

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*¹

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 pre-political, “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.²

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.³ 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.⁴ 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*?⁵

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?⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 nowhere. . . ." ¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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."¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.