

## *The Wedding Complex*

## FORMS OF BELONGING IN MODERN AMERICAN CULTURE



Elizabeth Freeman

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*Edited by Michèle Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg,  
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## *Preface*

One can easily imagine ceremonies with a difference—in which people might solemnize a committed household, ironize their property sharing, pledge care and inheritance without kinship, celebrate a whole circle of intimacies, or dramatize independence from state-regulated sexuality. A movement built around such ceremonies could be more worthwhile and more fun than the unreflective demand for state-sanctioned marriage. Indeed, some people already experiment in these ways. Why do they get no press?

—Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*<sup>1</sup>

Like many projects, this one began with an experience of cognitive dissonance. Even as I did activist work for same-sex partnership benefits at the university where I began graduate work during the early 1990s, I felt dubious about the politics of what I was involved in. I was certainly persuaded that domestic partnership policies and even gay marriage might transform gender as we know it. The marriage relation has historically worked to establish some people (“men”) as economic providers, and others (“women”) as sexual, reproductive, and domestic providers under the law. So it seemed clear that installing two people of the same sex into this structure might productively dismantle “manhood” and “womanhood” as opposite and complementary economic categories—though that work has in many ways been accom-



plished by reforms in domestic property law. It also seemed possible to me that same-sex marriage might productively muddle the gendering of parenthood, in which women are legally construed in terms of their supposedly prepolitical, “natural” relation to the children they bear, and their husbands are granted a legal form of guardianship that transcends and supersedes even the rights of the original male contributor of genetic material.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even as I recognized these possibilities, the rhetoric of the gay marriage and domestic partnership movements disturbed me. Its spokespeople often exalted sexual monogamy, shared property, and cohabitation as if they were the highest forms of commitment, frequently denigrating other ways of life as amoral or uncivilized.<sup>3</sup> Even as I believed that gay people deserved whatever rights straight people had, it seemed clear that domestic partnership policies or legalized gay marriages certainly wouldn’t question the culturally privileged status of couplehood, or the dominant assumption that couplehood entails monogamy, shared living quarters, pooled property, and so on. More important, legalizing same-sex partnerships would not question the way that marriage law has intersected with a more general transformation of public resources into private perquisites over the past two decades. In the contemporary United States, that is, marriage may have less impact on the division between men’s and women’s *roles* than on that between coupled people’s and uncoupled people’s *access to public resources*. For marriage law ensures that privileges and benefits accrue to those who are willing to limit their outwardly acknowledged sexual relations to one other person, and to oblige themselves to the care and maintenance of that person and any children that result from this union, “forsaking all others,” as the Protestant *Book of Common Prayer* puts it.<sup>4</sup> This last dictum is significant: marriage law may to a certain extent financially reward those who can limit the horizon of their social obligations, but it also allows the state to forsake the burden of caring for dependents. Why should any of us on the so-called Left be for *this*?<sup>5</sup>

So while I did work for policies that would equalize gay and straight partnerships at my university, I also increasingly doubted that economic or social privileges should attend to these kinds of relationships and not to others. Granting same-sex couples the benefits accorded to married heterosexuals would contribute—rather than criticizing or insisting on alternatives—to a privatized culture in which individual households are increasingly responsible for primary human caretaking functions such as physical shelter, health care, child support, and maintenance of the elderly, and in which

people without such households are increasingly vulnerable. Partnership benefit laws might even increase people's likelihood of getting married or moving in together for economic reasons even if they would prefer to remain spatially or financially separate. Crucially, cultural and legal recognition of same-sex couples would do nothing to enfranchise the relationships that have also been fundamental to queer life: friendships, cliques, tricks, sex buddies, ex-lovers, activist and support groups, and myriad others.

What would the world be like if intimate couplehood did not have to function as an economic safety net for so many people? At the very least, I wished that if core human needs had to be met by private constituencies rather than public funds, people could share their perks within whatever small-scale social configurations they chose—in short, that institutions including the state would cease to make a singular form of love and sex into the matrix for its allocation of resources. What if one could have each of the things that marriage combines with a different person or small group? What if I could live with my mother, but still give my best friend hospital visitation rights and extend my health insurance benefits to my ex-lover?<sup>6</sup>

But imagine the paperwork. Like many cultural critics trained in literature, I'm not prepared to draft policy. Instead, I have come to wish, more simply, that there were no such thing as legal marriage for straight people, gay people, or anyone else—no mechanism that privatizes and automatically packages together such incommensurate elements as the sharing of material goods and shelter, expectation of ongoing sexual relations, extension of institutional benefits, and social recognition of a relationship. I do recognize that what historians Lisa Duggan and Nancy Cott have called the “disestablishment” of marriage from the state would bring special dangers to dependents (at the very least, women, children, and the elderly) who must turn to state law for help in cases of abuse and neglect in their household environment.<sup>7</sup> But the state could certainly address violence between intimates without privileging marriage—indeed, the state's increasing treatment of domestic violence in the same terms that it deals with violence between strangers has actually benefited vulnerable members of society. In the end, I have come to desire the final disappearance of what Michel Foucault labels the “deployment of alliance,” or the state's maintenance of a social order by fixing the routes by which names, property, and other protected forms of cultural recognition travel.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Foucauldian “deployment of sexuality” is not the endpoint I hope

for either (nor is it Foucault's). The task is still, as he says, to imagine and put into practice new ways of being in relation, and I would add, to imagine representational possibilities commensurate with these new modes of connection: to produce something like a deployment of affinity.<sup>9</sup> I have come to wish that the more intangible benefits of social recognition and cultural intelligibility might accrue outside of state purview, and for a wide variety of intimate liaisons—the aforementioned friendships, cliques, tricks, sex buddies, ex-lover relations, activist and support groups, and beyond. But how? As I was thinking these things through, my most startling moment of cognitive dissonance came at a wedding. During the first of the two years that the activist group I was part of worked for domestic partnership benefits, we threw a mass “marry-in” in the university's central quadrangle. Some couples used this wedding as a public ceremony of commitment to one another and the idea that same-sex couplehood deserved institutional benefits. But all kinds of people who were more ambivalent about couplehood and/or marriage also showed up to symbolize and collectively affirm their shared histories, plans for a future together, and ongoing connections. As Ellen Lewin's ethnographic work on same-sex commitment ceremonies has demonstrated, many people use weddings to signal their ties to religious communities and extended families.<sup>10</sup> And many seemed to be at our marry-in to figure themselves as connectable and connected, period. For as anthropologist Robert Brain contends, Western culture lacks public modes of expression for emotional ties that fall outside of structured kin groups, but that do not constitute even informal couplehood, such as friendship dyads, love triangles, and extra-familial intergenerational bonds.<sup>11</sup> At the University of Chicago, then, groups of roommates married one another, a woman married her motorcycle, pairs of best friends stood up together, and a sexual threesome marched down the aisle. This wedding did not, of course, permanently (or even momentarily) reorganize the *institutional* interrelations among sexual practice, material resources, and social recognition. Nevertheless, it did tap into what felt like a queer desire to imagine and represent something different from the social choices at hand, which at the time and even now, seemed to consist of isolated individuality, domesticated long-term couplehood, or membership in an abstract, homogeneous collectivity like the gay community or official nation. What felt queerest at the marry-in was the unpredictability of the small-scale alliances that organized people's lives, for which they clearly wanted to make a public claim and an aesthetic statement.

I was startled by my own and other people's attraction to the wedding form as a means for doing these things, when it seemed so directly metonymic of an institution that many of us found so politically suspect. Didn't the wedding mystify heterosexuality, making it look natural, inevitable, and sacred? Didn't it stage a scene of manufactured consent, especially by women, to compulsory heterosexuality? Didn't it separate the couple from their previous social networks, glorifying their relationship with one another over their ties to parents, extended family, friends, and other lovers past or present? Didn't it force its participants and audience members to spend time, emotions, and money with no guarantee of a return investment on their own relationships? If many of us felt that *marriage law* could not be queered, why did the wedding ritual seem to lend itself to such interesting fabulations? Even in the absence of all the gifts that are supposed to provide people's primary motivation to have a nuptial ceremony, what did it mean for so many of us to want a wedding, but not a marriage?

I began to gather texts in which the wedding did not necessarily instantiate a legal marriage but instead tapped into fantasies that were irreducible to the wish for long-term domestic couplehood recognized by the state. Rather than doing fieldwork (though I did go to a few bridal fairs and weddings) or interviews (though many cocktail parties I attended devolved into competitions for the most interesting wedding story), I accumulated primarily fictional literary, media, and performance texts, reading them alongside, and treating them as part of, both the material culture of the wedding and the history of Anglo-American marriage law. This was partly the default result of having been trained as a scholar of literature, yet what I found also contradicted much of what literary critics have said about the relationship between narrative and weddings.

Literary critics have long described the wedding in terms of aesthetic, social, and psychic closure. In theories of comedy, of which the "courtship plot" is paradigmatic, narrative itself moves inexorably forward toward a wedding, which situates the characters in their proper social relation to one another and quashes any unstable subplots that the narrative has generated along the way.<sup>12</sup> For example, as Joseph Boone notes of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel's final two words, "united them," tie the love knot at the exact same moment that they tie up the story's last loose threads.<sup>13</sup> In the "marriage plot," through which accounts of literary realism have been articulated, the action begins shortly after a wedding, and the text goes on to

elaborate a state of connubial impasse, eventually ceasing to be a narrative at all.<sup>14</sup> In this view, the wedding halts both desire and plot, and minute descriptions of exterior details and interior psychic states substitute for the forward-moving dynamic of comedy. A crucial example here might be George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, in which Dorothea marries in one sentence at the end of chapter 10, only to find out by chapter 20 that "in the weeks since her marriage . . . the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither. . . ." <sup>15</sup> As this rhetoric of spatial and psychological confinement implies, Eliot's portrait of a marriage is also one of narrative stasis, of a story that can go nowhere.

But compare these texts to the 1987 pornographic film *Sulka's Wedding*, directed by Kim Christy, in which a male-to-female transsexual celebrates her surgical self-realization with a wedding.<sup>16</sup> Sulka's transformation of herself into a bride allows her to cross the line between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and even between old and young—for she cheerfully has intergenerational sex with both men and women in her gown and veil. Or, in what might be a fairer comparison of similar genres, consider Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 novel *Funny Boy*, a gay male Sri Lankan Canadian émigré's coming-of-age tale. In the opening chapter, the protagonist Arjie plays a game called "bride-bride," in which he and his cousins dress up and enact a wedding. This game allows Arjie to imaginatively transform himself into, variously, a Sinhalese cinema star, a religious deity, and an ordinary grown-up woman—to migrate across the boundaries between the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic identities that threaten to erupt into civil war, between domestic and public spaces, religious and secular iconography, male and female identities, adulthood and childhood. In fact, the game becomes the catalyst for a battle between Arjie and a female cousin who has been raised in Europe, and the two fight over the bridal sari. This might seem to be a rather simplistic use of the wedding, or more precisely the figure of the bride, as a representative of "traditional" culture embattled by Western norms—except that there are two brides, and the winning one is a boy obsessed with mass cultural icons rather than mythologized indigenous folkways. Indeed, Arjie's triumph as a better bride than the Westernized girl marks the beginning of his resistance to the sexual rules enforced by both the British Empire and the postcolonial Sinhalese state, a resistance that develops later on in the novel into a queer embrace of his own doubly minoritized, contradictory gay and Tamil identities.<sup>17</sup>

These texts use the wedding explicitly to reorganize gender. But their social imaginations also reach far beyond the mere neutralization of gendered economic and parental categories via same-sex marriage, or reforms in divorce and property law. They do not prioritize gender over other aspects of subjectivity or make its transformation contingent on a same-sex object-choice. Instead, they insist on connecting alternative possibilities for gendered embodiment to relationships between and among subject, family, nation, market, and other domains. *Sulka's Wedding* and *Funny Boy* do this partly by using the nuptial ritual as a device of narrative opening and semiotic linkage. As part of what Arjun Appadurai calls "a social *imaginaire* built largely around re-runs" in these texts, the ordinary wedding seems to provide neither psychic nor narrative closure, but rather an array of detachable narrative parts—characters, genres, story lines—that can be recombined into "proto-narratives of possible lives."<sup>18</sup> Not only does the wedding provide the representational toolkit for plotting an alternative life in these texts; it seems to provide the temporal dynamic for doing so as well. By using the wedding as a catalyst for "regressive" behavior of various kinds, *Sulka's Wedding* and *Funny Boy* also suggest that the wedding disrupts the Oedipal logic of "plot" itself, in which polymorphous desire yields to heterosexual object-choice, children succeed fathers, effect follows cause, and endings confirm beginnings.<sup>19</sup>

In short, though literary critics have punningly linked the dominance of "wedlock" with narrative "deadlock," when the wedding does appear in any sustained way in literary texts, it often produces anything and everything *but* closure. Even the word "wedlock" does not derive, as one might suppose, from the Old Frisian *wed*, "pledge" or "covenant," combined with the Old English *loc*, or "enclosure." Instead, the suffix "-lock" derives from the Common Teutonic *laiko*, "play," the High German *leich*, "song," and the Gothic *laik-s*, "dance." Thus wedlock means, roughly, "pledging by playing," or promising and thereby making a future by means of collective embodied performances.<sup>20</sup> The modern English word "wedding" actually disguises the kinetic, theatrical aspects of the nuptial pageant that, as I argue throughout this book, allow disruptive anachronisms to flicker forth, sometimes into flaming visions of unrealized social possibility.

The very form of a text, then, is part of how it works out the relations among suppressed or forgotten histories, the limitations or possibilities of a particular moment, and their imaginative transformation into a different

future—the relations among has been, what must be, and what could be. This, too, is central to my understanding of queer politics: the idea that what has failed to survive, often most legible as mere residue in a cultural text, might be a placeholder for the not-yet.<sup>21</sup> Working with literary and filmic texts, I aimed to disinter two things: a history of the dialectic between the wedding form and the institutional control of heterosexual couplehood, and a future of possibilities for making minoritized or subjugated affinities between people more culturally legible. I ended up with an archive of “wedding texts” that began in the 1830s, when the elements of the Anglo-American “white wedding”—a bride in an eggshell-colored dress and veil, orange blossoms, bridesmaids and best men, engagement rings and honeymoons—began their slow convergence into a form that is now taken as the standard against which all other U.S. weddings seem to count as mere variations. The archive took me right up to the surfeit of wedding films and performances that appeared during the 1990s, about which I will say more in chapter 1.

To my surprise, the dynamics of works that centralized the wedding were quite different than that of the narrative courtship plot. In the latter, various alternatives to marriage are systematically deployed and then rejected or overcome, and the wedding finale signals, at best, acquiescence to a social order only slightly modified by bourgeois feminine values. But in the texts I’d gathered, when a wedding took over a plot, narrative and social chaos ensued. Many of the weddings in my archive of found objects seemed to grant their participants some kind of transitivity: the ability to be both black and white, for instance, both male and female, both child and adult; the desire to go somewhere else in place or time; the desire to extend beyond one’s own bodily or psychic contours. And many weddings worked out fantasies about collectivity and publicity: the desire to be part of something publicly comprehensible *as* social, to create some group form for which the bourgeois couple was not metonymic but antithetical or just irrelevant. This suggested to me that the wedding might do cultural work at an interesting angle—perhaps slantwise—to that of marriage law. Indeed, in many of the texts I collected, the wedding actually served to demystify marriage, illuminating and critiquing the power of marriage law to maintain structures that do not seem immediately connected to it, such as the nation-state, racial taxonomies, and so on. Simultaneously, their weddings made forbidden (or forgotten) alliances tangible—as points of resistance to marital supremacy, and as figures for a

different social order. And their weddings often scrambled the temporal sequencing on which not only the love plot but also the intertwined narratives of sexual development and racialized national progress depend.

This doubled work of wild fantasy and rigorous demystification seems to me to be fundamentally queer: to “queer” something is at once to make its most pleasurable aspects gorgeously excessive, even to the point of causing its institutional work to fail, and to operate it against its most oppressive political results. *The Wedding Complex* details these operations as they pertain in particular to marriage. Insofar as the word queer insists on sex practice as a central aspect of culture making, I’m not sure I would count every nonmarital or even failed wedding as automatically queer. But the social alternatives that are exposed by the excessive and/or failed weddings I will discuss do seem to resonate with a genuinely queer politics, one that insists on the mobility of identification and desire, on the ongoing production of shared meanings and unforeseen constituencies, and on exposing links between the “private” sphere and various “public” techniques of control. So far in at least some recent queer social theory, though, the magical sign for these kinds of commitments has been the flip side of the cohesive couple, the purely physical and often anonymous sexual encounter—and not the tangled network of ex-lovers, concomitant relationships, unconsummated erotics, and so forth that structure so many queer lives, and that often get homogenized as “just friends.” Of course, the wedding is not the only possible form with which to “think” this social field, but its sexual meanings, its display of overlapping circuits of intimacy, its hyper-femininity, its improper, delicious self-aggrandizing dramatization of what is, after all, a relatively common event, resonates with experiences and sensibilities that in myself I can only identify not only as queer but deeply femme. All of this is to say that though gender is one aspect of the analysis that follows, the gendered lens through which I look is often femme rather than gender-neutrally queer or heterosexually female.

This book’s point of departure is a hunch that there is a productive non-equivalence between the institution of marriage and the ritual that supposedly represents and guarantees it. I use literary and other cultural texts to disaggregate the wedding so that it becomes metonymic not of the timeless, transcendent nature of marriage but of a history of struggle among various institutions, and between these institutions and the subjects they engender,



for control over the forms and meanings of intimate ties. Understood as a historically sedimented scene, the wedding has the capacity to suggest alternative futures to the one toward which U.S. culture seems to be moving, where long-term, property-sharing, monogamous couplehood accrues institutional benefits and social sanction, and other elective affinities cease to have any broad social meaning at all. It is toward any number of different futures that I launch this work.

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## *Chapter One*

### **LOVE AMONG THE RUINS**

What is marriage, is marriage protection or religion, is marriage renunciation or abundance, is marriage a stepping-stone or an end. What is marriage.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All*<sup>1</sup>

Between 1989 and the time of this writing, at least thirty-five Hollywood films, seventeen made-for-television movies, and eight national theatrical productions have put a wedding at the center of their plots. In a typical 1990s television season, eleven sitcoms opened or closed their series with a wedding; many national entertainment magazines produce “wedding issues” featuring celebrities; both network and cable stations regularly devote hour-long specials to home wedding videos and Hollywood weddings; talk shows and even the game show “Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?” stage live weddings on camera; and new Internet wedding sites appear and disappear every day. Meanwhile, print and television ads pile up wedding images to sell things unrelated to marriage: a short list might include Pillsbury frosting, Visa Gold cards, Estée Lauder’s Beautiful perfume, Loving Care hair dye, and MCI, with new ones appearing every time I try to finish this sentence.<sup>2</sup> This explosion of wedding images is different than, though obviously related to, the expansion of the bridal service industry or changes in the demographics of marriage. It looks like a national wedding complex in the psychoanalytic

sense—America's terrible case of heterosexual exhibitionism, or perhaps its mass fixation on the primal scene of induction into that most insular relationship, the married couple.

Yet many of the weddings cluttering the national mediascape are actually gay: the documentary short film *Chicks in White Satin* (dir. Elaine Holliman, 1992) won an Oscar for its look at lesbian weddings; *Late Bloomers* (dirs. Gretchen and Julia Dyer, 1996) featured two women marrying; the television shows *Roseanne*, *Friends*, and *Northern Exposure* have all featured same-sex weddings; and cover stories in the national gay magazines *Out*, *The Advocate*, and *Girlfriends* have focused on the planning and styling of same-sex weddings. Even contemporary representations of "straight" weddings often focus on a gay participant whose presence in the ceremony and exclusion from its results seems to guarantee heterosexual marriage, as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Meet the Parents*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *The Object of My Affection*, and *In and Out*. This proliferation of gay weddings, and gay people in weddings, hardly reflects a mainstream commitment to the idea of same-sex marriage, which has been rejected in many popular polls and state voting referenda as well as in the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act that defines marriage as a union between "one man and one woman."<sup>3</sup> Even many lesbian and gay people, myself included, feel ambivalent about gay marriage. As I noted in the preface, some of us may believe that straight people should not have privileges that are denied to gay people but also feel that legalizing gay marriage would simply extend a set of privileges to monogamous, long-term, property-sharing couples at the expense of those whose lives cannot be so neatly packaged. A state that promotes marriage also disenfranchises people whose primary affinities do not get into the couple form and contributes to a culture that stereotypes these people as isolated failures, as immature and/or sexually indiscriminating, or as part of some mysteriously primitive social system.<sup>4</sup>

Yet if ratings and box-office numbers are any indication, many straight, gay, and even queer people may want to watch and participate in weddings for reasons that have little to do with a wish to obtain legal marriage. Audiences seem compelled by the legally nonbinding commitment ceremony, and willing to be both voyeur and witness to the fantastic ritual of people making promises with no legal contract to enforce them. This compulsion may be undergirded by a longing for inclusion or a wish to watch the ceremony collapse under the weight of its own solemnities, but in the case of queers, we

may also identify with the expansive, figurally complex sociability suggested by some element of the wedding ritual. Many contemporary weddings, that is, suggest provocative visions of what the wedding itself might do beyond inaugurating a marriage; indeed, some of the richest contemporary images of weddings have little to do with gay or straight unions. Instead of featuring an ordinary couple with extraordinary accessories (as in the scuba, nudist, or bungee-jumping weddings of the 1970s and 1980s), quite a few mass-mediated wedding spectacles of the last decade or so dramatize ties altogether outside of, beyond, or even antithetical to couplehood itself.

For instance, the wedding has become a means of figuring and performing a relationship between persons and objects. A recent television ad for the Mazda automobile features a woman in full bridal regalia, sans groom, promising to “love, honor, and obey” in a vow that cuts two ways: in order to drive the car she must submit to its superior technology, yet that very technology enables the car to respond to her driving technique. This wedding registers the possibility of will, of intentionality, of *savoir faire* in a material landscape, of mastering consumer culture’s vast terrain. Using the wedding to link people and objects seems also to create a space of permission to publicize other social ties—friendships, extended family, nonparental intergenerational commitments, subcultural alliances, and so on. For example, a tv advertisement for Nike women’s sportswear shows a group of girls playing soccer, accompanied by a voice-over of females chanting wedding vows. Rather than a kiss passing from lip to lip, the soccer ball passing from Nike-clad foot to foot bonds the girls; the exhortation to “love, honor, and obey” portrays teamwork in terms of emotional ties rather than political or even athletic goals. Accompanied by another chant (say, the pledge of allegiance), the soccer game might be a figure for feminist activism in the civic sphere. But it would lose the erotic torque it gains from the wedding vows, which make the game into a specifically feminine expression of same-sex bonding, both suggesting and deflecting lesbian possibilities.

This overproduction of weddings seems odd in a country that has, since the formation of the New England colonies that count as the official beginning of its history, purported to follow a juridical rather than religious model in the making of its marriages. The civil courts have the last word on the validity of nuptial unions in the United States, and even the theocratic Puritans insisted that marriage ceremonies take place in secular spaces, in front of lay officials rather than clergy. Given this history, one would think that residents of the



United States could do without weddings altogether, simply registering partnerships the way they register births, voter status, automobiles, and patents; this is more or less the aim of the contemporary movement to extend legal and economic benefits to domestic partnerships or registered households. One might even expect to see long-term commitment dissociated altogether from state law, so that the decision to share living facilities, property, sexual pleasure, or child-rearing obligations with another person would be irrelevant to the governmental distribution of benefits and privileges.

Yet neither the reformist domestic partnership movement nor the more radical argument for disestablishing marriage takes seriously the need for whatever it is that weddings do: at the very least, they at once symbolize and multiply social ties, work in and with time, allow someone to be the star of a show, suggest the possibility of bodily and social transformations, and offer an elaborate series of visual icons to play with. Since the mid-1930s, the wedding industry has capitalized on these needs in order to promote an endless variety of goods and services. More recently, the national gay movement has tapped into these needs to advocate for the extension of rights and privileges to same-sex couples. Concurrently, the wedding seems to work as an emblem for the condition of belonging to constituencies *beyond* (if also sometimes constitutively connected to) the male-female couple: to proper gender, extended family, ethnic or religious constituencies, the nation, or a particular niche market. Yet, rather than producing these latter forms of belonging as homologous to couplehood—so that couplehood becomes, as Doris Sommer puts it, “the shorthand for human association”—the wedding often inadvertently plays forms of belonging against one another, so that the icons of one social configuration question the centrality of another.<sup>5</sup> Relatedly, some of the wedding’s specifically temporal operations may actually undermine its seemingly monumental ability to reduce a variety of social matrices to mere extensions of the marital dyad.

One way to get at these possibilities is to separate the wedding, at least provisionally, from its ostensible purpose of inaugurating a marriage. For if marriage is still imaginable without a “proper” wedding—as in a common-law union or courthouse registration—a wedding is supposed to serve as the inevitable precursor to a marriage. Yet the examples above, and most of the texts this book examines, partially or completely sunder the wedding from its legal ramifications, reveling in the expressive, theatrical, and symbolic aspects of the ritual. Focusing on the wedding itself reveals possibilities that are

lost when the purpose and result of “wedding” is presumed to be marriage as domestic law defines it: a monogamous, enduring, opposite-sex dyad with biological reproduction as its ostensible *raison d’être*. By undoing this presumption, texts that foreground the wedding as a production return to and rework the possibilities embedded in the ritual itself, asking in what ways the kinds of weddings people have, or dream of having, or thought they had, might be indices for forms of social life made possible in one domain but impossible in another, or in one historical moment but not another—or might even be avatars for changes in what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” new senses of collective being felt viscerally, in advance of their institutionalization in discourse.<sup>6</sup> In short, the desire for the symbolic apparatus that is the wedding and the legal apparatus that is marriage cannot be reduced to one another. It is important to at least momentarily unchain the wedding from marriage or even couplehood and to explore the dynamic between weddings and the marriages they supposedly stand for or produce.

In 1991, Su Friedrich made a film that did just that. *First Comes Love* premiered at that year’s New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, where some audience members complained that it was merely an advertisement for the gay marriage movement.<sup>7</sup> Shot in shimmery black-and-white, 16-millimeter film, this twenty-two-minute montage of four Italian Catholic weddings, interrupted by textual statements about same-sex marriage, does at first glance seem to traffic in mere envy of heterosexuality rather than critique it and to promote couplehood over other forms of intimacy. In its central shot, for instance, the bride and groom are seen from high above, standing at the altar, with the white aisle runner bisecting the frame and Richard Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus” as the sound track. This music fades into the sounds of Gladys Knight singing “It Could’ve Been Me.” Here, the filmmaker seems to “fall into line with the ritual,” as one reviewer asserts, aligning bride and groom, image and sound, visual splendor and emotional fulfillment in exactly the way that marriage is supposed to align two people with each other and the state.<sup>8</sup>

The altar scene cuts to an intertitle that reads, “If two men or two women wanted to legalize their commitment to each other, for any reason, they would be denied this privilege in the following countries.” This text is followed by a three-minute-long, alphabetized list of nations from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. In a white typeface against a black background, the intertitle creates a column in the very center of the screen, exactly matching the white aisle

runner, and then visually interrupts and replaces the wedding processional as the words stream upward and out the top of the frame. This text steals the whiteness and symmetry of the wedding to articulate what the viewer can now recognize as a new global political order. The alphabetical listing of these locales in a column aligns them along an axis other than the ones that officially conjoin nations, like geographic proximity, trade agreements, monetary systems, political theory, or religious ideology—specifically, that of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Depicting a “mass wedding” of individual countries into a world ordered by hetero-marital supremacy, *First Comes Love* is a momentary reminder that marriage is not only a relation between two people but also part of the process by which states ally with one another and create new citizens, especially through reciprocal immigration policies that naturalize “foreign” spouses.<sup>9</sup>

Thus Friedrich’s elaborate engagement with the wedding ceremony might in fact serve a certain global sexual imperialism, promoting marital couplehood as a regime of sensation, subjectivity, and social affinity that can cut across existing registers of race, class, nation, and even sexual orientation to produce something like a spousal planet. But this possibility is exactly what the film slowly unsettles, for it actually dramatizes the wedding as a queer counterpossibility to what it has pointedly demarcated as a multinational association of hetero-supremacist countries. On the formal level, *First Comes Love* breaks down the wedding, providing opportunities for reading it as a scene in which identity and belonging can be complicated rather than simplified, and alternative affinities between people can be distinguished from rather than merged with a new marital world order.<sup>10</sup>

This breakdown begins with the film’s opening. Over the words “First Comes Love . . . a film by Su Friedrich,” children’s voices chant a rhyme: “Lisa and George sittin’ in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Lisa with a baby carriage.” Narrating a male-female romance that ends as usual, with the woman doing all the child care, this chant is certainly a primer for compulsory heterosexuality. But the title “First Comes Love . . .” leaves the rhyme unfinished, substituting an ellipsis for the inevitable progression from kissing, to love, to marriage, to reproduction, to the asymmetrical allocation of gendered tasks. On the one hand, Friedrich certainly seems to intend the ellipsis to figure the lack of legal sanction for same-sex couplehood: for lesbian and gay partners, the title suggests, first comes love, then comes nothing. Certainly the chant that follows the title

might be filled in with new content, like “Wendy and Lisa” or “Gilbert and George.” Yet the ellipsis also creates a space of possibility wherein the temporal logic of the chant might be undermined: “First Comes Love . . .” and next, or before, comes what? In other words, what is missing is not just the legal status of “marriage” but the seriality and causal logic of “then.”

Rather than simply repeating the chant with a lesbian difference, though, Friedrich undermines its progressive narrative with her camera work. She shoots the weddings from the position of what one reviewer calls “part anthropologist, part kid at the candy-store window.”<sup>11</sup> As an “anthropologist,” of course, she reverses the power relations of ethnographic filmmaking by voyeuristically examining the dominant straight culture from a marginal point of view. But as a “kid,” she also aims to suture the viewer into the “before,” the infantilized subject position of someone who cannot enter into the wedding’s symbolics or fits imperfectly into its pageant.<sup>12</sup> From the sound of children’s voices chanting a progression they cannot yet enact, the film segues to its opening shot of two children. Later, the image of a little girl climbing rather laboriously up the church steps cuts to one of the bridesmaids ascending much more smoothly. In other scenes, Friedrich focuses on details that only someone of a child’s height would see straight on or she positions the camera from about three feet off the ground. *First Comes Love*, in short, uses the child as a figure for the polymorphous desires as well as prior personal and collective histories that marriage aims to erase. The point of view of the subject left below or behind, in a position of longing and incomprehension, halts the developmental logic of the playground chant, for that “first” point of view returns again and again.

But the figure of the child is merely a psychoanalytic intervention, a form of narrative disorientation and temporal regression that has no immediate public coordinates. Perhaps the film simply suggests that lesbians and gays are like children, stupidly falling in love with a social form that requires our abjection in order to maintain itself. Or perhaps *First Comes Love* means to point out that our history is intertwined with that of juveniles insofar as both children and adult queers have a long record of being legally barred from acting on their sexual desires. Although age-of-consent laws and laws against “sodomy” are historically and structurally interrelated, however, *First Comes Love* does not explore this phenomenon; that is simply not the project of the film.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Friedrich’s sound track, floating disjunctively over her image track, suggests psychic regression to “childhood” as a means of reanimating

lost historical moments and their corresponding kinship forms. The “juvenile” subject’s displacement from the wedding, the sound track hints, is not merely a result of her emotional immaturity but of historically located institutional forces that promote married couplehood over other kinds of relationships.

With the film’s sound track, Friedrich links her infantilizing camera work and images of psychological abjection to a horizon of historical and cultural displacement. The wedding footage is accompanied by a variety of bluesy songs from the 1960s and 1970s: Janis Joplin singing “Get It While You Can,” Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing,” and James Brown’s “Sex Machine” over a shot of the virginally white-clad bride. Various poignant and funny, these juxtapositions certainly interrogate the way that the wedding seems to sanctify heterosexual intercourse by erasing the individual erotic histories of the bride and groom: the songs interrupt the wedding ceremony with suggestions that the nuptial pair may have emotional and sexual ties that marriage law renders illegible, and that the ritual itself threatens to overwrite. But rather than simply celebrating a forbidden love object, these songs call forth sexual styles that monogamous gay or straight partnership cannot accommodate and that even mainstream gay culture seems to have renounced—ephemeral encounters, diffuse pleasures, flamboyant publicness, easy access to the technological mediations of pornography or sex toys. It is important, then, that several of *First Comes Love*’s songs come from the 1960s, an era whose vision of social justice was accompanied, some might even say propelled, by experiments in the forms and norms of intimacy. The songs also come from representatives of populations against whom marriage law has taken shape—straight black artists and queer artists of African and European ancestry, whose intersecting cultural history includes not only being barred from the privilege of marrying but also inventing and preserving associational forms other than monogamous nuclear families. The sound track thus expresses not only personal loss (the nuptial couple’s loss of natal family, prior sexual ties, and peer culture; Friedrich’s inability to marry her lover) but also the denial of kinship to whole cultures. In this way, the film implies that the wedding might work to consolidate not only heterosexual supremacy but more broadly, the hegemony of the Anglo-European nuclear family. The sound track also hints that the signs of the so-called white wedding—ivory gowns, pearls and diamonds, white flowers like orange blossoms and baby’s breath, and long misty veils—encode racial meanings too, though the film

does nothing with the suggestions. Yet at the same time, Friedrich's sound track makes the wedding into a scene for a certain *social* melancholia—melancholia for effaced forms and practices of *relationality* rather than a singular love object—and the insistent return of what has been effaced.

These disavowed possibilities are actually part of the Anglo-American white wedding's history and contemporary form. For crucially, the wedding ritual predates the state's control of marriage. The history of control over marriage suggests that the residual customary and religious elements in the ceremony might provide imaginary ways out beyond the state's promotion of monogamous, enduring couplehood. Other scholars have concentrated on the continuities among these institutions of control, on the way that each succeeding institution takes over and modifies aspects of the previous one so that the meaning and function of contemporary marriage seems dependent on a synthesis of patriarchal, Christian, governmental, and capitalist aims. But I am actually interested in the *discontinuities* between these three domains—on the dissonance within the nuptial ceremony produced by what each historical moment has foregrounded as the definitive sign of a valid marriage, and on the question of whether and how these discontinuities might be worked against marriage law and toward a recalibration of social life as we know it. And importantly, the present form of the white wedding is thoroughly saturated with commodity capitalism. Though the wedding industry seems to promote heterosexuality and link romantic partnership to material plenty, it also partakes in capitalism's unmaking of the nuclear family, a process in which shopping, consuming, and advertising actually create constituencies that compete with family ties.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, the wedding might have a more utopian or emancipatory place in theorizing about social change than marriage possibly could.

### *Something Old: On History*

Why does the white wedding make the couple, especially the bride, look sacred and untouchable even as it puts them on an often embarrassing regulatory display? Why does it englobe the couple in mystique, and yet also seem to make them run a gauntlet of spectators and pass a series of tests? Why does the wedding seem to flaunt the sanctity of couplehood and yet also display competing social connections? Answers to some of these questions emerge from recent ethnographies of twentieth-century "Western-style" wed-

dings in Asian countries, which emphasize the wedding's function of coordinating Anglo-American and Asian notions of subjectivity and social embeddedness, a couple's "Western" romantic involvement with one another and their "Eastern" status as emblems for a broader set of communal obligations. For instance, the anthropologist Walter Edwards argues that the Japanese "new style," commercialized white wedding does not stress the mystery and privacy of the couple per se. Instead, when Japanese wedding planners appropriate the stylized, abstracted, and detachable parts of the commercialized Anglo-American wedding, they enhance the Japanese ideal of every activity and pose as a gestalt, a form detached from other activities, and therefore complete in and of itself.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, these weddings suggest the incompleteness of the individual, interrelatedness of human beings, and necessity of social respectability. While bodily gestures and actions are detached and folded inward, in other words, subjectivity and couplehood are folded outward and merged with a larger order. This paradox need not depend on an opposition between East and West, though: one can see in *First Comes Love's* movement between spectacle and candid camera, between shimmery long shots and close-ups of rear ends, yawns, and other unsanctioned moments, that the Western-style wedding itself coordinates the ideal of an inviolable inward subjectivity with that of an ongoing outward responsiveness to the demands of an audience, the production of a private zone for the couple with the establishment of public authority over marriage.

Anthropologists have also noted the ways that Asian weddings, particularly Western-style ones, combine commercialized icons of "modernity" and those of invented national or local traditions, with the bride's body as the scene for these mediations. For example, Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni describes the contemporary urban Japanese wedding as a production of modern "Japaneseness," and Laurel Kendall calls its counterpart in Korea a "rite of modernization."<sup>16</sup> Yet oddly, in these and other analyses, "kinship" itself seems to remain beyond cultural change. Even when anthropologists use the wedding to capture the way that a given social group negotiates broad cultural continuities and discontinuities, they often treat the ritual as a relatively stable and straightforward index for the small-scale organization of humans through marriage and reproduction: each role in the wedding is presumed to express an ongoing, structurally significant relationship, as though the ritual's end product were always the same.<sup>17</sup> But no wedding works as such a transparent window onto the social structure. At the very least, even in the most ordinary

wedding, ephemeral identities and affinities are suddenly and momentarily visible: In the Anglo-American wedding these include the maid of honor, bridesmaid, flower girl, best man, usher, secular officiant, and so on. For most couples, these “extras” have no ongoing role or legal status beyond the ceremony; their functions do not carry into the future even to the same extent as other extralegal ties such as godparenthood or ritualized blood brotherhood. But they do provide glimpses of older models whereby the couple was both more formally supervised and enmeshed in larger kin and peer groups, and of possible futures in which dyadic partnership might be one unremarkable social form among many. In fact, as the disjunction between sound track and image track in Friedrich’s film suggests, the wedding actually vacillates between restrictive and expansive visions of the social, between elevating the couple and displaying alongside them the very things that compete with couplehood—ties with extended kin, social and religious movements, friends.

This dynamic is a result of specific changes in the function and meaning of Anglo-American marriage: once a means of subordinating a couple’s relationship to a larger social framework, marriage has become more and more a means of separating a couple from broader ties and obligations.<sup>18</sup> The wedding’s contradictory restrictive and expansive, privacy- and publicity-making qualities, then, condense a millennium-long history of institutional and popular struggle for control over marriage in Western Europe and North America. To sketch this history simply and schematically, marriage has been regulated—and weddings officiated—by an overlapping sequence of institutions. Before the Christianization of Europe, fathers, families, and community customs regulated marriage, to be followed by priests and the church, then by magistrates and civil law, now inflected by a commercial industry, with the couple’s authority over the formation of their own marriage waxing and waning alongside these institutions. Prior to the eleventh century, parents, and to a lesser extent the local lay community, supervised the courtship and betrothal process; the nuptial ritual involved friends as well. Shortly after the first millennium began, the Roman Catholic Church began to take control of marriage, first overriding parental prerogative by sanctioning the couple’s authority to marry themselves and then installing the priest as the crucial officiant; the number of participants necessary to validate a wedding narrowed to the couple and perhaps a handful of others. During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the English state usurped this control, though only its American colonies actually exercised total civic power over