgments directed at unmarried people because of their relationship status. In an article titled “I’m a Loser, I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me,” Sharp and Ganong interview focus groups of single heterosexual women, concluding that social shaming of single people continues even though “Americans now spend more years of their adult life unmarried than married” (957). Sharp and Ganong define singlism as

a pervasive ideology of marriage and family, manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies that favor couples over singles [including] the unquestioned belief that everyone wants to (and will) get married...that a romantic, sexual partnership is the only way to achieve intimacy, and thus, individuals who have a partner are happier, more adjusted, and lead more fulfilling lives than do single people (957).

Interestingly, while major medical studies highlight the health benefits of heterosexual marriage, other findings suggest that in marriage in early adulthood is linked to earlier mortality in later years. Research also highlights stress-related health risks connected to divorce, but those risks tend to lessen over time, along with a significant number of divorced people who experience positive outcomes even over the short term (Perrig-Chiello, Hutchinson, and Morselli 398). These findings challenge singlism by questioning the cultural assumption that marriage is always and undoubtedly the healthiest relationship option for adult life.

13 Concept 4, *Drive to Marry* (DTM), helps explain motivations to marry or stay single that are culturally constructed and individually internalized. Researchers have measured DTM

strength and individual motivations among demographic segments of the population. For heterosexual men, DTM is often focused around the desire to be a parent:

For men, wanting to become fathers is an especially compelling reason...to marry, whereas for women, it is an important reason, but only one of many. Because women bear children, and because they often have custody of them following the breakup of a relationship, it is logical that men would benefit from the close availability of a partner with whom they may share parenthood. Thus, it may be especially evident to young men who want to be fathers that they will have a greater opportunity to actively engage in this role if they get married (Blakemore 331).

14 As we think empathically about parenting and marriage choices, it is well worth considering how economic realities may influence DTM. One study concluded that African American men with a strong traditional work ethic and desire for self-reliance took on extra jobs, up to four jobs, to preserve a middle-class lifestyle. Also, compared to white couples, African American men (and women) tended to imagine a higher level of happiness outside of marriage, and expected that “their standard of living would suffer less with the absence of their spouse” (Dixon 26-46). These findings run counter to a common cultural assumption that a low DTM is a pathology to be overcome as opposed to a preference that is broadly distributed across populations, reflecting cultural differences as well.

15 Concept 5, *multi-partner fertility* (MPF) is a sociological term referencing parents who have children with more than one biological mother or father. The language used to describe these parent-child relationships is sometimes derogatory, especially when children are born outside of marriage; some vernacular terms such as *baby momma*, *baby daddy*, *love child*, and even the sexist and racist term *welfare mother* remain in common usage. At present, approximately 28% of women with two or more children have children by different fathers, suggesting that MPF is common among contemporary families (Wiltz).

16 The relevant literature on MPF describes its broad distribution among U.S. populations and highlights complexities and risks that may need to be negotiated in these family contexts. For fathers in these contexts, a possibility exists that with multiple families to support, “these men sometimes limit their financial support of their previous children or stop spending as much time with them,” essentially swapping families (Wiltz). Additionally, when there is a range of parent-child relationships within a single household, challenges of many kinds may arise – increased health risks for mothers (Wiltz), potentially rocky relationships with ex-partners to navigate, and, among more than 30% of U.S. residents who have at least one step- or half-sibling

(Ashbrook), a period of two to five years to “bond and figure out new relationships” in a household setting (Robinson). A 21st century relationship literacy requires us to be aware of relationship and household transitions in family life.

17 The study of MPF also has implications for racial identity formation. While interracial relationships and families are less common than similar relationships within a single race, the number of these relationships has been steadily increasing since the 1960s. Some reduction in the social stigma attached to these relationships can be seen in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case prohibiting miscegenation laws, and media narratives that treat interracial relationships more empathically (Lienemann and Stopp E411), but the persistence of stigma is reported widely in family studies literature. Adolescent partners in interracial relationships are less likely to tell family and friends about their relationships. Interracial partners are less likely to bridge between cohabitation and marriage, and such partners may experience reduced relationship satisfaction when children are present within the family arrangement. Interracial partners must also negotiate a “racial stratification hierarchy,” with regionally specific and frequently judgmental responses to particular racial group couplings (Herman and Campbell 345-346). In sum, despite a demonstrable trend toward greater acceptance of interracial relationships, social stigmatizing of such relationships persists.

18 Concept 6, *a Little Bit Married* (ALBM), describes a continuum of relationships that are monogamous, non-matrimonial, and enduring for at least 12 months. There may be parallels between ALBM and marriage: “Maybe you and your [partner] have lived together long enough to reach what many states would deem a legitimate common law marriage” (Seligson 13) or there may be children in common, pets in common, even extended families in common. Many of the 44% of US adults who are living single have these relationships, some of which last longer than typical marriages. Hannah Seligson, who coined the phrase *a little bit married*, is a strong advocate of lifelong relationship education.

An Individual Relationship Journey– the Political Becomes Personal

19 Self-education through reading family studies literature has deepened my understanding of several aspects of my personal relationship journey: growing up in a single parent household that was living near the poverty line, followed by a long period of adult singlehood, and finally, marriage and a blended, multiracial family. During this journey, however, I was mostly unaware

of how my experience connected with larger relationship trends, even as I experienced some forms of social stigma due to relationship choices, the ongoing hazards of anti-black racism, and the conservative culture war rhetoric of the post-Civil Rights era. Self-education has clarified connections between personal experiences and trends such as the de-coupling of marriage and parenthood in the contemporary U.S., with 41% of children being born to single parents (Hayford, Guzzon, and Smock 521), including my first child. The timing of my nuptial would also echo a significant national trend: in 2013, a record number of 12% of newlyweds married outside of their racial identity group (Wang).

20 Some of the current threads in family research literature can be retrospectively applied to the early years in my single life, including the very moment when I first brought someone home to meet Mom as a college sophomore. My sweetie's name was Lisa¹ – a tall blonde farm girl from Grand Island, Nebraska. I mean *farm girl* literally, not just as metaphor. Lisa was the eldest daughter of an upper middle class white family with a veterinarian for a father and a homemaker for a mother. I was a city boy from a Black family of modest means – raised by a single mother who had worked many years in domestic service while taking every opportunity she could find to self-educate through independent reading and workforce development programs. On Thanksgiving weekend, 1981, Lisa and I rode the bus from Iowa City, Iowa to Omaha. During a lay-over we walked downtown for window shopping and stayed too long – she missed the last Grand Island-bound bus. So, with no other options, we went home to meet Mom.

21 As the youngest child of the family and a high scholastic achiever, I was no stranger to high expectations, whether these expectations were spoken or unspoken. I knew that the proper way to handle my business didn't include unplanned overnight visits from young white women. Through the distancing of time and research-based perspectives, I can now say that the challenges faced by a black-white couple such as Lisa and I included a high potential for excessive public visibility and family disapproval, conditions which can “disconfirm and invalidate” the romantic relationship (Bell and Hastings 768). If we had been a longer-term couple, we would likely experience additional social stigma due to enduring social disapproval of interracial couples, particularly at the time when we dated (1981), less than fifteen years after the landmark *Loving vs. Virginia* case declared miscegenation laws unconstitutional. In that context, Lisa and I would likely have experienced forms of social stigma that are described as “a

¹ For privacy, the name and hometown have been changed.

chronic source of psychological stress” and a risk factor for negative health outcomes, especially for members of a socially marginalized population (Hatzenbuehler et al.). These stressors include the following:

stigma or expectations of rejection, experiences of discrimination (both acute events and chronic everyday mistreatment), internalization of negative social beliefs about one’s social groups or social identity, and stressors related to the concealment or management of a stigmatized identity (LeBlanc, Frost, and White).

22 In response to her son’s interracial relationship (and without the benefit of inclusive relationship education), my mother’s actions embodied a high degree of care, concern, and racial tolerance. Her hometown, Forrest City, Arkansas, is named after Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, a founder of the Ku Klux Klan, Confederate general, and in the minds of many, a war criminal responsible for an indiscriminate slaughter of Black troops in the Civil War’s Fort Pillow Massacre. Forrest’s memory is still evoked by the name of town where my mom was born in 1927, less than an hour’s drive from Fort Pillow and just over 60 years after the incident. Racism was a lifelong constraint in the life of my mother and the men in her family, illustrated by my father’s struggles to find employment as a World War II veteran and by my uncle’s mysterious death in an Omaha jail, several years after returning from the Korean War. And yet, even though her life’s journey was indelibly affected by white supremacy, my mother gracefully welcomed Lisa into our home, contained feelings of disappointment, and, as the years went by, respected my choices through multiple decades of single adulthood. Such a commitment to respect consensual relationship choices within our circles should be an outcome of effective relationship education.

23 My mother’s tolerance was informed by an empathic view of relationship variety, perhaps nurtured by her having spent the last five decades of her life as a single adult. Similarly, my own development of a nuanced and empathic view of all consensual relationships is a favorable consequence of thirty years of living as a single adult. Experiences during those years have led to questioning of key tenets within the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham and Saunders), including a determination to fully support and respect relationship journeys among people in our lives who choose to remain single. A protracted state of singlehood tends to fall outside of fundamental attributes of the heterosexual imaginary, such as

highly intertwined networks of social arrangements and ideologies that include

social processes and practices such as dating, initiating sex, engagements, weddings, proms, and caring for children (Ingraham and Saunders).

24 These social processes contribute to the naturalization of heteronormative marriage as the ideal adult relationship status. However, it is also possible that non-normative life experiences connected to singlehood are not perceived as stigmatizing, but as liberating. Additionally, cultural assumptions about marriage and relationship health bear examination. Family research projects in recent years have probed a constellation of questions around singlehood, marriage, and heteronormativity, such as whether health related benefits of marriage are broadly accrued across population differences in age, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Robles); whether or not sexual monogamy, with its highly variable definitions and practices, represents “the most psychologically, socially, and culturally advantageous relationship configuration” (Conley et al., 13); whether trends toward cultural reductions in the pressure to marry have a positive impact on divorce rates, especially as cohorts of single people in their 20s delay marriage frequently but are less likely than their older peers to experience divorce (Kennedy and Ruggles); and even whether or not the so-called “marriage advantage” (common assumptions that compared to singlehood, marriage leads to more frequent and better quality sexual experiences) can be demonstrated empirically. In a related finding, the 1989-2014 General Social Survey reports that married people are now having sex less frequently than single people (55 times per year for married people, 59 times per year for single people), a significant drop in sexual frequency among married couples that reverses historic trends (Bahrampour).

25 These findings collectively point towards a cultural reimagining of what it means to be single in relation to life satisfaction, and I see this research as another retrospective window on past experiences. I often experienced singlehood as a fulfilling and enjoyable state of being which offered a clear path to establishing meaningful relationships (romantic and non-romantic), time to pursue a career, and opportunities to develop personal interests. However, single life also entailed periods of loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional vulnerability, leaving me more susceptible to unhealthy behavior patterns and questionable relationship choices. So, there are simultaneous principles to hold in thinking personally and politically about loving relationships. Enduring love and lifelong commitments can be transformative, but there are many relationship forms that do not constitute a marriage and yet provide emotional fulfillment.

***ALBM* While Black – Personal and Political Anecdotes**

26 The literature on relationship trends in recent decades sheds light on personal experiences that include the role of *ALBM* (a little bit married) relationships as an essential source of love and support. While the research suggests that Black men are less likely than the national average to have an enduring marriage, Black men commonly take part in support networks that bridge between families. This includes networks that include fictive kin – “individuals who are unrelated by either blood or marriage, but regard one another in kinship terms” (Taylor, et al.) or by participating in child rearing within an extended family. Such experiences are undervalued in a heteronormative cultural context.

27 Two specific recollections from my single years are described here to illustrate meaningful relationship experiences that are ignored or minimized in our culture due to idealizing of the Standard North American Family, the pervasiveness of singlism, and implicit bias – stereotypical assumptions that have concrete and measurable consequences on the everyday experiences of culturally marginalized people. The first recollection centers a Black female friend, a single parent, who I met during my mid-thirties. I was attracted to her but the attraction wasn’t mutual, a disconnect that was obvious to people within our circle. After a year or so, I finally realized that there was no dating potential in this relationship, but I remained close to her and her two children for about four years. The care and support I provided extended to picking up her children regularly from day care, loaning her my car for both work and recreational purposes, and occasionally, making Friday night dinners of hot dogs and home fries for her children while she enjoyed an evening out for herself.

28 It was common for people in my circle to question why I provided such care and support and to suggest that she was taking advantage of kindness. These are reasonable concerns, but the concerns do not acknowledge a common cultural practice in a Black family context of creating caring bridges between families, a functional and adaptive response to the enduring economic and social consequences of white supremacy. I relate my provision of this extensive family support to Joan Morgan’s characterization of “black-on-black love” as a deeply rooted cultural value (Morgan 71). As a child born in 1963 and nurtured by the political idealism and institutional change processes set in motion by the Civil Rights Movement, I recall the Black community of my youth as infused with black-on-black love, expressed among strangers in personal greetings, evoked in popular music of the Motown Soul era, and affirmed by the pride

taken in any significant accomplishments made by individual Black people, celebrities and local schoolchildren alike. The idealism of this moment, however, competed with emerging trends such as mass incarceration, deindustrialization, and internalized self-doubt, which proved quite difficult for many Black men to overcome “when it comes to facing the evils of the larger society, accepting responsibility for [our] lives or the lives of [our] children” (Morgan 75).

29 I regard the relationship with my friend as *ALBM* – a Little Bit Married. This relationship status often entails engaged and loving responses to the ongoing need for connected and healthy families, and there is no valid reason why a sexual relationship should be a prerequisite for providing mutual love and support. This is especially true given that within Black communities, 72% of children are being raised in single parent families, compared to a national average of 25% and an average of 14.9% among all industrialized countries (NewsOne). Among these single parent families who often face harsh cultural judgments due to heteronormativity, there are unmet needs for financial and emotional support that are beyond the capacity or the willingness of the state to provide. *ALBM* relationships are a common source of such support, including my temporary but meaningful presence in the life of my friend and her children. The last time I saw my woman friend was in a grocery store, and her older boy had just graduated from high school. He was shopping with his mother to stock up his first apartment. I remain proud of the shorter-term but very positive role I had in his life, making those daily trips to the day care when his mom was caught up in an impossibly busy phase of single parent life. Clearly, the connection was mutually fulfilling, beyond the common (and heterosexist) assumption that in an arrangement like this, a woman is taking advantage of a man’s unrequited attraction for her.

30 The second recollection is centered the experiences of an extended family member, a nephew, and a child custody dispute that was impacted by racially-motivated singlism and implicit bias. At the time of this recollection, I was a gainfully employed single father of one biracial child. My former partner and I were never married, and it required intensive negotiations to establish guidelines for joint legal custody and a mutually satisfactory routine of physical custody for our child. With the help of private mediation, however, an agreement was reached for custody arrangements, and further interactions were avoided with an overburdened family court system that does not have the capacity to fully arbitrate individual cases.

31 A few years after my own custody case was settled, my nephew became a father in the context of an *ALBM* relationship. At the time of the pregnancy, my nephew was living with a partner in Los Angeles, CA. To seek greater family support, my nephew and his partner moved to central California and resided in the home of his mother (my sister). These living arrangements worked on a temporary basis; however, a custody dispute began when the partner relocated, with the baby but without mutual consent, to her parent's home in Northern California. A legal dispute began with both parents desiring full custody of the baby.

32 Hearing about these events from a distance, I decided to take family leave time to go to California to provide care and support. Previous experiences of being *ALBM* in a child custody context informed my assumption that sustained personal support and an awareness of family court processes would be an asset to my nephew during the preparation for the court action. As a younger adult, my nephew and his siblings were a source of emotional connection and early experiences in caring for children, and seeing my nephew's struggles as a new father reminded me of a broader social context related to race, gender, and parenthood. Being subjected to implicit bias is a risk when Black or interracial families turn to family court to resolve differences. Cultural assumptions about Black hypersexuality and sexual irresponsibility, assumptions that have been reinforced through racially-provocative disparagement of the Black family as dysfunctional and welfare-dependent, can be embodied by ways that the competence and commitment of a Black parent are questioned in a court setting. Anti-Black stereotypes can influence legal system responses to bi-racial couples as well, despite the longstanding *Loving v. Virginia* decisions that prohibits racial discrimination in family law:

[The] enforcement of child custody, adoption laws, and criminal laws, to name a few, operate together to effectively legally sanction and deter interracial relationships, even when laws have the objective of regulating other activity (Kim 779).

The influence of racial stereotyping in legal settings creates a hazard for Black people that resembles other instances where *de jure* discrimination is prohibited but *de facto* discrimination continues; the mechanism for *de facto* discrimination in this case is "a proxy regulation of interracial relationships" through court processes (Kim 779). Such discrimination is a particular risk in cases involving Black-white marriages, which in the most recent U.S. Census still represented only 7.9% of all interracial marriages (Kim 776).

33 My nephew's daughter was born to unmarried, interracial (Black male, white female) parents, complicating factors in an emerging legal dispute over custody. To provide care and concern during my days in California, I had several conversations with my nephew to help him anticipate the challenges he may encounter in his pursuit of a mutually agreeable settlement of the custody issues. The issue of implicit bias is a general concern for Black people interacting with the court system, and for a larger black male like my nephew, who was about 6'5" with an athletic build, the physical contrast between him and his smaller white partner was visually striking. Additionally, in relation to gender identity, a pattern of findings shows that 75% of child custody cases are won by the female party, and nearly 40% of noncustodial fathers have no access to or visitation with their children (Child Custody Statistics). These findings indicate the influence of *tender years* doctrine that, until the 1970s, gave broad preference to mothers in custody cases under the presumption that "maternal nurture" was in the best interest of children of tender years (Rose and Wong 4). While the *tender years* standard has been amended in many states, its constitutionality was never challenged, and a more recent standard of a "primary caretaker presumption" is a frequently applied standard in custody decisions, favoring mothers more often than fathers (Rose and Wong 5). Despite these potential obstacles to a decision in his favor, I encouraged my nephew to advocate for what he felt was the best result for his new daughter since, despite the potential for bias, a court hearing provides a formal legal process for determining custody questions.

34 In his first appearance, the family court found in favor of visitation for my nephew, but temporary legal custody of his daughter was awarded to the partner. The temporary order was subject to an additional legal challenge, which my nephew desired to do. However, challenging the order required a four-hour trip to Sacramento for the filing of court papers. I rode along and shadowed him for this experience, which required overnight travel, a rental car and hotel, and lost wages to execute.

35 The court process unfolded over two days and three lengthy visits to the William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse in suburban Sacramento. Shadowing him during this process was evocative of an ethnographic exercise in participant observation. While I was not an objective observer, I watched the process closely enough to provide advice and support during my nephew's negotiation with a complex bureaucratic system that had legal standing to make final decisions about child custody. I observed what I would characterize as microaggressions –

subtle, indirect, and perhaps unintentional racial slights – as clerks and court advocates responded to his presence and questions. However, I was distanced enough from the immediate emotions of this context to encourage him to respond calmly and to get as much information as he could from each conversation without antagonizing anyone that might have a decision-making role in this process.

36 At the end of a long first day at the courthouse, we drove to the temporary place of residence for my nephew's daughter and ex-partner, which was her parents' house, also in suburban Sacramento. No invitation was given to enter the house, so by the side of our rental car, I met and held my great niece for the first time. I also did my best to maintain the care and comfort for my nephew, who was embarrassed by this situation and surprised by my courtesy under these circumstances. Past experiences with being *ALBM* had provided insight on negotiating through a potentially volatile situation involving child custody.

37 The court process required a second day at the Family Relations Courthouse, which was the final opportunity to file court papers challenging the order awarding legal custody to the ex-partner. With the backdrop of time pressure in a county where no friends or supportive family resided, we were informed by the court clerk that a local witness was needed to sign and file the court papers. Through brainstorming, we eventually did identify an appropriate witness and returned to the county building just in time to meet a 4 p.m. filing deadline. Ultimately, my nephew was able to advocate successfully for legal custody of his daughter, and I was left with a reminder of the importance of relationship literacy amid this time of change in the structure of families.

Marriage and Enduring Love – Personal Commitments

38 After navigating a winding path to a loving marriage, and I still strive to remember many important lessons I learned in my life as a single person and to bring those lessons into a larger social context. I have experienced the hurt when your ways of expressing love are considered less worthy, incomplete, or illegitimate, even by close friends or family. I have faced the challenge of having only yourself, it seems, to rely on for solving financial, health, and family problems. These challenges in mind, I remain committed to being a supportive presence when others feel alienated due to their marital status.

39 Recently published scholarship in family studies uses empirical tools to assess trends and outcomes, but the task remains of advocating for next common steps toward greater acceptance of all relationships. This work is personal as well as political, and in that spirit, I remain committed to being a supportive presence for others who feel alienated by heteronormativity in its multiple and intersectional dimensions. I join with Bell and Hastings who call for all of us “to become more accustomed to seeing interracial relationships as part of the fabric of a diverse country” (Bell and Hastings 768), and to nurture loving relationships of among all sexualities and asexualities. Despite continuing social sanction and state repression, I join with Lori Jo Marso in support of

the legitimate wishes of adults who choose not to marry, who are divorced, who remain single, who choose to live with their sibling(s), who desire to live with two or three others, or who wish to cohabit (and practice sexual relations) in a variety of ways outside the boundaries of the married couple. Not only should these kinds of consensual relationships be considered legitimate lifestyle choices by all, but the state should not...be linking our benefits and rights as citizens to our sexual and intimate choices (Marso 149-150).

I encourage all to challenge any devaluation that heterosexism imposes on people who are single by choice, or by lack of choice, or anyone else who chooses a relationship model that is outside of heteronormative frameworks. *Obergefell v. Hodges* is an excellent starting point for moving forward, but the arduous work continues of creating safer social spaces for enduring love.

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L.H. Stallings: *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. University of Illinois Press, 2015

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1 When describing his approach toward funk music, one of its most famed contributors, Rick James reflected in a 1981 “Creem” interview, that funk allows him to traverse taboo societal topics that make powerful statements on vice, criminality, and law enforcement (DiMartino). For L.H. Stallings in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Culture*, revolutionary funk is multi-faceted and structurally disruptive. Its revolutionary power radically transforms politics, sexuality, erotica, energy, technology, and artistic expression. Funk’s multi-sensory and multi-dimensionality complements black political consciousness and subsequent activism. Throughout this colorful, unconventional, and lively text, Gender Studies researcher, L.H. Stallings explores how “funk” operates to inform black social movements, culture, and music. Funk is effusive, an effervescent Foucauldian biopolitical energy transfer, a force without *being* forced. Stallings deconstructs how funk is a manifestation of “African diasporic philosophy about transition, movement, and embodiment that relates to art, work, sex, gender, and national boundaries” (Stallings 6). Funk has a multi-purpose agenda, complicating rigid social constructs, hierarchies, and limitations.

2 *Funk the Erotic* asks how music can inform one’s body and subjectivity. Through this, Stallings highlights the transaesthetic components of black cultural art forms. While French theorist Jean Baudrillard defines *transaestheticism* through a “rejection of modernity,” where Western civilization is viewed as largely inconsequential, Stallings expands his definition (Stallings 11). Stallings describes transaesthetics as sexuality, art, expression, economics, and politics without boundaries, specificity, or characterizing distinctiveness (Stallings 11). She focuses on how transaesthetics disrupt biologically determinist ideas of subjectivity, and “produces causality and agency,” impacting representation and resistance (Stallings 6). Ultimately, “transaesthetics” provide a paradigm with which marginality is centered and better understood. Further, Stallings uses *transing*, or a disciplinary tool that serves to challenge “hierarchies of

gender...sexuality, functions and form,” to explore “anti-work” ideology, discussed below (Stallings 11).

3 Transing functions as a conduit of resistance to challenging normative ideas of sexuality, gender, and cultural expression. Cultural expression helps frame Stallings’ focus on the sensory experience of black people and significance of bodies to black movements and artistic representation (Stallings 11, 205). “Sensorium” thus informs the way subjects coordinate “all of the body’s perceptual and proprioceptive signals, as well as the changing sensory envelope of the self” (Stallings 11, 238). Additionally, sensorium affords black movements’ multi-sensory functions essential to its flourishing.

4 This multi-sensory function of the body and black movement complement Fanonian configurations of the effects of colonization on the black body. Similarly, Michelle Stephens conceives of marked bodies in *Skins Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*, as a crucial framework for understanding the stigma that racism operates in. Stephens asserts that for marked bodies, colonization is dehumanizing and separates bodies from their subjectivity. Stallings wants to expand the potentiality of black subjectivity, challenging *epidermalization*. In “epidermalization,” racialization reduces the skin to “merely a covering of a body already trapped in the symbolic order,” while transaesthetics and funk add a newly transformative ‘marking’ on the black body, one of metamorphosing experience and expression (Stephens 12). While Fanon helps frame the limitations placed on black bodies, L.H. Stallings advances the scope of the discourse, arguing for a transformative subject formation that recognizes black peoples’ internal monologue and the complexities of black subjectivity.

5 *Funk the Erotic* analyzes the politics of work-sex work, work society, leisure, anti-work politics, and a post-work imagination. The nuances of black work narratives inform the “body in motion” that frame Stallings arguments (Stallings 17). This “body in motion” brings us to funk’s impact on what is produced in the interior. The multilayered marking on black bodies are reproduced through kinetic energy and sensation. Marking functions like smell, and radically transforms bodies subjected to hierarchical and oppressive institutions. Dominant institutions that police sexuality, reinforce “master narratives” on work related to sex, depoliticize work, and pathologize sexual morality, embody the regulatory organizing of sexual labor Stallings seeks to disrupt. A moralizing

approach to sex work, and relegation to an informal economy is compounded by static capitalist divisions of sexual labor. This works to stymie agency, fluidity, and autonomy for the black worker.

6 In “Freaks, Sacred Subjectivity, and Public Spheres,” Stallings begins by reconfiguring Eurocentric conceptualizations of the “freak.” The “freak” in colonial narratives of black bodies is Otherized and sexually deviant. Stallings argues the de-pleasuring of sex aligns with settler-colonizing agendas of nation-building and exploitative, capitalist labor objectives. Funk defies the colonial, labor-intensive agenda that serves Eurocentric configurations of sexuality and societal formation. Stallings addresses how anti-work ideology and black women’s skepticism of property relations, lay a foundation for a powerful black emancipatory struggle. Ultimately, funk music and anti-work ideology decide black bodies are the site of energy, power, and creativity, not purely exploitation, limitation, and abuse.

7 Moreover, Black women’s sexuality is historically contextualized in the text. Stallings draws upon the black feminist literary canon to help construct an agentive, autonomous black female sexuality. *Funk the Erotic* pushes back against earlier endorsements of ‘respectable’ sexual politics, reducing black women’s sexuality to asexual victimhood or plainly, celibacy. This is what Stallings refers to as “sexual pacifism” (Stallings 34, 61). Respectability rests upon a premise that unapologetic black female sexuality reinforces colonial tropes about black women’s ‘promiscuity’ or ‘licentiousness.’ Yet Stallings advocates a nuanced model of sexual reclamation, whereby black women can affirm their sexual agency without being vulnerable to antiquated articulations of what sexuality *should* mean to them. Puritanical notions of sex endorse sexual binaries for black women. Funk disrupts this stultifying approach to construct a transformative black female sexuality.

8 Funk has roots in internationalist spiritual discourses originating from West Africa as well, and forms cultural influences in the United States. Funk challenges Eurocentric, individualistic, and anthropocentric aspects of humanity, including exploitative labor practices, and rigid sexuality.

9 In “Superfreaks and Sites of Memory,” Stallings finishes with an idealized vision of sexuality as an important site of memory for the metaphysical, as it can be for the

material world. Memory serves to “advance sexuality,” seeing it as an “object of imagination” (Stallings 151). Moreover, funk’s embrace of pleasurable sex subverts sexually repressive enterprises and reimagines intimacy, aesthetics, Otherness, and power in *transing* black subjectivity. Furthermore, work is analyzed, framing anti-work as crucial for resisting an oppressive, labor intensive, and gender essentialist hegemonic capitalist order on black bodies.

10 Methodologically, Stallings studies black performance artists and exotic dancers to construct questions around black performance, the power of visibility, and importance of black sexual agency. Theatrical works of Lynn Nottage, the illuminating erotica of Wanda Coleman and others, challenge the stigma associated with unapologetic black female sexuality, the politics of eroticism, and performance.

Conclusion

11 L.H. Stallings’ *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* is an innovative and creative exploration into the impact of funk music, work, art, transaesthetics, and the politics of black erotics on matters of resistance, social movements, and subjectivity. Funk complicates Eurocentric constructions of bodily movement, gender dynamics, and sexuality. While reading, I was curious how African-American female entertainers like Josephine Baker fit into the narrative of black female bodily autonomy, performance, and visibility that Stallings unpacks here.

12 If the themes explored in this text are of continual interest to the reader, Jennifer Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Duke University Press, 2014), offers complementary analysis on the necessity of affirming black female spaces where black sexuality is free from derision or regulation. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* is an important addition to Gender and Sexuality Studies, Black Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, queer theory, and queer of color critique. This creative text crafts a limitless subjectivity, ‘transes’ the status quo, and expresses the nuances of black female sexuality.

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