

THE STARK WORK OF LONGING: A CONVERSATION ON AESTHETICS AND ATTACHMENT

Lauren Berlant and Laura Letinsky have collaborated on two projects since the late 1990s: Letinsky's book of photographs, *Venus Inferred*, and a course they co-taught at the University of Chicago, titled "What's Love Got to Do with It: Genres of Modern Romance." Berlant has since gone on to write *Desire/Love*, *The Female Complaint*, *Cruel Optimism*, and numerous essays on intimacy, love, revolution, and sentimental normativity in relation to liberal law, Marxism and many varieties of Queer Theory. Letinsky has since gone on—in books such as *Hardly More Than Ever*, *Now, Again, After All*, and coming up in 2014, *Ill Form and Void Full*—to chronicle the dissolution of the promise of love, from the photographs of beautiful, awkward personhood to homes and objects once full of love, now hollowed, unused, or completely virtual, waiting for the next fantasizers.

Asked to join the *Carceral Notebooks* to talk about marriage, they decided to interview each other about where they are now, asking each other questions they never dared ask.

1. **Lauren Berlant (LB):** Laura, let's start with the occasion on which we speak—not the potential Supreme Court decision on how legal and illegal gay marriage will be, but the

presence of a discussion of marriage in a thing called *Carceral Notebooks*. Do you think marriage is a prison?

Laura Letinsky (LL): That's hilarious. And yes, at least in part. Who's the jailed and who is the jailer? Over the years, my understanding of this form of coupledness has undergone a seismic shift, due in part to experience and the work we've done together. Marriage gets perpetuated as the happy ending to the love story. This is a state (I know we'll come back to the issue of the state, unavoidably) to which one aspires. It's a sign of being loved and loving one, and only one other, the doorway to adulthood that involves procreation and property investment. It's a sign of belonging.



Laura Letinsky (courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery), *Untitled (Laura and Eric)*, 1993, from *Venus Inferred* series, 48" x 60"

The logistical, historical, and political function of marriage would seem sorely served by the romantic cloak of marriage. The demands of marriage have been proven difficult for almost anyone to achieve independent of fundamentalist religion (joking!, sort of) thereby necessitating a realm secondary to that of the initial thrall around “marriage” production, everything from *Brides* magazine, advertising revenue during *Sex in the City*, and the penultimate fluffy white wedding cake/dress. There’s surely enough marriage how-to’s to line every couple’s therapist’s office around the world! So, are we inadequate to the perfection of marriage? To consider it as a prison makes me want to think about it as a space, yet of course this is but one of its forms. Just as a prison is a physical space, as a state of mind marriage is perhaps more oppressive.

Or maybe it’s just me. Marriage, as we’ve constructed it, avails its participants admittance into the realm of the normal, with real benefits including health, taxes, and shared parenting. I do think that the pragmatics of this cannot be underrated, yet neither can the problem of its presence so as to insure these basic rights. But then, the problem of marriage as an ideal perpetuated in our culture and more conservative environments where the disenfranchisement of women is institutionalized in this relationship makes obvious that marriage is a form of property investment.

Can this institution be reconceptualized? I want to hope so. Selfishly so I suppose as at least here and now it seems to hold potential for a positive place in which to raise kids, share resources, and maybe even deep affection with occasional “hot tit killer fuck” in the present, rather than the past, as sung by Sonic Youth in “Tuff Gnarl”.

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Wondering how you'd answer this question? Years ago I feared that to let go of love's romantic promise came at too great a cost, whereas now I see that the promise itself carries with it enormous and horrible repercussions—not necessarily unintentional rather a self-imposed blindness. There's got to be another, more productive and fertile space.



Laura Letinsky (courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery), *Untitled #8*, from the series *Fall*, 2009, 48" x 58"

LB: I find I can barely track what you've just written. Each paragraph involves bursts of rebooting, asides, parentheses, tonal shifts—the jittery performance of an ambivalence that's no longer under the cloak of denial, but still trying to stay cheerful. So something's stuck here, still: what kind of ring are we dancing around the rosie?

Ashes, ashes. People constantly tell me that, to cite Liz Phair, they “didn’t think it would happen again”: the fantasy of an embracing and sustaining and self-transforming love—then the fall; the projection of self-continuity onto an object and a life organization built around it—then the fall; the couple form suspected as romantic medium but legitimated for parenting—then the fall.

But it’s not only idealization and its realist discontents at work in shaping intimate investments—after all, idealization is often accompanied by doubt, skepticism, rage, dissociation, and pragmatics of all kinds. There are as many marriages as there are motives for it, not just the romantic one. People marry to achieve the couple form, the family form (and its relation to reproductive pasts and futures), the fantasy of being an “adult,” its imbrication with property logics—the tools we are given normatively with which to make life. Marriage enables a whole cluster of things, mutually magnetized into seeming like one thing.

Let us, then, stop looking at fantasy for a minute, and focus on the many materialities of marriage. It’s impossible for me to talk about the prisonhouse of marriage (in language, in psychoanalysis, in sexuality, in racial formation, in bourgeois/liberal/capitalist logic) without beginning with property and its association with kinship. Silvia Federici, Kathi Weeks, Amy Stanley, Angela Mitropoulos, the Beyond Marriage project of Queers for Economic Justice—they write elaborately on the relation of the culture of contract, slavery, and marriage, and how they’re all bound up in the philosophical, legal, and economic traditions sustained and reproduced not only in liberal-

carceral society generally but in the university we work in as well.

So liberal society gets rid of slavery and calls wage society “free,” even though that form of “freedom” to sell labor-power is really the freedom to be exposed to alienation and exploitation for others’ profit. Liberal society can get rid of primogeniture and claim that property is a democratic form that can be alienated among any strangers with adequate resources, but there too property is not only the trace of the theft of a colonized common but class warfare in the form of debt and housing peonage. Liberal society can free women from coverture to be full political subjects who are free to choose or not choose to be in a relation of possession to other individuals through a consensual legal bondage (marriage). But there too the control over reproduction and the problem of the family as an economic unit constrain relations into situations of coerced debt-in-dependency: “I can’t afford to leave” is as often economic as it is emotional. So all of that freedom, all of it, is a mirage, or just a moment of choosing within a system structured in chaos and debt and yet allowing to grow few infrastructures for alter-nativity (not none, thank god).

As Marx wrote, we don’t know what it would feel like *not* to be saturated in our system of property, with its institutions, contracts, and fantasies through which normative life is reproduced. Our concepts of freedom in relation are all bound up in possession and this justifies inequality in areas from sex and sexuality to rent and ownership and to paid and unpaid labor. Then there is the question of reproducing not only life but children, and the notion that children are the possessions of parents, or the state, etc.

From all of these perspectives, it would be crazy *not* to talk about marriage in *The Carceral Notebooks*. Marriage is a vehicle for the enshrinement not only of social inequality in economic and normative terms, but a machine for the reproduction of the erotic investment in a property logic that shapes what love wants to magnetize. This is why gay marriage is both a civil right to which gay people ought to have access by rights, at the same time as it extends and reproduces racial supremacy, conservative kinship, and class antagonism as desire. Marriage is about sameness and the taming of difference. You know this, you make stark work from within these investments.

I've been thinking a lot about this recently, about how the concept "life" is so bound up in property and possession: a friend says she's having a baby and immediately it's about things, nesting, skills, smartness, and upward mobility fantasies only half offered in play; so many are getting married, so many beginning to accumulate rituals and things as evidence that life is becoming dense and real. If friends ask I tell them, good luck, but remember, you have no idea who you'll be in this marriage, it will open up a heretofore walled-off zone of expectation about what a life is, what an adult is, what your class aspirations are, and what constitutes threat. This is not just about straightness, either: but heteronormativity. Even queer people get caught up in eugenic fantasies of buying likeness, of managing race. Repro-mimesis in a good neighborhood....so many people's desire.

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Laura Letinsky (courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery), *Untitled* from the series *Somewhere, Somewhere*, 2005, 50" x 68"

Of course the absence of marriage wouldn't dissolve inequality and life-building on the racial-repro-property model. But marriage enshrines these forces into desires.

Except in pointing to the ways property and structural racism/misogyny/homophobia are all bound up, I realize that I haven't touched much of what interested you—the problem of fantasy that always insists on pushing something into action. Is there a dangerous version of the question that moves you? Or do you want to restart elsewhere, making me look at some image or passage or . . . ?



Laura Letinsky (courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery), Untitled #31, from the series *The Dog and the Wolf*; 2009, approx. 40" x 50"

LL: Cheerful, no; ambivalent, yes. The complicatedness of it all flattens me and ironically, the flatness of the photograph provides the space to think through the intersections of the personal and the political, fantasy and the mighty real, optimism and nihilism...it's a means, a space, to project a future in which I want to live, one that involves making something out of the muck that otherwise just feels like quicksand.

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Laura Letinsky (courtesy of Yancey Richardson Gallery), *Untitled #3*, from the series *Ill Form and Void Full*, 2009, 40" x 47.5"

For me, the medium of photography, and other visual and material forms, because of the abeyance of words, opens up a space of possibility. Of action that I don't think is dependent upon fantasy but instead on reckoning with fantasy among other things. I'm struck by your facility with language and if we're daring to ask questions we wouldn't otherwise ask, I wonder how you maintain optimism with language? How do you make it real as in, how do you make these ideas manifest in your daily life?

LB: You think of language as closed and the image as opening the quicksand of the ordinary? That's funny to me. I love your idea, though, that the image forces fantasy to reckon

with the inconvenience of other things. It depends on what we mean by fantasy, I guess (the normative versus the unconscious, for example): fantasy can turn a blind eye to what's inconvenient to its normative optimism, but insofar as unconscious fantasy is what makes it possible to reproduce one's sense of the world it also has no choice but to be reshaped by the encounters that arise.

I see you over the last few decades struggling with optimism, trying to get at attachment and desire insistently, but by peeling away layers of players: first the photographs focus on people in arousal, romance, and love, tortured and torturing somewhere in the image atmosphere even when the scene is happy; then fewer and fewer people anchor your image, as though the architectures of domesticity have absorbed and can be made to express the truth of what kept people there (there are no children manifestly factored in, that I remember); and then in the recent digital work, coupled domesticity no longer appears in its decayed intention to be happy (I'm thinking of your portraits of the garbage left on the table after dinner) but appears as trace, in abstract splashes of appetite in a space of fantasy that exists only as the surreal and the unreal, as barely decorative, as almost slashed in the very act of beautiful composition. The couple's become desire in solitary confinement, radioactive.

Insofar as my work has always been located in the overwhelming, yet borne, contradictions of attachment—to political and economic systems, to objects, or to people—what writing does for me is similar, in a way. I aim to create a scene, in the psychoanalytic sense, in which the reader can risk being in the room with her/his defenses against encountering, on

behalf of sustaining an attachment to life, the complexities of power, violence, and desire; and the fear of loss that makes people conservative, even when personal and social life break down. The writing does stage an encounter with ambivalence, with the ways that our life-structuring objects both threaten and sustain us: as analytic writing dissolves objects into relations, it induces an opportunity to focus on how processes get to be calcified and how they might become different.

I often perform this kind of operation in any given piece of writing (I typed “wiring”) by moving among knowledges and idioms—philosophical, aesthetic, political—and increasingly, through experimental styling that provides a sonorous pull toward staying with the noise of relation. This is why I’m hard to read, often: because instead of producing a plane of consistency, an aesthetic performance of a new norm, I perform what is difficult about maintaining fit, what falls out of the idealizable story, or stresses normative comfort in it. The capacity to do this, to bring many kinds of knowledge to a given problem, is what sustains my optimism for thought, teaching, and living open to risk and productive loss.

To tie this back to marriage, to make writing is therefore also, for me, to provide a training in what it means never to have or possess one’s object, what it means always to fail to capture it or be captured by it. Attachment is hard because one can never predict who one is in relation and who the other will be: so one needs to find a way to sustain attachment to life within the space of an active contingency. One needs to learn within the intractable scene of conflicting aims, desire and aggression, and so on. One needs to learn how to endure and navigate the incoherences of power and norm. This is where

you and I used to conflict—you thought people could resolve the noise of their own aggression into a form of love, or that they should try. Now, together we watch struggles take form in scenes of personal and impersonal power, and in our different media we struggle to displace the reproduction of what does not work. Some people would call that aestheticizing or utopian; I call it, too, a political commitment.

So it's not just a question of how individuals learn to become more capable of adjudicating the thicket of self-splitting drives and social antagonisms in the ongoing world of the ordinary: sometimes events happen that create flashpoints in that world that shift our actual and virtual encounters with it, that shift the "our" from a collection of individuals to the forced mass visibility of the population or movement. Some of those events are legal: like the decisions in the *U.S. v. Windsor* (DOMA) and Proposition 8 cases, which came down in favor of lesbian and gay civil rights in the U.S. while we were writing this. The eventfulness of the event makes me want to ask you a question about visual art and its impact on you: we know how the law can reframe acts and incidents in the everyday; has there ever been a single aesthetic event that reframed for you what it means to think and make work about the couple, love, or marriage? That has shaken you up the way a legal judgment can seem to shake up collective life?

LL: I love that your description of your process is so visual! I feel that I learned to read with you, the way you articulate your ideas inviting me to enter this dialogue on terms in which I feel some fluency, some eloquence, but also, ability to negotiate the quicksand, that is, language. Although now I understand this medium, really any medium including, or rather,

especially photography, as quicksand. Like language, photography's relation to what is thought of as "real" actualizes a division that I initially thought of as ambivalent, mired in the romantic longing for a there that never was except for in fantasy. So much of the work we did together spurred me to examine this formulation, to try to get at its underneath, to what is not seen, to try to understand what is at stake (here, I wrote "steak") in sustaining these kinds of formulations. For the past few years, I am attempting to, as you write, de-calcify this formulation without knowing what else there is but nonetheless building a world I can live in. Or is it, living in a world I can build?

I am hesitant to claim a sole aesthetic interaction as comparable to what is as obviously societally profound as the court's recent decision on gay marriage. Such an event is not going to do anything in and of itself rather it's how that event is situated and considered within a life that is in relation to a world. If we are going to talk about aesthetics, we have to acknowledge that this category doesn't just involve pleasure, an, "I like" or "I don't like", but a whole nexus of historical, political, societal attitudes and value judgements. It's what connects the political to the personal, the theory to the personal, the cycles of production to those of consumption... That is, the sensory information the category of "aesthetic" addresses must presume a body that is attached to a brain that is attached to a social order. Body as a prison? Thinking about aesthetic revelation in this way makes sense for me to address this question. Acknowledging aesthetics as such involves a reckoning about one's values — political beliefs, gender biases, socio-economic attitudes—and their actualization within the world.